



Università
Ca' Foscari
Venezia

Dottorato di ricerca in Filologia Moderna
XXIII ciclo

Scuola di dottorato in Lingue, Culture e Società
A.A. 2007/2008 ÷ A.A. 2009/2010

The End of History in English Historiographic Metafiction

Settore scientifico-disciplinare di afferenza:
L-LIN/10 LETTERATURA INGLESE

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“True, novelists don't normally write about what's going on; they write about what's not going on. Yet the worlds so created aspire to pattern and shape and moral point. A novel is a rational undertaking; it is reason at play, perhaps, but it is still reason.”

(Martin Amis, *The Second Plane*,
September 11: 2001-2007, p. 13.)

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Introduction

A sense of an ending, a symptom of something completed and over, is widespread in the postmodern era, in the life, thought and culture of the late twentieth century. A sense of impoverishment and historical failure, distress and disillusion, characterises the spirit of the whole post-war period. It seems that all solid foundations, all coherent means of comprehending the self, society and the world have dissolved or appear to be inconsistent. Postmodernism is the direct result of a great disillusion with science, progress, universal truth and teleological history. The prognosis of the various ‘ends’, such as the end of ideology, the end of metanarratives, the end of all those convictions once considered surely enduring, defines postmodern relativism and scepticism towards epistemological claims. Undoubtedly, endist thinking is one of the distinctive qualities of postmodern culture. In my thesis the end of history is taken into account both as an important feature of postmodern culture and as a suitable topic through which contemporary fiction can be read and interpreted. The end of history in postmodernism is the end of the belief in history’s direction and purpose, in history as progress. The American critic Fredric Jameson argues that postmodernity is characterised by a crisis in historicity; the postmodern age has forgotten how to think historically and this exasperating condition “determines a series of spasmodic and intermittent, but desperate, attempts at recuperation”.¹ Despite the prognostication of the end of history and the demise of historical *telos*, postmodernism entails a return to history, which is not a positive and simple return, but a critical one. Postmodernists claim new and diverse approaches to history, refusing to impose positive meaning and intention upon history and offering an alternative historical understanding.

This study aims to define the relationship between the philosophical concept of “the end of history” and postmodernist models and critiques of history in contemporary English literature; in particular, my interest focuses on the genre of the novel and on “historiographic metafiction”. My understanding of historiographic metafiction is informed

¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, Introduction, p. XI.

by the Canadian academic Linda Hutcheon, who has coined the expression and has provided both a definition and commentary on it.² Hutcheon considers historical consciousness and reflection upon history to be fundamental in the postmodern literary experience; according to her, historiographic metafiction perfectly represents the poetics of postmodernism. In its contradictory nature, historiographic metafiction refers both to the world of history and that of fiction, namely it is the meeting point of history and fiction, allowing us to approach the subject of history and historical study from the related area of literature.

I will explore twelve representative texts within English historiographic metafiction that bring into focus the importance of history and its literary interpretation. These novels cover a period of thirty years, from 1974, which is the date of publication of Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor*, to 2004, the date of publication of Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, yet most of them were written in the 1980s. They all deal with twentieth-century history, focusing in particular on the Second World War and its consequences. The novelists I will dwell particularly on are Graham Swift, Julian Barnes, Doris Lessing, Anthony Burgess, Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith, and Andrea Levy. These novelists produce critical histories through postmodernist modes of representation. Since they repudiate some of the fundamental assumptions behind received accounts of history, they rewrite history by showing the limits and biases of conventional models of history. I will approach their position through the philosophical debate on the end of history and the end of a certain concept of history. Their novels (analysed in chapter three and chapter four) are among the most significant for, and representative of, the theme of the end of history in contemporary English fiction. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the complete oeuvre of each of these writers and my choice of their novels according to the theme outlined above does not mean to be exhaustive.³

The starting point for my research is an analysis of the meaning(s) of history and its end. The first chapter deals with those philosophers who meditated upon the end of history and their influence on postmodern understanding of the end of history. I particularly focus on the Russian-French philosopher Alexandre Kojève, who offers an end of history doctrine

² Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1988.

³ Undoubtedly, there are other texts which address similar questions to those discussed in my thesis: for instance, the topic of the end of history could be analysed in dystopian novels, or in the work of American novelists such as Kurt Vonnegut, Dave Eggers, and David Foster Wallace. It could also be interesting to apply the same method of research not only to literary works written in the English language, but also to contemporary novels in comparative literature.

based on his personal and original interpretation of Hegelian dialectics.⁴ Kojève argues that the principle of history is grounded on human satisfaction and desire for recognition: human beings create themselves and the world around them, continuously fulfilling their desires; they transform nature in order to satisfy their aspirations and strive for mutual and equal recognition. They finally lead history to its end, its climax and exhaustion with the creation of “a universal and homogeneous State”, which is a realm of freedom where people’s needs are recognised, legitimised and defended. Kojève maintains that the end of historical evolution has already occurred; he shares the Hegelian belief in a historical completion in 1806, with the battle of Jena, and believes that what happened after 1806 served to fulfil the quantitative task of extending the end of history to the rest of the world. However, Kojève suggests that the moment of triumph is also a moment of terminus and impasse: the future ceases to be dominated by negativity and change, by man’s intention and resolve to transform the world and alter the *status quo*. Post-history has no meaning; there is no vision of the future except centuries of boredom. At the end of history, man looks and behaves like an animal: he cares only for his survival and comfort.

My aim is to shed light on those aspects of Kojève’s philosophy – such as the disenchantment with modernity, the rejection of homogenising and totalising principles, or the perspective of history as a source of consumption and pleasure – which can be considered the seed of postmodern thought and are echoed in English historiographic metafiction.

I also pay attention to Francis Fukuyama’s approach to the end of history and to the differences between his position and postmodern attitudes. His famous book, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), has had the merit of reopening the debate on the post-historical world; yet, its thesis is almost impossible to agree with and has been sharply criticised as universalistic and totalising. Fukuyama argues that the progression of human history as a struggle between ideologies has come to an end and thus he optimistically welcomes the end of history. He suggests that the system broadly known as liberal democracy is the last stop, where sooner or later the socio-political development of every nation on earth will come to rest, and predicts the eventual global triumph of political and economic liberalism. I refer to Kojève’s and Fukuyama’s arguments in order to introduce the context within which the novels in this study are read. Mainly Kojève’s reflections on

⁴ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, London: Basic Books, 1969.

the end of history and post-history will provide the frame and the intertext for my reading of English historiographic metafiction, in particular of Swift's *Waterland*, Barnes's *England, England*, Burgess's *The End of the World News*, and Smith's *White Teeth*.

The second chapter provides an understanding of postmodern reaction to the end of history; postmodernism rejects grand narratives and history as a grand narrative. Postmodernist critique of history claims that we no longer believe in history as something we can all agree upon and shows scepticism about extended historical narrative and linear temporality in historical events. Postmodernism regards history as a web, a net, a tangle in which the temporal value is not succession (no time's arrow pointing towards the future) but simultaneity (the time of eternal present). Postmodernists declare and found a non progressive concept of history, which is explored and discussed in fiction. My interest focuses precisely on that reversal of the notion of history, on the epistemological change that history has undergone. I approach postmodernism through some important readings such as Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* and Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. Postmodernism has been defined as a social phenomenon, a historical change and the episteme of the contemporary world. Jameson views post-industrial society as dominated by mass-media and the logic of consumerism and argues that culture has become a product in its own right; Lyotard announces the breakdown of grand narratives in postmodern society and stresses the risk of dealing with knowledge as a commodity and with culture as a commercial item; Harvey clearly dissects the new perspectives and epistemological schemes that postmodernism entailed.

I will survey the radical doubt and uncertainty that postmodernism celebrates, which puts up opposition to the Enlightenment trust in historical progress. For instance, I will show how historical progress is questioned and even ridiculed in Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*: throughout the ten chapters and the stories they recount, history follows a cyclical pattern and is far from redemptive. Barnes points out that history repeats itself and he provides the reader with an apocalyptic historiography; my interest will be focussed on Barnes's metaphor of human history as a journey of a failed ark.

I will consider the different perspectives of those philosophers and critics who believe that history does have a pattern, and those who argue that it is simply a stream of chaos, cruelty and war. I will provide an account of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the Enlightenment and examine their influence on postmodern understanding of history and

of its loss of meaning in contemporary society. Postmodernists claim that the project of modernity is based on a fantasy of completion and believe that such a completion is impossible. They jettison the presupposition of modernism that a good life will be attained through reason, science and the possibly attendant progress. Postmodern relativism consists of rejecting the primacy of reason or any ideology that claims to be rational. For instance, Lessing and Amis discuss the irrationality of presumed rational systems in *Memoirs of a Survivor* and *Time's Arrow* respectively.

In postmodernism, there are no totalising models; no single truth stands out, except the inevitability of multiple truths. History ceases to be a vehicle for progress and meaning, and is no longer a source of exempla for human beings. Since history has proved not to follow a rational course, there is no point in finding teleology in the succession of events. On the basis that we can no longer speak of a rational development or a linear logic of history, the postmodern world experiences the end of history and enters a post-historical phase. The historical stalemate and the temporal dimension of eternal present in which contemporary society has ended up, implicate the break up of any sense of hierarchy and the consequent homogenisation of all values. In post-industrial society, history and past are modified and represented through TV, films and books; they are consumed only for pleasure. To take one example, the theme of history as a commodity to be consumed by tourists is examined in Julian Barnes's *England, England*: here history is absorbed into the realm of simulation and is destroyed by its reproduction. History cannot be deleted but can be retold, thus becoming another history; it is captured by consumerist society in a mechanism that asserts its own end. In my investigation of the relationship between the logic of consumption in contemporary society and the postmodern condition of an eternal present and a post-history without meaning, I will refer to the French philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard's theory on simulation and the consequent disappearance of history.⁵

Within the debate on the end of history there exists a dichotomy between a tragic and apocalyptic idea of history, which classifies the end of the postmodern experience as technicality and nihilism, and a more positive/liberating view, which considers nihilism to have been overpassed by aesthetics (the apocalyptic turns into the decorative). The conclusion of chapter five in Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* is rather significant for both the apocalyptic idea of history and its reproduction in the artistic field;

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, London: SAGE, 1998.

the author claims: “catastrophe has become art: that is, after all, what it is for”.⁶ I will outline the philosophical and theoretical interpretations underpinning these two ideas in order to investigate the contemporary English novelists’ approach to the end of history in fiction. I will take a detailed look at the relationship between literature and history and try to answer the question of what writing on history entails when history is proclaimed to have come to its end. I will outline the concept and sense of history among postmodern English writers and their attempt to interpret and revisit such a history in their historiographic novels.

The third chapter focuses on literary examples of the end of history, such as Swift’s *Waterland*, Barnes’s *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, Burgess’s *The End of the World News*, and Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*. Contemporary novelists such as Swift, Barnes, Burgess and Amis still feel the need to deal with the past, but they are far from representing historical events realistically; in their novels the past is manipulated and becomes an object of irony and parody. Their novels embody the qualities of historical self-reflexivity and pastiche; they are part of a certain contemporary literature devoted to play and interplay, quotation and self-quotation, ambiguity and irony. The postmodern ploys that are most frequently used in the novels under study are narrative within narrative, focus on intertextuality and the process of writing, and emphasis on blurring the boundary between fact and fiction. Although postmodern writers represent history and the past using playful and ironical techniques, they always demonstrate an underlying serious concern in regards to this subject. My selection of literary examples of English postmodernism and historiographic metafiction aims to show that postmodern writers disagree with the idea that history is only creative fiction and that every perspective on the past is as valid as any other. I suggest, rather, that each writer engages with postmodern aesthetics in order to produce an ethics of history and draws attention to its positive and therapeutic effects.

Following Michel Foucault’s concept of history, the novelists I take into consideration regard and rewrite history as “a plurality of discourses”. They abandon teleological narratives of completion and wholeness and turn to partial and provisional representations of the past. They are concerned with the effects of historical forces on the lives of their characters and show how the characters’ understanding and knowledge of history represent the only possible way to cope with contemporary life. The novelists’ outlook on history is not nihilistic; what they question is not the possibility to write about history and the past, but the ways history and the past have been written up until now. I will

⁶ Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, London: Pan Books, 1990, p. 137.

focus on the literary rewriting of history in Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, and in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Postmodern writers believe in the importance of otherness and difference, and engage in an attempt to democratise history; they draw our attention to those voices which have been ignored in conventional historiography and denounce official history of self-congratulation. In order to produce critical histories, they resort to *petits récits* and to a great number of language games; they deal with the construction of history as a network of stories and explore the meaning of history through individual stories. To the end of history, Swift, Barnes, Burgess, Rushdie, and Smith oppose their characters' storytelling, which functions as an ultimate means to endow life with some meaning. They refute both purposive history and the metanarrative of the end of history doctrine, and through their heterogeneous little stories they show that history is, rather, cyclical and recursive. Their characters' interest in, and in some cases obsession with, history and the past also determines their understanding of personal and collective identity. I will examine how contemporary writers portray certain identities and their evolution in their attempt to redefine the notion of 'Englishness' and tradition. I will look specifically at Barnes's *England, England*, Smith's *White Teeth* and Levy's *Small Island* as examples of critical, parodic readings of 'England and Englishness'.

The fourth chapter introduces the topic of new born identities through an analysis of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, where the meditation on the past is a process of redefining identity (the focus is on postcolonial identities) as well as of revising history. Rushdie depicts national history and examines the way in which it is articulated in the present through the account of his narrator-protagonist, Saleem Sinai, and his individual fate. As with Swift's and Barnes's novels, *Midnight's Children* tackles the difficulty of knowing the past with any reliability and draws attention to the ways in which the individual is intertwined with the threads of history. I will then outline the common features of Smith's and Levy's novels, which deal with the meaning of roots and identity in a multicultural society. Both Smith and Levy interpret Britain's relationship with its colonial past and explore the creation of contemporary ethnic, racial and religious identities. However, the difference between Rushdie, Levy and Smith in their ways of dealing with the construction of postcolonial identities is that for Smith postcolonial identities are almost a reality. She is very ironical about the meaning of Englishness and throughout her novel, insists that such a concept must be rethought in terms of contemporary ethnicities in Britain.

Starting from the concept of the end of history and an analysis of the postmodern answer(s) to universal history and its end, I will focus on the ways history is framed and rewritten in a strategically selected body of fiction and I will conclude with a critical perspective on multiculturalism. This study could be a useful tool for students of contemporary literature to develop an understanding of what the end of history is, how it has been defined in the philosophical field and articulated in English historiographic metafiction. I work with the assumption that readers might not have read all the novels discussed in the chapters and, therefore, I will offer a short summary of their plots together with a detailed analysis of their approach to history, its end and its rewriting. Finally, in my conclusion I will gather together the range of postmodern literary attitudes towards the end of history that are explored in the main body of my thesis.

Chapter One

The Philosophical Debate on the End of History

- 1.1 On History and its Meaning(s)
- 1.2 Kojève's Dialectics and End of History
- 1.3 Fukuyama's Welcome to the End of History

1.1 On History and its Meaning(s)

“The only important thing about history I think, sir, is that it’s got to the point where it’s probably about to end” - Graham Swift, *Waterland* (p. 14).

In order to introduce the topic of the end of history, I will follow a philosophical approach. I start my argument by posing some general questions about history and its meaning (such as what history is, what it is about, how it proceeds, and what it is for), and attempt to provide some basic answers. I linger over the nature, subject-matter, and method of history (and of any philosophy of history), and look specifically at the expression ‘end of history’, in which each word weighs, history as end, and involves on its turn other words and concepts, such as that of time and of purpose, of progress and of closure. The question at issue is whether the historical happening means anything over and above the merely factual, whether a meaning in history and its course can be found. On the basis that for philosophers like G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx, and Alexandre Kojève (who studied and referred to both Hegel and Marx) there is a meaning in history and history leads to somewhere, I will focus on the consequences of their claim that history might finish or is already finished.¹ First of all, I ponder on the different meanings that ‘history’ has been given over the centuries, specifying which of them is to be considered in the phrase ‘end of history’. One of the meanings of ‘history’, and I would say the first as the most immediate one, is simply the movement of mankind through time. Obviously, there can be no end to

¹ The linchpin of my investigation is Kojève’s interpretation of the Hegelian-Marxist end of history: cf. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel. Leçons sur la phénoménologie de l’esprit*, Paris: Gallimard, 1947; Engl. trans. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, London: Basic Books, 1969. In addition to that, some readings have been pivotal to my analysis on the philosophical debate on the end of history: cf. Karl Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche: Der Revolutionäre Bruch im Denken des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1964, Engl. trans. *From Hegel to Nietzsche: the revolution in nineteenth-century thought*, London: Constable, 1965; Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History, the Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1949; Karl Löwith, *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1966; Robin George Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, London: Oxford University Press, 1967; Barry Cooper, *The End of History: An Essay on Modern Hegelianism*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984; Jürgen Habermas, *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen* (1985), Engl. trans. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1987; James H. Nichols, *Alexandre Kojève: Wisdom at the End of History*, USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007; Shadia B. Drury, *Alexandre Kojève: the Roots of Postmodern Politics*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994.

such a movement unless mankind is wiped out; this explains why when we refer to the expression 'end of history', we do not argue about the extinction of the species nor about universal entropy. After all, mankind is still alive.

Another meaning is a momentous and passing phenomenon, time after time like a purposeful movement. In this case the end of history occurs when history attains its purpose. And this does not entail that time stops - as it will never do, but rather that, as Fredric Jameson argues, time gets fragmented into a series of perpetual presents.² Historical time with its teleology is undermined and substituted by a new conception of temporality, a new way of being in time, an alignment of juxtaposed, diverse instants. At the end of history, there is no point in conceiving time as divided into past, present and future any longer; the disappearance of a sense of history makes contemporary society live in a perpetual present. Therefore, the end of history is not the end of history as successive happenings: history as the succession of events is always moving onwards, whether we have an eschatology for it or not. It is not the end of the world; apocalypse is not contemplated. It must be interpreted as the end of the belief in a purpose, in history as progress.

We associate history with the evolution of mankind as well as with the exploration and representation of the past. The past is one of those concepts which history implicates, but is not a synonym for it. History refers to interpretations of the past; it is what in the present we make of the past. As Keith Jenkins observes, history is one of the series of discourses about the world, a way of appropriating (not creating) the world and giving it all the meaning it has.³ More precisely, history is an account of the past but does not tally with it: history is a way of thinking about and looking at the past, but the events of the past as told by history are not identical with the events as they happened. Jenkins argues that no historian can cover the totality of past events because their content is virtually limitless; no account can recover the past as it was because the past is not an account, but events, situations. Additionally, history is something more than what happened in the past; it is our mode of understanding and representing the past and consequently constitutes a body of knowledge. The past is its subject-matter, it is a group of facts demanding historian's attention. History is a form of thought which establishes knowledge about the past, about

² The concept of perpetual present is explained by Fredric Jameson in the first chapter, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1938-1998*, London: Verso, 1998.

³ Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 20.

particular events in space and time which are no longer happening (i.e. about *res gestae*), and also recreates the ways in which people once were and lived. Man cannot live without history; he needs an idea of what the past was like. Historians are responsible for dominant frameworks and accepted notions of the past; their task is to understand and explain it. They tell different stories of the same past, posing questions about it and finding some meaning within it. The nature of their writing and rewriting must be critically examined, not ingenuously accepted; there is no one truth embedded in records waiting to be revealed. Depending on the historian's perspective, the past can be reconstructed in different ways and forms; history is a subjective way of seeing and explaining the past. The way of narrating and representing the past defines the reality that is captured in the produced history. In *The Purpose of the Past*, Gordon Wood argues that knowledge of the past has a profound effect on our sense of ourselves. History teaches us how to live in the world and enriches our experience; it offers a way of coming to terms with present and future.⁴

History is an ambiguous term because refers to what happened no less than to the narration of what happened; indeed, the term is also used to signify the discipline that deals with past events and characters. At the same time history shares characteristics of a science in its method of inquiry based on evidence and those of a literary construct. As Roland Barthes purported to demonstrate by looking at its structure, in its essence historical discourse is a form of ideological and imaginary elaboration. The problem with narration and language as the means we use to narrate, is the impossibility to tally with reality, with what really happened. Stages, ages or epochs exist in our own mind, not in the world itself; they are human conventions as we seek to make sense of the world. Narration invokes imagination and mental schemes which are not part of reality, but are human construction of reality in order to interpret and represent it. Hayden White suggests that any historical representation aims at "having real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary"⁵. Any historical investigation aims at representing the past as it was, but the past cannot be truly and faithfully represented as cannot be experienced anymore: it has already occurred and any representation of it is something other than it. The past is never a given fact which the historian can apprehend empirically by perception: the only possible knowledge of the past for the historian is

⁴ Cf. Gordon Wood, *The Purpose of the Past*, New York: The Penguin Press, 2008.

⁵ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987, p. 24.

mediate or indirect, never empirical.⁶ Any reading of the past is subjective and partial: any pretentious claim to be able to reconstruct the past as it was must be avoided. White insists that history fails if its aim is an objective reconstruction of the past according to the evidence. It fails because the process involved is the literary one of interpretative narrative: writing history requires the emplotment of the past not just as a way of organising the evidence, but also taking into account the rhetorical, metaphorical and ideological strategies of explanation which historians use.

Our knowledge of the past relies on historians' records and on the ways in which other historians have written about and interpreted those records. Historians are confronted with narrative; they decide how to emplot past events or put them in a story (they re-enact the past in their mind). In *Metahistory*, White defines the historical work as a verbal structure, a narrative discourse: historians tackle events that have happened and make a story out of them.⁷ History is made of narratives heard of and reported; it is a body of texts possessing an imposed or sometimes even invented meaning and implies a strategy of reading and interpreting them. Postmodernism focuses on the literary or aesthetic aspect of history, claiming that it is not a mode of explanation primarily dependent upon the established empiricist paradigm and cannot count on undisputed notions of truth and objectivity. The concept of the end of history gives rise to the postmodern problematic loss of a mode of understanding and knowing what happened in the past, creating a need for new and diverse approaches to the subject. History must pose new challenging questions about how we gain knowledge about the past. By drawing attention to the subjective and cultural sources of historical knowledge, postmodernists affirm that such knowledge is nothing but a personal and cultural construction, providing us with no reliable information about the past.⁸

The end of history tallies with the end of the peculiar ways in which modernity conceptualized and made sense of the past, with the end of the long-standing identification of historical truth with the correct representation of the past. History as grand narrative is questioned and finally jettisoned: some historical events (meaning here the tragedies of history, such as the two world wars, the atomic bomb, the various attempts at ethnic

⁶ Cf. R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, cit., p. 282.

⁷ Cf. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.

⁸ History is not only itself a form of fabulation but is also reliant on the very narrative strategies that historians previously claimed belonged to the imaginative world of literature. For postmodernists, history is invention with approximations to historical reality. Cf. Andrzej Gašiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After*, London: Edward Arnold, 1995, p. 149.

cleansing throughout history) cannot be explained in terms of historical teleology.⁹ As long as a meaning is sought within history, in historical terms, heavily influenced by the notion of progress, any explanation of the meaning of such events will fail.¹⁰ Postmodernism rejects the truth and validity of a universal history which has been dominated by a desire for truth and a will for power. It puts forward historical relativity and declares the loss of the sense of an absoluteness of any Western account of history, aiming at freeing history from the shackles of authoritarian ideologies. Postmodernism blames any desire for mastery and its drive to fully explain, and denounces delusive methodology and the coercive ideas of reality and truth. Universal narratives of progress are abandoned, objective theories of knowledge discarded. In this study, the belief in the end of history theory is understood as an alternative to postmodernism. Whereas postmodernism jettisons metanarratives, the end of history theory presents itself as a metanarrative, which supports logics and linearity within historical course and endorses humankind's progress and evolution by claiming its final completion.

History is also a method of creating identity, a way to impose order and continuity upon human life. Identity pivots around what we remember and what we forget; our historical past, either personal or public, is necessary to provide some meaning and purpose to our lives. Human beings are willing to create order and find some meaning in their lives, so they are eager to look at the past and to write their own histories. History functions for society like memory does for the individual: it conveys experience, offering a means to deal with the present and the future.¹¹ Historians have the task to define people and society in relation to the past and to shape identity. They decide what and whom to remember, and, in so doing, they choose what histories are for, they provide them with a specific meaning. Both the content and the purpose of history depend on a subjective choice. Historical knowledge is thus open to the charge that it is a culture-specific and conventional construction. The manner historians dig in the past, their designs and plans, have a deep impact upon the social environment: they are responsible for the construction of personal and national identities. Not only does postmodernism (and postcolonialism) subverts history writing, but also questions the specific ideological perspective from which history has been

⁹ We might explain such events in terms of actual historical causes; nonetheless, the absurdity of much of what has happened and still happens eludes any explanation.

¹⁰ Cf. Henry Jansen, *Laughter Among the Ruins: Postmodern Comic Approaches to Suffering*, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2001, p. 235.

¹¹ Cf. Gordon Wood, *op. cit.*

written. Postmodernity witnesses the disappearance of a sense of history and the social system loses its capacity to retain its own past. It seems to happen that at the end of history there is no possibility to define identity and provide some order any longer. Continuity has been broken, time is fragmented into a series of perpetual presents; what remains in postmodernity are shreds and disruptions. One of the effects is the contemporary increasing anxiety about the nature of identity. I argue that the end of history doctrine and its consequences on postmodern thought have affected the ways in which identity can be formed. In particular, my focus will be on Englishness and the literary representation of British identity.

Looking at the phrase ‘end of history’, I now focus on the word end. It is easy to notice that, like the Latin word *finis*, it has a double meaning: one is conclusion, stop; the other is purpose, goal. Conclusion and goal, however, are certainly not the same thing. There may be a conclusion which is not simultaneously a goal: something may stop without having reached its purpose. Believing in the end of history as a metanarrative, a grand and dominant story that covers other partial narratives and claims to possess universality and validity, means believing that conclusion and goal coincide, and inwardly cohere. Therefore, in the end of history doctrine the first term is meant to be both stop and purpose. History halts as it gets its goal. Such a doctrine is a metanarrative which claims to account for our present condition and to make sense of things; it asserts that there are universal laws behind human actions in the world and that they are predictable. Accepting the end of history means establishing positive meaning, direction and intention upon history. It presupposes thinking that history is linear, causal, logical: it starts and ends, reaching its aim. Postmodernists think that this means suffering from an illusion.

Maintaining that history is finished presupposes the belief in a rectilinear view of the world in which there is a beginning and an end, like in human existence. In this sense, the “end” is a figure for death as if the world could reach its term. Such a conception mirrors human desire for order and need to live by a pattern. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode notices that one consistent element in human beings seems to be the yearning for finding and creating orders of meanings. Sequence of events, plots and stories put our minds at rest exactly because our existence is determined by the need to be related to a beginning and to an end, to a chain of facts enclosed by a start and an ending. This need reflects our experience of life itself where birth and death are the decisive and inevitable stages for each of us. Thus, history and narrative, or history as narrative, meet our sense of belonging to a

larger scheme. Not only do they stress the way in which we make sense of the world but also shape the way in which we conceive ourselves.

History is a fictive substitute for authority and tradition, a maker of concords between past, present and future, a provider of significance to mere chronicity.¹²

Any attempt to give a meaning to the mere factual, to devise an order different from that of pure chronicle involves an appeal to the order of fictional narrative. Therefore, we should be aware of the provisionality of any history as a fictionalized account of the world.

Human beings are meaning-making creatures who turn to the act of storytelling in order to cope with their need to find, and make, some meaning in their life and in their understanding of events. Storytelling has often meant the creation of a sequential plotting of one event after another with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Traditionally, narrative history has entailed a chronological linear order. Kermode maintains that it is the very nature of fictional form - conceived of as divided into beginning, middle and end - that may involve apocalyptic implications. History is a construct: the historian cannot achieve a record of simple successiveness, a chronicle without a *telos*. To give a meaning to a story and to suggest a purpose for it, infers imposing an end on it – the same can be applied to history as a grand story. “The End” gives reason and purpose to all that has gone before.¹³ The historian’s sense of that end is defined by his own historical position: readers accept a measure of mythmaking, the intrusion of personal feeling, or national or class feeling. More or less consciously, we face biases and artificiality in any historical account. We can give a sense to history only from outside history, namely judging history from a meta-historical perspective. Over the centuries historiography has offered several concepts of history; however, they can be summed up in two great visions: the first considers history like a developing process in which historiography takes the form of a quest; the second interprets history like a completed process where the present is the last stop and historiography takes the form of a collection, becoming the official archive of facts. The concept of the end of history derives from this second vision.¹⁴

¹² Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 56.

¹³ Both Frank Kermode and Hayden White claim that “the End” determines the *telos*.

¹⁴ The end of history and the loss of history’s meaning are views primarily associated with postmodernism, but extend further by including New Right theorists, such as Francis Fukuyama (on whom I will focus at the end of my first chapter), as well as Leftists, such as the Marxist Fredric Jameson, who argue that we have entered the era of *posthistorie*. Cf. Andrzej Gašiorek, op. cit., p. 147.

The subject of the end of history is theoretical or interpretative: it presumes a philosophy of history. The philosophy of history deals with the old questions about the meaning of history and of its final purpose. Pondering and examining its possible meaning(s), the philosophy of history asks whether a design or direction might exist in the course of human history. The questions the philosophy of history addresses are not framed up in the past, but are part of the present, indeed of the future: above all, they refer to what the historical process is leading up to. It thus becomes clear that to reflect upon history in a spirit of philosophical enquiry inevitably leads to pose some questions on its end. In *Meaning in History*¹⁵, Karl Löwith maintains that historical meaning can be understood only in relation to the end of history: meaning in historical course lies in eschatological future, i.e. the temporal dimension of the last purpose of history. Löwith's premise is that speaking about the end of history entails referring to its scope: since history is a temporal movement, its scope must be in the future.

Here I want to refer in some detail to Löwith's essay. Löwith aims at demonstrating that the source of the philosophy of history is the conception passed on by the Jewish-Christian Biblical tradition and the consequent theological interpretation of events. Löwith offers a clear analysis of the theological implications of the philosophy of history, following a regressive order which dates back to the considerations of some exemplary thinkers such as Burckhardt, Marx and Hegel, to its original theological core, or the Biblical vision of history. The very idea that history has an end does not have its origin in Western philosophy, but in Western religion, i.e. in Christianity. What happened later, over the last centuries, was the secularisation of such an idea. The first major break with the end of history tradition came with Marx who saw religion as offering a false view of the world and thus opposed a secular view of history and its end.

Löwith assumes that Jakob Burckhardt's idea of history is a starting point to examine what history is and what can be defined as historical. Burckhardt considers the essence of historiography closer to a form of art than to a science, and recoils from the idea of any systematic scheme of history. He states that history is not a science of neutral facts, but an account of facts deemed to be important.¹⁶ Obviously the choice of what facts to tell and what facts to leave untold is mostly subjective: the historical way of thinking is characterised by the principles of selection and generalisation. The greater part of what has

¹⁵ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History, The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, cit.

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 42.

happened in the past has been ignored or not comprehended, or simply not noticed: histories are partial as they present only one small part of a complex whole and this part has been narrowly interpreted and determined by the historian's own position and prejudices. What history tells is a deformation of reality and truth. Historians select some events, stressing and valuing them within the historical account; they choose some fragments of the past which can be regarded as typical for the age and which help them understand later events and developments. The historians' work has to do not only with making neutral facts subjective but with making them real and significant. In Burckhardt's opinion, the meaning in history lies in its continuity; therefore, the end of history would occur if a radical crisis broke such a continuity.¹⁷ He maintains that continuity does not coincide with a simple proceeding of events that accepts customs, but implies a conscious strain to continue and to renew our tradition. However, he does not indicate if there is a way to foretell the end of history and what to do when the historical continuity breaks up. Löwith reports that Burckhardt does not offer any solution of his own but only shows the problem.

The problem with history's continuity, which postmodernism raises, is that such a continuity is not an element of the past or of its sources, but a human construction. The basis of the supposition that the past is in some sense continuous is a literary one.¹⁸ History is a reasoned account on the documented sources of the past, but these sources are clearly not continuous, nor is conscious human experience of time continuous. What is continuous is not so much reality, or the form in which reality exists in its obvious discontinuity, but the form in which our culture represents reality. The impulse to represent and defend the continuity and essential unity of history comes from human need to find order and meaning out of chaos and discontinuity. In *The Discourse of History*, Roland Barthes maintains that

the historian is not so much a collector of facts as a collector and relater of signifiers; that is to say, he organizes them with the purpose of establishing positive meaning and filling the vacuum of pure, meaningless series.¹⁹

The historian's purpose of representing facts goes hand in hand with that of transmitting coherence and meaning. Yet, coherence seems to be illusory and meaning arbitrary, revealing history to be an authorial creation.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁸ I here mean that the past's continuity is fictional, it is a convention.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Discourse of History*, III, "Signification". See also Keith Jenkins, *The Postmodern History Reader*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 121.

In his survey, Löwith considers Hegel's history which is both a philosophy of history and a history of philosophy.²⁰ Hegel was the last Christian philosopher before the break between philosophy and Christianity, and Löwith takes in exam his attempt to transform Christian theology of history into a theoretical system. Hegel offered historicism to posterity as a surrogate of religion: historicism entails faith in the meaning of events and an eschatological perspective. His conception of history postulates an irreversible direction towards a future purpose: world history starts in the East with the great empires of China, India and Persia, and finishes in the West with the Christian-Germanic reigns.²¹ According to Hegel, the Muslim East had made no advance since the caliphate, while India and China were static nations in which there could never be anything that could be called progress to something else. The necessary fate of Asiatic Empires was that of being subjugated to the Europeans. In Hegelian perspective, universal history of mankind tallied with progressive human advancement toward full rationality and toward the awareness that rationality is expressed in a liberal government.²² He believed that historical course would attain its end with the realization of free societies in the world and proclaimed the end of history with the battle of Jena in 1806. Hegelian reconstruction of the course of history follows temporal progress, where past determines present, which in turn will be the basis for future. Whereas Asia represents the beginning of history, Hegel thought that Europe is the emblem of the end of history as the spirit owns the consciousness of freedom and gets possession of the Other from itself. The emerging state at the end of history was intended as the highest expression of spirit, hence of reason, in history: the rational becomes fully actual. Hegel believed that history does have a rational content and aim, which are represented by a constant progress in the consciousness of freedom. Nonetheless, the concept of progress is not valid any longer and, according to Löwith, Hegelian idea of the end of history as the perfect completion is unacceptable.²³

The fundamental aspect in history is transformation: people and states change, men are born and die, prosper and decay, build and destroy. The question all philosophers try to

²⁰ In the winter of 1822-23, Hegel gave a series of lectures on the philosophy of history at the University of Berlin. The philosophy of history for him meant the onward march of spirit, or reason. See his *Philosophy of History* (1837 – E. Gans, ed.).

²¹ Karl Löwith, op. cit., p. 74.

²² What Hegel had in mind as the highest form of human society was the Protestant State founded upon a civil society.

²³ Writing after the Second World War, Löwith can find neither pattern nor purpose to history, neither a providential design nor progressive development within historical course. The dream of a rational and teleological *Universalgeschichte* had been shattered.

answer is: why does it happen? What is the sense of such a movement? Löwith observes that Hegel, as a Christian philosopher, answered such a question by making Christian faith become worldly providence and transforming Christian history of salvation into a worldly theodicy where divine Spirit is immanent in the world and the State is a secular god.²⁴ Hegel's philosophy of history paved the way to historicism: his disciples transformed Hegelian thought into absolute historicism, keeping the historical element of the Spirit, which historically develops and transforms itself, and considering what happens in time as the supreme force of the philosophy and the Spirit.²⁵ Hegel's disciples regarded the historical Spirit as a criterion for truth and falseness, because only history reveals what lasts over time and is thus proved to be true. This perspective postulates that in the world history only what lasts and provokes consequences is valid and worth being examined. Nonetheless, sequence of world events should not be evaluated on their success: what is reasonable does not coincide with what is successful. Löwith severely condemns historicism as it purports to believe in the rationality of facts and in the continuous progress of 'the becoming'.

Unlike the Hegelian thesis of the accomplishment of the Spirit-history, the end of history according to Marx has still to come; the reign of freedom tallies with a Communist society, which is the ultimate goal of historical Messianism. The Marxist end of history would have occurred with the triumph of the true universal class, i.e. the working class, and the following realization of a global communist utopia would have ended the class conflict once for all; human collectivity will finally be in control of its own destiny, being history a form of collective praxis. Comte, Proudhon and Marx abolished divine providence, substituting it for the faith in progress. They tried to convert the religious faith into an anti-religious effort to establish predictable laws of history. According to Marx, historical development pivots on changes of relations in the production of goods, and the engine of history lies in economic struggles among different classes. He made socio-economic relationships the crucial factor in history and imagined the end in terms of systems or modes of production. Since capitalism is an exploitative economic system, it must collapse and be substituted.

In his backward analysis, Löwith shows how a theological assumption is at the ground of both the Enlightenment positivistic progressivism and the Marxist materialistic Messianism, and it has ended with affecting also modernity. According to Löwith, the

²⁴ Karl Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche: Der Revolutionäre Bruch im Denken des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, Engl. trans. *From Hegel to Nietzsche: the revolution in nineteenth-century thought*, cit., p. 236.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

numerous doctrines of philosophy of history are all clung to the same theological roots, precisely the Biblical vision of history. Beside his historiographic thesis that the philosophy of history has a theological derivation, Löwith also supports the more theoretical thesis that the philosophy of history is destined to inevitable failure. He tries to investigate the way in which theological conception has paradoxically become the cause of the end of the idea itself of a secular philosophy of history, which is Christian in its origin and anti-Christian in its outcome. Löwith describes the passage from theological conception of history, which is obviously pre-scientific and grounded on God will and divine providence, to its empirical interpretation, which claims to be scientific and based on human will and rationalistic prediction. Drifting away from the original Christian vision of history, events are supposed to be forms of an unceasing optimistic process. Theology of history has been secularised on the base of the concepts of time and 'the becoming'. Thus, history has been regarded as an infinite process, a continuum which is made of event after event with no letting up. Yet, the search for meaning in the historical process ends with the search for a final purpose, living on hope and expectation and believing in an eschatological future. Löwith thus shows how the philosophy of history is still subject to theological influence and constrained by an eschatological perspective.

On the assumption that historical events in themselves do not refer to any ultimate and comprehensive sense, the historical process may have a meaning only on the ground of faith and then cannot be rationalistically explained. The philosophy of history has failed not because it abandoned the ground of faith and the eschatological perspective, but because transferred some assumptions valid only on the ground of faith to the rational and empirical ground of science. The development of historical modern thought should be represented by a departure from the Biblical vision of history and the coherent abandonment of any claim of the philosophy of history. Löwith suggests that the only possible way out to the theological impasse of the philosophy of history could be the radical 'historicization' even of our historical conception. Human history should be traced back to a cosmological perspective, based on the idea of a necessary order of the world. However, in so doing, history is vanished because every specific sense of human action is subject to the necessity of a cosmic pattern.

Löwith maintains that the sense of history, if there is any, is to be searched only and necessarily out of history. Its purpose, *telos*, cannot be conceived within the historical coordinates. From within the perspective of history, history will always remain a mystery.

We must accept that history has no sense, albeit out of itself, or we must renounce any philosophy of history which misinterprets the providential idea with a secular and progressive one. Löwith assumes that theological ideas of Christian conception have finally led to a simplistic and relativistic conception of the historical course and warns us about any theological and providential interpretation of events that presents itself as secular and progressive, but indeed it is not, albeit on its surface only. Any claimed possibility to free themselves definitively from the influence of Christian thought, of its values and conceptions, is illusory. If anybody thinks s/he can, s/he deceives her/himself and people who follow her/him. Therefore, Löwith is against any philosophy of history that started, and carried on, a secularising process of the Biblical vision, and denounces contemporary historicism, which is also defined 'the relativization of history', as the last outcome of such a process. Löwith concludes that Christianity, even if secularised, remains the grounding paradigm of Western culture, since our modern historical consciousness presumes an eschatological perspective with a view to a future conclusion.

The point is that, once again, postmodernism doubts that the future can provide history with a meaning, let alone with a purpose. In postmodern culture the sense of history itself seems to disappear, being substituted by a pervasive depthlessness, by what Jameson names a "perpetual present"²⁶. Is there any room for something different from the present? How can we imagine the future? What is the logic of any eschatological perspective? Contemporary ideas of history lack any sense of reason, order and meaning and the only way out to the present stalemate in history is to accept a new, yet less comfortable, conception which needs to be free from any perspective of completion. The traditional model of history as an objective record of the past as it was has been clearly superseded. There is no such thing as a unitary historical truth waiting for the historian's discovery and description. However, the inability to reconstruct the past as it "really" was does not infer the need for silence. Calling the past back to mind means understanding, interpreting and not forgetting it. Historians can make some provisional sense of the evidence they evaluate, using it to give an account that seems to us to have meaning.²⁷ There must be the awareness that history is personal and provisional; yet, this humility needs not to be seen as negative. Postmodernists invoke a tolerance of many truths and descriptions for the representation of

²⁶ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1938-1998*, cit., p. 5; p. 8.

²⁷ As regards to the historians' attempt to provide history with a sort of meaning and history's provisionality, cf. Beverley Southgate, *History: What and Why? Ancient, Modern and Postmodern Perspectives*, London: Routledge, 1996.

the past; they argue that any vision of totality is chimerical and must be replaced by plurality.²⁸ I draw the attention to the fact that for postmodernists what has changed and ended is the notion of history itself: a metaphor for history is not a single track or stream anymore (which reveals the conception of history as a grand narrative), but a net made of multiple threads that can intertwine or move apart.

Together with the end of great ideologies, any claim on the possibility to find a meaning in history is rejected. If a design in history really existed, we would never know it. To share the end of history perspective means to assume and believe in the existence of a linearity and a logic in the unfolding of events, to trust the very metanarrative which was called by Hegel 'Universal History'. The end of history is, for those who believe in it, a somehow felicitous perspective. I argue that it must be seen as a felicitous and optimistic perspective as it still allows to find a meaning in historical course. Such a possibility is exactly what postmodern thought firmly objects to; in fact postmodernism questions the existence of universal History, of one single and unique History. Postmodernists reject the belief that man works at perfecting himself and that history is progressive, as man directs it through his rational will and agency. They challenge any attempt to project a meaning onto historical events with the aim to establish some kind of progressive teleology. For postmodernists, the end of history as a perfect completion is an optimistic thesis hard to believe in and agree with. What actually ends in and with postmodernism is the possibility, and the belief in that possibility, of a direction or an end to history. Our time is marked by the loss of belief in history as progress; it is a post-age unable to foretell how it will continue into that age beyond the post.

²⁸ Cf. Andrzej Gašiorek, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

1.2 Kojève's Dialectics and End of History

“And to make an end is to make a beginning” - T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets

On the general assumption on, and first attempt at definition of, the end of history, I take a detailed look at the thought of the Russian-French philosopher, Alexandre Kojève, whose reflections represent a fundamental contribution to the philosophical debate on this subject. I shall provide a more specific argument about what can be said of the end of history as the end of a certain concept of history and its repercussions on social and political fields. In analysing Kojève's work, I also argue that the end of history doctrine, presuming a positive belief in the course of history, presents itself as an alternative to postmodernism, a metanarrative to account for our present condition, to make sense of things. Kojève puts forward the hypothesis of the end of history in the twentieth century: his belief that history has already come to its end epitomizes the political position he develops during his life. He rationally comprehends the end of history as the outcome of the completed historical process and as a state, the only state known to us, in which one has good and sufficient reason to be satisfied. His approach to Hegel's philosophy is pivotal in understanding modernity in relation to the concept of fulfilment and expectation of an end. I will emphasize the ways in which his method is a sound starting point for the analysis of postmodern assertion that there has been an ending of sorts, that we live in a post-historical world, which is an eternal afterwards. Indeed, postmodernity is a condition overwhelmed by a sense of ending, by the feeling that we are at the end of an era and we have to deal with the 'end-after'.

From 1933 to 1939 Kojève taught a seminar at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.²⁹ His lectures were collected, edited and published by Raymond Queneau in *Introduction à la Lecture de Hegel* (Paris: Éditions

²⁹ At the *École Pratique*, Kojève continued the course on Hegel's religious philosophy, which was inaugurated the previous year and taught by his friend and colleague, Alexandre Koyré. Accepting the professorship, Kojève thus came to terms with the Hegelian thought and achieved an understanding of it.

Gallimard) in 1947.³⁰ The seminar functioned as an antidote to the attitude of phobia for, and refusal of, the Hegelian thought – an attitude present at universities at the end of the 1920s, which were oriented towards a return to the Kantian and Cartesian scientific thought. To face Hegel was inevitable in an era when absolute knowledge had come to its decline: it was the beginning of what some decades later became the postmodern utter mistrust towards any search for truth and any positive affirmation, of what Lyotard proclaimed as the end of the grand narratives, the rejection of Hegel's Universal History and the acceptance of only histories as local narratives. Hegel was the model for some epistemological categories not valid anymore in the present era. With hindsight, Kojève's lessons clearly represent a fundamental moment in European culture as they sowed the seed of postmodern thought.

Hegel was the emblem of Western logics and history, which have arrived to completion and end; he had developed the final and definitive philosophy of the human, historical world. His philosophy worked as a touchstone to measure the modern nihilism with regard to the various ends, such as the end of history, the end of philosophy and the end of ideology.³¹ The course of Western civilization proceeded from the Age of Enlightenment to cultural nihilism: the faith in the united progress of reason and freedom collapsed as an adequate explanation of the world, leaving a sense of emptiness and of impossibility of any epistemological claim. Nihilism reflected upon the absence of unquestionable truth. History as a storehouse of examples has no further ontological significance and it is not, of itself, meaningful. If the eternal truth has gone or has been finally unmasked as an illusion, how can philosophy distinguish truth from falsehood? Hegel's answer was that the philosopher can understand history only if history is over, if all historical human possibilities have been achieved, and all interpretative discourse has been completed. According to Hegel history is an organically progressive set, an interconnecting rational chain, which ends in the present. It never repeats itself: "its movement travel not in circles but in spirals, and apparent repetitions are always differentiated by having acquired something new".³² Hegelian idealism assumed a complete assimilation of the historical and the logical: history is logical, it obeys laws, it is a science, it follows a necessary progression and has a meaning.

³⁰ English trans. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr., New York: Basic Books, 1969.

³¹ To maintain that ideology has ended is to renounce a system of meaning, an embodiment of beliefs, values and categories that constituted the way of looking at the world. The end of ideology infers an end of meaning: there is no meaning to find, or to attributed anymore.

³² R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, cit., pp. 114-115.

Kojève's original interpretation of the Hegelian thought was one of the most important episodes of French culture in 1930s. The seminar he held for five years every Monday afternoon deeply affected a whole generation of intellectuals. The group of auditors included Raymond Queneau, Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan, André Breton, Jean Hyppolite and Eric Weil. They were all fascinated by Kojève's personality and subject, his talent and virtuosity. During his lectures, he was theatrical and ironic, always availing himself of an extraordinary analytic confidence. The Russian-French philosopher was animated by the desire and aspiration to survey the basic principles of thought and philosophy, through a course which led to the threshold of absolute knowledge. His interpretation of Hegel can be read as an attempt to make sense of our present social and political life in a systematic and comprehensive way. When he presents his public comment on *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he plans to decipher Hegelian text in order to shed light on a hidden message. He reads the pages of *Phenomenology* as a revelation, finding in it the announcement of the end of history, and considers such a theme of pivotal importance. According to Kojève's reading, Hegel demonstrated that the principle of history is grounded on the desire for recognition and human satisfaction, and foretold the end of history. The achievement of absolute knowledge and the actualization of the universal and homogeneous state tally with historical completion.

Kojève himself admits his originality in approaching Hegelian dialectics. In a letter, dated 7 October 1948 and addressed to the Vietnamese philosopher Tranc Duc Thao, he writes:

My work did not have the character of an historical study; it was relatively unimportant for me to know what Hegel meant to say in his book; I conducted a course in phenomenological anthropology by putting Hegelian text to use, but saying only what I considered to be the truth and letting drop what seemed to me to be an error in Hegel.³³

Kojève means his interpretation of Hegelian text to be political propaganda: he does not believe in the idea of history as theophany; absolute knowledge had to be thought as the death of God because of a revolutionary act. Kojève thinks of Hegelian philosophy as an ideal, a project to be carried out through action. It was not only an academic matter, his comment would have influenced action and determine the shape of the future. His seminar offers a stance on the contests between the Right Hegelians (Americans, liberals and

³³ Cf. James H. Nichols, *Alexandre Kojève: Wisdom at the End of History*, cit., p. 23.

capitalists) and the Left Hegelians (Russians, Marxists and communists) about the best means to attain the end of history. He suggests that his interpretation of Hegel is destined to strike people's mind, and thus has a propagandistic meaning. Breathing a highly politicised atmosphere, he shares the sense of political engagement. On the political meaning of Kojève's analysis, James Nichols writes:

Kojève considered that his own interpretation of Hegel, presented from 1933, the year of Hitler's coming to power, to 1939, just before the outbreak of war, would help to promote the left-wing project of correctly understood Hegelianism over the possible variants, doubtless most importantly those of the Fascists and Nazis.³⁴

For Kojève, the end of history has an ethical and political meaning, for the course of history proved its development from the master-slave dialectic to the supremacy of the citizen. He has a socialist conception of justice as equity and notices that history finally reached a synthesis of the masters' justice of equality and the slaves' justice of equivalence in the citizens' justice of equity.³⁵

Kojève offers a political reading of Hegelian philosophy and aims at bringing out the anthropological aspect from the *Phenomenology*. In his peculiar way, he is a Marxist kind of Hegelian: dissociating himself from the Right-wing Hegelian interpretation, Kojève follows Marx in considering history as man's own self-making project. The most significant feature of his interpretation is the atheistic or anthropological conception of the Spirit. He develops a thoroughly atheistic Hegelianism, rejecting the theistic interpretation of *Geist*. For Kojève, the Hegelian *Geist* is not meant to be the divine, but the human spirit. Kojève proposes his own Hegelian philosophy: instead of interpreting the end of history as the final moment of reconciliation with God or Spirit, Kojève identifies it with the transcendence of an illusion, in which God is recognised as man's own creation. God incarnates the fear of death and the consequent condition of slavery; only when man liberates himself of God, he will be free.³⁶ History ends with atheism, when man accepts his own mortality and lives in the face of death. In his reading of the *Phenomenology*, Kojève is influenced by Marx as well as by Heidegger. Whereas from Marx he takes a secularised, de-theologised philosophical anthropology, from Heidegger he takes the insight that humankind is distinguished from nature through its distinctive ontological self-relation. Kojève is influenced by Heideggerian existentialist interpretation of human being as free, negative, and radically temporal. His

³⁴ Ibid., p. 83.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 71.

³⁶ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, cit., "Summary of the course in 1936-1937".

conception of man is inspired by Heideggerian existentialism to the point that his whole philosophical project can be read as an effort to historicize it.³⁷

In Kojève's interpretation, Hegel's *Phenomenology* is a philosophical anthropology, which systematically and fully describes human existence and behaviour, and signals that, at the end of history, man has perfectly and thoroughly understood himself. The Hegelian text must be regarded as the presentation in which the Spirit becomes conscious of the fact that it has revealed itself in its totality and that it has historically reached its complete fulfilment. This means that its development and history, in which the development occurred, are over. The end of history, as fashioned by Hegel, was a metaphysical doctrine. The philosophy of history was a parallel, if not a replacement of the theological direction of history. In his essay *The End of Ideology*, Daniel Bell comments:

In the Hegelian view, there was an original cosmic consciousness that was diredmpted by the emergence of self-consciousness. Man was divided into subject and object, the I and the Me, and the distinction between appearance and reality. Through time, his division proceeds through the inner levels of consciousness by the *Begriff*, the cunning of reason, while on the manifest level, the divisions of history are realized by world-historical figures such as Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon, who are the instruments of the sweep to universalism. The end of history, in the Hegelian scheme, becomes the realm of the transcendental.³⁸

Following his own interpretation of Hegel, Kojève maintains that the philosophical evolution of mankind has come to its completion. Hegel had developed the final and definitive philosophy of the human and historical world; his system was somehow definitive knowledge and completed the fundamental evolution of philosophy. The Spirit is constantly struggling toward completion, self-fulfilment and self-understanding, and Hegel's philosophy describes the various historical shapes it assumes during its quest. The full development of the Spirit occasions the coming into existence of wisdom or definitive knowledge.³⁹ Therefore, the end of history is also the end of philosophy, since wisdom, which is man's self-knowledge and self-awareness and his ensuing satisfaction from such knowledge and awareness, has been fully actualized. The history of philosophy is concluded by the sage, whose advent is the last historical event. The sage could answer all questions, because he possesses a universal knowledge. This knowledge includes oneself, which is why the sage must be perfectly or fully self-conscious; he is the paradigm or the model for

³⁷ Cf. Shadia B. Drury, *Alexandre Kojève: the Roots of Postmodern Politics*, cit., p. 14.

³⁸ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: on the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, London: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. XVI.

³⁹ Hegel interpreted knowledge in its development through the dialectical stages of the Spirit in History.

himself and for the philosopher. Besides his claim about the end of history, the other important aspect of Kojève's Hegelianism is his analysis of the master-slave dialectic and his application of it as the underlying motive force of world history. Hegel expressed the need to transcend mastery: when individuals and civilizations renounce to it, they get wisdom; this is the process by which the principle of freedom actualized itself.⁴⁰ Once the regime where all are free has been, in principle, established, no further historical action is possible. Wisdom can be actualized only at the end of history when there is nothing further to change. Kojève's seminar ended in 1939 exactly with his discussion of the transformation of philosophy into wisdom at the end of history.

Kojève models his interpretation on two moments taken from the Hegelian teaching: the fight for recognition and the end of history. He interprets history as the archaeology of desire, and struggle and work as the means of the whole phenomenological course. Desire is humanly intrinsic, it disquiets man and leads him to act. Desire is not a real object: it is an emptiness, the presence of an absence. Animal desire and human desire are different: the first aims at a real object and fills itself with that natural content, the second aims at another desire, at desire itself. Unlike animal desires, which are directed toward natural things like food or what is useful for life, human desires are directed toward what is useless from a biological point of view, like love, admiration and honour. Each desire is a desire of value: whereas the greatest desire for animals is life and its preservation, human desire prevails on the desire to preserve life and directs itself towards another desire. Human history is the story of desired desires. Man is ready to risk his life to follow his anthropogenic desire. Such a risk stems from the desire for recognition, which Kojève defines also as desire for pure prestige: man feels the need to impose himself upon other men and make them respect his worth and dignity. Anthropogenic action to impose on the others takes the form of a struggle fought to obtain recognition from the adversary.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Hegel's philosophy of history is the universal history of mankind and exhibits a progress from primitive times to civilization, through the development of freedom. His whole philosophy turns on the principle that every historical process is a dialectical process in which one form of life, for example Greece, generates its opposite, which is Rome, and out of this thesis and antithesis there arises a synthesis, in this case the Christian world. Cf. R. G. Collingwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-119.

⁴¹ The process of man becoming other men's adversary in the obtainment of his desires and in the competition for his rights to be recognised is already described in the seventeenth century by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes. In his anthropology, Hobbes defines the struggle between men as a natural condition: *bellum omnia contra omnes*. According to Hobbes, all human action is a mechanical response to external stimuli; he calls appetite the motion toward the cause of the stimulus and powers the means to obtain a good by following one's appetite. In the condition of mere nature, man's appetite towards things is limitless and the only opposition it finds is in other men's will or desire. The right of each one to all things provokes serious conflict, in Hobbes's words *homo homini lupus*: not only is the state of nature a state of war, but even worse, it

Kojève considers the theory of mutual recognition as the paradigm in terms of which all historical phenomena are ordered. For actual recognition both combatants must remain alive: the adversary has not to be killed, but subjugated. If he dies, he will not recognise the winner as superior. If he survives, he will renounce his independence and recognise the other as his master. After the fight for recognition, man ends to be either master or slave. After the historical epochs of mastery and slavery, citizenship follows and it is only in this moment that real recognition for men occurs. During the first phase, the master dominates the slave and the meaning of history is revealed only through mastery; during the second, slavery determines the essential reality of human existence, but freedom has still to come. Lastly, as the end of history is a synthesis of the two eras, in the third and final historical epoch, human existence is revealed to itself through the active realization of its own possibilities, including full and complete understanding. This is the era of the citizen-sage.⁴²

Desire functions as historical engine; the slave becomes such because he wants to preserve life and avoid death. The terror of death gives rise to history and is also one of the causes of historical slavery. Experiencing deep fear at the possibility of losing his own life, the slave chooses instead to submit to the master, thus finding security for life. The slave, exchanging autonomy for security, is inclined to acknowledge that he is inferior and accepts his own status as slave. He finds it acceptable to give up freedom with terror of death in exchange of security in slavery to the master. The problem, notices Kojève, is that recognition between master and slave is not completely satisfying: the master is recognised by a man whom he does not respect and does not acknowledge in turn. The master believes the slave to be unworthy, because he has plainly accepted his position of inferiority and has not triumphed over his animal desire.⁴³ The master lives through obliging the slave to work, who provides him with all his needs. The slave obeys because he is induced to it by his anxiety of death. However, anxiety alone is not sufficient to justify the creation of history. History is created by human action, by man's taste for changing the existence as given, for transforming nature through *techne*.⁴⁴ The essence of man is action: man is time and history through the action of fight and work. The master fights but does not work, as he lives like a

coincides with a war of all against all. Hobbes announces the creation of the State (and infamously the sublimation to the authority of an absolute sovereign power) as the necessary way out to the state of war. Cf. Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, New York: Penguin Books, 1968.

⁴² Cf. Alexandre Kojève, op. cit., "Summary of the first six chapters of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*", pp. 50-55.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ Hegel claimed that everything which happens in history happens by the will of man, for the historical process consists of human actions.

warrior; the slave works but does not fight, as he lives a working existence. Work represents the way in which the slave gets freedom. Giving up enjoyment, he works because he fears death: yet, his work is the source of social and historical progress. It is through the slave's work that history develops. The slave becomes conscious of meaning, value and necessity of the experience that he made in the fear of the master. He becomes aware of his capacity to negate the given, to act on nature. Through work, he transforms the objective real world and himself: he fulfils himself as a historical free individual and gets his satisfaction.

Finally, the fight for recognition makes the master unsatisfied and the slave quite satisfied: the slave changes the world and changes his condition, the master changes only through and by the action of the slave. The master's interaction with the objects he desires is mediated by the slave's work. The master, ironically living like an animal, merely consumes what the slave provides him with, and has no reason to work and negate the world. The slave works for his master, creating desired objects that he will not enjoy; he thus learns to take a distance from the objects of desire, becomes free in relation to them and learns about the possibility of exchanging one thing for another. Satisfaction is action and action means transforming the real. Future and history belong to the working slave, who gets independence and freedom only after his experience of slavery. He transforms the world, in which he is a slave, into a world he himself creates, in which he will be free. Historical process and becoming are his doing, the fighting master is not involved in it. After transforming the world through work, the slave transforms himself and creates the conditions to restart the liberating fight for recognition. Universal history is the story of the interaction between fighting masters and working servants, and ends when the difference between master and servant does not exist any longer. Only through his work, the slave understands the meaning of freedom and thus accomplishes the project of a violent revolution that makes history end in the immanence of universal and homogeneous state.

Kojève takes the master-slave dialectic to be the foundation and the vital core of Hegel's phenomenological anthropology; he makes it the key to Hegel's whole system.⁴⁵ Kojève consciously reinforces the role of the master-slave dialectic, by considering it the underlying motive force of world history. History originates with the fight for recognition, which is provoked by the anthropogenic desire, entails the division of men between masters and slaves, progresses and extends with the work of the slaves, and gets its completion when the difference between masters and slaves disappears. This is attained for the first time in

⁴⁵ Cf. James H. Nichols, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

history with the French Revolution and is signalled by Napoleon's advent to power. The French revolution is the key to the slave's emancipation, because he finally accepts to risk his own life, overcoming the fear of death that originally defined him as a slave. The result is the accomplishment of universal recognition and the expansion of freedom. History originates with the master-slave dialectic and ends with its full synthesis, which is incarnated by the citizen of the universal and homogeneous state. With his empire, Napoleon made the mutual and universal recognition of men possible. The fight for prestige is not necessary any more: it is the state that confirms the desire for recognition, assuring the complete and definitive satisfaction to each citizen. A citizen takes part in politics and he is recognized for his contribution and participation. There is no need for him to imagine a better world after death, in the Beyond. The better world is on earth: the new heaven of the enlightened citizen is worldly.

The universal state is the historical form of the end of history, and the battle of Jena is the symbolic moment of its exhaustion and completion. In 1806 Napoleon defeated the Prussian monarchy at the battle of Jena-Auerstadt, thus bringing the principles of the French Revolution to Hegel's corner of Germany.⁴⁶ The goal in that historical moment corresponds to the realization of the universal and homogeneous state, where everyone's being is equally recognised as having absolute value. The state is the universality developed by all the particularities: since mastery is linked to universality and slavery to particularity, the recognition of one by the other permits the dialectical union of universality and particularity. Therefore, history really ended in 1806 and subsequent events only represented the extension in space of the conquests of the French Revolution. History after the battle of Jena is but a geographical extension of the revolutionary force first made actual in France. Kojève states:

I understood that the Hegelian-Marxist end of History was not yet to come, but was already present, here and now. Observing what was taking place around me and reflecting on what had taken place in the world since the Battle of Jena, I understood that Hegel was right to see in this battle the end of history properly so-called. In and by this battle the vanguard of humanity virtually attained the limit and the aim, that is, the *end*, of Man's historical evolution.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Hegel did not mean that the liberal state had won all over the world, but that the twin principles of freedom and equality, grounding modern liberal state, were found and carried out in the most advanced countries, and that superior principles to those of liberalism did not exist.

⁴⁷ Alexandre Kojève, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

According to Kojève, what happened after 1806 served to fulfil a quantitative task, that is to extend the end of history to the rest of the world, to make the backward countries align themselves with more progressive European positions. The essentially political historical evolution has already occurred; what remains is but the working out of details of implementation.

Kojève believes that the two world wars with their following large and small revolutions had only the effect of bringing the backward civilizations of the peripheral provinces into line with the most advanced European historical positions. On this point, Kojève appears to be a rational modernist (and risks to appear a colonialist too) in a way he probably did not mean. Considering historical events after 1806 as the necessary extension of the end of history to the rest of the world entails considering a part of the world not only superior but also necessarily ruling the other. I would argue that Kojève's stance on such a question sounds somewhat hazardous as tending to justify and accept not only a European-made history but also Western hegemony. His stance suggests that all the periphery has to do at the end of history is passively resigning to what central Europe decides for and imposes on it. The attitude of justifying subjugation through the logic of the necessary development of history is authoritarian and totalising. As above said, Kojève appears here to be colonialist: he legitimates the "civilising" democratic mission in the Eastern countries and promotes the idea of democracy as the best system which is to be extended to all the rest of the world. What if the rest of the world did not resign itself to accepting the necessary evolution of history, or better the imposition of the West? What if at the end of history wars did not cease and the end would be only the beginning of new struggles? I will turn to this subject and to the various possibilities after the end of history at the end of this chapter.

Kojève takes the end of history to mean some ultimate achievement of democratic equality in both American capitalism and Soviet communism, only later suggesting that the desirable variant of it is Japanese snobbism. He believes in the importance of the process of democratisation, yet this process appears to be very problematic and not pacific at all: it is carried out by force and stands for something the West does to weaker countries. The Western interference in the affairs of the weaker states implies an elitist, rather than universalistic perspective. Presenting democracy as the final shape of every human government and suggesting that history necessarily leads other states to adopt it means at some point to convey and legitimate a totalising outlook over the rest of the world.

Democracy is however a difficult system to sustain, it is vulnerable and precarious, depending on a delicate balance of forces and powers. It does not seem to be the proof that history has got its completion, satisfying human needs and desires. Indeed, the fact of being at war demonstrates that history keeps going on, that sets itself brutally in motion with new actors, new discourses, new risks. There still exist, in particular in the Near East, wars showing that the fate of the world is at stake. If the outcome of these wars can change the fate of the world, it means that history has not ended but is still at stake.

Kojève reads the *Phenomenology* as the linear account of the story of human civilization culminating in the universal and homogeneous state, where people live in agreement and harmony. The disappearance of Man is consequent to the advent of such a state, it is the inevitable epilogue of the post-revolutionary world.⁴⁸ History ends when the state actualises the evolution of mankind and human beings are all equally recognised; it ends with a universal order, without classes and differences. Masters and slaves exist no longer, and everybody mutually recognises the other's freedom; the historical cycle is completed because the human needs of being recognised, legitimised and defended are fully satisfied. History as such, in which men fight against each other for recognition and against nature for changing the status quo through work, is the realm of necessity; the post-historical world (Kojève's *dernier monde*) is the realm of freedom.

Hegel pronounced that the State, or civil society, is the expression of universal reason that freely reconciles objective (general) and subjective (particular) wills by offering the very conditions in which freedom is realized. The State thus allows the final realization of freedom and exists for its own sake. It also functions as the mediator of rationality and morality, in its absence, individuals would fall victim to self-destructive hedonism and irredeemable nihilism. However, Kojève argues that at the end of history man dies as "Man properly so-called", because he is robbed of the activity that defines his essence.⁴⁹ After his death, what remains are bodies with human shape but without spirit, without time and creative force. The kind of man who inhabits the *dernier monde* is conceived by Kojève rather in the manner of Nietzsche's last man⁵⁰: he has no dreams, hopes, or aspirations, he has nothing to worship and nothing to fight and die for, he is peaceful and completely satisfied.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 158, note.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, London: Penguin Books, 1954.

At the end of history, there is the end of the individual as a form of what the West has wanted to call “man”. Man properly so-called disappears: all human possibilities are exhausted, man does not grasp the negating action any longer. History has stopped: nobody acts and changes anything because the given reality is completely satisfying. In his essay on the end of history, Barry Cooper asks and answers an important question:

When do we know that history is over? If history is the story of human transformations of what is given, where there is nothing to transform, nothing to negate, no action in the strong sense of the term, then there is no novelty introduced to the world, no creations, nothing to do – except understand that there is nothing to do. But understanding is not acting; understanding changes nothing, just looks on.⁵¹

According to Hegel, the Napoleonic Empire is a universal and homogenous state, where wars and revolutions are impossible. That is to say that this state will no longer modify itself and will remain eternally identical with itself. For Kojève, the universal and homogeneous state is not a place for action in the sense of introducing novelty and negativity, it is a place where equal recognition and peace are finally realised. The state through which man becomes satisfied is the state where he loses his humanity: man survives only as an animal. Kojève states that the return to animality is the main sign indicating that humanity has entered post-history.

Nonetheless, Man’s disappearance at the end of history is not a cosmic catastrophe, instead it marks the end of man’s ability to plan his future. Man sinks into an eternal “Sunday of life”, into a peaceful post-historical world, where he lives in a state of satisfaction, is fully conscious of it and completely inactive. The expression “Sunday of life” comes from Hegel: post-history corresponds to a time of an interminable Sunday of life that equalizes all things and distances any idea of evil. Time is fixed and immobile, everyday is Sunday, everyday is peace and rest. Completely satisfied with the present, man has no dreams of glory, power and bravery; he distances himself from war as he has transcended his desire for mastery. Kojève believes that when history disappears, also human desire for recognition and the very need for battle are disappearing. Yet, it should be added that there is no valid reason to presume that conquest, violence and the quest for dominion will not be part of the post-historical world. Shadia Drury argues that

whatever Kojève may say, history has not eliminated the quest for dominion; it remains a powerful instinct that no civilizing process can erase. It is an animal

⁵¹ Barry Cooper, *The End of History: An Essay on Modern Hegelianism*, cit., p. 74.

instinct connected to the desire for territory, breeding ground, wealth, and all the things that minister to biological needs.⁵²

Kojève supposes that the disappearance of the struggle, (struggle which Hobbes defined as the state of nature and, at the same time, which was the source of history), makes man happy with his life, not wishful of anything else, asking for nothing different from what he already has. Hard work and bloody battles are over: man's negativity is that of a man who has nothing more to do. The absence of action tallies with the death of man: the end of action means the end of human time and history.

The end of history levels everything and everyone, and stops the possibility of human political activity. Wars and revolutions disappear, yet all the rest can be preserved indefinitely: art, love, play and all that makes man happy. Man returns an animal and his activities will no longer remain specifically human but will be similar to those of animals:

his arts, his loves, and his play must also become purely 'natural' again. Hence it would have to be admitted that after the end of History, men would construct their edifices and works of art as birds build their nests and spiders spin their webs, would perform musical concerts after the fashion of frogs and cicadas, would play like young animals, and would indulge in love like adult beasts.⁵³

History ends in the animalization of man, the eclipse of mankind and the triumph of slave morality. As Barry Cooper observes, the animality of last men is not confined to their artistic, erotic, and playful behaviour, it would extend to their communication as well: no longer would human beings speak, they would simply react by reflex to vocal or visual signals. Existence returns to the pre-historical absorption of consciousness in things.⁵⁴ If human discourse disappears, so does philosophy and wisdom. Men fall silent: complete satisfaction has led to the extinction of their desire, they have no desire to speak, reason and think any longer. They are like animals, which have no intellect and cannot produce any knowledge.

With regard to economy, history ends with accomplished capitalism.⁵⁵ For Kojève, it is in capitalistic countries, and not in communist ones, that the economic actualization of human productive capacities has met its climax. Capitalism has demonstrated great transformative capacities, in particular that of producing and spreading wealth. In so doing,

⁵² Shadia B. Drury, op. cit., p. 64.

⁵³ Alexandre Kojève, op. cit., p. 159, note.

⁵⁴ Barry Cooper, op. cit., p. 261.

⁵⁵ The view of history as ending in capitalism has been more recently expressed in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, (New York: Viking Press, 1977). Cf. Shadia B. Drury, op. cit., p. 228.

capitalism has made the socialist revolution unnecessary because prosperity will soon overtake the globe. Unlike Marx, Kojève sustains that the age of revolution is already past and gone. Freedom, wealth and equal recognition have already been reached. He thinks of the United States as the economic model of the post-historical world: America economically triumphed over the Soviet Union, being its model more efficient and successful. With the mass experience of American capitalism, the post-historical man already lives in an eternal present, where he has all he wants. However, ten years later Kojève finds another possibility of post-historical life in Japan. Man as creator of history and meaning is not necessarily destined to disappear: his possibility to survive after the end of history lies in snobbery. Kojève identifies the idea of a post-historical Japan in the total gratuity of mass gestures like the tea ceremony or the ritual theatre.

Evaluating the post-historical world, Kojève meditates upon the two following different perspectives, which would occur at the end of history. One is the American way of life, which allows for the universal recognition: men are all members of a classless society and can appropriate for themselves everything they want. America, as the incarnation of the post-historical society, is yet populated by Nietzschean last men.⁵⁶ America is the heart of the universal and homogeneous empire, but at the same time it is the leader in the process of man's animalization; it represents the end of history and the death of man. The democratic liberalism coincides with the end of history; but the other side of the coin is that to satisfy the desire for recognition man returns an animal, as he lives desiring and consuming. The satisfaction of desire produces enjoyment which is continually renewed by lack and endless consumption. Capitalism, which favours this mechanism of multiplication of desires and continuous offer of consumable products, makes man a passive subject, a last man whose only action is to consume. This way of life, typical of the United States (and, by now, of all the West), was not an auspicious one.⁵⁷ What is freedom in industrial democracies if not the pursuit of economic interests and the possibility to compete in economic space?

⁵⁶ Kojève's description of last men's triumph at the end of history bears a striking resemblance to Nietzsche's last men in the Prologue of his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. "Nietzsche imagined a generation of self-satisfied brutes who were well-fed, well-clothed, well-sheltered, and well-medicated. Their biological needs satisfied, they were like contented cows. They strove for nothing beyond their animal pleasures and their creature comforts". Shadia B. Drury, op. cit., p. 82.

⁵⁷ Also the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek pessimistically returns on, and refers to, last men's way of life. Žižek argues that "we, Western men, are Nietzschean last men, immersed into foolish pleasures of daily life", holding a slave-position because we are unable to free ourselves from a soporiferous consumer attitude. Cf. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: five essays on September 11 and related dates*, London: Verso, 2002, p. 46.

In the note added to the second edition of his *Introduction to Hegel's Reading* (1968), Kojève identifies the fall of man into the post-historical condition of animality. Not only does the post-historical man end to be an animal, but is also unable to create History as movement through the steps of creation of meaning. Therefore, Kojève examines the second option on the scene, the Japanese. Far from promoting human evolution toward a society of American kind, in which the ideal is to be a rich consumer, Kojève sympathises for the second possibility, whose conception followed his journey to Japan in 1959. Then Kojève discovers the existence of a society already immersed in the end of history, whose life style is the emblem of post-historical wisdom. He sees at first hand a society that had for three centuries lived in isolation and without fighting. Nobility, the embodiment of Japanese civilization, had ceased to risk life but had not become bourgeois. If by nature snobbery was a prerogative of a small minority, the Japanese had yet succeeded on democratizing it. Snobbery, namely formalised values empty of content in the historical human sense, could provide the basis for the continued existence of humanity in the post-historical future.

The American way of life coincides with a preference for fast and easy satisfactions, an impatience with tradition and a practical utilitarianism linked to a sort of contempt for theory and contemplation. Post-historical Japanese civilization is committed to a road diametrically opposed to the American way. The Japanese lifestyle indeed offers an alternative to the American model and prevents man's return to animality. Japanese society displays snobbery, which is for Kojève sufficient to produce the difference between preserving humanity and lapsing into animality. Snobbery is the Japanese answer to the end of history and expresses itself in aesthetic exercises, such as arts of flower arrangements, tea ceremonies and Noh theatre. Thanks to snobbery, death and negativity have nothing to do with risk. The Japanese post-historical society presents unemployed negativity: formal snobbery is the expression of megalothymia which does not entail horrors any longer.

Snobbery in its pure form created disciplines negating the 'natural' or 'animal' given which in effectiveness surpassed those that arose, in Japan or elsewhere, from 'historical' Action – that is, from warlike and revolutionary Fights or from forced Work.⁵⁸

Kojève comes upon the idea of the 'négativité gratuite' thinking that it could be a solution to the unbearable homogeneity of the world. He regards it as man's highest virtue: Japanese

⁵⁸ Alexandre Kojève, op. cit., p. 162, note.

purposeless negativity permits to humanize the end of history and escape from the descent into animality.

In the second part of his life, Kojève puts his philosophical ideas into practice.⁵⁹ Facing real problems, Kojève takes note of the fact that we live at the end of history and tries to cope with its political implications. He announces a massive standardization between the East and the West, underlining a predominant shift of the modern world to the West. The East and the West want and do the same things, so that we witness a sort of alignment between them. History leads to a universal and homogeneous State, where nature is transformed in order to satisfy our desires and to obtain acknowledgment by the others. At the end of this process there is a return to animality, which can be avoided only through unemployed negativity (Japanese way of life at the end of history). In the post-war years Kojève looks for that political idea able to put into practice the state of the end of history, the universal and homogeneous state. He disagrees with any attempt to reduce all of human life to the economic dimension. He understands that Europe based merely on economics would not have a future and that the European Economic Community lacks a political original idea, being dependent on USA.

From 1945 he starts to work as a bureaucrat dealing with foreign economic relations in the French ministry of economics and finance.⁶⁰ At the DREE (Direction des relations économiques extérieures), where he works until 1968⁶¹, the lines of his conduct are two: the first aims at actualising the conditions of the end of history, favouring the development of the third world; the second intends the creation of a unique European market, which includes national economics through the free circulation of goods and money. Kojève's central concern is to bring underdeveloped countries into the world system of economic prosperity: he plays an important role in matters relating to the European Economic Community and GATT (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade). Regarded as one of the earliest architects of the European Union, he believes that he is presiding over the development of the final shape of the world.

Kojève leaves his disciples and succeeding generations a weighty heritage and urgent questions. What does it mean to say that history is already over? What are the implications of such an assertion on man's view of present and future human life? Shadia

⁵⁹ Kojève was a politically engaged intellectual who tried to understand the world around him and act to improve it. He thought that ideas make history and that philosophers must influence the powerful.

⁶⁰ Kojève talked about his work as "administering the end of history". Cf. James H. Nichols, *Alexandre Kojève: Wisdom at the End of History*, cit., p. VIII.

⁶¹ He died at an international meeting in Brussels on 4th June 1968.

Drury investigates Kojève's influence on French and American intellectuals, and offers a clear analysis of the way in which some aspects of Kojève's philosophy can be considered the seed of postmodern thought. By repudiating reason as homogenising, totalising and oppressive, and by rejecting the modern world, Kojève can be regarded as a forerunner of postmodern ironical attitude toward reason and disenchantment with modernity. I think that Kojève's conception of the end of history plays a key role in giving shape to postmodern approach to history, and it is over this aspect I would like to linger. Is the appeal to history still possible? If the answer is positive, in what way? Postmodernism denies any rational development in history and reports the end of the myth of progress. History ends to be a finished work of art, a kind of entertainment or a passion for sight-seeing. Such a conception seems to come straight from Kojève's reflections on the post-historical world, where man is an insatiable tourist, history becomes his entertainment and the world his museum.

Kojève understands history as the project of transforming the world in order to satisfy man's desires and aspirations, and states that contemporary history has finally attained its end. The end of history, with the affirmation of the realm of freedom, sounds even optimistic. It indicates the resolution of contradictions, the reconciliation of subjective and rational will and the realization of freedom on earth. The old master-slave relationship is substituted by mutual and equal recognition. The end of history involves the definitive resolution of all conflicts, the attainment of universal satisfaction of the desire for recognition, and the presence of a state that allows happiness into an indefinite future. The future ceases to be historical, that is to say dominated by negativity and change, and ends to be a post-revolutionary and post-historical state with full harmony of man and nature. However, Kojève's ambiguity lies in the fact that he concludes his thesis with Nietzsche's last man and some pessimistic predictions. He finally sinks into despair and a sort of nostalgia for a lost and irretrievable past. The only exception or way out to despondency is the Japanese model and the possibility to apply the unemployed negativity to the rest of the world. It seems curious that the end of history on the one hand tallies with the battle of Jena and the advent of the universal and homogeneous state, whereas on the other, it is also represented by the Japanese lifestyle. The idea of the end of history in Japan might in some respect contradict Kojève's previous cogitation. So, when and where is history over? What kind of heritage is postmodernism asked to bear? The end of history and the death of man take place in postmodern society where all the horizons have exploded and ideologies are recognised as fictions. The Truth does not exist anymore, only many truths are to be found;

History disappears and makes room for a myriad of stories. Historical fulfilment and completion have already occurred, but it seems ironically reasonable to deduce that the end of history itself is not one only.

1.3 Fukuyama's Welcome to the End of History

“When I die I don't want to go to Heaven, I want to go shopping in America” –
Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (p. 286).

Following Kojève's approach to history and politics, Francis Fukuyama delves into the subject of the end of history and reopens the debate on the post-historical world. In 1989 he published an article entitled “The End of History?” in the journal *The National Interest*, in which he poses the Kojévian thesis on the end of history again, by applying it to contemporary society. Then, he dedicated himself to writing a whole essay on this topic: *The End of History and the Last Man* appeared in 1992. Fukuyama reinvigorates the end of history tradition as an alternative to postmodernism by sharing with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment a belief in the power of reason and a faith in progress. His presupposition is that we have to take into account the possibility that history is over, unless we can imagine a world different from that we live in, and the future may lead to any improvement to our system. He uses the notion of the end of history to refer to the idea of the completion of history, of history coming to a close. On the basis that liberal democracy has been met with enthusiasm in several countries, Fukuyama maintains that it could be the goal of the ideological evolution of mankind and the final form of human government. In this sense, liberal democracy would sanction the end of history, which is “not the end of occurrence of events, but History taking into account the experience of all peoples in all times”.⁶² He relies pivotally on Kojève's ideas that at the end of history wars and revolutions are over and man is a last man, whose needs are satisfied and whose self-preservation is made possible by rational and universal recognition.

In his book, Fukuyama aims at offering a socio-economical interpretation of the end of history: he explains the last stage of the historic-political progression, which led to the democratic state, by referring to those who saw the process of actualisation of freedom at the core of history. In particular, he mentions Hegel's and Marx's thought, emphasising that both philosophers considered the possibility of a last form of society which would have

⁶² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: MacMillan, 1992, Introduction.

fulfilled historical evolution. His theory on the end of history is far from original; he is indebted not only in the distinguished tradition which includes Kant, Hegel and Marx, but also in the views of Kojève and his Hegelian interpretation, to the point that he often considers Kojève's and Hegel's ideas as the same. Fukuyama focuses on those thinkers responsible for the development of modernity, using their ideas as tools to help interpret the contemporary situation and glorify and idealize the present, thinking that further progress is almost impossible. The biases of his study originate from his interest more in the ideas rather than in the philosophers who originally articulated them and in his consequent misrepresentations in his selection of them.

Fukuyama believes not only that history has come to an end but also that such an end is positive: his thesis can be viewed as an alternative to postmodernism since it affirms that the Enlightenment project has been finally accomplished and that the faith in progress has been rewarded by the creation and consequent universalization of Western liberal democracy.⁶³ Postmodernism, which strikes at the heart of the Enlightenment project by claiming that no absolute foundation and truth can be discovered or revealed, rejects Fukuyama's theory as universalistic and totalising. The incompatibility between his thought and postmodernism lies in his very attempt to present his interpretation as the only correct one. He avails himself of the Enlightenment search for a metanarrative in order to account for our present condition and concludes that there is only one possible metanarrative, namely the end of history, which can make sense of things. By stressing the remarkable consensus concerning the legitimacy of liberal democracy as a political system, Fukuyama declares that it is the final form of human government and the final ideology. He maintains that no further development in political ideology is desirable or even possible. According to him, the ideal of liberal democracy cannot be improved on and, eventually, we shall all reach the same destination.

Fukuyama's thesis became popular amid the triumphal celebrations over the fall of Communism by Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush. His argument is American-Eurocentric and I cast doubt on its universal applicability. Liberal democracy appears to be not a universal form of government as it cannot be prescribed for all states: it is rooted in specific Western historical experience, which endorses a theory of economy

⁶³ Such a reading of the Enlightenment is rather idiosyncratic. For an analysis of the Enlightenment's historical and cultural context and an interpretation of its aims and representative authors, see Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche, ed., *L'Illuminismo, Dizionario Storico*, Bari: Laterza, 1997; Vincenzo Ferrone, *I profeti dell'Illuminismo*, Bari: Laterza, 2000; Tzvetan Todorov, *In Defence of the Enlightenment*, London: Atlantic Books, 2009; Vincenzo Ferrone, *Lezioni illuministiche*, Bari: Laterza, 2010.

over the others; it demands that market economy is adopted as the primary model of production and distribution of economic goods and services. In response to Fukuyama's confidence and positiveness, I argue that it is not true that all people want liberal democratic capitalism to win nor do they think desirable it would happen. It is sound to think that people in non-Western societies might not share Fukuyama's idea that the ingredients for a better future are individual freedom and capitalist enterprise, but have their own view of what a better future might be made by. Moreover, it is very hard to share Fukuyama's conviction that human race is moving into an era of peace and freedom - if only it were true and we could have this certainty. It is more probable that just as some of the horrors of the nineteenth century survived into the twentieth, some twentieth-century horrors will survive in the twenty-first. Fukuyama's outlook on the historical future is easily contestable: if the world were actually more rational, wars would have eventually ceased in the new political system brought by reason. Yet, this is not the case. On the contrary, what happened in the twentieth century challenges any possibility to think that we have progressed and we will continue to do so. Any belief and hope in progress and in a better and more pacific future has been severely tested.

Nonetheless, Fukuyama appears to be blindly sticking to the Enlightenment positivistic progressivism. Howard Williams writes:

Fukuyama's argument is that there is one universally true set of moral and political principles and that there is one universally true form of rationality which underpins these principles. In doing so, Fukuyama shares the same Enlightenment picture of the world as his key predecessors Kant, Hegel and Marx.⁶⁴

Kant's thought has been influential on Fukuyama about international relations and the need for a pacific union of liberal democratic states; Williams observes that Fukuyama agrees with Kant in seeing the constitutional republics created by American and French revolutions as providing role models for others to follow.⁶⁵ It was not at the fall of the Berlin Wall that liberal democracy triumphed, but already more than two centuries ago with American Revolution (1776), and the emancipation of Colonies, and French Revolution (1789), and the depose of the ancient regime. Yet, liberal democracy has constantly to be actualised and made over by its members: the process of democratisation has started but not finished.

⁶⁴ Howard L. Williams, *Francis Fukuyama and the End of History*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997, p. 166.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

According to Fukuyama, the end of history must be understood in terms of the victory of the idea of liberal democracy, of a constitutional order in which citizens might determine their fate together peacefully under the liberal rule of law, but this does not mean that wars and other conflicts would immediately cease. If not immediately, when then? Fukuyama argues that the great battles for the future of humanity have been decided on the basis of three propositions:

- 1) that the idea of freedom must be seen as realizing itself through the planetary acceptance of liberal democratic institutions; 2) that this acceptance has resulted in a growing "common marketization" of international relations; and 3) that this common marketization is gradually eliminating the possibility of war.⁶⁶

Fukuyama agrees with the notion, of which Hegel, Marx and Kojève speak, of world history as a rational evolutionary process. Both Hegel and Marx had a teleological view of history; they shared the belief in a pattern underlying the course of events and thought that the route history gets is a necessary one. Marx accepted the Hegelian argument on underlying historicity in human facts, namely the idea that, in the course of time, human society has evolved from primitive social structures to more complex and advanced social ones, and Hegelian thesis that history might end. According to both Hegel and Marx, human societies have coherently developed, going through simple tribal forms and then theocratic ones, and finally leading to modern liberal democracy and technologically driven capitalism. The difference in their viewpoints lies in their choice of agency in bringing about the necessary steps forward in history: Hegel believed that human beings are the agents of one higher driving force that he called Spirit; for Marx the agents are social classes and the forces of production. Even if in different terms, they both thought of a final form of society, free of contradictions, whose realization would have put an end to the historical unfolding. In Hegel the end of history would have coincided with the Prussian state in which he ended his academic career; in Marx it would have coincided with a communist society (the dictatorship of the proletariat). Marx deemed the liberal state as unable to solve the fundamental contradiction of the class conflict, that between middle class and working class. The liberal state did not represent the universalization of freedom, but its only appropriation by the middle class. Also Fukuyama considers history as a single, coherent, evolutionary process and claims that it comes to its end in, and with, modern democracy, which grounds

⁶⁶ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Imagining the Possible: Radical Politics for Conservative Times*, New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 196.

itself on the twin principles of freedom and equality. Fukuyama regards Hegel as the greatest of modern philosophers and wants his essay to be Hegelian in its inspiration and orientation, and shares with Marx the secular idea of the end of history, making a radical break with all theistic views of historical change.

Fukuyama observes that, for Kojève, Hegelian universal history had been more prophetic than the Marxist, and human history, despite the turning points and changes of the following years, did really end in 1806, as Hegel professed. The twin principles of freedom and equality brought by the French Revolution were at the base of the modern universal and homogeneous state, and represented the achievement of human ideological evolution, beyond which no further evolution might occur. Fukuyama maintains that Kojève was the most important interpreter of Hegel in the twentieth century, like Marx in the nineteenth. In *The End of History and the Last Man*, he continually calls the attention on Kojève, being indebted to him for most of his intuitions on, and revisions of, the historical progression. It is thanks to Kojève that Fukuyama writes a universal history of mankind in the Twentieth Century. His book is based on the justification of the validity of a new universal history: it opposes to the tendency of the twentieth-century pessimistic philosophy, which did not consider the possibility of a necessary historical course that would affirm the best of the possible worlds. For Fukuyama, the best of the possible worlds is epitomised by the democratic state: the new history finds its completion in the liberal democracy of the United States.

Fukuyama's claim is that America has won as the champion of a victorious ideology: the dissolution of the Soviet Union demonstrates his (and George H. W. Bush's) idea of America's history as world power. He appears to be the spokesman for the American effort and tendency to shape history in its own image. Indeed, his views have often been dismissed as being no more than an apology for American foreign policy. Writing at the end of the Cold War, Fukuyama claims that the fall of Communism and the triumph of free market liberalism brought an end to history: the old era of ideological clashes could be replaced by a quieter time of consensus and peaceful stability.⁶⁷ In Fukuyama's triumphalist historical account, history is a closed book and there can be great comfort in that. Daniel Bell argues that, on the contrary, with the end of Communism we are seeing a resumption of history, "a lifting of the heavy ideological blanket and the return of traditional ethnic and religious

⁶⁷ The end of the historical dialectic (between communism and capitalism) and of ideologies' competition resulted in left-wing intellectuals' fears that an adequate political resistance to the global advance of capitalism was no longer possible. Slavoj Žižek insisted that a left alternative to liberal democracy should be proposed.

conflicts in the many regions of the former socialist states and elsewhere".⁶⁸ The new economic tendency is responsible for great political fragmentation and the assumption of American superiority leads to the resurface of racism and clash of civilizations. Fukuyama claims that the Cold War's end reinvigorated the triumphalist narrative of American history; however, the events of September 11 deeply challenged it. The 1990s are sinisterly bracketed on the one side by the end of the Cold War and the Fall of the Berlin Wall, on the other side by the terrorist attack, by the fall of the Twin Towers. American optimism was severely shaken by terrorist attacks and September 11 revealed all the vulnerability of democracies.

Twentieth-century intellectuals jettison the idea that history is a coherent and rational course and declare themselves pessimistic about the possibility of a global progress within democratic institutions. Such pessimism is as much understandable as justifiable in front of two world wars, the rise of totalitarian ideologies and modern science that produced nuclear weapons, damaged environment and finally turned against man himself.⁶⁹ There are pieces of evidence proving that history has not ended and that humanity does not seem to progress; suffice it is to mention increasing levels of inequality about everywhere and the rising and unbearable indebtedness in the Third World. Despite Fukuyama's pronouncement, contemporary history still goes on and sadly faces the intensification of ethnic and cultural divisions in many parts of the world. In the light of twentieth-century events, we can but infer that history like a progressive sequence of events and order full of meaning does not exist any longer. The very existence of the Holocaust and other terrible evils of the twentieth century represents an impossibility for a meaning in history – indeed, it has been the belief itself in a meaning in history that led to many of the occurred atrocities. It would be absurd to clothe with meaning the pure insanity of war and its following horrors.⁷⁰ The logical attitude is that of deconstructing and abandoning any historical meaning - in the next chapter I will focus on postmodern response to the end of history, on the fact that postmodernists spurn the belief in the end of history and its meaning.

With the appearance of totalitarianisms, modern technology and political organisation were both put in the service of evil. Science appears to be not democratic; it does not promote equality, it gives the few immense power over the rest. History gives

⁶⁸ Daniel Bell, *op. cit.*

⁶⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *op. cit.*, Introduction.

⁷⁰ Cf. Bernard Henri Lévy, *Réflexions sur la guerre, le mal et la fin de l'histoire*, Engl. trans. *War, evil and the end of history*, London: Duckworth, 2004, p. 152.

evidence of the fact that science has often been used for egotistical ends of individuals or nations, not for the good of humanity. There is no logical connection between scientific and technological societies and peaceful and democratic ones. The fact is that technology does not necessarily mean prosperity: even if it is wise and advisable to think that technology will bring an end to scarcity, it is unfortunately not automatic or consistent. The wars, which were provoked by totalitarian ideologies, caused the mass destruction of populations and of economic resources. How is it then possible to find a linear logic, a scheme or a project in the course of history? The intellectual crisis comes from the inability to profess a historical progress and detect a direction or an inner logic in the historical course. Where is humanity leading to? Instead of a unique history steering in a precise direction, we perceive a plurality of stories and notice as many goals as the populations are. The intellectual crisis of Western rationalism is analogous to the twentieth-century political crisis, which questions the possibility that liberal democracy is to be privileged among the various forms of government.

Under the influence of his reading of Hegelian and Marxist thought, Fukuyama still thinks of a single history of mankind, at once universal and multiple, and supposes that different human societies run towards an end. According to him, the values and institutions developed during the Western Enlightenment are potentially universal; scientific and historical progress is still to be conceived. He celebrates the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history. Not only does he believe that liberal democracy is to be privileged among the various forms of government, as it met great consensus among several countries, but also that it represents the final stage of historical progression.⁷¹ There is no better system, economically and politically, than liberal democracy and it will become more and more prevalent in the long term.

The idea that democracy is the general and inevitable tendency of peoples comes from the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville. In his journey in the United States, Tocqueville interrogated himself on the basis of democracy and maintained that democracy must be conceived not only in its etymological meaning, power to the people (*demos* equals people, *cratos* equals power), but also and above all, in its social sense: democracy is a

⁷¹ For a critique on political democratic systems and its intrinsic nature subjected to corruption, cf. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, cit., pp. 76-90.

historical process which grants equality to people.⁷² He understood democracy as being at bottom the acceptance of human equality rather than any one type of government: in democracy, citizens have same rights and social mobility is permitted; the general aspiration is towards equality. Nonetheless, equality of rights does not entail equality of economic and social conditions: differences in living standards will continue to exist even within a democratic system. In view of people's different conditions, Tocqueville observed that the equality conceded in democracy was not real but imaginary. Yet, the tendency toward equality of conditions, which Tocqueville considered inevitable in the course of history, was somehow dangerous for the balance of society and political freedom, as it went hand in hand with the increasing of individualism. On the one hand, individualism involved a weakening of social cohesion, on the other hand it made the individual submit to the will of the majority. In the light of this thought, he wondered if this progress towards equality was compatible with the other important principle of democracy, that is freedom. Freedom must be regarded here as the personal resistance to the political power and it opposes itself to equality because the individual has the tendency to delegate his power to a despotic authority and thus not to use his political freedom anymore.⁷³ The way out to this impasse was for Tocqueville the return to political and social associations and corporations that help strengthen social relationships. Joining in association accustoms people to collaborating and taking part in the life of the organisation from the same position, without wealth differences. Fukuyama, and first Kojève, focuses on the importance of the right to freedom of association in democratic systems as meeting human need for recognition: political groups, civil associations and political parties must be developed and protected. Tocqueville believed that democracy in modern age was the best form of rule because it promised the greatest opportunity for extending liberty to all citizens, and that democratic society was destined to triumph because allowed happiness to most people. American society is egalitarian as it allows everyone to fulfil himself and rewards individual progress. Tocqueville has been hugely influential in disseminating the idea that America is the country in whose path all others are bound to follow (sooner or later, one way or another).⁷⁴

⁷² Cf. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America* (1831-1832), Yale University Press, 1960; Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835-1840), Engl. trans. *Democracy in America*, University of Chicago Press, 2000.

⁷³ Although the trend towards democracy was benign and irreversible, it carried with it a threat to freedom of mind and action; indeed, Tocqueville predicted the risk that America could fall into a type of mass conformism.

⁷⁴ Cf. John Gray, "An Ambivalent Authority" in *Literary Review*, December 2006/January 2007.

Fukuyama shares Tocqueville's view and promotes American liberal system which represents the State at the end of history:

The state that emerges at the end of history is liberal insofar as it recognises and protects through a system of law man's universal right to freedom, and democratic insofar as it exists only with the consent of the governed.⁷⁵

In the United States popular sovereignty is granted and secured because everyone takes part in the administration of the *res publica* (and votes). According to Fukuyama, modern democracy, based on the twin principles of freedom and equality, is the end of history intended as an evolutionary process, unique and full of meaning. Central to his confidence that we are at the end of history is the belief of the triumph of liberal democracy over all other ideologies: his tone is sinisterly triumphalist and optimistic. His claim that the disintegration of Communism, and Fascism, in Europe has made liberal democracy and its attendant capitalist economic system catch on everywhere is challengeable, because the process does not seem to be a necessary one. Fukuyama writes as an American citizen, taking the society of which he is part as the best model to apply to the rest of the world. As I implied before, his liberal aspirations for the rest of the world are vulnerable to the charge that they do but mirror American strategic and political interests.

In spite of the bitter reflections of twentieth-century historicism, Fukuyama appears to be optimistic: if it is true that the strength of liberal democracies has been menaced by the violence of ideological conflicts, it is also true that such strength can be conquered again. Fukuyama does not share European despair about a lost and irretrievable past. He tackles the conditions of modernity with a sort of optimism, which is typically American. He attempts to underline the positive aspects of the last fifty years by examining the weakening of the dictatorships both of the military-authoritarian Right and the communist-totalitarian Left. In the Second World War, liberal democracies defeated authoritarian regimes and surfaced, in the second half of the century, on the global scene as the dominant form of government. However, one could counter that there is a relation of continuity between mass democracy and totalitarian states: in twentieth century parliamentary democracies have rapidly turned into totalitarian states and totalitarian states have then converted into parliamentary democracies. Fukuyama argues that in addition to military triumphs, the increasing prosperity of the West designates free markets as efficient providers of economic goods and services. Liberal democracy, almost a synonymous with free markets, thus

⁷⁵ Francis Fukuyama, op. cit., p. 4.

demonstrates that civil and political rights can coexist with high standards of living. For Fukuyama, the end of the Cold War sanctioned the death of Soviet communism as the ideological rival of liberal democracy.

Therefore, he deems that liberal democracy is the only coherent political aspiration, even if not present in all the countries. He tries to show that liberal democracy has by now triumphed, yet it would be more correct to regard its victory as a temporary condition rather than a permanent one. It has been argued that liberal democracy is a difficult system to sustain, because it requires compromise and consensus on large questions. One of the problems of democratic politics is to bring the voting power into relation with the general interest of the community: people are not free because they can vote, but are free as long as the voting system guarantees them their interests, not thwarting and frustrating them for the benefit of others. Moreover, as a vulnerable political system, it can work as long as it prevents ecological and environmental disasters and does not breed social unrest, dissatisfaction or resentment. Ali Khan argues that “the concept of liberal democracy cannot be universalized because many states are unwilling to separate state from religion and some are inclined towards socialist economies”⁷⁶.

Fukuyama reasons that most of the economic liberal principles spread and produced prosperity not only in industrially developed countries but also in impoverished countries. Liberal democracy will thus rapidly become the universal political form because of its economic system which delivers the goods; for Fukuyama economic and scientific developments increasingly demonstrate that capitalism and Western science are far more successful than any of their rivals - yet, there is no proof that if liberalism increases conflicts decrease. In order to prove that democracy is the most coherent result of the historical course, Fukuyama identifies the engine of the whole process with the spirit of science and the desire for recognition.⁷⁷ Upon these two concepts, he makes a good case for the existence of a universal history and its final attainment. According to Fukuyama, it is still reasonable, at the end of the twentieth century, to speak of a coherent and directional history of mankind that will finally lead most countries to the political form of liberal democracy. He deduces that if liberal democracy is not the only possible solution, it is however

⁷⁶ Ali Khan, *A Theory of Universal Democracy: beyond the End of History*, The Hague - London: Kluwer Law International, 2003, p. 47.

⁷⁷ Cf. Francis Fukuyama, *op. cit.*, Part II “The Old Age of Mankind” and Part III “The Struggle for Recognition”.

reasonable to maintain that it is the most plausible. It is an open question if we have to aspire to it, or not.

Fukuyama traces his positivism back to two different argumentations: one is scientific and economic, the other is linked to the fight for recognition. He assumes that there is a close relationship between scientific development and economic change and traces a connection between advanced industrialization and capitalism.⁷⁸ The development of science and technology is the single human activity to be progressive and constantly increasing; for this reason, modern science acts as a regulator of directional changes in history. Nevertheless, science does not provoke such changes, it only controls them. The discovery of modern science produces directional history; it is unlikely that scientific method suddenly stops ruling our life and that industrial societies revert to pre-modern and pre-scientific. Indeed, history seems to exhibit some irreversible developments. Fukuyama doubts that modern science can be forgotten or not invented (the scientific method is owned by all of mankind and the lessons of the past cannot be fully unlearned), unless the physical annihilation of human race occurs. On the basis that modern science is cumulative and irreversible, the logic conclusion is that even directional history and its social, economic and political effects are irreversible. Thus, through the mechanism of modern science, Fukuyama proves the directionality and coherence of history.

Scientific development boosts productivity and leads to the good life: economic development improves living standards. Technology is accessible to us and we choose to use it as we are desiring creatures looking for improvement in living conditions: the products of science and technology make people's lives more comfortable and more secure. Fukuyama ponders the fact that all the countries in which a process of economic modernisation takes place, are meant to look alike more and more: "they would rationally unify on the basis of a centralising state, urbanise, replace traditional forms of social organization like tribe, sect and family with economically rational forms"⁷⁹, which ground on function and efficiency, and finally endow their citizens with education. Through global markets and the spread of a universal consumer culture, societies have ever more become linked with one another. The world is increasingly becoming a global village. According to Fukuyama, the logic of modern science will introduce a universal evolution toward capitalism. The device of modern science helps Fukuyama in explaining the economic

⁷⁸ According to Fukuyama, the economy provides one certain guarantor of the forward movement of history and modern science can be considered a mechanism apt to explain historical directionality and coherence.

⁷⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

triumph of capitalism, which he connects to the satisfaction of material human needs⁸⁰, but it does not entail the political supremacy and legitimacy of liberal democracy. Therefore, the question he tries to answer is whether this logic actually leads to liberal democracy or not.

The deep connection existing between economic development, high levels of education and democracy is showed by southern Europe (Spain, Greece and Portugal) and by Asia (Japan, Taiwan and South Korea). Looking at the world situation, Fukuyama detects a general and high correlation between the growing socio-economic modernisation and the presence of new democracies. He statistically notices that development goes hand in hand with democracy: western Europe and North America, which are the oldest and firmest liberal democracies, are rated among the most developed regions. But this is not an automatic equivalence: successful economic development and industrialization do not necessarily give rise to democratic institutions and political freedom. There are indeed numerous examples of technological capitalism coexisting with political authoritarianism (for instance Singapore or Thailand). In particular, Fukuyama lingers over the case of the Middle East, which does not present stable democracies, even though it enumerates several states with a per capita income similar to that in Europe or Asia⁸¹.

Fukuyama argues that liberal democracy faces two challenges: radical Islam, which represents an evident obstacle to democracy, and rising authoritarian powers, such as China and Russia, which pose a rival model. Besides such political external menaces to contemporary democracies, Fukuyama is also conscious of the inner difficulties and serious problems that they might meet, like drugs, homelessness, crime, environmental damage and the frivolity of consumerism. Nonetheless, he says that “these problems are not obviously insoluble on the basis of liberal principles, nor so serious that they would necessarily lead to the collapse of society as a whole”.⁸² He notes that there is a general consensus, with the exception of the Islamic world, on the fact that liberal democracy is the most rational form of government and that economic liberalism offers the best means for prosperity to each population asking for it. People living in the scientifically advanced societies of the Western liberal democracies have all that is needed to secure the basic necessities of life and have the

⁸⁰ In Fukuyama's perspective, ideological strife is finished because humans have their material needs satisfied by technologically enhanced powers of capitalism.

⁸¹ Such wealth can be explained with the presence of oil reserves, whose proceeds allowed states like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and Arabian Emirates to seize the signs of modernity, but societies have not experienced the social changes that occur when wealth is produced by the work of people. Cf. Francis Fukuyama, *op. cit.*, Part II “The Old Age of Mankind”.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

advantage of being able to pursue intellectual and cultural activities. However, the other side of the coin is that modern economy, together with the process of industrialization determined by modern science, is inducing the homogenization of mankind, and this will soon lead to the destruction of a great variety of traditions and cultures. Modern economy involves a coercive theory of assimilation. Prosperity and homogenization (or globalization?) go hand in hand. The problem is that, whereas everybody wants economic development, nobody wants cultural uniformity.⁸³

Besides, Fukuyama also considers the possibility that in future systematic alternatives to democracy could establish themselves, i.e. new authoritarianisms. It is plausible that in the Far East a systematic and illiberal alternative appears, combining economic and technocratic rationalism with paternalistic authoritarianism. The logic of modern science and the industrialising process it entails, do not head towards a single direction in the political field, unlike in the economic field. Liberal democracy is compatible with industrial growth and is preferred by many industrially developed countries, but a necessary link between them does not exist. The economic interpretation of history that Fukuyama suggests, aims at explaining liberal democracy as the necessary outcome of the historical progress, but somehow fails to explain that liberal democracy actually is so. In order to understand the mechanism at the base of the historical course, Fukuyama thus relates to Hegel (and to Kojève's reading of the *Phenomenology*), who identified the main cause of human history not with modern science, but with something that is completely non economic, i.e. the fight for recognition. Fukuyama is deeply (and ironically) indebted to Kojève, yet he states that Kojève's interpretation often risks to drift away from Hegel's original aims and intentions. Actually, the same can be said about Fukuyama's view.

Kojève puts the arguments of the fight for recognition and the end of history at the core of Hegel's thought in a way that the German philosopher would never have done. Fukuyama, too, misrepresents Hegel's non materialistic explanation of history based on the fight for recognition, availing himself of Hegel's thesis to prove our being democratic and to legitimise the American model as the best result of historical progress in politics. It is through the historical course that man becomes a supporter of people's sovereignty and of a justice system guaranteeing human rights. What drives him is the desire for recognition,

⁸³ Behind the notion of the end of history there is the belief that modernization is transforming traditional cultures, making societies everywhere more alike (i.e. globalization). Charles Taylor deals with the fact that, at the end of history, societies all look like each other in his Preface to *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. XI.

which in political terms is the striving for liberty and democratic rights. The emergence of modern liberal democratic society is due to human desire to have his dignity, worth and value recognised and respected by others. Fukuyama thinks plausible to demonstrate a tendency for more and more states to develop into liberal democracies over time, because this form of society is the most effective at fulfilling the desire for recognition. He aims at showing that the success of liberal democracy is inevitable because of something inherent in the human spirit. The fact that man is motivated not only by economic and material concerns, but also from a sense of his own dignity and worth, lies at the heart of the movement towards democracy. Man is able to dominate his animal instincts (first of all that of self-preservation) in the name of higher principles and aspirations, i.e. ideals. Man is part of the natural world but is different from animals, wishing not only real objects, but also non material goods. Man desires other men's desires, he desires to be searched and recognised by the others. The fight between two men, which leads to the mastery of one upon the other, has prestige at stake: in order to gain it, man is disposed to risk his life. The whole historical course is made of the desire for recognition and those feelings of rage, shame and pride that stem from it. The desire for recognition coincides with that part of man that feels the need to give value to things, the specifically political aspect of human personality that Plato called 'thymòs', Machiavelli 'desire for glory', Hobbes 'pride' and Rousseau 'amour-propre'.⁸⁴

In Hegelian dialectic, the desire to be recognised as a human being with self-respect persuades man at the beginning of history to fight to death for prestige, and the result is the division of society into a class of masters and a class of slaves. As above said, the master-slave relationship is unsatisfying: the master is recognised by a person (the slave) whom he does not recognise, he wins recognition from the loser. The ideals and principle of the French Revolution helps ending this contradiction and fulfils the desire for recognition in allowing a reciprocal recognition among equals. Fukuyama observes that French and American democratic revolutions abolished the distinction between masters and slaves, making it possible, through the principle of people's sovereignty and the authority of the law, that slaves became masters of themselves. Then, universal and mutual recognition took place: each citizen recognised all the other citizens' dignity of being human, and such dignity was in turn recognised by the State through the acknowledgement of rights. In Fukuyama's dialectic, *thymòs* plays a key role as politics is a thymotic affair. *Megalothymia*,

⁸⁴ Charles Taylor claims that Rousseau is one of the originators of the discourse of recognition as he began to think out the importance of equal respect and deemed it indispensable for freedom. Charles Taylor, op. cit., p. 237.

the desire to be recognised as superior to the others, and *isothymia*, the desire to be recognised as equal to the others, are the two different manifestations of *thymòs*, thanks to which it is possible to grasp the historical shift to modernity.⁸⁵ Hegel stated that the end of history occurred with the French Revolution because the desire for recognition, which set history in motion, was finally satisfied in French society, characterised by universal and mutual recognition.

According to Kojève, the desire for recognition is the tie up between liberal economy and liberal politics. He affirms, interpreting Hegel, that the universal and homogeneous state is the last stage of human history which completely satisfies man. Fukuyama underlines the importance of the desire for recognition as the motor of history too. Recognition plays a central role in politics because it is the origin of tyranny, imperialism, and the desire to dominate. Liberal democracy brings history to an end because it substitutes the irrational desire to be recognised as superior to the others with the rational desire to be recognised as equal to the others. Ergo, a world made of liberal democracies would not induce man to wage war, as each nation would recognise the legitimacy of the other. Kojève believes that the universal and homogeneous state, which Fukuyama calls liberal democracy, definitively solved the problem of recognition, replacing the master-slave relationship with equal and universal recognition. Nonetheless, Fukuyama wonders whether the recognition obtained by citizens in contemporary liberal democracies is completely satisfying, and delineates two exhaustive answers, one coming from the Left and one from the Right.

Both the left-wing and the right-wing critics of liberalism doubt that liberal democracy can fully satisfy the desire for recognition and yet claim that it can express itself in other different and dangerous ways. The Left affirms that in liberal democracy the universal recognition is incomplete because there will always be poor individuals, invisible as human beings for their fellow citizens. Capitalism creates disparity in means and requires a division of work that in itself implies unequal recognition. In liberal societies mutual recognition is not realised; indeed it is unequal recognition depending on economic disparity. Even if able to generate a great amount of wealth, capitalism would never satisfy human desire of *isothymia*, of equal recognition. The division of work produces various levels of dignity depending on different kinds of employment. As long as the distinction between rich and poor exists and some jobs are considered prestigious and others degrading, no degree of

⁸⁵ Cf. Francis Fukuyama, op. cit., Part III “The Struggle for Recognition”.

material prosperity will ever prevent poverty, racism, sexism and a daily offence to the indigent citizens' dignity.

The second answer, with which Fukuyama agrees, makes clear that the problem of a liberal society is not the failure to offer universal recognition, but that of aiming at equal recognition: human beings are intrinsically different and to regard them as equal does not mean to affirm their humanity, but to negate it. This kind of thought comes from that Right deeply affected by the levelling effects of the French Revolution, and found its most gifted spokesman in Friedrich Nietzsche, who believed that modern democracy did not let slaves be the masters of themselves, but tallied with slaves' victory and their servile morality. For Nietzsche, human superiority, distinction and nobility could be possible only in aristocratic societies; true freedom and creativity could only rise from *megalothymia*, that is the desire to be recognised as superior to the others. Nobody can be at his best if he simply wants to be alike the others and he never surpasses himself. According to Nietzsche, to emerge from the end of history it is a last man who stops believing in his superiority against a secure self-preservation; the last man is interested only in his health and prosperity. Regarding his self-preservation as the most important thing, the last man resembles the slave of the fight to death at the beginning of history. He is a man without *thymòs* and pride, only able to find out new ways to satisfy his worthless needs, in the perspective of a long and comfortable life. Satisfied with his happiness and incapable to despise himself for depending on those needs, the last man is not human anymore, he returns to be an animal.

For Fukuyama, modern man is not as deplorable as he is for Nietzsche: at the end of history man has the good sense not to risk his life for a cause, because history is full of useless battles. The end of history is the end of wars and bloody revolutions; agreeing on the scope, men have no reason to fight anymore. Man satisfies his needs through economic activity and does not have to risk his life in battles. Fukuyama maintains that nature will preserve some degree of *megalothymia* even in the democratic and equal world since democracy needs *megalothymia* and cannot last if it is only based on the universal and equal recognition. *Megalothymia* finds expression in the economic field, in politics and in merely aesthetic activities, for example in sport, where the aim is to demonstrate who is the best, fulfilling the desire to be recognised as superior. Kojève thinks that, in a world where all the main problems have been solved and battles are useless, the chief expression of *megalothymia* consists in formal snobbery. Fukuyama notes that the fight to be recognised superior and *megalothymia* have not disappeared, but their manifestations have changed.

His argument is that recognition “cannot simply be abolished from political life, because it is simultaneously the psychological ground for political virtues like courage, public-spiritedness, and justice. All political communities must make use of the desire for recognition, while at the same time protecting themselves from its destructive effects”.⁸⁶ The danger, which Nietzsche stressed, to become last men, risk-free and absorbed by personal interests and by the pursuit of convenience, for Fukuyama is less problematic than its opposite, namely the danger that man returns to be a first man active in useless and bloody battles for pure prestige.

The problem of human history for Fukuyama can be seen as the search for the way to satisfy the desire for recognition that both masters and slaves have, and it is solved with the victory of the social order that fulfils this purpose. Therefore, it is possible to maintain that history gets its end if the present social and political system entirely satisfies essential human needs. The post-historical world is a world in which secure self-preservation is more important than the desire to risk life in a fight for pure prestige and in which universal and rational recognition substitute the fight for mastery once and for all. Fukuyama concludes his analysis maintaining that it is however probable that the world remains divided in two parts: a post-historical part in which the states would interact on the economic field; and a part, still clung to history and torn by religious, national and ideological conflicts, where the old rules of political power would remain and prevail. The coexistence of historical and post-historical worlds will be that of two parallel but separate realities. There will be many points and reasons for the two to clash - Fukuyama names three of them: the concentration of oil reserves and other vital natural resources, the problem of immigration into liberal democracies, and the world order questions such as the spread of technologies that include nuclear weapons, missiles, chemical and biological weapons.⁸⁷ In front of such a division, it is yet consoling for Fukuyama to notice that the historical phase, which characterises some parts of the world, is traceable to the course made by Western democracies, and is therefore destined to peter out. After all it is only a matter of time.

I have tried to show so far how the philosophical debate on the end of history originated and carried on. I have lingered on Fukuyama's thesis because, though open to many objections, it creates the occasion to confront with a set of big-pictures questions, about where we are at historically, about a possible sense of the dramatic events of the

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, Part IV “Leaping over Rhodes”.

twenty and twenty-first centuries, and about the possibilities we have for the future world order. In the 1990s, Fukuyama's doctrine was opposed by the political scientist Samuel P. Huntington's theory on the clash of civilizations. Huntington, in reply to the Neo-Kojévians, who saw the expression of the end of history in the fall of the Berlin Wall, foresees a war of the West against the rest of the world, naming Islam in the heart of this rest. For Huntington, the political Cold War divide has given way to deep cultural antagonisms, particularly between Western Christendom and Islam. Therefore, in the post-Cold War world, people's cultural and religious identities will be the primary source of conflict. The conflict between civilizations will supplant ideological and other forms of divergence as the dominant global form of conflict; the axis of world politics will be the relations between 'the West and the Rest'. Huntington writes:

The conflicts of the future will, in substantial measure, involve the responses of non-Western civilizations to Western dominance. The central axis of world politics will no longer be the conflict between superpowers, but the conflict between the West and the Rest.⁸⁸

His political theory was first formulated in a 1992 lecture at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research⁸⁹, then developed in the 1993 article "The Clash of Civilizations?" for *Foreign Affairs* and later expanded in the 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Huntington opposes his political theory to Fukuyama's doctrine, arguing that it is culture rather than the State to be regarded as the place of future conflict. In order to understand present and future conflicts, we need first of all to understand cultural differences.

Huntington takes in exam three different visions of the post- Cold War world: the image of the end of history and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of government professed by Fukuyama; the back to the future model which predicts intensified violent conflicts between nation states; the image of the decline of nation-state by the conflicting pulls of tribalism or fragmentation on the one hand, and globalism or interpenetration on the other.⁹⁰ Eventually, he adds another picture to this gallery, offering his hypothesis on historical future. He maintains that the fundamental

⁸⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations?*, Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1992, p. 18.

⁸⁹ AEI, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, was founded in 1938 in order to defend the principles and improve the institutions of American freedom and democratic capitalism. It is an independent non-profit organization supported primarily by grants and contributions from foundations, corporations, and individuals.

⁹⁰ See Samuel P. Huntington, *op. cit.*

source of conflict in the world will not be primarily ideological nor economic, it will be cultural: the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. “The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics”.⁹¹ Huntington’s answer to Fukuyama’s doctrine on the post- Cold War world aims at demonstrating that history is still here, or that it is back with all its struggles and violence. The presence of wars and conflicts proves that history has not ended, and that instead it keeps moving on. Therefore, we might wonder whether it is right and significant to speak of the end of history or it is better to look specifically at an unexpected revival of history. In any case, the idea of a Sunday of life in a peaceful world is still distant and chimerical.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 2.

Chapter Two

The Postmodern Answer to the End of History

- 2.1 The End of the Enlightenment Trust
- 2.2 Goodbye Metanarratives
- 2.3 How to Make Sense of the Past (?)
- 2.4 Post-history without Meaning: the System of Production and Consumption and the End of Experience
- 2.5 Historiographic Metafiction: Framing History in Fiction

2.1 The End of the Enlightenment Trust

The Enlightenment was a widespread intellectual and scientific movement, which began in the early seventeenth century in England under the influence of philosophers such as Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke.¹ They sowed the seeds for two of the components of the Enlightenment thought: empiricism, based on the principle of human observation for the study of natural phenomena, and a mechanistic world view, for which the universe is a machine functioning by natural and predictable rules, it is rational and thus can be understood through the use of reason. They considered the world, and the problems it presented, in a pragmatic and principled way; they tried to offer a practical program for the safeguarding of the individual's freedom and social rights. Hobbes and Locke wrote about a new political order which allowed the pursuit of self-interest and was chosen by the people through a "social contract": individuals gather into a society and agree to a social contract that stipulates the laws and rules they would all live by. Following Hobbes's and Locke's emphasis on the individual and on the State as the result of the people's consent, Enlightenment intellectuals embraced a liberal philosophy and believed in the state and the rule of law as the institutional basis for the individual exercise of freedom. Locke wrote: "where there is no law, there is no freedom"². The rationale for the Enlightenment consisted in the transformation of the world and society through politics, innovation and the power of the intellect.³

Francis Bacon dedicated himself to a revaluation and re-structuring of traditional learning: he supported a new method for the natural sciences which granted a successful study of natural phenomena and helped scientific discoveries. Bacon called for a *novum organum* (which gave the title to his essay), namely a new logic which emphasized observation by experimental procedure; he claimed to adopt the inductive method in order

¹ See Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* (1620); Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651); John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and *Two Treatises on Government* (1690).

² John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government in Two Treatises on Government*, Minneapolis: Filiquarian Publishing LLC, 2007, chapter 6, sec. 57, p. 50.

³ See Stephen Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 70.

to gain knowledge and get rid of prejudices and idols.⁴ He believed that induction could discover the most important causes or laws of natural phenomena, and that, through practical knowledge, man could establish his dominion over the earth and thus relieve his condition. Bacon preached progress and purported scientific advance. Thomas Hobbes, whose philosophical system is a synthesis of materialism and rationalism, applied the methods of exposition and explanation of physical sciences to political philosophy.⁵ Hobbes's book, *Leviathan*, is one of the most influential works on political theory in European history. Hobbes dealt with the problem of social and political order and laid the foundations for the State. He argued that the state of nature coincides with a perpetual struggle of individuals against other individuals for advantage, power, and gain, and that society is a group of selfish individuals that unite into a single body in order to maximize their safety and protect themselves from one another. To preserve his/her life everyone renounces his/her natural rights in favour of the sovereign, who has the power of ruling over all members of society and enforces the social contract. Hobbes's notion of sovereignty is a rational exchange predicted on consent: the members of a society sign a contract because they want to keep peace and security; authority is created in order to enforce the terms of the social contract. Hobbes' social contract theory is the method of justifying political principles or arrangements by appeal to the agreement that would be made among rational, free, and equal people. The creation of authority, by which Hobbes meant a monarch, transformed society into a State. According to Hobbes, humanity is better off living under the circumscribed freedoms of a monarchy rather than the violent anarchy of a completely equal and free life; using this reasoning, Hobbes argued for unquestioning obedience to authority.

John Locke claimed that at the beginning human mind is a *tabula rasa*, that is a "blank slate", which is then filled with sensations; according to him human mind is completely empirical, and so is knowledge. He considered intuition and demonstration as the two possible avenues to truth: his concern was not for the discovery of absolute truth, but for the formation of conditions in which truth might be sought. In *Two Treatises on Government* (1690), Locke argued that society is the result of a social contract signed with the aim to protect human equality and freedom, and produced an anti-authoritarian theory of the State. Whereas Hobbes maintained that monarchy was preferable to violent anarchy,

⁴ For an extensive study on Francis Bacon and his work, see Charles Whitney, *Francis Bacon and Modernity*, New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1986.

⁵ For an account on Hobbes's works and intellectual endeavours, see Tom Sorrell, *Hobbes*, London: Routledge, 1986 and Tom Sorrell, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Locke believed that, as soon as authority ceased to defend the fundamental rights of human life, the members of society could break the contract and overthrow the ruling government. However, both Hobbes and Locke thought of the state in terms of a utilitarian device which supported law through sanctions and regulated the competition of the market. They both identified the public realm with the State and the private realm with the interplay of particular interests and personal property.⁶

The Enlightenment developed as cultural movement in Europe and, as its name suggests, it aimed at bringing the light of truth and reason among darkness and ignorance, false myths and superstition of human thought. It exhorted individuals to become aware of their capabilities and become emancipated through their intellect. It put reason at the centre of human affairs in order to improve the quality of people's life, and celebrated human experience as the underpinning of human understanding.⁷ On the wake of the above-mentioned English philosophers, Enlightenment thinkers argued that truth could be known through empirical observation and the use of reason, through logic and common sense. Reason demonstrated faith in the possibility to understand any particular fact by looking at the general principles of the nature of the fact itself and its status among other particular facts. The function of reason was to oppose ignorance and false notions, and to build a better world; reason was considered the primary source for legitimacy and authority.⁸ The Enlightenment supported an increasing application of scientific knowledge and rationality to all areas of human life with the aim to ease the discomforts of hard work and promote societal progress. It was based on the acceptance of positivism and experimentation in science, of reason and rationality promoting explanation; it purported new ideas concerning government through contract rather than force, in order to grant peace and avoid war, and developed the notion of human rights. Liberalism emerged, with its central principles of

⁶ See Stephen Eric Bronner, op. cit., pp. 43-44.

⁷ In my chapter the Enlightenment is not given an extended treatment: indeed, I limit to its origin and aims, because the focus of my survey is on the process which some centuries later led postmodernists to reject Enlightenment's principles. For a comprehensive investigation of the period and its characters, such as Voltaire, Diderot, Hume, Rousseau and Kant, see Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, New York: Norton & Company, 1969, and also Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche, ed., *L'Illuminismo, Dizionario Storico*, cit.

⁸ The eighteenth century has been labelled the 'Age of Reason' (for instance, this expression was proudly used by the English intellectual Thomas Paine as title for his essay in 1794). However, such a definition is not met with acceptance: for the debate on this misleading label and the suggestion of considering the exponents of the Enlightenment not as rationalists, but rather as critics "aiming to put human intelligence to use as an engine for understanding human nature, for analysing man as a sociable being, and the natural environment in which he lived", see Ray Porter, *The Enlightenment*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, pp. 2-3.

popular sovereignty and equality of opportunity, and with the conception of the marketplace as a rational economic mechanism. Stephen Bronner argues that

liberalism was the central political theory of the Enlightenment. Its method was the critical deployment of “reason” and its goal was bettering the conditions of social life and expanding “freedom”.⁹

Enlightenment thinkers promoted the belief in the power of reason and a universal science; they showed faith in man’s rationality and in the inevitability of historical progress. They assumed that society could be controlled and centrally directed, that man could dominate the world through the application of reason. They acknowledged that ideology and exploitation are rooted in social and political institutions, and that injustices are the product of social action. They foretold the dawn of a new era of human history where men would be freed from irrational forces, superstition and political tyranny. Nonetheless, critics of the Enlightenment, such as the German sociologists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, claimed that the Baconian scientific reason with the aim to subject nature to human needs had been transformed into a complete rationalization of reality; the use of that scientific reason had produced both capitalism in Western democracies and twentieth century political tragedies (such as the Holocaust). The Enlightenment revealed that in its bosom it carried the seeds of its own destruction, being it a relentless pursuit of instrumental rationality; it dismissed myth but fell back into a further myth¹⁰, that of individualism and equality under instrumental reason. Over the last centuries, the indiscriminate application of positive science and technology resulted in the limitless exploitation and destruction of the environment, the mass extermination of certain categories of human beings and the development of war technologies that could end humankind’s very existence. Reason failed to keep the world under its control and guarantee progress; history thus witnessed the exhaustion of the Enlightenment positivistic progressivism and the limits of the scientific rationalism. Critics of the Enlightenment call attention to the price of progress, the costs of alienation and reification, and the damages provoked by science and technology to nature and society.

⁹ Stephen Eric Bronner, op. cit., p. 41.

¹⁰ Myth had originally sought to control nature and now, in the age of full-blown barbarism, enlightenment would retreat into myth. Cf. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung, Philosophische Fragmente*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1969; Engl. trans. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London: Verso, 1979, p. 10.

The Italian scholar Vincenzo Ferrone argues that the Enlightenment's proponents had become victim of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century nationalisms, and of those philosophies of history which were dominated by the idea of historical progress and of humankind's evolution, and which regarded the past in terms of accomplishment.¹¹ Ferrone claims that, over the last centuries, the Enlightenment as a historical, social, and political movement has been manipulated and misinterpreted. He analyses the development of the Enlightenment's historical discourse and suggests that the Age of Enlightenment should be regarded as a cultural matter and a historical world that must be rebuilt. He is very critical towards Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialektik der Aufklärung* because it fails to consider the historical Enlightenment with its cultural and chronological context and is rather based on an abstract idea of the Enlightenment.¹² Also Stephen Bronner argues that Adorno and Horkheimer's image of the Enlightenment is arbitrary and one-sided; in their essay "a genuine historical analysis is never undertaken" as their role is limited to evaluating Enlightenment's connection with technological rationality.¹³

Despite the fact that Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the Enlightenment has been denounced as limited and biased, my study will follow their negative philosophy of history¹⁴ and will dwell particularly on postmodernists' reaction to it, in order to better understand history and its end of meaning in postmodern society. In the twentieth century, the legacy of the Enlightenment was assaulted, and positivistic history and rationalistic theory rejected. The Enlightenment's trust in the progress of reason and freedom collapsed as adequate explanations of the world, and so did the two most important political later products of the Enlightenment, i.e. liberalism and socialism. No longer did people believe that any form of knowledge, including history, could be modelled on the scientific method of inquiry, or that progress in science and technology was unquestionably desirable. Science has been dethroned as the source and the model for all that is true and fixed categories previously endorsed as rational have been questioned. In the twentieth century, the Enlightenment was proclaimed to be exhausted because inappropriate to interpreting and

¹¹ Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche, ed., *L'Illuminismo, Dizionario Storico*, cit., p. 514.

¹² Cf. Vincenzo Ferrone, *Lezioni illuministiche*, cit., p. 38.

¹³ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, p. 84.

¹⁴ The two German sociologists denied the possibility of a universal history: "After the catastrophes that have happened, and in view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that a plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it." They employed an "inverted historicism" to confront various enlightenment versions of the philosophy of history with their teleological assumptions. Cf. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, cit., p. 320; and Stephen Eric Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists*, cit., p. 184.

understanding contemporary condition: traditional religion and rationalised secular culture failed to offer a foundational value-system; religious and historical theologies of redemption or progress were necessarily abandoned. Besides, the Enlightenment was denounced as the main source, the cause of recent terrors and disorder. The belief in human mastery through reason, and the attempts to impose it on the universe, was but the root of the gloom and desolation of our postmodern condition. Postmodernists have overtly jettisoned the Enlightenment's and positivistic trust on science, on the existence of universal truth and knowledge, and on historical progress.¹⁵ They have blamed the Enlightenment's assumption that a perfect society could be built on common sense and tolerance, and defined it an illusion. The association of reason with rationalisation and with human progress has lost much of its persuasiveness after the experience of the world wars, after Auschwitz and Hiroshima; in the shadow of such historical episodes, critical theory insisted that the cost of progress was too high. As the events of the last century proved, reason has been unsuccessful as purposive or instrumental rationalism and nowadays it is impossible to refer to a rational development or a linear logic of history. Where is history leading to? Does it lead somewhere, or is the present all that we have? Postmodernists are helpless in the face of recent events: humanity seems to be drifting without direction, in a post-historical and (post-) ideological world. Ferrone wonders how the philosophical debate on the Enlightenment (and modernity) will carry on and how the clash between modern and postmodern intellectuals will end. He also denounces all those thinkers who reject reason and its use without offering serious alternatives.¹⁶

Postmodernism outlines an attitude to history; it is a reaction to a technical and rational way of thinking of the world, a reaction to modernity as a form not valid anymore. As Patricia Waugh defines it, postmodernism is a critique of Enlightenment, is 'a mode of counter-Enlightenment'.¹⁷ For postmodernists, the Enlightenment's project of pursuing a rational, scientific understanding of the natural and social world, and of grasping universal principles out of a fragmented experience, has proved to be an impossible fantasy and even a dangerous one: the world is too complex and too wide-ranging to be understood through a

¹⁵ In his essay, "Modernity versus Postmodernity" (1981), the sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas asks "should we try to hold on to the intentions of the Enlightenment, feeble as they may be, or should we declare the entire project of modernity a lost cause?" (p. 8). Unlike postmodernists, Habermas does not jettison the possibility of a rational, scientific understanding of the life world; according to him, modernity is an unfinished project. Habermas argues in favour of Enlightenment thinking's potentials.

¹⁶ Cf. Vincenzo Ferrone, *Lezioni illuministiche*, cit., p. 58.

¹⁷ Patricia Waugh, *Practicing Postmodernism, Reading Modernism*, London: Edward Arnold, 1992, p.16.

single totalizing theory, all master narratives have decayed and ceased to grip.¹⁸ Indeed, postmodernity is the leading resistance to any hegemonic theory (and History) which claims for false coherence and universal applicability. Pivotal to the postmodern understanding of society is the belief that the Enlightenment's totalising principles, the appeal to positivism and experimentation in science, to rationality promoting explanation and progress, and even to the ability to represent reality, have been fatally undermined. Postmodernism calls into doubt the "ineluctable" progress of reason, which sounds tragically paradoxical after Auschwitz and Hiroshima. It polemically sheds light on the fact that modernity not only failed to grant a level of social and political well-being within social formations, through the application of science and technology, but also made the Holocaust and the atom bomb possible. The project of rationality was extended to the point where it appeared to coincide with its opposite.

In their essay *Dialektik der Aufklärung, Philosophische Fragmente* (1947), which was the most important product of the Frankfurt School, Adorno and Horkheimer explained why it was no longer possible to believe in the idea of progress. They drew attention to the dark side of the Enlightenment, reflecting on the fact that Enlightenment's rationality aided in the creation of a totalitarian society, that rationalism, seized by totalitarian regimes, produced Auschwitz.¹⁹ Totalitarianism regarded total dominion of men as its final purpose; concentration camps have been the place where to experiment total dominion. Rationalization, bureaucracy and modern technology have been the source of many unexpected evils. Adorno and Horkheimer argued that what is called 'Enlightenment' and was hailed as 'progress' led eventually to the gas chambers. The Enlightenment's use and abuse of reason are central to the postmodern debate: postmodern intellectuals agree with Adorno and Horkheimer's arguments, seeing the Enlightenment's conception of reason as totalitarian. The Enlightenment's reason paved the way to totalitarian regimes of rationalist efficiency serving utterly irrationalist ends: Adorno was critical towards the Enlightenment's reason as a form of instrumental, rationalist domination of nature. He argued that reason could not grasp the totality of the real, and denounced the violence

¹⁸ The master narratives of modernity have lost their meaning and consistency; their end is announced by Jean-François Lyotard in 1970s. I will return on, and linger over, this subject later.

¹⁹ There is a wide range of attitudes toward the Enlightenment: Adorno and Horkheimer's work has been criticised above all by intellectuals who attempt to reclaim the Enlightenment and to present it as a living tradition. John McCarthy defines Adorno and Horkheimer's method "one-dimensional and reductionistic", arguing that the Enlightenment, by its very nature, is an open-ended, anti-authoritarian process. Cf. Daniel W. Wilson and Robert C. Holub, *Impure Reason, Dialectic of Enlightenment in Germany*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993, pp. 13-14.

perpetrated in the name of rationality and rationalisation. The Enlightenment's reason was unable to disempower irrationalism, to annihilate superstition and false credence, and its faith in progress was misplaced or misdirected; instead of being conducive to morality, justice and social improvement, reason and rational organization led to a mechanical and utilitarian view of the world. Terror and concentrations camps cannot certainly be cited as evidence of progress; progress demonstrated to be dangerous, fake, and unthinkable. Adorno and Horkheimer thus acknowledged the end of trust in the Enlightenment's reason and progress.²⁰

The *Dialektik der Aufklärung* is a fundamental reading for any attempt to redefine contemporary history and its role, because it investigates the process that transformed cultural progress into its opposite, into regression. Reason itself has been historically subjected to a turnaround: mankind has sunk into a new kind of barbarity, instead of entering a truly human condition. The contemporary concept of history is deeply affected by such an involution. There is a sort of parallelism between the Enlightenment's self-destructive tendency and man's fall into barbarity, as interpreted by Adorno and Horkheimer, and the dead end to which the last man comes by returning to be an animal, as described by Kojève in his thesis on the end of history. If history does not go forward, it seems to go back to its mythical beginning. Then, will it start all over again? Following what has been clearly stated in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, it gets easier to analyse the historical stalemate of contemporary society and the temporal dimension of eternal present in which society has ended. The modernist idea of progress and teleology have been discredited; hence the end of evolutionary time has been spelt. History seemingly divorced from causality and, as a result, it coincides with a series of perpetual presents. In postmodernism's view, we are stuck in a perpetual present: there is no way back and apparently no beyond, no beginning and no end.

The Enlightenment's original aim was to free the world from myths by exploding them through science (a crusade against superstition), and to better the lives of individuals. The Enlightenment presented itself as the modern scientific spirit, as the philosophy which identified the avenue to truth with scientific method; through scientific enquiry, man could solve the mysteries of the universe, find principles, order and truth, and deduce knowledge.

²⁰ Yet, there are historians and critics, such as Peter Gay, who clarify that the Enlightenment's idea of progress should be interpreted as the possibility of personal liberation and popular empowerment, as the will to know and the fight against prejudice, rather than as the belief in the omnipotence of reason and in its authoritarian imposition. See Peter Gay, *op. cit.*, pp. 141-145.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant claimed that the Latin phrase *Sapere Aude*, literally meaning “dare to know”, could be used as motto for the Enlightenment’s aim.²¹ According to Adorno and Horkheimer the Enlightenment’s failure consisted in the perversion of the use of human intellect and the production of instrumental rationality. The organization and system of science at some point in history underwent a crisis: scientific commitment failed to keep its ethical promise. Despite the Enlightenment thinkers’ attempt to defend the free exercise of subjectivity and support the free pursuit of scientific knowledge, the logic of science reaffirmed illiberal forms of authority and the power of myth. Under totalitarian regimes of both the left and the right, the state could no longer be seen as the best institution for securing civil liberties and furthering social justice. Adorno argued that the Enlightenment’s promises of cosmopolitanism, autonomy, and moral progress already seemed to have been betrayed by a totally administered society. Science, with its content and organization, and technology did not alleviate misery but instead made possible total war. Therefore, the meaning and function of science, together with that of knowledge, were doubted and discredited; teleology and determinism, science and positivism, historical laws and grand narratives were abandoned. Myths and delusion continued to exist, whereas the possibility of getting truth and the sense of truth itself were put into question.

Progress aimed at liberating human beings from their subjection to nature, making them masters of themselves and nature, freeing them from their fear of the unknown and irrational. Reason was regarded as an impulse to seek an understanding of the world, looking for progress (a progress of a better understanding). Yet, progress has finally overturned into regression, making men victims of themselves.²² The Enlightenment’s objective of mastering nature, of setting humanity above nature, inevitably had negative effects for humanity itself. A humanity which could enslave nature could also enslave fellow human beings – what actually happened. On the one hand, the individual has become aware of his power on reality and nature through science and reason; on the other hand, such

²¹ In his essay, *An Answer to the Question: ‘What is the Enlightenment?’* (1784), Immanuel Kant describes the Enlightenment as an intellectual self-liberation through the use of reason and invites individuals to have the courage to use their own understanding (*Sapere Aude!*). Freedom is the ability to think freely, to use one’s intellect without another’s guidance.

²² In his attempt to salvage the Enlightenment legacy, Stephen Bronner claims that the Enlightenment identified progress with “fostering the will to know and the fight against prejudice, the insistence upon tolerance and reciprocity, the demand for a democratic public sphere, and the accountability of institutions”. See Stephen Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement*, cit., p. 29.

a power revealed itself first to be a control over other individuals and finally to coincide with the dominion of objects (goods, work, money) over individuals, giving rise to human alienation and the processes of reification and commodification within society. In the end, men become controlled by the economic structure in which they live, slaves of the social strains they themselves created. Adorno and Horkheimer maintained that in the modern era the conformist and profit-driven “culture industry” subverts the very possibility of reflection or revolution.

In the light of its relationship to power, the Enlightenment dialectics is contradictory: while it allows men to gain power, it makes them victims of their own power.²³ The powerlessness and vulnerability of an individual increase with the amount of goods that is given to him: the more he has, the more he wants to achieve - and the desire for property is finally fulfilled at the expenses of other individuals. The increase of economic production provides social groups, who have the benefit of it and distinguish themselves by property, race and gender, with a superiority over the rest of population: capitalism generates economic inequality. The Enlightenment thought failed in its attempt to free men from slavery through the power of reason, by allowing some men, precisely some classes only, to master the means necessary to produce economic prosperity. In order to get wealth and success, these classes have exploited and harmed all the people who did not have such means, by forcing them to live in a condition of slavery or subjection.

In this sense, the Enlightenment has been intrinsically linked to a tendency towards regression and destruction of freedom. Although Enlightenment thinkers conceived human history as the story of progress in the human condition, from immaturity, superstition, and slavery to maturity, reason, and freedom, their hailed progress did not lead towards civilisation, but back to barbarism. The Enlightenment paved the way to the predominance of technology in society: systems and methods of production (which the Enlightenment occasioned) converted the world of ends into a world of means. The use of technology entailed the transformation of men into mere tools for the obtainment of precise aims. Rational thought has progressively come to be technological and technocratic, a thought which uses individuals as puppets and then gets rid of them: the clearest example comes from concentration camps. It was the rational world of modern civilisation that made the Holocaust thinkable; cruel irrationality has destroyed the belief in rational human progress

²³ Vincenzo Ferrone argues that Nietzsche’s reflections on the Enlightenment’s authentic spirit as “will to power” and on the use of reason as a means to power have influenced the twentieth-century critique of the Enlightenment. Cf. Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche, ed., *L’Illuminismo, Dizionario Storico*, cit., p. 558.

achieved through increasing knowledge. History sadly witnessed the Enlightenment's degenerated effects and products: slavery, wars, exploitation and death camps. The point for Adorno and Horkheimer, and for their postmodern followers, is that totalitarianism is a product of the very Enlightenment.²⁴

The *Dialektik der Aufklärung* investigates the historical development of Western civilization that tragically pointed to anti-Semitism and Nazi-Fascism, and invites to read them as extreme effects of the Enlightenment's logic and bourgeois progress.²⁵ During the 1940s, Adorno and Horkheimer elaborated the Enlightenment's self-destructive process, claiming that there is no point beyond the Enlightenment since it has been frozen into an age where reason has manifested itself as its own perversion. They terminated their analysis of the Enlightenment in and with its negative manifestations. Reason was a device subjected to social processes and its value lay in the function of ruling men and nature; rational systems were developed to master the environment and ended with dehumanizing modern society. Modern rationality was a function of dominion, not of reason; the West has been blind in its commitment to a narrow and instrumental concept of rationality.²⁶ At the time when Adorno and Horkheimer published the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Nazism had conquered Europe and it nearly won the war, while the state structure of the Soviet Union, its secret police, military style and propaganda were roughly the same as that of its fascist enemy.²⁷ Political disappointment derived from the Stalinist planning in the Soviet Union, the triumph of fascism in Germany, and from the fact that a Western revolution never took place. Adorno and Horkheimer saw in the Enlightenment "the most totalitarian of all systems as it related to things like a dictator to men who knows them because can

²⁴ Stephen Bronner argues that, in such a reading of the Enlightenment, the radical democratic and egalitarian aspects of the Enlightenment have been betrayed. "Enlightenment thinkers were not utopian with totalitarian inclinations, but realists who understood the costs of progress". Cf. Stephen Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement*, cit., p. 39. Also Vincenzo Ferrone blames critics of the Enlightenment who establish a connection between the Age of Enlightenment and Totalitarianisms (and the moral bankruptcy of mass societies). Cf. Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche, ed., *L'Illuminismo, Dizionario Storico*, cit., p. 557.

²⁵ For a closely critique of the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, see Jürgen Habermas's *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen* (1985), Engl. trans. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (1987). The book is an ongoing dialogue and debate with the work of the Frankfurt School, in particular with the writings of Adorno and Horkheimer; cf. chapter V "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno", pp. 106-130.

²⁶ Over the seventies and eighties, Habermas defended the rational potential of the modern age against the depiction of modernity as a spent epoch and a lost cause. Habermas avoids the bleak conclusions of his predecessors, whose analyses focussed on the hypothesis of stasis and finality, and believes that a theory of rationality can be universal. Habermas's response to the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* is his theory of communicative action: actors in society seek to reach common understanding and coordinate actions by reasoned argument, consensus and cooperation.

²⁷ Cf. Stephen Eric Bronner, op. cit., p. 95.

manipulate them”²⁸. The Enlightenment dialectics ended to be folly and nonsense, restoring that lack of rationality against which it fought and adversely influencing political and social life.

In *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin wrote: “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”.²⁹ Suggesting that barbarism is a product of civilization means that barbarism is part of human nature; the germs of barbarism existed in Western civilization from the beginning. However, Adorno and Horkheimer identified the cause of “modern” barbarism with technological and social progress: the road that began with the Enlightenment ended in Nazi death camps. Adorno claimed that after Auschwitz, interpretative categories were not valid any longer, progress was nonsense; the idea of history as something positive that could give meaning to each individual’s life seemed a pointless mocking. Horkheimer maintained that philosophical thought reached a deadlock: the core of the problem lies in the concept of rationality which grounds contemporary industrial culture.³⁰ Industrial societies undermine critical thought among the population in order to promote the national economic machinery. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the objectivity of reason is a delusion; the Enlightenment destroyed objective reason. Reason has obscured truth; the search for truth is substituted with the acceptance of conformism: conformism means believing that reality is rational and that social apparatus keeps its promises. The Enlightenment has become a mass mystification: the new ideology holds the world as its object with no aim at making it better because the only task is to represent it as it is, in the most precise way. Reality is not judged and questioned; man resigns himself to it. Liberty of thought, to which the Enlightenment claimed to have led modern consciousness, ends to be uncritical consumption of goods.

Contemporary society is immersed in a fetishist ideology of production and consumption. History ends within such fetishist ideology: man is entrapped in a system he has himself created and is unable to evolve further. He lives like a prisoner, there is nothing left outside the world he lives in, no other world is possible. His actions tie with production and consumption of goods: he is unable to say no to what market offers him, he is clung to

²⁸ Cf. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, op. cit., p. 9.

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (1950) in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-1989, Engl. trans. *On the Concept of History*, New York: Classic Books America, 2009, VII.

³⁰ Max Horkheimer, *Zur Kritik der instrumentellen Vernunft. Aus den Vorträgen und Aufzeichnungen seit Kriegsende*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1947, Engl. trans. *Eclipse of Reason*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1947, Preface.

life and its pleasures. The world presents itself as complete, one and indivisible: history thus cannot develop into something different and more advanced; it has ended. History has faced unthinkable tragedies and atrocities in the events of the last century, and in the 1960s it comes to a standstill, because social and political alternatives to the present seem not to be possible. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse exposes the idea that European societies, which are industrially advanced and devoted to exercise democracy, represent forms of “blocked societies”³¹: that circumstance is due to the absence of alternative models to those already existing. Societies are blocked on both the political and cultural levels; there is no hope left for a future change. This perspective or, better to say, this lack of perspective, finds its optimistic inheritor in Fukuyama with his belief that if no improvement can be imagined it is because man has already reached the best form of social and political organization, therefore the end of history is here and the wheel has turned full circle.

Marcuse maintains that societies cannot keep on becoming civilised and all contemporary social and political situations are at some point versions of one-dimensional society. Unlike Fukuyama, Marcuse never claims that history finally proves the existence of a perfect model to follow or imitate. He pessimistically notices political tendency to unify opposites with the result that opposites become the same thing. In contemporary societies there is no room for opposition anymore; no revolutionary change will ever happen because “the other” does not exist any longer. Postmodern relativism follows Marcuse’s critique of society; postmodernism is the product of a great disillusion: with science, progress, teleological history, and even with the possibility of far-reaching social change. No revolt, no other options are possible. The Otherness is an economical, political and social space to rebuild: this is a difficult task because one-dimensional society alters the relationship between rationality and irrationality and man loses his freedom to act, as he is progressively enslaved by the productive system, and becomes a parasite of the system. Everything comes to be a potential source of progress and exploitation, labour and satisfaction, freedom and oppression. Freedom does not necessarily lead to wealth, on the contrary it is a new way to poverty. One of the most scaring aspects of industrially advanced civilization is the rational feature of its irrationality. There is something wrong in the rationality of the system; that is,

³¹ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, London: Routledge, 1964.

according to Marcuse, the way in which men have organised their work within society³², the way in which they have decided to live.

Politics' *telos* is to live well: human beings feel the compulsion to improve their living conditions and use reason in order to satisfy such a desire, but they do that at the expense of nature and other people. Reason has always served man as a means to improve his life condition, assisting the upward course of biological evolution in history³³; in such a course, three main stages of human life condition can be traced out: the first saw man struggling for his survival against nature and other men, reason thus helping him to be alive. Once nature has been dominated and men have learnt to live together respecting each other in a community, the function of reason became to let man be alive in a satisfactory way. Thus, reason assured man not only the possibility to be alive, but also to live well. This stage has almost come to an end in Western countries, where most people now aim at expanding the occasions and the ways to get satisfaction. This is tantamount to an aestheticization of life: man's goal is his own pleasure.³⁴ The same cannot be said for the poor and underdeveloped countries; indeed, there is a huge gap between less-developed countries and advanced countries: they have different situations and perspectives, different needs and reactions. In the third stage that we can call the postmodern era (or Western post-history), reason serves man to gain a steady increase in satisfaction, fulfilling his desires and offering manifold chances for pleasure. Despite the achievement of this third stage, we wonder if our society is developing toward, or away from, an increase in human well-being.

By rendering purpose effective, reason answers human urge towards the attainment of an end and has finally turned into a means for prosperity: history tells the stories of people who become rich and of people who are exploited and remain poor. As long as differences in living conditions continue to exist, wars and conflicts will be rampant over the world. Supposing there is a historical reason for, and meaning of, this perpetual inequality among people and consequent resentment and unhappiness, what is it? The objective ground of historical rationality should be to appease the fight for existence. On the basis that the aim of history should be world peace, the most reliable historical truth lies in the system which offers more possibilities of peacemaking. Is such historical truth still traceable? Technology should be used to help peacemaking, yet technology is a double-edge

³² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 152.

³³ Cf. Alfred N. Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1929.

³⁴ Postmodernism favours an "aestheticization of everyday life": art and aesthetic become the master paradigms for knowledge, experience and sense of life-meaning. Cf. Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, London: Sage, 1990, pp. 41-64.

sword: it can increase and decrease man's power, often eluding him. It is a fact that nowadays man is more powerless towards his own apparatus than in the past. Adorno and Horkheimer described the negative effects of the fetishist ideology of technology and production, tracing a link between technological rationality, scientific development and system of production.³⁵ Technological rationality is included in the productive system, is the source for alienation and reification, and invests even culture; the ills of technology are related to the commodification of culture. Adorno and Horkheimer examined the effects of the commodity form on culture, focussing on the way in which the state could employ the new media in advanced industrial society. The increasing power of the culture industry is a direct reflection of the expanding power of the commodity form and instrumental reason. Culture is produced to be sold, following the logic of profit; it becomes imitation, empty of contents.

Society is a system of needs, whose principle is selfishness and social control is determined by the system of needs that it generates. In capitalistic societies, technical-scientific rationality and manipulation are the new forms of social control: contemporary totalitarianism is exercised by forms of media and thought control. The progress of technical apparatus and the dehumanizing process go hand in hand; progress threatens the idea of man, who loses his autonomy as individual, his imagination and cleverness: he is unable to defend himself from the system of mass propaganda. Reality is aestheticized in the name of the commodity; technical perfection of reproduction is used to obfuscate the falsification of the ideological content. Man is an alienated producer of goods: art becomes goods, renouncing its autonomy and presenting itself on the market; culture and knowledge become goods too. The use of knowledge has become computerised, commodified and fragmented, while culture has profoundly become economic or commodity oriented. The value in use is substituted by the market value; everything has a value because can be exchanged: the only aim is the profit. Imitation and repetition are worshipped: whereas human action is negated, passivity is instead requested. The user does not have to work with his head: the product already sets each reaction, and its power on its consumers depends on the enjoyment it offers. Imitation floods every field of daily life, fusing itself with reality to the point that it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. Because of the pervasive power of technology

³⁵ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, cit., pp. 110-115.

and systems of representation, the world becomes increasingly divorced from the real. Introducing his novel *Crash* (1973), the writer James Graham Ballard writes:

the balance between fiction and reality has changed significantly in the past decade. Increasingly their roles are reversed. We live in a world of fictions of every kind. [...] We live inside an enormous novel.³⁶

The individual does not have to adapt himself to society but identify with it. Mass culture glorifies the world as it is. The individual is deprived of his freedom to think against the models that society supports and celebrates. Technology has become the main vehicle of reification, the presence of advertising and the media, television in particular, is ubiquitous. Mass media are both vehicles of information and enjoyment and instruments of manipulation and indoctrination. In contemporary society commercials and propaganda coincide. Human imagination undergoes a process of reification: man is possessed by his own images.³⁷ In *Television and Postmodernism* (1986), John Wyver argues that

we live in a mass culture to which we do not simply submit. We take its images, its narratives, its formulations of desire, and measure them against our real experiences of a real world.³⁸

Imagination, which is a function of man's freedom, is now blocked. Reality is transformed into images by the bombardments of the media, time gets fragmented into a series of perpetual presents: temporal distinctions between past, present and future cannot be made any longer, and they are replaced by a perpetual present. Postmodernists thinkers focus on the new depthlessness and the consequent weakening of historicity. The intense velocity with which information circulates in the mass media alters human experience of historical events. The coming up of new forms of private temporality changes human relationship to public history. The present has dissolved in images, history has disappeared. Jameson claims that

we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach.³⁹

³⁶ J. G. Ballard, "Introduction to the French Edition of *Crash*" (1974), p. 8. The novelist argues that the most adequate approach to the world around us lies in the assumption that is complete fiction.

³⁷ Both Jean Baudrillard and David Harvey consider image-manipulation a result of late capitalism. See Baudrillard's *Société de consommation* (1974), Engl. trans. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, London: SAGE, 1998, and Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

³⁸ Qtd. in Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 100.

The postmodern era is the age of the image and simulation. History is out of reach: all we have are images in an endless reproduction. Yet, we keep on digging up the past in the hope that it can contribute to our knowledge of the real world. But there is no way to construct the meaning of past or future human history: even the pretence to find a meaning must be abandoned. Postmodernists warn on the futility to derive the laws of historical dynamics and to predict social or economic changes: it is impossible to foretell where history is leading to. Does this mean that the course of history cannot proceed further? Is the future already determined by the past? What kind of perspective does the present provide men with? The acceleration of historical changes leaves men unable to hint rationality in human existence and logic in events. Nonetheless, the sense of uncertainty about the present induces us to reflect upon the past and its meaning. The past is part of our condition and represents a source of 'order': it is a 'model' for the present because stands in front of us already determined and finished.⁴⁰ Since the present is the result of the past and the starting point for the future, its uncertainty must be worked out. Such a sense of uncertainty paradoxically comes from the impossibility, in confronting and dealing with historical events, to accept the recent past and its purpose. We actually wonder on its purpose. "Uncertainty" inescapably remains the key word in postmodern dialectics, which aims at questioning all that has been given for granted. The idea itself of postmodernity belongs to the contemporary unpredictable and uncertain global condition. Postmodernism challenges rationalistic and humanistic underpinnings; yet, despite growing suspicions, it still looks for a piece of truth. My final question is whether it can come from history.

³⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, II, p. 25.

⁴⁰ The terms 'order' and 'model' are here used not to convey the idea that the past can be the place for human *exempla* as it would be absurd to maintain that after twentieth-century history. Order is instead meant to be linked to something certain because already imposed or discovered, whereas model stands for a regular pattern which has a beginning and an end.

2.2 Goodbye Metanarratives

I have looked carefully at the way in which the scientific, Enlightenment's confidence in Truth, universal answers and theories have been the root of all modern oppression. The inevitable result has been a declining faith in human progress and an increasing doubt that man can master the environment through which he is shaped. Therefore, the idea that man directs himself and history through his rational will and actions has been abandoned. Man cannot manipulate or control his destiny deliberately: there is no confidence in managing the future. The consciousness of the crisis of modernity arose after the Second World War and, over the two following decades, modernity was proclaimed to be at an end; since then, humanity entered a period we call postmodernity.⁴¹ The late twentieth century characterizes itself in terms of an absolute end or failure of modernity: the end of modernity and the beginning of postmodernity entailed the consumption and inconsistency of the old frames of reference, the metanarratives which purported to explain humanity and the world. In the 1970s, the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard declares the end of the grand narratives of modernity, focusing on the fact that they have lost their meaning as a guide for future action. Any representation of the future based on concepts of reason and progress are not only deceptive but even dangerous, as they give rise to totalitarian tendencies. Lyotard uses the term 'grand narrative' as synonymous for master narrative or metanarrative, referring to all those organizing frameworks that presupposed the belief in, and the doctrine of God, History, Reason, Truth and Science. These are grounded on transcendental truths and signify ideological systems such as Christianity, the Enlightenment and Eurocentrism. Lyotard announces the end of their legitimacy: universal ethical and political systems are no longer admissible, total philosophical or religious systems are no longer available. He identifies metanarratives with a form of constraining and controlling ideology which proved to be violent and tyrannous.

Lyotard is the first who theorises the postmodern in philosophy: he defines it as the attitude of rejecting grand narratives, as 'incredulity towards metanarratives'.⁴² In the period

⁴¹ For the development of postmodernism and its different phases see Steven Connor, *Postmodernism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

⁴² Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne* (1979), Engl. trans. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 4.

between the 1970s and 1980s, there grew a general disbelief in metanarratives; the impulse to discard them, the incredulity towards their validity, came from the awareness that, far from being natural and universal, they were useful for the articulation of very particular interests, always privileging some perspectives at the expenses of others. They functioned in order to legitimise political positions and courses of action which can no longer be shared. Postmodernists attack any claim for universal truths and jettison universalism as an Eurocentric perspective, a means of imposing European concepts of rationality and objectivity onto other people. Universalism shows a racist bent because it denies the possibility of non-European viewpoints. By contrast, postmodernists are very interested in the variety of viewpoints, as well as the possibility of embracing a pluralism of smaller, local narratives (which cannot be totalised in a unitary scheme). Whereas grand narratives have lost their credibility, local legitimate narratives have been employed by postmodernists to offer temporary judgements about limited, particular situations; grand narratives are replaced with localised, personalised 'petits récits'.

Postmodernism's critique and rejection of the metanarratives of modernity (science, religion, philosophy, humanism, socialism, etc.), all of which seek to impose some sense of coherence onto history, direct us away from universalizations toward the particularity of local knowledge.⁴³

Postmodernism is European culture's awareness that it is no longer the unquestioned and dominant centre of the world. It is a certain self-consciousness about a culture's own historical relativity, involving the loss of the sense of an absoluteness of any Western account of History.⁴⁴ Postmodernism is the condition of disillusion with the Enlightenment, idealism, Christianity, Marxism, which all tried to make sense of, or to give a sense to, reality. It regards them as temporary fictions. The pursuit of absolutes and definitive theories about the nature of the world has been the great enterprise of Western philosophy or dream of the Enlightenment and has finally failed.⁴⁵

The Enlightenment's grand narratives, scientific rationalism and liberal politics have collided. Scientific rationalism promised that human suffering could be reduced through the

⁴³ Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, cit., p. 33.

⁴⁴ For the sense of superiority of European civilization through belittling or caricatured representations of other cultures, precisely its colonial subjects, see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978).

⁴⁵ In *Elogio dell'Illuminismo*, Elio Franzini argues that the Enlightenment is not something dead, which has been killed by history and its tragedies: its principles of tolerance and respect for "the other", the study of nature and its mechanism, and its trust on progress and the necessity of human laws, should still be pursued, in order to give a sense to history. See Elio Franzini, *Elogio dell'Illuminismo*, Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2009, p. 6.

domination of nature, but ended to enslave man himself, increasing his misery. Liberal politics argued that the benefit of science and reason should be made available to all, regardless of class, race, or gender; yet, class, race and gender differences continue to exist and are the source of new conflicts. Postmodernism is a response to the general failure of modernity in its attempt to produce social and political comfort through the application of reason, science and technology. The Enlightenment equation of reason with progress and emancipation is rejected, since universal powers attributed to Western rationality have been used to justify the subjugation of entire races.⁴⁶ Contemporary society presents itself as fragmented; being fragmented is a historical result and a condition. It is a result of the fact that traditional religion and rationalised secular culture failed to offer a foundational value-system; and a condition of living in a time when bridging the gap between fragments and recollecting a unitary sense and purpose seem to be impossible. In postmodernity, grand narratives are consumed and appear to be inconsistent. Thus, postmodernist fundamental principles are epistemological scepticism and political defeatism.⁴⁷ It is no longer possible to believe in the emancipatory and improving qualities of knowledge typical of modernity.

Some important questions then emerged. What is knowledge and how can we get it? Does an absolute knowledge exist or is it a product of political forces, depending on power? Is there any political system which grants freedom, equality and free knowledge? Dealing with the question on knowledge and power, postmodern theory has been in particular influenced by the French philosopher Michel Foucault.⁴⁸ In *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969), Foucault argues that knowledge is power and that to engage in the production of knowledge (that means history and science) is to get involved in relations of power in a variety of ways. Power operates in modern societies through the process of knowledge and institutionalised discourses that produce it: power and knowledge are seen as intimately interconnected. According to Foucault history reveals relations of power, not of meaning; history is not innocent storytelling, it is an instrument of and for power. His attention to history lies in

⁴⁶ We have already noticed that, following Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the Enlightenment, postmodern intellectuals focus on the repressive aspects of Enlightenment thinking.

⁴⁷ Opposing postmodernists' view, Habermas believes in Enlightenment political values as representing the basis of progressive thought and takes seriously Enlightenment's understanding of liberty and progress. Habermas interprets modernity under the sign of subjective freedom: "this was realized in society as the space secured by civil law for the rational pursuit of one's own interests; in the state, as the equal rights to the participation in the formation of political will; in the private sphere, as ethical autonomy and self-realization". Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1987, p. 83.

⁴⁸ For a comprehensive study on Foucault, see Gary Gutting, *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, and Gary Gutting, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Michel Foucault*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

attending to the archaeology and genealogy of knowledge production; he puts forward revisionist histories, which are relativising correctives of official recorded historical truth, and reveals that the accepted interpretations of history are only a partial view of it. He suggests that it is sound to accept chains of interpretative signification, but is impossible to grant recoverable original meaning.

Foucault's notion of history is that of a plurality of discourses; historical facts can only exist as discursive entities, as imposed narrative processes. In discourse, desire and power are always at work; some discourses dominate our social world, they have shaped and created meaning systems that have gained the status of truth; other discourses are marginalised and subjugated. According to Foucault knowledge and discourse are interchangeable and they are related to the exercise of both intellectual and material power. He questions the links between truth and the power systems which shape and determine it. He resists to seek an origin or transcendental subject that would convey any specific meaning on existence. Following Foucault's ideas, postmodernism has broken with previous modes of knowledge, investigating the very process of knowledge and its construction. It celebrates the instability of all knowledge, by reminding us that knowledge is couched in language, is constructed from elements of our culture and may never claim to be objective. Postmodernists draw attention to the representational function of language in the production of historical knowledge, stressing on the unreliable nature of historical discourse that results from the subjective signifier-signified-referent relationship.

The definition of historical truth depends on historians' arbitrary idea of what constitutes the historically real, which Foucault summarises as "la volonté de savoir", the will to knowledge. He argues that history is never objective because it cannot be independent of the historian, his own time and cultural context. He claims that historians should look at the linguistic basis that composes history, rather than have pretensions to covering the real world of things; they should abandon the search for original meaning. What creates meaning is the power of language:

Language occupied a fundamental situation in relation to all knowledge: it was only by the medium of language that the things of the world could be known.⁴⁹

In "Michel Foucault and History", Alan Munslow reports that according to Foucault "our only way to make experience of history is through the primary medium of language as a

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (1966), Engl. trans. *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, London: Routledge, 1989, p. 322.

signifying process normally constituted within a framework for the exercise of power, legitimacy and illegitimacy".⁵⁰ Foucault argues that we come to understand history by examining not its content but rather the form or structure of the language in which that content is represented by people in the past and by the historian in the present; language is an area in which relations of domination and subordination are established. History has often involved hegemonic structures of knowledge and power; the discourse of which history is made of, must be critically analysed and deconstructed. Postmodernists follow Foucault in regarding and understanding history as a language system of arbitrary socially constructed relationships between words and things, and aim at showing its hidden agenda.

Postmodernism regards absolute knowledge as unattainable: postmodernists agree with Foucault that knowledge is a construction, a product of language, depending on its relations to power and the people who hold it. They challenge the certitude and authority of traditional conceptual norms and hierarchies, focusing on the limits of the grand narratives of the past. History, Reason and Science were used to meet the ends of their government, they served socio-political purposes. The very problem with metanarratives has proved to be their potential for exploiting and suppressing peoples, races and cultures who disagree with those that tell the story and fight for their right to make a different choice for their future. I have previously demonstrated that the result of grand narratives has been oppression, fanaticism, and tyranny: imposing their grand vision, they exploited, marginalized and eliminated peoples, races, and cultures who did not share the same idea of, and perspective on, the world. The Enlightenment has been accused of being compromised with the project of subordination. The rise of totalitarianism became postmodernism's justification for rejecting all grand narratives, all those positions which declare to know and to know for sure. All totalitarian attempts are ethnocentric and racist because they force a single vision of the world upon what is a plurality. Western rationality, with its claimed conclusiveness and judiciousness, revealed a fascistic bent: postmodernism assaults Enlightenment discourses which universalise white, Western, middle-class male experience. It opens the debate on the various possibilities of discourse and on its construction from different viewpoints (i.e. not white, Eastern, low-class, female and gay experience). Postmodern writers acknowledge the importance of trying to democratise history, by recognising otherness and difference. They claim to produce critical histories that give voice to those people who, until then, have been ignored in conventional historiography. Denying any totalising account, postmodernists call

⁵⁰ Cf. Alan Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, Second Edition, London: Routledge, 2006, p. 129.

for decentred, multicultural narratives in order to promote multicultural diversity and redefine Western knowledge.

Postmodern scepticism and relativism regard not only science and knowledge but also history and politics.⁵¹ The Enlightenment's dialectic, colonialism, the Holocaust and total war, have all contributed to the rejection by postmodernism of history as grand narrative – since history as grand narrative had kept minorities out of the national story. Postmodernists want to give voice to those who did not speak or were not allowed to do it in that kind of history writing; they feel an urgent need to write dissonant and dissident, subaltern and subterranean histories. In order to meet this need, they reject conventional methods previously used to narrate and rewrite it. Postmodernists change the ways in which history is conceptualised and narrated: they destroy confidence in models of linear history and denounce those historical records that ignore heterogeneous perspectives and instead impose the winner's perspective (which, not by chance, coincides with that of the writing historian) as authoritative. They doubt, deconstruct, and finally take distance from that which is defined, constructed and limited, challenging any way of totalising history. As for politics, they despise authoritarianism in whatever form it may take. They are sceptical about liberal democracy as the universal and last form of government: it may proclaim that we live in a free-market society where all can compete on equal terms, but actually the market is an exploitative system built in favour of those having the economic power in their hands.

It ensues that there is no other choice but to reject metanarratives. Then, what are postmodernists left with? Seeing that the grand narratives of the past do not make sense any longer, postmodernism has resulted in the abandonment of them in favour of local knowledge. Giving up the grand narratives, postmodernists resort to the little ones; authoritarian and totalising universalisms are discredited in the face of the local or the periphery. Totalising theories are rejected as mere discursive constructions, or ways of looking at the world with no objective validity. Metanarratives are replaced by a great number of language games. For postmodernists there is no guaranty that truth may be founded on the knowledge of providence or science or any other grand narrative that wishes

⁵¹ Christopher Norris attacks post-structuralist and postmodernist theory by arguing that it has disabled any terms in which political convictions may be validated: "their 'radicalism' has passed over into a species of disguised apologetics for the socio-political status quo, a persuasion that 'reality' is constituted through and through by the meanings, values or discourses that presently compose it, so that nothing could count as effective counter-argument". Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism?*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990, pp. 3-4.

to establish itself as the centre on which discourse may be grounded. By attacking the entire Enlightenment project, postmodernists suggest that the search for truth is the prime Western illusion: truth is invented, not discovered. They claim that there is no truth outside ideology. They regard truth as a part of an intellectual structure that we have agreed to accept: truth is conventional, not unambiguous, it is relative, not absolute, it changes, it is not static. Postmodernists claim that truth is a provisional human fabrication. The only possible answer to human desire to find some truth, some shared hope for humanity that transcends mere optimism and resists despair, lies in the opportunity to hold a pluralism of small, local narratives produced in a variety of historical and cultural contexts. Hence, incredulity towards metanarratives does not necessarily mean the end of history but opens the door to a proliferation of stories.

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida deconstructed the very concept of the end of history as an ideological confidence trick. He used deconstruction as a warning against human presumption on offering comprehensive explanations and theories on the world, which finally proved to be totalitarian. The totality of any extensive phenomenon, such as “meaning” and “history”, always manages somehow to elude us. In *Spectres de Marx* (1993), Derrida faced Fukuyama’s position and argued that claiming “the” end of history was contradictory, because, even if it had ended, history would start again. Since an instant follows the other, time after time, and we always wait for the arrival of something else, history goes on. Then, the end of history should have been better defined by Fukuyama as the end of Marxism, or the end of history as the Western myth, revealed to be partial and subjective, yet claiming to be universal and objective. Derrida suggested that what actually ended was a given concept of history⁵², the one with which we are all familiar in the West: “history as a site of ideological conflict between competing world-systems (liberal democracy versus fascism and communism) each striving to persuade us that it is the more capable of delivering humankind from the twin evils of material want and socio-political oppression”.⁵³ Such a concept of history found its end with communism’s collapse, nonetheless, Derrida argued that history did not end, nor did the possibility of other concepts of history. Only people who accept the balance of economic and political power

⁵² Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale*, Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1993, Engl. trans. *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 74.

⁵³ Stuart Sim, *Derrida and the End of History*, Cambridge: Icon Books, 1999, p. 10.

that currently prevails in the world can believe in the end of history and regards it as good news.

Derida contested Fukuyama's optimistic vision, claiming that our socio-political condition is bleak and liberal democratic ideology is structurally flawed.

It must be cried out, at a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelize in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity. Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the 'end of ideologies' and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth.⁵⁴

Also Lyotard and Baudrillard contributed to the debate on the end of history. I have previously alluded to Lyotard's announcement of the end of grand narratives (with his critique of conventional history holding on a model of linear progress) and I will later focus on Baudrillard's analysis of post-history. Yet, such a debate is only a small part of a much larger one called 'endism'. Derida observed that endism has been often considered to be one of the distinctive qualities of the postmodern culture, even though it is not a new historical phenomenon. The term 'endism' refers to all those positions and thinkers whose common element is that they are announcing the end of something: history, humanism, ideology, philosophy. Many of these ends are connected: when ideology ends, so does history; when our current concept of man ends, so does humanism.⁵⁵ Postmodernism and endist thinking go hand in hand, inviting us to free ourselves from traditional authority and the hold that the past can exert on our thought and behaviour. Postmodernists encourage us to abandon all universal values and standards and to accept that everything is relative, is a product of specific historical circumstances. Postmodern history calls for deconstruction, textuality and the process of decentring. Unilateral historical accounts must be destabilised; one must create the awareness of the possibility of many other parallel histories.

There is no such thing like a single purpose in history, because history itself is not one, but manifold. Postmodernism thus claims that universal history does not exist and only the possibility of many histories does make sense. While History is deconstructed, many

⁵⁴ Jacques Derida, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

⁵⁵ Cf. Stuart Sim, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.

histories are instead constructed. “The end of history” as a metanarrative is unacceptable not only for postmodernists, who reject any kind of totalising theory, i.e. grand narrative, but also for all those intellectuals who argue that wealth is not the only source of happiness and therefore the present economic system is not satisfying.⁵⁶ The end of history tallies with the endless reproduction of our market and democratic systems, but this does not make any sense because the materialist world is no longer satisfying, as only offers short term satisfactions. An excess of consumption produces unhappiness. After achieving a certain level of economic welfare, which meets the basic needs and provides some comfort, people want other kinds of goods: these are not goods offered in the market; rather, there are non-marketable goods such as companionship, intrinsic work enjoyment, or self- and social esteem.⁵⁷ Harmony with nature and other people is demanded; the emphasis is put on interpersonal relations. New humanism encourages the transformation of *homo sapiens*, which has reached the apex of his power and has been able to destroy his kind with the weapons he himself has (not wisely) created, into a more spiritual being, which is less dependent on material goods, less greedy and rather more in good terms with other individuals. Priority should be put on human, not economic development; for most people in rich societies it is not true that money buys more happiness because happiness is subjective well-being. However, the problem with humanist vision lies in the fact that society has to be rich enough to afford nonmaterial values.

Metanarratives ground human experience in some larger framework, some idea or purpose that make sense of our lives. Without them, we lose any hope for understanding the past, making sense of the present, and imaging and working towards a better future. How can we do without grand narratives? Eventually, even postmodernism is itself a grand narrative, precisely the narrative about the end of grand narratives, and its effort is to cope with what is left, by providing temporary, conditional, provisional answers. Jameson argues that even after the end of history, there persists some historical curiosity of a generally systemic kind: not merely to know what will happen next, but as a more general anxiety

⁵⁶ In *After the End of History: the Curious Fate of American Materialism* (2006), Robert Lane opposes a humanist vision to the dominant materialism of our time; the essay records a struggle, in the shape of a dialogue between two academics (Adam, the economist, and Dessie, the philosopher), between the materialistic and the humanist view of the world. According to Lane, the “capitalist-communist axis” is dead: to dominate our age is the “materialist-humanist axis”. (cf. p. 83). Lane is also the author of *The Market Experience* (1991) and *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (2000).

⁵⁷ Robert Lane argues that, after the end of history, it begins a transition from materialism to humanism. In the era of “New Humanism”, priorities change and the new system is based on the value of human life as the central value, higher than money, power or prestige.

about the larger fate of destiny of our system.⁵⁸ Jameson focuses on the loss of historicity as a sense of teleological linear time, which is linked to the post-Enlightenment loss of faith in origins, centre and end. Time becomes a sequence of non-correlated moments, a series of present moments which are isolated and lacking of depth associated to the perception of the past and the future. Jameson rejects the idea that an accurate understanding of the past might recreate a sense of history. Nonetheless, postmodern writers seem to strive for it: the goal of contemporary novelists, who write of and on history, is to recreate a historical sense and meditate on the importance of history to understand who we are, where we come from and who we can become.⁵⁹ Postmodern novels show that history does not end: historical narrative, the way it is created, studied and reviewed, continues to shape how people see themselves and, so, how they act in the world.

⁵⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, cit., p. 52.

⁵⁹ For a discussion on the purpose of history as human self-knowledge, cf. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, cit. Collingwood claims that “the value of history is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is” (p. 10).

2.3 How to Make Sense of the Past (?)

“The past is a distant, receding coastline, and we are all in the same boat” -
Julian Barnes, *Flaubert’s Parrot* (p. 101)

In the title of this paragraph, I have intentionally put a question mark in brackets to suggest that making sense of the past is a challenge, not a definitive achievement, and that the ways in which writers and historians conceive the past are mere possibilities, not enlightening solutions. While dealing with this subject, and on the basis that history has always been a great inquiry, I have found it more appropriate to raise some questions than offer clear answers. Therefore, I consider it reasonable to pose some doubts and problems in order to shed light on history and its construction. At the present, there is much curiosity about history and the past; yet, they critically remain subjects of controversy: controversy concerns the topics historians explore, the approaches they use to find meaning and insight from the past, and the way they construct history itself. The sense of the past has changed: most readers no longer trust official histories to be reliable, because they recognise the degree to which all knowledge of the past is a construction. Postmodernists claim that history is an act of creation, an ideological product of the age in which the account is written; it is a personal construct, a manifestation of the historian’s perspective as a narrator. For instance, Hayden White argues that history is not a science but a narrative discourse: “far from being a natural medium for the representation of historical events and processes, it is the very stuff of a mythical view of reality”.⁶⁰ Whereas narrative explains the past, it cannot guarantee that its explanations are truthful: historical texts do not passively mirror an objective historical truth. Postmodernists thus explore history as a narrative, always bearing in mind that there are many alternative ways to write it. There is no access to the past as it actually was, there is only a story version (or many stories) of it.

⁶⁰ Hayden White, *The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, cit., Preface, p. IX.

What can historians and postmodern writers do of the past in their records and in ‘historiographic metafiction’⁶¹ respectively? They try to interpret, explain and reconstruct the past. They can make a scientific enterprise of it, by looking for pieces of evidence of the past, or they can treat it as an object of study. The traces remain as witnesses to what once was, they guide the historian’s investigation. However, any evidence deriving from the past is partial, not objective: all historians can do with that evidence is to evaluate it and make some provisional sense of it. For White, the historian has to select what is significant from the evidence and produces a meaningful explanation, or an emplotment. White’s model of history concedes the historian absolute control and power over the historical archive; his function and duty is to provide a meaning through the organisation of the data as a narrative. There is not a single track to follow and pass on: the imposition of a single narrative frame is denounced as harmful and dangerous. Instead, historians and postmodern writers provide a critical vision and interpretation of history, offering an alternative historical understanding. Postmodern writers can even play with the past, making it a source for composition and invention, using it for decorative purposes (thus aestheticizing history).⁶² Yet, the sound question to pose now is not what they can, but what they should do of the past.

The flaw that exists at the heart of the ‘history enterprise’ is that the past exists for us only as it is written by historians: to answer the question of what history is, we have to refer to how a historical account is made, to what we mean with historical development and to the way the historian deals with facts. History is a discourse about the past, which once was and is now gone; even though we all believe that an actual past existed, it has never been a simple entity that could be easily comprehended, perceived or understood.⁶³ It is possible to view the past from numerous standpoints, to select different items and events as central and noteworthy, to trace different causal chains. Therefore, it is more reasonable to accept chains of interpretative signification than believe in a recoverable original meaning. The condition of living in a perpetual present implies the idea that the past has changed and, in the end, has petered out. It has lost its epistemological primacy, becoming a rewritable text according to the authority and power of those doing the rewriting. The old, modernist sense of history as the source of understanding, or as the teacher of moral or intellectual certainty,

⁶¹ As previously said, the expression has been coined by Linda Hutcheon (*A Poetics of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1988) and refers to a specific kind of postmodern fiction including those literary texts about the past and their own construction of the past. I will return to it later.

⁶² The aesthetic in postmodernism is considered an alternative way of knowing.

⁶³ Cf. Beverly Southgate, *History: What and Why? Ancient, Modern and Postmodern Perspectives*, London: Routledge, 1996.

has disappeared. By contrast, postmodernists call for a recognition of the relativism of meaning, provoked by one's perspective and the subjectivity of any historical representation; they do not claim that the world is meaningless, but that any existing meaning is a human construction.⁶⁴ An infinity of interpretations of the past is potentially available; nonetheless, postmodernists do not maintain that all interpretations are valid, what they claim is that there are never only one final version and one ultimate meaning. In an interview, the postmodern writer Julian Barnes argues:

the way history is remembered and therefore to a certain extent the way history is written about is a matter of taste, but I certainly don't believe that all tastes are equal, or that taste is any substitute for truth.⁶⁵

I wish to demonstrate that postmodern writers, whose works I will analyse in the next chapters, disagree with the idea that history is only creative fiction and that every perspective on the past is as valid as the other. Otherwise, saying that everything may be true would tally with saying that nothing is (true). However, their outlook on history is not nihilistic: they have never denied that history can be written, by contrast they question the ways history and the past have been hitherto written and use new means to write or rewrite it. So doing, they finally attempt to restore a comprehensible human dimension to historical experience.

It is now widely accepted that all history is inevitably ideological: it has been written from some standpoint and with some agenda. Historical writing has always been strongly political. According to Walter Benjamin, history as it has been practiced by historians has mainly sympathised with the victors. Benjamin argued that history is always fake, a narrative written and told by the winner which legitimizes his victory and shows the previous historical course like a continuum which leads to his final triumph. The final triumph of the winner for Fukuyama tallies with the establishment of liberal democracy, the system on which, sooner or later, the socio-political development of every nation on earth would come to rest. Fukuyama believes in history as a pattern and a metanarrative, whereas postmodernists take the distance from such a perspective. According to Benjamin the task of

⁶⁴ On scepticism about the nature and status of historical knowledge, cf. Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, London: Routledge, 1991, and *The Postmodern History Reader*, London: Routledge, 1997. Jenkins claims that history is a cultural, literary and philosophical activity which produces meaning about the past rather than discovering it in its empirical traces.

⁶⁵ Julian Barnes in Rudolf Freiburg and Jan Schnitker, "Do you consider yourself a postmodern author?": *Interviews with Contemporary English Writers*, Münster: LIT, 1999, p. 58.

history is to give the oppressed access to tradition and the past stands in need of “reawakening”. About Benjamin’s ‘Messianic Materialism’, Stephen Bronner writes:

Benjamin wished to confront the unilinear and teleological view of history inherited by Marxism from the Enlightenment. His undertaking was marked by compassion for what had been irretrievably lost and a new view of the past as open and capable of constant reconstruction.⁶⁶

Benjamin suggested that historical knowledge should pivot around the break of continuity and that we should get to a concept of history in which exception is the rule.⁶⁷ Postmodernist construction of the past undermines the determined assumption of teleological continuities; postmodernist thought opposes a teleological history and works to dismantle conventional historiography.

The grand narrative of Western History exhibits the winner’s perspective, that is Eurocentric and America-centric dominating power. Such a History is finally jettisoned by postmodernist thinkers and writers: looking at how the past has been represented within Western culture, there is the need to abandon the specific ideology. Postmodernists aim at freeing history from the shackles of authoritarian ideology, from coercive ideas of reality and truth. They are concerned with identifying who we are and how we have become who we are - and question this process of presumed progress.⁶⁸ Where do we come from and lead to? How and why did what we achieved become a source of degeneration?

Postmodernist and postcolonial perspectives and aims are both interlinked and diverging; as for their differences, Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin write:

While postmodernism has increasingly fetishised “difference” and “the Other”, those Otherved by a history of European representation can only retrieve and reconstitute a post-colonised self. While the disappearance of grand narratives and the crisis of representation characterize the Euro-American postmodernist mood, such expressions of breakdown and crisis instead signal promise and decolonization potential within postcolonial discourse.⁶⁹

The case of the rewriting of history rather proves to be a good example of the intersection of, and interchange between, postmodern and postcolonial trajectories. Postmodernism challenges the reliability of conventional images of the past, focusing on the fact that reality

⁶⁶ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists*, cit., p. 137.

⁶⁷ Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (1950), Engl. trans. *On the Concept of History*, cit.

⁶⁸ For a study on society and political and cultural transformations over the last century, see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), and David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (1990).

⁶⁹ Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin, *Past the Last Post: Theorising Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, p. 8.

is a discursive product, always strategic. Postcolonialism claims that history has been written by the winners for their own self-justificatory purposes, by spokespersons of imperial powers and dominant nations and, consequently, that history has to be rewritten from a postcolonial perspective. Postcolonialism underlines that in the conventional production of history there are no traces of the outlooks of the subdued and colonised, characterised by differences of race, gender, ethnicity, native status and class. According to Homi Bhabha, authoritarian histories based on the theory of imperialism must be discredited in favour of dissident, hybrid and cross-cultural histories and voices.⁷⁰ Postmodern and postcolonial novelists resist conventional models of history (which are the creation of those who are in power) with the purpose to produce a new historiography attentive to cultural difference.

In *Shame*, Salman Rushdie writes: “History loves only those who dominate her: it is a relationship of mutual enslavement”⁷¹. Rushdie argues that history is natural selection as much in facts as in narrative, and that to dominate is, in a certain sense, the law of the strongest. History records the facts of the winners not those of the losers, of the masters not of the servants. However, Rushdie is one of those postmodern and postcolonial writers who are engaged in the rewriting of history from various viewpoints, drifting away from grand narratives and official historical records. If a postmodern truth is ever possible, it comes from the local and the limited. Contemporary writers⁷² destabilise existing representations of the past, showing the extent to which such representations are provisional rather than faithful images of the past. They refute conventional models of history and conventional techniques to represent historical events, shedding light on their limits. They aim at discarding accuracy and neutrality in historical account as impossibilities and stress representational frailties and epistemological uncertainties of and about the past.

The status of history in postmodernism is perplexing. What are history and the past for? How can we make sense of them? And why do we still wish to do that? If all history is just a contingent, relative, fictional construction, what is its point? Why do we need to

⁷⁰ Cf. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 5.

⁷¹ Salman Rushdie, *Shame*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1983, p. 124.

⁷² Among the novelists who deal with the representation of history and its rewriting, see Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow* (1991) and *House of Meetings* (2006); Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989); Kazuo Ishiguro *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989); Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (2004); Ian McEwan, *Black Dogs* (1992); Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1980) and *Shame* (1983); Graham Swift, *Shuttlecock* (1981), *Waterland* (1983), and *Even After* (1992); Adam Thorpe, *Ulverton* (1992) and *Nineteen Twenty-one* (2001); Sarah Waters, *The Night Watch* (2006). In the next chapters I focus on some of these novels, investigating their attempt to make history and the past their subject, and their interpretation of, and relationship to, the concept of the end of history.

worry about what is past at all? In the sixties, Anthony Burgess was trying to deal with the same question:

why, when there is so much present clamouring to be written about, should a novelist concern himself with the past? One answer sounds rather like a quibble: the present is only a thin line between past and future; the future has not yet come into existence; therefore we have only the past to write about.⁷³

However, the point of historical fiction (and historiographic metafiction too) seems to be the construction of some order and the disclosure of some meaning. We turn to narrative constructs to make some sense, answering human needs to impose an order on, and give a meaning to, experience. The reason why we worry about the past is our demand to comprehend the present and define what we are. Like Swift's and Rushdie's narrator-protagonists in *Waterland* and *Midnight's Children* respectively, we are compelled to tell our story in order to understand the place we take in history and society: we cannot understand the present if we do not understand the past that preceded and produced it. Our identity is bound up to the past: the construction of postmodern identity requires an attentive approach to the past; an investigation of the practice of production of the past that abandons any search for objective truth about it. As conventional notions of truth and historical progress are under question, it is essential to rethink the function of history and renegotiate its uses for the postmodern age.

How do we make sense, through narrative, of postmodern times? On the assumption that history is inevitably partial, incomplete and biased, why do we continue to feel the urge to represent it and claim that it has not ended nor that it can ever do? In *Why Bother with History?* Beverley Southgate ponders that the question which gives the title to his essay might be a strange one to pose at a time when the subject has never seemed more popular.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, the great interest in the subject demonstrated over the last decades and its increasing popularity are not sufficient to answer his query. Indeed, historians are obliged to come to terms with the postmodern challenge that questions not only the validity of the subject as it has been previously practised, but the very point of studying history at all. This historical trouble has been also translated in literature; many postmodern novels interrogate the sense of the past and its investigation. I here want to quote one of the passages in Graham Swift's novel, *Waterland*, where the narrator-protagonist, a history teacher, faces

⁷³ Anthony Burgess, *The Novel Now*, London: Faber and Faber, 1967, p. 133.

⁷⁴ Beverley Southgate, *Why Bother with History?*, London: Longman, 2000, Preface, p. IX.

the problem of the history-value. During a lesson to his class, Tom Crick has to answer his student Price's question:

What is the point, use, need of History? History is a fairy-tale. What matters is the here and now. Not the past. The here and now – and the future.⁷⁵

In understanding our present, though, it seems that we cannot escape the past: the theme of the deep connection between history and the individual directs the novel. The present is a time in which history is under threat (it is at an end, we lose the sense of it), and so it seems more than ever necessary to find some positive answers to the question of why we should bother with it – bother with the past and with representations of the past.

The concern with the past is expressed by the increasing presence, in the eighties and nineties, of memoirs, testimonies, films with historical themes, museums and monuments. Historical novels and novels which relate to history are more and more popular too: their success lies in the way in which they address the widespread interest in history-making by offering themselves as models for an understanding of the past and a means to construct identity. The tragedies of the twentieth-century history (the two world wars, the Holocaust, the destructive use of atomic power, the cold war, the Gulags etc.) have influenced and changed the very modes of relationship between narrative and history. The Holocaust is the evidence for the break and destruction of Enlightenment idea of a universal History and the universal human: there is no longer History, Man and Woman in capital letters, but only stories, men and women in particular times and places, and these categories shift and change. Nonetheless, historical events continue to shed light on and draw attention to aspects of the human, so that to understand man and woman's actions and reactions we look for clues in history (whereas the grand narrative of history is abandoned, the attention is drawn to particular, familiar history, to the small tale of one's origins). Historians are asked to supply memory and recollection, and make out traditions on which lives are grounded.⁷⁶ Historians cannot claim to know the past as it actually was because historical facts do not speak for themselves; historians happen to interpret it through other texts, through layers of other historians' interpretations. Their task is to provide credible narratives and explanations of

⁷⁵ Graham Swift, *Waterland*, London: Pan Books, 1984, p. 14.

⁷⁶ Memory is considered an important element in the reconstructions of past events. Aleida Assmann argues that, under the impact of the Holocaust, the relationship between memory and history has changed in many ways; in particular, she focuses on the function of memory in history-writing, since it is not discarded as unreliable and distorting source any longer. See Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, München: C. H. Beck, 1999.

the past, offering plausible analyses of what happened in response to the questions people ask about past events. Historians work to recover and represent the content of the past: thus doing, they face the problem of locating the past and representing it with fidelity.

In postmodern times it is impossible not to feel some fears about the past: the risk of losing or misunderstanding it and the terror of not finding people who are able to look at it because they have lost the sense of history. In order not to forget and lose the past, historians must record it, transmit it to future generations and help to preserve the sense of history in the potential audience. But what kind of history is available in postmodernity? H el ene Raddeker calls it ‘sceptical history’.⁷⁷ I will briefly refer to her analysis of what postmodernist sceptical history involves, suggesting that there are many common features between historians’ practice in recording history and postmodern writers’ use of the past in historiographic metafiction. Raddeker suggests that the historian has to own a self-reflexive practice, which includes both self-criticism and frank admissions of her/his own position and that the emphasis in history must be placed on leaving argument open. The historian must claim the provisional nature of any argument or interpretation, showing suspicion of closures of knowledge as presented in traditional discourses. S/he must focus more upon ruptures, breaks or discontinuities than on continuities in developments or processes in the past, in the attempt to avoid teleological and essentialist representations of the past. Discontinuity becomes the object and the tool of historical research: the matter for historical analysis does not consist in finding traces and tradition, but rifts and limits, pondering on changes and developments. Furthermore, history has to be the record and the recognition of difference (differences of culture, race/ethnicity, class, gender) in order to avoid earlier tendencies to universalise cultures and homogenise people.⁷⁸

As above said, postmodern writers abandon teleological narratives of completion and wholeness, turning to partial and provisional representations of the past. Both in fiction and in history, the rewriting and the depiction of the past are not conclusive but involved in the present. History is narrative and therefore can be endlessly rewritten: postmodern writers seek to open up the processes by which history is made, they encourage relativism, tentative beliefs and playfulness. Narrative selects and distorts; therefore, the very idea of any one history accurately mirroring the past and being truthfully written has to be abandoned. As George Orwell put it, “...what is peculiar to our own age is the abandonment of the idea that

⁷⁷ H el ene Bower Raddeker, *Sceptical History: Feminist and Postmodern Approaches in Practice*, London: Routledge, 2007.

⁷⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 33.

history *could* be told truthfully”⁷⁹. There is no unitary truth embedded within our ideas of the past; we can reconstruct the past in different forms. As our perspectives change, we look at the past in new ways, reinterpreting events and posing new questions about what has happened and then recorded.

Not only historiography but also literature offers access to the past: the novel is the best textual means of re-enacting the past; it shows the effects of time on identity and consciousness, and enables the reader to inhabit a past world and understand the thoughts, feelings and actions of those who lived in a completely different environment. This might explain what the justification of history writing is. However, other reasons can be added: history writing allows memory, renders homage to the dead and supplies some teaching for the future. Memory is the mediator between present and past, offering the possibility to link them.⁸⁰ Aleida Assmann argues that possible motivations for the acute interest in memory and the past are:

- The breakdown of “grand narratives” at the end of the cold war and the resurgence of frozen memories; with the change of political framework, access was finally possible to the sealed archives of the former Communist countries, which provided a new basis for history and memory;
- The postcolonial situation in which humans that had been deprived of their indigenous history and culture are trying to recover their own narratives and memories;
- The post-traumatic situation after the Holocaust and the two world wars, the accumulated violence, cruelty, and guilt of which is surfacing only gradually and belatedly after a period of psychic paralysis and silence;
- The new digital revolution in communication technology that changes the status of information by creating more efficient ways of storing and circulating information without, however, securing its long-term durability.⁸¹

Postmodernism assumes that memory is a ground of identity. It is part of the nature of man the wish to discover the sources, the origins of our present circumstances. We are not as free from the past as we think we are: being aware of it is to have a historical sense. Why should

⁷⁹ George Orwell, quote from “Looking Back on the Spanish War” in *A Collection of Essays*, London: Harvest Edition, 1981.

⁸⁰ Aleida Assmann, also called “memory expert”, investigates the field of cultural memory, remembering, and forgetting. She acknowledges four levels or ‘formats of memory’: individual memory, social memory, political memory, and cultural memory. See Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, cit, and *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, München: C. H. Beck, 2006.

⁸¹ Aleida Assmann, “Memory, individual and collective” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, ed. by Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, chapter 11, pp. 210-211.

we study history? The study of history grants (or rather granted in the past) an attempt to understand a fact by its own nature and by its relationship to other facts in a wider context. The historian's central concern should be the authenticity of the past. Furthermore, there remains the duty to speak for those who could not; to speak is to bear witness.

The urgent question today becomes whether history can help the postmodern project to somehow alleviate the postmodern condition. Can it contribute to an understanding of our own self-consciousness, of our own unstable and uncertain position in epistemological frames not valid any longer? Can history assume a therapeutic function?

If the whole point of history is under question, it may seem perverse (or even presumptuous) to consider its potential moral role. Deprived of any meaningful narrative direction or purpose, robbed of any absolutist or essentialist pretensions, history may thus seem to have been left in a state of amoral relativism that would negate any claim to value.⁸²

Nonetheless, I agree with Southgate arguing that postmodernism imposes on history an ultimately moral role; “history is needed to underpin our future, and the definition of that future thereby becomes the responsibility of individual historians”⁸³. Far from seeing history as coming to an end or as irrelevant, Southgate appreciates it – after having rethought and revisited it – “as having greater importance today than it has ever had”⁸⁴. History shows that the only strength opposing to casualty can be moral, revealing human desire to continue, to change, and to bear witness. The ethics of history consists in an increasing call for justice and responsibility in the representation of the past.

My aim is to demonstrate that, through historiographic metafiction, contemporary writers suggest a postmodern renewal of an ethics of history; literature has the task of constructing an ethically usable past. The postmodern claim that it is impossible for us to know everything does not mean that we do not know anything. The past, even if presented in provisional and subjective reconstructions, can still teach us something. In his article “The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History”, Gordon Wood wrote:

By disparaging the capacity of history to teach lessons, I don't mean to suggest that studying the past can't teach us anything. If history has nothing to say to us, then it wouldn't make much sense to study or teach it or read about it at all.

⁸² Beverley Southgate, *Why Bother with History?*, cit., p. 137.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, Preface, p. XI.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem.*

[...] It may not teach us particular lessons, but it does tell us how we might live in the world.⁸⁵

In the final analysis, history is about finding out what happened and understanding and explaining it. It is the responsibility of historians to establish the truth of the past as much as possible.

⁸⁵ Gordon Wood, "The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History" in *Historically Speaking*, January 2009.

2.4 Post-history without Meaning: the System of Production and Consumption and the End of Experience

Considering the possibility that history has come to its end, then we should be living in “post-history”. According to Kojève, post-history is the realm of freedom and peace. Is this really so? The present era is the historical result of processes of production and consumption. The French philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard is a theorist of the postmodern who investigates the imperatives of profit and the logic of consumption within contemporary society as well as their consequences for human behaviour. He offers a grim analysis of the current human condition and his work epitomises an ultimate state of disenchantment with the concepts and the categories of Enlightenment thought. His vision of postmodernity leaves no exits. According to him, what characterises our society is the lack of any perspective, the absence of sense and reflection. He said in an interview:

postmodernity is a game with the vestiges of what has been destroyed. This is why we are post – history has stopped, one is in a kind of post-history which is without meaning.⁸⁶

To think of history going somewhere is to suffer from an illusion; the end of history as linear and progressive is a defining feature of postmodernity. For Baudrillard, the age of simulation is the age of the disappearance of history: boundaries and the sense of history have been blurred; history has dissolved into its representations.

The fact that we are leaving history to move into the realm of simulation is merely a consequence of the fact that history itself has always been an immense simulation model.⁸⁷

Post-history is thus left with no meaning.

Consumerism and excess characterise the last decades of our history: society has been invaded by objects, goods and services. The result of the contemporary trend to consume and accumulate is that man is surrounded by and subjected to objects; objects gain absolute power within society. Baudrillard examines the logic of consumerism and reviews

⁸⁶ Qtd. in Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, cit., p. 155.

⁸⁷ Qtd. in Keith Jenkins, *The Postmodern History Reader*, cit., p. 44.

its story as follows: man is led to objects that can satisfy his desires, yet he is never completely satisfied because he is constantly prompted by new desires which are determined by a continuous supply of goods. The commercial manipulation of images through advertising and the media entails a constant reworking of desires; commodity excites desires, yet strangely denies satisfaction. Man never feels complete satisfaction, so the story goes on unchanged.⁸⁸ Such a course recalls what has already been announced by Kojève in his theory on the archaeology of desire: at the end of history man remains alive as an animal; he returns to be an animal and lives among abundance and complete security. The “American way of life”, which involves spending one’s time desiring and consuming, prefigures the “eternal present” future of all humanity.⁸⁹ Baudrillard explores the possibility that consumption has become the chief basis of social order and of its internal classification. Consumer products have come to constitute a classification system that codes human behaviour: they function within a sign system that programmes individual consumption and, through consumption, structures the social. Baudrillard maintains that the system of consumption is not based on need or pleasure any longer, but, rather, on a code of signs (objects/signs). He depicts consumer society as saturated with signs, messages, and images. When people consume objects, they unconsciously enter a system of coded values. The primary function of consumer objects is their sign function, which is promoted by so-called life style advertisements and television commercials. The sign function of consumer objects persuades us to invest in them.

Why do we compulsively buy and consume? The answer lies in the bitter reflection on our addiction to the system of consumption. In contemporary society consumption has become a moral duty: we are trained to consume. We buy and consume objects that we do not need only because we are under the control of the sign system. There is no way out of such a system: objects simulate social essence, i.e. social status. Objects do not have value because they come in use, but because they serve as signs. Contemporary society privileges values linked to standing and communication: man is what he has and what he shows he has. Baudrillard is pessimistic: he puts forward a negative critique of commodity culture. He believes that there is no remedy for consumer society - in the present historical stage, sign control is complete and totalitarian.

⁸⁸ Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *La société de consommation* (1974), Engl. trans. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, London: SAGE, 1998, “The Theory of Consumption”, pp. 49-98.

⁸⁹ Cf. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, cit., p. 161.

In the 1970s, Baudrillard develops a theory on simulation: he detects a fundamental break between modern and postmodern societies, as the first are organised on production and consumption of goods, the last on simulation and activities of signs and images. Post-industrial society shifts away from the production of commodities and towards their mass cultural representation. Baudrillard notes that new forms of technology and information are central to this shift from a productive to a reproductive social order.⁹⁰ Simulation rules the new social order, whose codes and signs are the organising forms. Human beings live in a hyper-reality in which entertainment, information and media are the models for daily life. They are surrounded by an endless stream of information and a-historical simulacra. Signs, images and codes pop up and, in their turn, generate other signs. Consumer's freedom and power are delusions: the new system of values implies human passivity. Passivity consists in accepting the system, in being conformist and not thinking with one's own mind. Every act of consumption is an act of complicity with capitalistic society. Man accepts to live the life television tells him he should have; his perspective is medium-delimited. The overload of information provided by the media makes him inert and silent; he is unable to chain the continuous flow of diverse images together into a meaningful message. Baudrillard's postmodern categories help understand some social dynamics in the computer and media world, in which signs and objects direct the subject, reducing him to a yes man. Media produce and embody the code, governing all forms of exchange. Media, especially television, shape culture and the way people live. Culture is not a production by people, but a construction by media. Culture is not produced to last: it is subject to the laws of the market, it is an item.

Baudrillard's scrutiny on consumer society demonstrates that everything is reduced to mere sign. He says:

Consumption is a myth. That is to say, it is a statement of contemporary society about itself, the way our society speaks itself. And, in a sense, the only objective reality of consumption is the idea of consumption; it is this reflexive, discursive configuration, endlessly repeated in everyday speech and intellectual discourse, which has acquired the force of common sense.⁹¹

⁹⁰ See also George Siomkos, 'Homo Consumericus: The Coming of the Post-Modern Consumer', *Marketing Week*, Special Issue No. 1.000, 5th of April 2004; Gad Saad, *The Evolutionary Bases of Consumption* (Routledge, 2007); and Gilles Lipovetsky, *Le bonheur paradoxal, Essai sur la société d'hyperconsommation* (éditions Gallimard, 2006).

⁹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, cit., p. 193.

Consumption is a set of meanings like language. Daily life is the place for consumption and is a system of interpretation. The logic of consumption is a manipulation of signs.⁹² Consumption becomes a potent element of social control: it is politics, it is the new ideology. Baudrillard is against any idealist standpoint which considers production as a clue to prosperity and prosperity as a way to democracy.⁹³ It is a fact that economic growth itself implies social disparity. Production and consumption are part of the simulation. Baudrillard thinks simulation as reality ersatz: it entails the mixture of all the signs without the presence of something real. Signs no longer claim to depict and mirror an objective reality, everything is faked. Simulation substitutes reality: it is so true to reality that replaces it. The principle of reality is exchanged with the logic of simulation. Simulation works for disenchantment: there is no meaning in the real and in its representation.⁹⁴ Baudrillard believes in the end of the real, which paradoxically finds its expression in an excess, in the hyper-real, that is the reproduction of the real.⁹⁵ In systems of simulation the principle of hyper-reality substitutes that of reality: the hyperreal has managed to replace the real, it is a reproduced real. Technology has granted the creation of a virtual reality, signs make the reality disappear and concealed its vanishing. Disneyland is an example of the culture of simulation which has made reality, history and the past disappear. Places like Disneyland confirm the hyperreal as real. Appearance is the only important thing, the only ontological dimension left. But the hyperreal has escaped our control: it is an extreme attempt of reality to survive itself, its excess consists in producing a reality instead of representing it.

In *Le crime parfait*⁹⁶, Baudrillard traces the stages of destruction of reality and delusion through media information and new technologies. The end of the real coincides with the growth of the hyperreal. Technology is used to collect what remains of the real and transform it into representations. Images destroy the real by creating the virtual: they become a form of discourse, detached from the real and able to supplant it. Representation has acquired a sort of materiality, whereas reality has undergone a process of

⁹² Ibid., p. 200.

⁹³ Baudrillard can be read as implicitly opposing Fukuyama.

⁹⁴ Also Slavoj Žižek deals with the concept of the real and its symbolic representation or virtualization: see Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, London: Verso, 1997. The Real for Žižek is immaterial as inaccessible to, and thus unknowable by, the Symbolic; the Symbolic can only "virtualize" the Real, can only posit an inadequate simulacrum of it. The Real has a purely "formal" existence apart from and parallel to any symbolization.

⁹⁵ See also Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: five essays on September 11 and related dates*, cit., p. 15. Here, Žižek argues that virtual reality generalise a practice of offering a product deprived of its properties: reality itself is deprived of its substance. Virtual reality is experienced as reality without being a very reality: the process of virtualization leads to the point that we perceive reality itself as a virtual entity.

⁹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Le crime parfait* (1995), Engl. trans. *The Perfect Crime*, London: Verso, 2008.

dematerialization. Representations no longer reflect reality, they rather constitute it: we only experience reality through the representations we make of it. Our experience is not authentic, it is mediated by reproduction and simulation. Baudrillard insists on the importance of signs and simulacra within consumer society, underlining the risk in the act of duplication: every duplication forces both replica and original into the realm of simulation. He investigates the relationship between reality and imitation, concluding that there is no line that separates them anymore.

Art is not the only one to play on the ambiguity of sign of the objects: reality is consumed through the object/sign, the system dries up in its reproduction. Baudrillard affirms that even power is simulation: power itself does not exist, it is an occasion for simulation. Man is seduced by power because it works as a simulacrum: it changes into signs and it is conceived on signs (this is the reason why parody, the reversal of signs and their excess possess a great influence on power).⁹⁷ It is not only political, it is also symbolical. The essay *Oublier Foucault*, as the title suggests, is polemical: Baudrillard starts from Michel Foucault's analysis of power and tries to go beyond his hyperrealism. Foucault has been instrumental in drawing attention to the relation between knowledge and power and to the dispersal of power throughout the social field. He abandoned the traditional approach to the question of power, which was based on legal and institutional models (definition of sovereignty, theory of the State), and privileged a factual analysis of the ways in which power penetrates human beings and their lives. His survey on mechanisms of power and social control examines the rules for the construction of discourses. The assumption is that politics is the place in which the interplay between man and *logos* occurs. Foucault believed that politics is made of discourses: by describing them, we manage to find the way to understand the whole system.

Baudrillard maintains that "Foucault's discourse is a mirror of the power he describes, reflecting the power relations and reproducing them"⁹⁸: Foucault does not create a discourse of truth, but one of hyper-reality. According to Baudrillard, he is unable to grasp the end of power and the end of the real. He creates discourses and, through them, explains the ways in which power changes and develops, without noticing that power is fading. Power is never here: it is simulation. Baudrillard considers power as a symbolic structure built on signs, their difference and exchange. Power is something we exchange not in the

⁹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Oublier Foucault* (1977), Engl. trans. *Forget Foucault*, London: Semiotexte, 2007, p. 51.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

economic sense, but within a process of seduction, challenge and cunning. It is a human construction: if we cannot exchange it, power simply disappears. As a system of signs which defines man as cultural being, power is linked to the concept of knowledge and creation of meaning. Man's task is to wonder now about the function of power and knowledge within contemporary society and about the purpose in constructing their systems of signs.

The end of the real theorised by Baudrillard is a topic linked with the end of knowledge, or the end of the possibility to make experience. The computerization of society affects the nature of our knowledge, which has been transformed into an informational commodity, important for its efficiency only. It is no longer something we share, but something we use: it is an economic factor, a marketable and exchangeable tool. This change in conceiving knowledge deeply affects human experience. Contemporary man has been deprived of his experience: his typical day consists of facts and events which are not experience or do not become experience. The best example of man's impossibility to make authentic experience comes from the artistic field. As Walter Benjamin clearly explained, in the age of mechanical reproduction the aura of the work of art disappears.⁹⁹ Technology permits the automatic creation of copies; the work of art loses its uniqueness and authenticity, which were represented by the *hic et nunc* (i.e. place and time where and when the work of art happened to be), by the context of tradition in which it was imbedded. Art stops serving as a connection to past and tradition and is mechanically reproduced. Reproduction destroys tradition, deletes any clue to the past frame of reference. Man's approach to the work of art is consequently altered: there is no possibility to enter tradition and past frame of reference through the object. The work of art becomes a source for pleasure and profit, it is an item on the market. The power of the market has been extended over the whole range of cultural production.

Communication is no longer a way of sharing experience and knowledge but a way to convey the dominant information. Man's relation with the world is based on repetitive use and consumption, is not immediate, but mediated. The only authentic aspect of his daily life is his inability to make and communicate experience. In *The Storyteller*, Benjamin observed that contemporary man happens to be deprived of his ability which once seemed inalienable - the most confident and strongest among human skills - i.e. his ability to

⁹⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1955), Engl. trans. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, London: Penguin Books, 2008.

exchange experience.¹⁰⁰ In *Infancy and History*, Giorgio Agamben clarifies that experience is associated with words and stories; it relies on human use of words and on the way man creates and tells stories. The origin of experience and history lies in human infancy. Agamben thinks necessary to go back to the roots of human experience and wonder about the relationship that it has with language. It is language that gives us the experience of temporality, human time, past, present and memory. Language is made up of both *langue* and *parole*: human nature is originally split as infancy witnesses the difference and discontinuity between language and speech. Man's historicity grounds on such difference and discontinuity.¹⁰¹ Speech, unlike language, is historical: it is made of real and consecutive facts and cannot be analysed out of time when it has developed. Man who fails to accede fully into the realm of speech and language, lacks the experience of temporal continuity and, therefore, is condemned to live in a perpetual present. Agamben affirms that it is infancy, which is to be intended as transcendental experience of the difference between *langue* and *parole*, that opens the space of history. Infancy of history is language. History is the moment of human transition from the pure language (the semiotic, the sign that has to be recognised) to speech (the semantic that has to be understood).

Postmodernists claim that history is a cluster of discourses, anchored to language. Language is a convention, history is a construction. History is made by little stories: there is a series of stories and individual languages, but there is no link between them that forms a grand narrative. There is no possibility to build a global history, man tries instead to create particular and local stories, in order to portray aspects of different epochs. Foucault denies linear historical causality between events and epochs; he focuses on ruptures and breaks in developments in the past, rejecting grand narratives:

The problem is no longer one of tradition, of tracing a line, but one of division, of limits. [...] The history of thought, of knowledge, of philosophy, of literature, seems to be seeking, and discovering, more and more discontinuities.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ "It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experience" - Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller", in Michael McKeon, *Theory of the Novel, a Historical Approach*, Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, p. 77.

¹⁰¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Infanzia e storia, Distruzione dell'esperienza e origine della storia*, Torino: Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 2001, Engl. trans. *Infancy and History, Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, London: Verso, 1993, pp. 52-53.

¹⁰² Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969), Engl. trans. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1972, p. 6.

Postmodernists follow Foucault's lead in emphasizing discontinuities in history or the passage of time rather than the conventional approach to linked sequences of cause and effect in chronological and teleological models. History cannot be identified as a linear and indefinite process: historical and temporal categories do not coincide, they are not necessarily the same. Postmodernists redefine history by abandoning any dialectical interpretation based on the principles of causality and necessity. History has undergone an epistemological change: it takes on a new shape and creates its own theory based on the investigation of discontinuity and concepts such as threshold, break, mutation and transformation. History is not the continual progression of mankind along a linear time, but is, in its essence, break and discontinuity.¹⁰³

Over the last few decades critical attention on history focuses on the phenomena of breaking and change, instead of insisting on large spans of time like epochs or centuries. There is no History, but fragments of it, only histories. The core of the postmodern debate on history is the very importance of such interruptions and fractures in historical course. Personal consciousness and history are marked out by metaphors of crisis and discontinuity. History is a network of narratives through which experience is framed and understood. Past is representation, is simulacrum; it can be caught through images, which are temporary, not fixed and eternal. Postmodernists have with increasingly frequency visited the past in order to illuminate the present, undertaking a search for identity and tradition. Through an analysis of a series of postmodern novels which belong to the category of English historiographic metafiction, I aim to answer the question whether history can still be an epistemology, providing us with some rules for gaining and using knowledge.

¹⁰³ See also Giorgio Agamben, *op. cit.*, p. 53: "History cannot be the continuous progress of speaking humanity through linear time, but in its essence is hiatus, discontinuity, *epochē*".

2.5 Historiographic Metafiction: Framing History in Fiction

I conclude this chapter on the postmodern answer to the end of history by taking a detailed look at the topic of historiographic metafiction, which works as a very *trait d'union* to the next chapter, in which I will focus on some postmodern historical novels. Though a sense of an ending, a hint of something completed and over is widespread in postmodernism, contemporary writers argue that history has not ended and engage themselves in its depiction and representation. They finally demonstrate that the past remains an integral part of our experience, and that, for this very reason, we cannot stop digging it up. My argument is that, on the whole, postmodernism entails a return to history, not a positive and simple return, but a critical one, questioning the entire notion of historical knowledge. History is not discredited, yet its modes and meanings are diversified. Postmodernism forces us to review and reconsider our idea of what history is, exploring the cultural presumptions on which any account of history is founded. As we noted before, what has changed within postmodernism is the way we conceive history, with the increasing awareness of the limits and faults of any construction and representation of the past. Contemporary writers who deal with the rewriting of history are motivated by a need to highlight the gap - which is impossible to fill - between the real past and any representation of it. Historiographic metafiction answers the double need to reflect on history and reality, and to question the ability to represent them. In her attempt to offer a definition of historiographic metafiction, Linda Hutcheon suggests:

by this I mean those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages.¹⁰⁴

Historiographic metafiction is obsessed by history; it is concerned with historical events, it makes history its subject and reflects on historiography. It combines metafictional elements with particular and deep attention to history, including three genres, literature, history and theory, as one. It is exactly the literary, self-conscious combination of history and fiction. Postmodern theory challenges the separation of the literary and the historical:

¹⁰⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1988, p. 5.

they are both modes of writing, linguistic constructs and intertextual. On the basis that history and fiction are human constructs, historiographic metafiction dedicates itself to a “rethinking and reworking of the forms and the contents of the past”.¹⁰⁵ It raises the issue of what writing about history implicates, questioning the sense and the various possible interpretations of the past. Hutcheon argues that historiographic metafiction is inherently contradictory: it works within conventions in order to subvert them. While claiming reference to the historical world, it doubts and plays with such a world. Historiographic metafiction must live with the double awareness of its fictionality and its foundation in real events.

Looking at the two terms that compose the expression ‘historiographic metafiction’, let us recall what Patricia Waugh maintains about metafiction, defining it as

fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically calls attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.¹⁰⁶

Metafiction is a fiction which talks about itself, showing out its structure, demonstrating itself as fiction. The author asks her/his readers for their willing suspension of disbelief: they have not to believe in fiction, they have not to passively enter the fictional world. The world that metafiction portrays is not the real world that it resembles. Malcolm Bradbury suggests that

the novelist today may feel himself under a growing need to present his fictions as fictive – because the problems of presenting the structure of a novel as authoritative or somehow co-equal with life are intensified and obscured where there are no communal myths or ethics. Novelists use language to explore contingent reality and not to create systematic orders. There is not a necessary order to present any longer.¹⁰⁷

For Hutcheon, “the meeting of metafiction and historiography produces a new kind of experimental writing uniquely capable of fulfilling the poetics of postmodernism”.¹⁰⁸ The term historiographic reveals the critical interest in history and in the writing of history. It follows that historiographic metafiction uses metafictional techniques to underscore that

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁶ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: the Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction*, London: Routledge, 1988, p. 2.

¹⁰⁷ Malcolm Bradbury, *Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 264.

¹⁰⁸ Linda Hutcheon, “British Historiographic Metafiction”, in Mark Currie, *Metafiction*, New York, Longman House, 1995, p. 71.

history is a construction, not something natural that tallies with the past, but a literary artefact. It draws attention to the fact that we know the past through other texts, that all historical sources are intertextual.

Intertextuality plays a fundamental role in postmodern literature: historiographic metafiction turns to the intertexts of both history and literature.¹⁰⁹ Postmodernism argues that we can only know reality as it is produced and sustained by cultural representations of it; we experience the world through our past and present narratives of it. Historiographic metafiction teaches us that we know the past only through its traces, relics, its textualised remains.¹¹⁰

The intertextual parody of historiographic metafiction offers a sense of the presence of the past, but a past that can be known only from its texts. [...] To parody is not to destroy the past; in fact, to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it. And this is the postmodern paradox.¹¹¹

Among contemporary British fiction, I wish to cite Adam Thorpe's *Ulverton* (1992) as a fitting example of a historical novel in the tradition of historiographic metafiction. Thorpe records and reconstructs the English village's history (that of Ulverton) by presenting it as a collection of stories, myths and tales, mediated through a variety of texts which include written documents (described as real source material) as well as oral texts. In the novel, Thorpe deals with epistemological and methodological problems associated with history and historiography, such as the different source materials with which a historian is concerned, or the nature of historical knowledge and interpretation. As a piece of historiographic metafiction, *Ulverton* claims to refer to a real past by covering three hundred years in life of the village, but also suggests that we have no direct access to that real past, unless we avail ourselves of textual elements such as myths, tales and our various discourse about it. The novel is an archaeological attempt to uncover the past. Thorpe is a postmodern writer who digs up the past rather than create it; in an interview, he declares:

That's what postmodernism is all about, borrowing, putting models together in a collage of things of the past or contemporary things, and the two sort of

¹⁰⁹ In order to illustrate the use of literary and historical intertexts in contemporary British fiction (historiographic metafiction), Hutcheon refers to the work of John Fowles, Anthony Burgess, Peter Ackroyd, Julian Barnes and John Berger.

¹¹⁰ Cf. the views of the historian Dominick La Capra, who argues that "the past arrives in the form of texts and textualised remainders – memories, reports, publishing writings, archives, monuments, and so forth". Dominick La Capra, *History & Criticism*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 128.

¹¹¹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, cit., pp. 125-126.

jangle together. Which is partly the point about *Ulverton*, putting things up against each other.¹¹²

Historiographic metafiction creates a debate within fiction on the ways in which history works and is to be understood. Hutcheon writes:

historiographic metafiction shows fiction to be historically conditioned and history to be discursively structured, and in the process manages to broaden the debate about the ideological implications of the Foucauldian conjunction of power and knowledge – for readers and for history itself as a discipline.¹¹³

Since I have already pointed at Foucault's influence on postmodern theory, I will not linger any longer on the interrelationship between power and knowledge, between rhetorical and political purposes in historical accounts. I have made it clear so far that postmodern writers focus on, and aim at, uncovering the relations of power which are constitutional in the process of history-making. In quoting Hutcheon, I want to suggest here the importance of the third genre which constitutes historiographic metafiction, that is theory: historiographic metafiction is built on the mutual dependence of fiction and critical theory. Postmodern writers are concerned with the problem of the construction of a critical history; self-reflexivity is a fundamental feature of all postmodern historical novels as they ponder on the production and the reception of histories. The metafictional self-reflexivity invites us to wonder about our knowledge of the past and the ways we have achieved such knowledge.

The reader is forced to acknowledge not only the textuality of our knowledge of the past, but also both the value and the limitation of that inescapably discursive form of knowledge.¹¹⁴

Postmodern historical novels are not just about history, they historically reflect on the making of historical narrative, observing how the times in which we live shape the way we understand the past. They reconnect the past to the present; Steven Connor argues:

historical narrative such as it is evidenced in the novel of history in the postwar period is not a matter of representing the truth of history but of constructing the terms of a conversation or structure of address between the past and the present.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Adam Thorpe in Rudolf Freiburg and Jan Schnitker, op. cit., p. 227.

¹¹³ Linda Hutcheon, "The New Novel, the Postmodern Novel" in Michael McKeon, *Theory of the Novel, a Historical Approach*, cit., p. 843.

¹¹⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, cit., p. 127.

¹¹⁵ Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History: 1950-1995*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 164.

Postmodern historical novels critically revisit the past; their interest in what has been before does not simply tally with a nostalgic return. They are concerned with the effects of historical forces on the lives of individual characters: to be recorded are the experience of great historical events and their consequent traumas. Contemporary experience is permeated by the past; therefore, the focus of the novels is on both the movement of history and the rhythms of ordinary life. In postmodern novels, historical events are proved to be deeply influential on the way in which the characters construct their understanding of their personal and national pasts: let us think of Tom Crick in Swift's *Waterland*, Martha Cochrane in Barnes's *England, England*, Saleem Sinai in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Archie Jones in Smith's *White Teeth*, or Queenie Bligh in Levy's *Small Island*. I could carry on with examples for pages, but I here limit to refer to some of those novels I attend to in this thesis. My approach to the protagonists' act of construction of the past and their identity focuses on the fact that it is modelled through dominant national narratives. They examine their nation's past as it survives, as it is retold and understood, and so as it shapes the way people live in the present. They ask how to imagine the future unfolding from the past, inviting the reader to reflect on received versions of history. The process of building identity is connected to such reflection on the past. Postmodern historical novels question the received narratives of national identity.

Central to these novels is the question of how we imagine history, focusing on the limits and powers of reporting or rewriting the past. The investigation of the past is based on the longing to pinpoint the processes of representation that form history. Historiographic metafiction reveals the constructed, imposed nature of meaning; it plays upon the truth and lies of any historical record. With the presence of many possibilities of meaning, reality seems to fall to pieces; nonetheless, Hutcheon believes that historiographic metafiction is able to confront reality, though she does not believe in reality as a single, graspable entity. Reality is to be known only through its cultural representations. Postmodern historical novels also speak about the ability of fiction to approach truth in their accounts of past events. The characters of historiographic metafiction are not confident of their ability to know the past with any certainty; yet, they demonstrate to possess a historiographic consciousness. Throughout the novels, they seek to understand their own self in historical terms, finding some reassurance from the consciousness that there is a history behind them, obtaining some certainty from the awareness that they have something behind to look at and confront with. Historiographic consciousness is based on the development of the past;

historiographic metafiction is interested in who had the power to compose truths about the past. If postmodern fiction does not aspire to tell the truth, at least it questions whose truth has hitherto been told.

Despite postmodern writers openly acknowledge their novels' status as constructed, aesthetic artefact and they might warn the reader that what s/he faces is a reality made of words and ink, they often claim that out of fiction a kind of truth can emerge. What kind of truth can emerge from an analysis of the past and a work of fiction about history? The ambiguity of historiographic metafiction depends on the fact that it deals with a subject, i.e. history, that is itself problematic and self-contradictory. I have started the first chapter by providing some interpretations of the different meanings that history has. I wish here to conclude the second chapter by quoting the first epigraph to Swift's *Waterland*, which gives us the chance to reflect once again on the meaning(s) of history and the contradictions which ground any research or study of it. The novel exactly opens with a dictionary definition of history:

Historia, -ae, f. **1.** inquiry, investigation, learning. **2.** a) a narrative of past events, history. b) any kind of narrative: account, tale, story.¹¹⁶

This first epigraph to *Waterland* suggests that history can be at the same time more than one thing and that finally is neither objective nor teleological, but, more in line with the claim of postmodernism, multiple, open-ended and tentative. This explanation indicates that the ambiguity upon which historiographic metafiction is founded is at the heart of the word history itself.

¹¹⁶ Graham Swift, op. cit.

Chapter Three

Literary Interpretations of History and of its End

- 3.1 Dredging up the Past: Graham Swift's *Shuttlecock* - *Waterland* - *Last Orders*
- 3.2 Making History more Accessible: Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* - *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* - *England, England*
- 3.3 Is This the End? An Analysis of Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, Anthony Burgess's *The End of the World News*, and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow, or the Nature of the Offence*

3.1 Dredging up the Past: Graham Swift's *Shuttlecock* - *Waterland* - *Last Orders*

Graham Swift is one of the postmodern writers who tackle the issue that history is a narration, converted into histories, stories and voices. He shows how history and its account do not really make sense, but how we need to interpret, construct and reconstruct them anyway. Swift's work explores the ways in which individuals seize the past and what ensues from it. I have decided to examine three of his novels, *Shuttlecock* (1981), *Waterland* (1983) and *Last Orders* (1996), because they all articulate the perpetual presence of the past in the characters' lives and focus on the ways the past re-emerges and shapes the present. Their narrators pursue their researches in history, looking for some sense of personal identity. In Swift's fiction, history cannot be escaped. My reading of his novels aims at identifying the characters' understanding and knowledge of history in their attempt to cope with contemporary life. In all the three novels, we clearly perceive that narrative constructions of history (either private or public) are always partial and problematic. Swift makes his characters uncover the past not as a known tale but as an enigma or a secret and the structure of his stories has a jigsaw nature. *Shuttlecock*, *Waterland* and *Last Orders* revolve around underlying mysteries. In *Shuttlecock*, the secret concerns the book (within the book) "Shuttlecock" written by the narrator's father: we finally learn together with the protagonist that his father was far from being a hero, as he betrayed his fellows and was after all saved by the allies. In *Waterland*, the narrator-protagonist discloses that his brother Dick, the "potato head", is not his father's but his grandfather's son (thus being at the same time Tom's brother and uncle) and that he is the murderer of the playmate Freddie Par. In *Last Orders*, the memories of a dead man's friends reveal truths and half-truths behind the public facts of his life. Reading these novels, we share the characters' excitement, frustration, concern in their search for buried stories out of distorted and scattered fragments, until some truth about the past becomes known.

Swift focuses on personal histories and family business, pondering on the relationship between different generations and the layers of which history and its narration are made. He is a novelist who, throughout his work, concerns himself with the past and with the construction of history as a network of stories. My discussion of his novels

proceeds by exploring how dredging up the past is a mission for Swift's characters, a duty for contemporary writers, and an attempt for any individual to come to terms with the present and to attain self-knowledge. Swift shares the idea that history is a way of knowledge that does not study the past for its own sake, but that the research into the past is always undertaken in view of a possible application to the present. He lingers over the nature of the relationship between personal and public histories. The characters in his novels are all engaged with the complexities of their relationship with history; they try to find a buried history, to reconstruct and make sense of it. The past haunts them in various forms. In both *Shuttlecock* and *Waterland*, Swift deals with the concept of history, the conflicts between generations and the position individuals hold in the larger scale of events. The reality of history and its questioning are central themes: in *Shuttlecock*, the protagonist Prentis toils to learn how much reality there is in his father's self-declared heroism during the Second World War. In *Waterland*, Crick combines personal, regional and national history, setting them against the historical perspective of the natural world and the landscape of the Fens.

As a postmodern writer, Swift rejects the chronological and linear view of narrative; his novels are constructed on many narrative layers and are fraught with flashbacks and flash-forwards. Temporal sequence and order are not deemed to be wholly appropriate. In their structure and investigation of history, Swift's novels reflect the postmodern idea that history is not an arrow pointing the future:

It goes in two directions at once. It goes backwards as it goes forward. It loops. It takes detours. Do not fall into the illusion that history is a well-disciplined and unflagging column marching unswervingly into the future.¹

On this assumption, the representation of history and its building in narrative are not based on relations of cause and effect and the principle of continuity. To play an important role in the construction of the narration is characters' memory: it is always subjective and creates several occasions to compare the differing perspectives of the generations. In *Shuttlecock* and *Waterland*, Swift uses first person narrators in a stream of consciousness manner (both Prentis and Crick are very self-conscious); in *Last Orders*, each chapter is narrated from one of the characters' point of view and covers different lapses of time: Swift makes us overhear the inner thought of the various characters as they travel to dispose Jack Dodd's remains (Jack is a dead relative for some of the characters, a friend for others), thus providing

¹ Graham Swift, *Waterland*, cit., p. 139.

multiple perspectives over the course of the novel and several memories of the absent character Jack.

Shuttlecock, Swift's second novel, published in 1981, is based on the memories of the narrator-protagonist Prentis and on his compulsive reading of his father's memoirs about the war. Swift draws attention to the effects of History not only on the protagonist's father, who actively took part in the war and now resides in a mental hospital as a catatonic after a mysterious breakdown, but also on the following generations and their approach to the world. In particular, Swift dwells particularly on Prentis's complicated relationship with his boss at work (a surrogate father-figure to Prentis) and with his wife and his sons at home (whom he treats sadistically). Throughout the book, human relationships between father and son, husband and wife, boss and subordinate, are exhibited in terms of power and submission, and are reduced to those of master and slave. The novel pivots on the Prentis family, on the three generations represented by the protagonist's father who does not speak at all, the protagonist who tells the whole story, and his children who are a passive presence. The significance of History, and the way it is recorded, is crucial to their lives. As the son of a British war hero, Prentis lives in the shadow of his father's glorious past commemorated in "Shuttlecock", the book within the book. As the sons of a frustrated man historically unable to perform glorious deeds and castrated by his father-figure, Prentis's children suffer from the impossibility of receiving true love and attention from their father. Their attempt to hide their grandfather's book is a way to call their father's attention, it is an indication of their need to be considered and loved by their father, but Prentis misses to understand it and severely punishes them, instead. Throughout the novel, the father-son relationship is very complicated: Swift examines his characters through the parent-child conflict. However, he finally presents us with a happy family gathering: Prentis, who throughout the narration does not care of his family because he is all concerned with his father's case, renounces to the Sunday visit to his father at the mental hospital and makes an excursion with his wife and sons.

Prentis, whom we know only by surname, is a senior clerk working in the archives of the police force. He is a police investigator of 'dead crimes', thus being always engaged with, and immersed in, the past – either the others' past or his own. The text of the novel is his diary; the narrator explains what drove him to write:

It all began when I remembered my hamster in the tube and I had this urge to set down my feelings and try to account for them. It's strange, I've never really

wanted to put them on paper before. And then it seemed, no sooner had I written that first confession than there were lots of other things that had to be examined and written down – and now I’m at it again. I don’t know where it’s getting me. It’s not as if anything extraordinary is happening – but I feel I have to go on.²

This first confession refers to the moment in which he is coming back home from work and in the tube rethinks of the hamster he had when he was a child. He tortured the little animal, in order to feel obliged by remorse to love it more. On the other hand, the hamster contributed to increase his sense of responsibility too. The figure of the hamster, with which the novel opens, is emblematic³: Prentis can be identified with the little animal in more than a circumstance, yet at the same time his relationship with his wife and children suggests that he now behaves towards them like he did with the little animal in his childhood. Throughout the novel, Prentis thinks that he is the dupe, the victim of circumstances, a helpless little creature like the hamster. However, in the end it acquires a more positive meaning, as Prentis learns the truth about his father and his boss, and he does not feel passively manipulated anymore. It is a memory of his childhood that makes Prentis start to write his diary and, with the same image, he also finishes the book.

“Shuttlecock”, which gives the title to the novel, was the codename of the protagonist’s father, who worked as an English spy during the Second World War. The shuttlecock evokes the image for a man on the end of a parachute. His father was dropped behind enemy lines in France, was captured by Gestapo, but in the end he managed to escape:

During the War my Dad was a spy. He used to be dropped into occupied France and liaise with resistance fighters, keep watch on German installations and help to blow them up. He wrote a book about his exploits, in the fifties, and for a few years his name was well-known, he was one of the war-heroes.⁴

His father’s story is contained in a book, written by his father himself and, as said before, entitled “Shuttlecock: The Story of a Secret Agent”. The novel plays with the idea of the narrative within the narrative: in *Shuttlecock* we find extracts from the autobiographical book “Shuttlecock”. The protagonist has read the book thousand of times, underlining some

² Graham Swift, *Shuttlecock*, London: Picador, 1997, pp. 39-40.

³ On the whole, Prentis the character functions as a Guinea pig for Swift the author: in fiction, Swift plays god with his creation, that is his character, in the same way a scientist does with a Guinea pig in his laboratory. The relationship between man as a god-scientist and mouse in trap returns also in Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) with the FutureMouse project (cf. my analysis of Smith’s novel in chapter four).

⁴ Graham Swift, *Shuttlecock*, cit., p. 49.

passages and pondering on them. His access to the past occurs through his reading of the book. Prentis faces the fictional problem of any historical record: the book is a possible account of what happened, yet not necessarily trustworthy. It is made of words about facts, not of facts as such, and there can never be a full correspondence between facts and words. Prentis argues:

with so much of Dad's book I have to struggle to make it real, to wrest it out of the story-book realm into the realm of fact.⁵

Throughout the novel, Swift plays with postmodern ploys: narrative within narrative, focus on intertextuality and the process of writing, doubts about what can be known of truth and reality, emphasis on the blurring boundary between the realm of fact and that of fiction.

Prentis is particularly intrigued by his father's story of capture, torture and escape, shortly before the end of the war. "Shuttlecock" is about France occupied by the Germans and his father's activities as a spy, containing his apparently heroic wartime exploits. Prentis idealizes his father: he jealously handles and obsessively reads the book again and again. He keeps two copies of it at home; one of them is inscribed by his father and Prentis shows himself very protective towards it as it represents a memory of his father and of the past, and a means to understand them both. Yet "Shuttlecock" is not a faithful record of what happened to his father in France during the war: it is an expiatory creation as he could not stand his guilt. His father's autobiography is a fiction, a distorted and incorrect representation of the past. The plot of the novel centres on this dark secret: the protagonist's war hero father, the celebrated spy whose codename was Shuttlecock, is ultimately revealed to be a traitor. The history he narrated is untruthful. The protagonist wonders about his father's real past:

There are a thousand questions I want to ask, about things that aren't actually stated in my book. About how Dad felt at the time, about what was going on inside him. Because Dad doesn't write about his feelings; he describes events, and where his feelings come into it he conveys them in a bluff, almost light-hearted way, as in some made-up adventure story; so that sometimes this book which is all fact seems to me like fiction, like something that never really took place. What really happened Dad? [...] What was it like, what was it really like?⁶

⁵ Ibid., p. 146.

⁶ Ibid., p. 52.

Prentis presents his father as a war hero who has broken down and withdrawn into silence: he has been in a mental hospital for two years where Prentis goes to see him twice a week, on regular visits on Wednesdays and Sundays. Despite his family's objection, Prentis does not miss a single visit to his father and, despite the fact that his father does not utter a word, he has long conversations with him. He repeatedly tries to communicate with his father, who however remains motionless and dumb. Therefore, the only way for Prentis to get close to his father is by reading "Shuttlecock".⁷ What Prentis actually misses is a relationship with his father, but reading "Shuttlecock" cannot compensate for it. The failure of communication between Prentis and his father is reiterated in the following generation, between Prentis and his two sons. Whereas Prentis's father represents the past, his sons embody the future: Swift implies that if we fail to understand the past, we will also fail to come to terms with the future. How can the protagonist overcome this impasse? How can he free himself of his sadistic desire for mastery over his wife and children and have a more natural relationship and emotional contact with them? The answer is: he has to discover the truth about his father, reconstruct his personal history. Thus, he will be no longer dominated by the oppressive image of his father as war hero, no longer obsessed with his storytelling, and indeed he can understand that his father has been very helpless and weak.

The symbolic role of the father is a central theme also in *Waterland* and *Last Orders*, and is always linked to the disclosure of some truth: that of Tom's brother in the former and the adoption of Vince by Jack and Amy in the latter. Swift's narrators face the complexity of their past and of discovering the truth about it, because their fathers refuse to tell them the past as it was or do it with extreme difficulty. In Swift's fiction, the desire to know is paradoxical as it coincides with the pain that this knowledge brings about. Nonetheless, all his characters reclaim the past: they need to understand the past in order to come to terms with the future. Prentis would like to ask his father whether he betrayed the other agents, but he finally does not. He does not want to humiliate his father. He might also be afraid of the truth. As he reads in the book, "the truth is that certain things defy retelling"⁸: probably his father was there justifying himself not to tell what really happened. Prentis's urgent question "What was it like Dad? What was it really like?" falls on dead ears, because his father does not speak anymore.

⁷ Swift suggests that the access to the past, which in the novel is epitomised by Prentis's father, is possible only through written records, and that these records may often be a personal construction of historical facts.

⁸ Graham Swift, *Shuttlecock*, cit., p. 139.

His father's secret is not the only one in the novel. Prentis's boss at work, Quinn, hides a mysterious past too. Paradoxically, it is only thanks to him that Prentis learns the truth about his father. Prentis's reflections on Quinn induce the reader to think that Quinn is a sort of father for the protagonist: Quinn has power and influence like Prentis's father had before the breakdown. Somehow, Quinn is a substitute father-figure to Prentis. Prentis was born after the Second World War, is thirty years old and wants to fulfil himself in life and become like his father (a hero) or Quinn (an influential and authoritative boss). He ambivalently feels envy, hatred and admiration towards Quinn, feelings that he does not direct at his own father. Quinn is going to retire and Prentis thinks that he is in the position of taking Quinn's place, as he is the one in the office with more experience. In the impossibility to become a war hero, Prentis aims at succeeding Quinn as head of the police department. It is very interesting to notice that what his job amounts to in the office is linked to his activity of reading "Shuttlecock" and discovering his father's truth at home. The government agency, for which Prentis works, collects and files information concerning old cases and unsolved crimes. Prentis's job consists in reconstructing full and explanatory narratives from incomplete and scattered information in the police archives. He has to grasp a vast web of partial details and references of the dead crimes and explain the case. He is a builder of stories out of lacking information and the same he has to do at home with his father's history. His attempts at reconstruction, both at work and at home, involve other texts, namely fictionalised data of history: incomplete files on which Prentis works in his office and his father's book at home.

However, Prentis is unable to reconstruct his father's story, offering a meaningful and true narrative of his father's life. It is Quinn the one who discloses the truth: Prentis's father was not a hero but a traitor, he did not escape the Gestapo, but was saved by the American allies. Quinn reveals that Prentis's father was spared by the Germans because he told the names of his three comrades, thus betraying them:

Your father did not escape from the Germans – from Château Martine. He succumbed under interrogation, betrayed several resistance units and the whereabouts and covers of three British agents operating in the extreme east of France. [...] The letters say your father was a coward and a traitor.⁹

⁹ Ibid., pp. 182-183.

The only evidence of his father's innocence are the pages of his book about his escape, but the book is his father's creation. The protagonist reports them as he reads them at night before going to sleep and wants them to tally with what really happened:

the last pages, where he describes the Château, and his escape are too convincing not to be real. He couldn't have written those things, if they never happened. [...] The last chapters are more convincing than the other parts of the book, even though the other parts are about things nobody disputes are true. It's not just the authentic detail – it's the tone. [...] If he didn't actually escape, if it was all a deal with the Germans – why should he write a false story anyway? Why should he have written his book at all and put himself at risk? Shouldn't he have just kept quiet?¹⁰

To the protagonist's questions, Quinn replies that his father "had to justify how he got out of the Château. He couldn't just say, They let me go. His war record up till then had been pretty remarkable – the grand finale had to live up to it".¹¹ The storytelling in "Shuttlecock" is an attempt at concealing his collapse under Nazi torture and his betrayal of other agents. Quinn's hypothesis about Prentis's father coincides with past truth: the memoirs written by Prentis's father are nothing but lies. Quinn explains:

he is trying to save himself - Why does it read like a real escape? Because it is an escape, a quite real escape, of a kind. Who knows if in writing your father didn't convince himself it was true?¹²

These words make us think of the power of narrative and reveal Swift's deep interest in storytelling and in interpreting texts which he himself creates and includes in his novels.

Prentis must accept that his father was not a hero but a mere human being who broke down under torture and sent three fellow agents to death. Quinn did not behave heroically either: in the moment of the final crash he escaped from the enemy, stepped in panic on the face of a dying soldier, and was hurt in the leg (the wound was so bad that he lost his foot). He admits that time has helped him to forgive himself and live with his guilt. The unsettling admission of Quinn's desertion makes the protagonist confused; like at the beginning of the novel, Prentis thinks of the hamster he received as gift for his tenth birthday. He thinks of himself like the hamster, a poor victim, cheated by the people around him, both by his father and by his boss. Quinn's confession goes on and Prentis learns that his father had a lover, exactly his best friend's wife. His best friend, maybe because of the adulterous relationship

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 186-187.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 187.

¹² Ibidem.

between his wife and Prentis's father, committed suicide (case x in the novel). Maybe, the letters linked to the case x provoked his father's breakdown. Finally, Prentis takes Quinn's place, gaining a promotion and, in return, he omits files by hiding or burning them. Together with Quinn, he decides to burn any evidence of the past which can prove his father's guilt or innocence: the incriminating files are incinerated.

All these little bits of poisoned paper I am slowly dropping into oblivion. What people don't know, can't hurt them...¹³

When the protagonist finally knows what really happened, he decides to forget it. And he stops reading *Shuttlecock*:

How much of a book is in the words and how much is behind or in between the lines? Perhaps it is best not to probe too deeply into those invisible regions, but to accept on trust what is there on the page as the best showing the author could make. And the same is perhaps of this book (for it has grown into a book) which I have resumed now after six months' lapse, only to bring to its conclusion.¹⁴

The novel closes with a Sunday trip: Prentis renounces to visit his father and takes his family to Camber Sands. Swift concludes *Shuttlecock* with the protagonist's return to a place of his childhood and the image of the hamster, 'a piece of nature', a memory of his past that has been the inspiration for the book itself.

Throughout his work, Swift bears on the rewriting of the past: the experience of the past made by the characters in his novels makes it clear that the past is fundamental to understand their present. They continuously feel the need to inhabit history and recover buried stories. Thus, Swift suggests that the past is an integral part of the present itself, permeating contemporary experience. History is something that takes place and is never simple, but convoluted: its meaning is discussed in his novels. Swift's characters offer a reconsideration of history: it is a treacherously seductive artifice, yet an essential means to make sense of human life. Swift's books are a befitting illustration of Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction. Swift actively engages with history and the fictional way in which it is written; his novels put the fabric of history under question and reshape our understanding of historical consciousness. Whereas the characters are set within specific historical settings - in all the three novels I analyse, the background of the crucial episodes is the Second World War - the objectivity of historical narratives is at the same time, and

¹³ Ibid., p. 212.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 214.

paradoxically, subverted. Moreover, the grand events of History, which Swift includes in his novels, do not play a central role, but rather function as the background to the daily, ordinary lives of his characters.

Waterland, published in 1983, is probably one of the most cited examples of historiographic metafiction (among critics, by Hutcheon herself).¹⁵ The novel incorporates the past and its criticism through the narrator-protagonist's perspective, who is no less than a history teacher. Tom Crick speaks of his own past, telling his personal story and his familial unfoldings, and tries to teach his bored pupils about the French Revolution and the meaning of history. Hutcheon suggests that Crick is "an allegorical representation of the postmodern historian"¹⁶, who argues that a certain and objective perception of events does not exist: everything is relative and can be interpreted from manifold perspectives; there are lots of different histories, depending on the historian's way of looking at the past. Crick is a disillusioned historian and a postmodern sceptic. Swift avails himself of this character to face the problem of what history is, why it matters, and how we can comprehend or narrate it. Although the epigraph to *Waterland* is a dictionary definition of history¹⁷, the key element of the novel seems to be Crick's (and Swift's) acknowledgement of the impossibility to explain what history really is. *Shuttlecock* and *Waterland* share this common feature: their narrator-protagonists restlessly attempt to define history and the past. Both Prentis and Crick tell their stories in an effort to cope with their implications and in both the novels history reveals its protagonists disturbing truths. Yet, the difference is that in *Waterland* there is no happy ending: the price Crick pays for digging up the past is very high and leaves him desolate.

Tom Crick is a middle-aged man looking back at his life: he shows an undivided attention and drives towards history, determined not only by his job at school, but also by personal reasons. He entangles himself with several layers of history, in an effort to come to terms with a more personal history, the life of his father, brother and his childhood friends. His account covers a vast lapse of time, from the eighteenth-century events linked to his ancestors' lives to the twentieth-century circumstance in which he writes. In between, Crick

¹⁵ Hutcheon sees *Waterland* as participating in a broader literary conflation of historical and fictional narrative, one that identifies both historical and fictional texts "as linguistic constructs". Cf. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1988, p. 105.

¹⁶ Linda Hutcheon, "The Politics of Postmodernism" in Bran Nicol's *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: a Reader*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002, p. 350.

¹⁷ The epigraph, which I have already quoted at the end of my second chapter, is: "*Historia*, -ae, f. 1. inquiry, investigation, learning. 2. a) a narrative of past events, history. b) any kind of narrative: account, tale, story".

reports the story of his parents' marriage after the First World War, the mysteries and discoveries of his childhood, his experience in the Second World War and his marriage to the childhood playmate Mary Metcalf when he returned home from the war. He intertwines the story of the decisive events in his own life with an account of the events and characters from the Industrial Revolution to the present time, at the same time offering a philosophical meditation on the meaning of history.

Throughout the novel, the narrator wonders why he is so much interested in history, but the real motivation of his vocation is not found out. His attitude towards history remains ambivalent and appears in tune with a postmodernist approach: on the one hand, Crick scorns history's pretensions, on the other hand, he trusts its ability to unveil some truth. His narrative to his listening class is made of the history syllabus he is supposed to teach, the history of the Fens in East Anglia, where the novel is set and Crick has grown up, and the personal story of his family. Crick teaches his pupils that history is not only the one we learn from books, but that there is also natural history, to which he introduces them. The novel and the sequence of its chapters are built on this division between natural history and official History. Crick draws his students' attention to both of them, combining and mixing them up throughout his lessons and his narrative. He is not a supporter of a progressive understanding of history; history never assures an endless progress. In fact, it shows that "the same old things will repeat themselves"¹⁸. Crick does not believe that we study history in order to learn from our mistakes and to improve the present: he can neither state that the present is better than the past, nor find a scientific explanation to what happens or any secure means to avoid its happening. His attitude mirrors his author's philosophical rejection of positivistic history and rationalistic theory. "There's this thing called progress. But it doesn't progress, it doesn't go anywhere".¹⁹ Crick is a post-Enlightenment thinker who rejects the belief in progress and historical teleology, and claims that there is a perpetual conflict between innate human nature and the artifice of society.²⁰ In his lessons, he suggests a cyclical view of history²¹ that denies the idea of linear development: each step forward is followed by a step backward; there is no achievement without loss. "It cannot be denied, children, that the great so-called forward movements of civilization, whether moral

¹⁸ Graham Swift, *Waterland*, cit., p. 240.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

²⁰ Cf. Andrzej Gašiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After*, London: Edward Arnold, 1995, p. 154.

²¹ Cf. Anthony Burgess's novel, *The Wanting Seed* (1962), in which the protagonist, Tristram Foxe, is a history teacher like Tom Crick, and in which it is often repeated that history is cyclical.

or technological, have invariably brought with them an accompanying regression".²² However, Crick never claims to dismiss history.

By contrast, the one who wants to dismiss history is the headmaster of the secondary school where Crick works. Because of departmental reorganization and budgetary directives, the headmaster, Lewis Scott, decides that history is one of the first subjects which he can cut back. Thus he reports to Crick:

You know how the cuts are biting. And you know the kind of pressure I'm under – “practical relevance to today's real world” – that's what they're demanding. And, dammit, you can't deny there's been a steady decline in the number of pupils opting for History.²³

But the truth is that Scott, who once was a teacher of physics and chemistry, is convinced that History is useless and regards it as “a ragbag of pointless information”²⁴. He decides to merge History with General Studies, in order to provide children with a sense of their usefulness, with an ability to apply, with technical, pragmatic and utilitarian knowledge. Arguing for an unavoidable reduction, Scott literally puts an end to history, and frees himself (and the school) from the subject and its content. Thus Crick is removed from history, forced by the headmaster to early retirement after thirty-two years schooling:

Children, our commendable and trusty headmaster regards me and my department (whatever he says) as a thorn in his flesh. He believes that education is for and about the future. Thus a subject, however honoured by academic tradition, which seeks as its prime function to dwell on the past is, *ipso facto*, first to go ...²⁵

The new government wants to focus on the Here and Now and the future: children must be equipped for the real world, not bored with what is past and fairy tales.

Crick finds himself on the defensive with the headmaster and also with his students about the very relevance of his discipline. His pupils, too, believe that what matters is the Here and Now, not the past:

I know what you feel. I know what you think when you sit in your rows, in attitudes of boredom, listlessness, resentment, forbearance, desultory concentration. I know what all children think when submitted to the regimen of

²² Graham Swift, *Waterland*, cit., p. 139.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

history lessons, to spooned-down doses of the past: 'But what about Now? Now, we are Now. What about Now?'²⁶

Throughout his account, Crick tries to explain that the Here and Now is the product of History and the past, not something that is aside from them. As a schoolboy Crick believed that History was a myth, but then life (more precisely, the meeting with the Here and Now) taught him that history was no invention, but existed indeed and he was part of it (he was pushed into history in the summer of 1943). However, it is hard for Crick to convince his class to pay attention to what is over at a given historical moment when the future seems to be under threat, and history might definitively end in a nuclear holocaust. In front of certain topics of the day, such as "the Afghan crisis, the Tehran hostages, the perilous and apparently unhaltable build-up for nuclear arms"²⁷, knowing how things have been in the past makes no difference to how things are now and will be next; history does not help. The rebellious Price acts as the class spokesman for a shared anxiety towards the future and Crick can but take note of his pupils' fear of nuclear disaster and impending apocalypse. One of the most significant moment in the novel is when Price interrupts Crick's lesson on the French Revolution, uttering:

The only important thing about history, I think, sir, is that it's got to the point where it's probably about to end.²⁸

The prospect of an imminent and actual end to history produces a suspicion of the narrative of history itself. *Waterland* puts forward the claim that history has ended or is about to end (the second chapter is entitled 'About the End of History'), and plays with the postmodern argument on the meaning of history, its underlying fictionality and the point of studying the past:

And when you asked , as all history classes ask, as all history classes should ask, What is the point of history? Why history? Why the past? I used to say: But your 'Why?' gives the answer. Your demand for explanation provides an explanation. Isn't this seeking of reasons itself inevitably an historical process, since it must always work backwards from what came after to what came before? And so long as we have this itch for explanations, must we not always carry round with us this cumbersome but precious bag of clues called History?²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., p. 65.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 14.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 111.

The preoccupation with what is gone and past lies at the bottom of history: history is a kind of research or inquiry, it is the attempt to answer questions about human actions done in the past. If we look for explanations, we go through history. But this never implies that it is possible to find reasons and justifications for what has happened and what will happen; we do not have to trust people who claim to possess the truth about the past and the key to the future. Swift presents a counter-Enlightenment perspective; the novel mocks and distances itself from “the Enlightenment’s overweening aspirations”.³⁰ Crick has actually lost his faith in the grand narrative of History; like a postmodern sceptic, he welcomes neither the possibility of universal history nor that of a grand plot. His attitude recalls Lyotard’s analysis of the postmodern condition, of the crisis in the West’s historical metanarratives. Crick provides his pupils with a meditation on stories and storytelling instead, transforming his classes into meetings where stories are told.

For his professional interest in history, Crick tackles problems relevant to teaching his subject. The present-time section of the novel mirrors the 1970s and 1980s, and their widespread sense of confusion in the methods applied to the scholarly study of history. Previously, the teaching of history mostly focused on political facts, then it started to broaden, including the history of people and issues of race and gender.³¹ Crick worries about cultural history and the means for handing it on: he firmly believes that the history of a culture, of a land, of a family, always permeates the present and needs to be imparted to the following generations. History is made not only of documents and facts, but also of the visible and invisible effects of human actions and reactions. He tells his pupils that where we come from is relevant to who we are and become; the interplay between the past and the present is the central thread in the novel. Crick does not stick to the traditional history curriculum, but enriches his lessons with some other stories, including his personal one. His experience suggests that when the Here and Now is unbearable because it is difficult to explain, when we start asking why and when everything went wrong, we crave history.

The narrative in *Waterland* tallies with the series of Crick’s history classes in the last few weeks before he is dismissed. Crick has arrived at a crisis point in his life and thus begins to tell his story in a desperate attempt to explain how things turned out so badly. He is affected by serious problems both at work and at home, finding himself at the end of both

³⁰ Andrzej Gašiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After*, cit., p. 157.

³¹ The teaching of history started to include not only lessons on the following of historical events in time, but also on the culture in the past. Cultural history became the dominant form in the 1980s; it combined the approaches of anthropology and history to look at popular cultural traditions and cultural interpretations of historical experience.

a career and a marriage. He is leaving his job because the school is closing down the history department and his students are cynical about history lessons, for they feel they have no use for the present. His wife, who is unable to bear children, has kidnapped a baby from a supermarket, has been arrested and finally committed to a mental institution. Basically, the novel is a dramatic monologue: the history teacher, before his pupils, recounts his own life story as well as that of his ancestors and the marshy fens. The supposed topic of his class is the French Revolution, but he seldom mentions it, as most of the narrative's material is made of his past experience. Crick intertwines History with many stories (Freddie Parr's murder, Dick Crick's incestuous conception and his consequent suicide, Mary Metcalf's abortion and insanity, the fens and the Ouse, the eels), posing some central questions about the nature of history and the relationship between past and present. What is history? Can the past really be known? How does the past influence the present? Price's claim that history has ended and Scott's effort to put an end to history imply that the proper framework for *Waterland* is the philosophical argument suggesting that from the late twentieth century on we have entered a period of post-history.³² The novel witnesses the disappearance of History as a grand narrative and commits itself to the exploration of little stories.

Crick has the traditional function of storyteller and reminiscer. He relates the history of three time periods: his childhood with its most salient and traumatic episodes; his present situation at the end of 1970s; and his ancestors' lives in the eighteenth century. A totalising account is impossible; despite Crick's aim at covering most of what has occurred in the past, totality remains unpractical. The way in which Crick tells the past underlines history's status as narrative; history falters and stops in the same way his storytelling does. In *Waterland*, the events are not chronologically recorded: the stories are out of sequence because "there are no compasses for journeying in time"³³. We are told many different stories all at once and are presented with many digressions which themselves are interrupted rather than closed. Crick disregards linearity: his account progresses and regresses all the time. The constant flow, convergence and divergence of history and the past with the present (the Here and Now) emerge as the controlling pattern. The structure of the novel, which frequently moves back and forth in time, also suggests the fluidity of the relations between the intersecting stories, between past and present, of which Crick is acutely aware. The narrative follows a circular pattern like Crick's conception of history: in the end of the novel

³² Cf. Bran Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

³³ Graham Swift, *Waterland*, cit., p. 139.

we need to go back to the first chapter and chronologically reassemble the narrative, whereas the end of the story is only a moment for a new beginning.

Waterland opens with Crick describing his childhood growing up in the Fens, an area of eastern England. Born in 1927 by Henry and Helen Crick, Tom lives in a cottage by the River Leem with his father, a lock-keeper, and his mentally retarded brother Dick, a silt dredger. His mother died when he was eight years old. One day in July 1943, a dead body floats down the Leem: it belongs to Tom's playmate Freddie Parr. The story flashes forward to the present when Tom is leaving his job because the school where he works is getting rid of history teachers, and because of the scandal involving his wife who has stolen a baby from a pram at a supermarket. Tom Crick's history lessons rarely focus on the proper topic for his present classes, the French Revolution, instead pinpointing the history of the Fens, as well as men's persistent effort over the centuries to drain the land, and the ups and downs of Tom's ancestors from the eighteenth century to present time. The anecdote about the Atkinsons, his mother's ancestors who were enterprising businessmen (barley farmers, brewers, river-makers), is particularly significant for the idea of history and progress that Swift wants to discuss. The Atkinsons believed in historical progress, according to which the present is undoubtedly better than the past and the future in turn will be better than both present and past. Over the centuries, they "made history" and reshaped the real in the image of their own desires; Swift presents them as believers in, and producers of, history as grand narrative, who envisioned themselves as agents of Progress: "what moves them is indeed none other than that noble and impersonal Idea of Progress".³⁴ The Atkinsons acted to improve their own condition, but finally faced failure and disaster. Their optimism and belief in purposive history could not hinder their ruin; Crick's grandfather ended up bankrupted. In Swift's novel, nature proves to be a destroying force. Nature and history are cyclical, alternating lucky periods with miseries. In the case of the Atkinson family, economic failure corresponds to the failure of the belief in an unlimited progress.

The narrative often returns to 1943: Tom notices a bruise on his friend's drowned body and finds a beer bottle with which he was probably hit. It becomes clear that the murderer is Dick. Providing the reader with many explorations of the nature of history, the story flashes back to 1942 when Tom and Mary, both fifteen years old, first begin to explore each other sexually. The following year Mary becomes pregnant and Dick convinces himself that he is the father of the child. Mary does not want to tell Dick that the father is in

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

fact Tom and lies by saying that Freddie is the father. Dick is in love with Mary and wants his revenge with Freddie. Having an unsound mind, Dick strikes Freddie over his head with a bottle of ale and leaves him to drown in the river Leem. 1943 is the most significant and appalling year in Tom's life: Freddie dies, Mary has an abortion and Dick commits suicide. Tom feels responsible for each of those tragedies which, in many ways, reach forward in time to influence the present of the narration. The narrative flows backwards, forwards and sideways. Tom portrays a distant past, relating the history of the Atkinson family and the way they built their fortune through land-reclamation projects and a brewery business. Mysteries, stories and fairytales intermingle. Tom tries to manage with them all, looking for the reason why things happened and for their connection to present circumstances.

Tom's father must keep two secrets about Dick: Dick is not his son, but the child of incest (he is his father-in-law's son) and he is Freddie's murderer. Tom's grandfather (his mother's and Dick's father) left a letter in a chest, confessing his sin to Dick, and then shot himself. Reading his true father's letter, Dick cannot stand the truth and commits suicide (exactly like his father: history repeating itself). In 1945 Tom joins the army and, when he returns from the war, he marries Mary. As the story reaches the present, Tom and Mary have been married for thirty years and have no children. Mary's abortion when she was a teenager injured herself to the point that she could not bear with children anymore. At the age of fifty-two, she announces she is going to have a baby: following a nervous breakdown, she kidnaps a boy and tells the police she has been guided by God. After some conversations on history and teaching with his student Price and arguments on the cultural value of history with the headmaster Scott, Crick returns to the past, the history of the Atkinsons, concluding his account with his brother's conception, birth and death.

For the frustrated history teacher, the meaningless real is the starting point for fabulation; storytelling functions as a means to endow his life with meaning. Tom Crick tells the whole story in order to meet his need to keep reality under control and to provide his life with some order. However, his desire for clarity and completeness cannot be fulfilled. His obsession with exploring the meaning and value of history is linked to the curiosity he had about the world when he was a child, to his questioning nature, always asking why things happened as they did, and to the impossibility as an adult to make sense of the present and answer the question "Why?". Such an incessant question functions as a monitor for the limits of human knowledge; Crick is completely aware that it remains unanswered because the more we investigate into life, the more we realise that we do not

know much. When he was young, he was convinced that history could give him the answers he looked for; now he has lost such a faith. He is tormented by history's inability to explain the past.³⁵ He argues that "by for ever attempting to explain we may come, not to an Explanation, but to a knowledge of the limits of our power to explain".³⁶ Yet, this does not mean that we have to stop our investigation into the past. Crick's present unhappy circumstances make him delve into the past, interrogating himself on what has happened to his life. Trying to understand how the past impinges on the present is a necessary quest for him and is a sound justification to teach and study history too. But what is the result of such a quest? Bran Nicol has pointed out:

Crick's relentless storytelling and drawing of endless parallels between the stories leave him unable to establish a set of rational conclusions nor even to end the story with a proper sense of closure.³⁷

Crick's whole story, like his idea of history, is circular and lacks an end. The last lines of the novel circle back to its beginning and the myriad questions that Crick poses are left suspended. The narrative offers no hope, no solution: it resists final answers and definite models, and cannot shelter us from the mortal finality and absurdity of the real. Crick's destiny seems to be that of passive reflection. He illustrates the repercussions of the past on his family's life, but the meaning of the recorded events is not disclosed; Crick's narrative carries him back to reality's void. There is no point of exit out of the multilayered circularity of history and its storytelling. The repetitiousness of history hinders Crick's attempt to build a structure; his narrative is rambling and recursive. He is determined to disentangle history from fairytale, but finds that history and story collapse into one another:

the more you try to dissect events, the more you lose hold of them – the more they seem to have occurred largely in people's imagination.³⁸

Once again Swift plays with the fraying edge between fact and fiction, reality and invention. The semi-gothic plot is marked by strong elements of the supernatural and the fantastical, in a sort of fairy-tale atmosphere.

Despite the fact that the grand narratives of history and knowledge are abandoned as they slide like the watery fens, Crick insists that his pupils must be curious about the world

³⁵ Cf. Andrzej Gašiorek, op. cit., p. 151.

³⁶ Graham Swift, *Waterland*, cit., p. 94.

³⁷ Cf. Bran Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, cit.

³⁸ Graham Swift, *Waterland*, cit., p. 144.

and its past. “Nothing is worse (I know it) than when curiosity stops. Nothing is more repressive than the repression of curiosity. People die when curiosity goes. People have to find out, people have to know”.³⁹ Curiosity is the only means which can prevent the end of history not only as a subject, but also as a metanarrative, namely the theory for humankind’s evolution: so far Crick’s pupils are curious and pose questions about history and the *status quo*, they save themselves from becoming Kojévian last men in the post-historical condition of animality.⁴⁰ For Crick, the lack of curiosity would coincide with the end of human battle against the real, with the end of man’s attempt to inscribe significance on the cultural environment he inhabits. Crick suggests to explore *historia* in the mode of inquiry and demanding rather than to read it as a comprehensive and eschatological narrative: inquiry works to counteract the totalizing tendencies of history as narrative; it interrogates, instead of subscribing to, the grand narratives of history.⁴¹ Crick crucially opposes history as query and explanation to history as narrative that pushes toward finality; the hope for the future lies in man’s capacity to question and reject history as a grand narrative. The past needs to be endlessly dredged, like the silt of the fens which are always in a process of being reclaimed, in a perpetual state of recovery and loss. Brian Shaffer notices that the watery fens are the leading metaphor for Crick’s own complex understanding of history: the fens are at once water and land, silt and sea, a combination of elements as contradictory and paradoxical as history itself.⁴² Telling coherent stories that give adequate explanation of the past is as difficult as attempting to drain and stabilize the fens. But one has not to give it up. “It’s all a struggle to preserve an artifice. It’s all a struggle to make things not seem meaningless”⁴³. Crick resorts to storytelling to counteract meaninglessness. It is not a waste of time, it is man’s endless effort to exert power over reality, to look for meaning, to defend civilization (which Crick identifies with the learning process). To his pupil Price, Crick explains:

do you know what prompted me to teach? It was when I was in Germany in 1946. All that rubble. Tons of it. You see, it didn’t take much. Just a few flattened cities. No special lessons. No tours of the death-camps. Let’s just say

³⁹ Ibid., p. 207.

⁴⁰ Cf. Alexandre Kojève’s reflections on the American way of life and man’s acceptance of, and satisfaction with, the world in which he lives.

⁴¹ Cf. Damon Marcel Decoste, “Question and Apocalypse: The Endlessness of *Historia* in Graham Swift’s *Waterland*”, in *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, volume 43, 2002, p. 396.

⁴² Cf. Brian Shaffer, *A Companion to the British and Irish Novel 1945-2000*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

⁴³ Graham Swift, *Waterland*, cit., p. 241.

I made the discovery that this thing called civilization, this thing we've been working at for three thousand years, so that now and then we get bored with it and even poke fun at it, like children in school is precious. An artifice – so easily knocked down – but precious.⁴⁴

Crick hopes for his class to listen to, interpret and understand his storytelling. He both confesses his story and past, and confides in his pupils for the future.

Waterland and *Last Orders* share a concern for where we come from and for what the future holds. Whereas in the first novel Tom Crick is the only protagonist and the spokesman for a great and obsessive interest in the past, and anguish for the future, in the latter there are mainly three characters who reflect on their roots and on what they consequently deserve: the dead and alive Jack Dodds, who wanted to be a doctor but took over his father's business instead, his adopted son Vince, whose real parents were killed by history in a bomb attack during the Second World War, and his best friend Ray Johnson, dubbed by Jack 'Lucky' and wondering the whole time if, after all, he is really lucky. Shaffer argues that Swift's novels do not offer compensation for the anguish of history; what constitutes "the most acute source of anguish for the characters is the realization that we may be at the end of history".⁴⁵ Throughout his work, Swift displays a preoccupation with origins and ends; his characters are always seeking for their roots and meditate on death. At some point, they all come to a dead end:

That's how everything feels suddenly. Like we're all in some place where things have come to a standstill, and the rest of the world is whizzing on past, like traffic on a motorway.⁴⁶ - Vince

Swift ponders on the effects and value of history in his character's lives and in their narration. It is clear that Swift's interest in history is not only for its residual and lasting elements, but also for its positive and therapeutic effects. He pays attention to history both for its content and its form. He describes personal histories in their connection to broader contexts and also deals with history as representation. Very often, he focuses on the existential need to tell stories and the different possible ways of telling them: Prentis must work out his father's story in order to make his own; Crick desperately attempts to collect his past and rebuild his story to live on; Dodds' friends try to do some order in their memories about him, not only to remember and finally say goodbye to him, but also to

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 240.

⁴⁵ Brian Shaffer, op. cit.

⁴⁶ Graham Swift, *Last Orders*, London: Picador, 1996, p. 185.

come to terms with their own lives. In all the three novels by Swift that I analyse, the quest for the past and the desire to tell stories pivot around human urgency to find and pass on some meaning. However deeply Swift's characters investigate the complex mechanisms of history and reality, they can but acknowledge that history and reality remain incomprehensible.

Swift's sixth novel, *Last Orders* (1996), is built around the incident of Jack Dodds' death and his family and friends' inner thoughts before and after this episode. Jack Dodds is a London butcher who, at the end of his days, asks that his ashes are scattered into the sea, at Margate Pier. His last orders, which give the title to the novel, are the occasion for his friends' burial journey and narration. Unlike in the previous novels, here Swift makes use of multiple tellers: the story is narrated through the voices of Jack's three friends, Ray Johnson, Lenny Tate and Vic Tucker, his adopted son Vince (born Ian Pritchett), Vince's wife Mandy Black, and Jack's wife, Amy Dodds. They are all first person narrators, linked in some way to the deceased Jack, through decades of companionship, trust, love, and secrets. On the car trip from Bermondsey, south London, to Margate, Kent, they reflect on their relationships to Jack and their life experience, on death and the different ways to deal with it. Unlike Crick, who is addressing his class, they are all talking to themselves. The narrative is a meditation not only on life and death, but also on history and memory, contradictions and change.

Jack is the central character of the novel, despite the fact that he has just died and never speaks for himself: what we know of him is what his friends and relatives remember and disclose. Jack was, and symbolically still is, the leading and binding force in the group of friends. Ray, Vic and Lenny have more of a connection to him; Jack was their point of reference. His boxed ashes make his son and friends meet in the London pub⁴⁷, leave for the South Coast town of Margate and prompt their reminiscences. The journey, the novel's characters embark on, is, at the same time, both physical (from south London to Kent) and psychological (a journey in memory). Through their memories, Jack is revealed to be a war hero, a tireless worker, a failure as father and a cheated husband. A butcher by trade, he confessed to his friend Ray that he secretly wanted to be a doctor, but that he anyway took over his father's butchery. He wants Vince to do the same, but his adopted son refuses to carry on with the butchery business; Vince enters the army to escape Jack's pressures and,

⁴⁷ "Last orders" is a pun: it both refers to Jack's last orders before death and to his friends' last orders at the pub before starting the journey to accomplish Jack's wishes (last orders).

when he comes back, he declares that his passion is for motors: he works as a mechanic and finally manages to open a car showroom he calls "Dodds' Autos". Vince makes Jack feel cheated and betrayed, exactly the same way Vince felt when they told him he was an orphan whose parents died in the war. The relationship between father and son forms a recurrent element in Swift's novels: there are Prentis and his father, Prentis and his children; as well as Tom Crick and his father, Dick Crick and his father; or Jack Dodds and Vince. Their bonds are always complicated and characterised by resentment, lies and friction. Even marriages are not happy and simple in Swift's novels: Prentis and his wife, Crick and Mary Metcalf, Jack Dodds and Amy, are all troublesome couples, whose problems depend, in different ways, on some past incident or on the characters' connection with the past. The marriage between Jack and Amy failed because of Jack's reaction to the birth of their severely retarded daughter, June. Jack was not able to accept her; he was upset and decided that the best thing to do was to forget all about her. So, Amy was alone with her shock, sense of duty and maternal love towards June. Twice a week for fifty years, she has gone to visit their daughter in the mental institution where she was recovered; Jack never went with Amy, choosing to ignore their daughter's existence. For this very reason, Amy deliberately does not go with the others on the day trip to Margate to chuck his husband's ashes. She asks Ray to fulfil Jack's last wishes and goes to visit June instead, thus saying goodbye both to Jack and their daughter.

Jack was a good soldier: he served in the Second World War in North Africa with Ray Johnson, who became his lifelong friend. They fought in the desert, in Cairo, where they met Lenny Tate. The three fought against Rommel in the battle of El Alamein, in 1942. History and memory go hand in hand in the novel; they both are a form of telling. More than a simple soldier, Jack is defined by Ray and Lenny as a hero, but the war did not change his life; after the war he returned to the butcher's shop, where he proved to be an indefatigable worker. Across the street from Jack's butcher's shop there is Vic Tucker's coffin shop. Jack is a master butcher, Ray an insurance clerk, Vic an undertaker and Lenny a greengrocer. Swift deals with the ordinary lives of ordinary people, and with the mess and disorder of circumstances that influence and mark such lives. They are lower-middle-class small-business owners in their late sixties who have been acquaintances for thirty years and have always met at 'The Coach and Horses' local pub. But this time, 2 April, 1990, Jack cannot be with them, except that with his "last orders".

The story starts in the East London pub where Vic, responsible for Jack's cremation, brings the jar containing Jack's ashes in order to carry out his last wish, together with his friends and the middle aged Vince. Ray and Lenny are waiting for Vic and talking about why Amy decided not to join them. Lenny and Vince are angry with her for not accompanying them, Ray is the only one to know the truth behind Amy's resolution. The reader shares the characters' thoughts and memories as the trip to Margate progresses. Jack is an 'absent present' character from the very start until the end of the novel, from the moment in which his friends meet at the Bermondsey pub to the moment in which his ashes are finally carried away by the wind at the end of the Margate Pier. The end of the journey symbolically coincides with the end of the story: "End of the road, end of the pier. Splash. [...] This is Jack's last ride".⁴⁸ The journey, which is Jack's last one, is also a way for his friends to say goodbye to him. Jack's death functions as the frame for the progressive emergence of a net of relationships and intertwined and buried histories: Ray has been in love with Amy for many years, and they even had a relationship for some months; Vic knew of Ray's and Amy's affair, but never said anything either to Jack or to Ray. Lenny cannot stand Vince because first he made his daughter Sally pregnant and then left her; Lenny convinced Sally to have an abortion and she resented him for it. Jack confessed Vic that he was going to close the shop, buy a bungalow in Margate and start a new life with Amy. Jack had financial problems with the shop and, on his deathbed, he asks Ray, who is a successful gambler, to bet some money (that Jack borrowed from Vince) on a long shot race for Amy. Ray finally wins, but Jack will never know it as he is already dead.

The novel is told chapter by chapter from a different character's point of view in the first person perspective. The narrative waves between the characters' memories, which are both controlled and unexpected, and the plot, involving huge leaps in time and numerous flashbacks. However, *Last Orders* starts and ends with present time. The present time is 1990: Jack's friends are almost seventy years old and they randomly remind moments in their lives. In all Swift's novels, the present is pierced by the past; the narrative time moves between a remembering present and remembered pasts. The past is vitally unfinished as long as one continues to enter it; all Swift's characters are involved in the enterprise of reliving and reconstructing it. They need to figure out the historical incidents that have made them what they are and which have brought them to their present, critical state. It is always a moment of crisis or loss that makes them look backwards and tell their stories. Swift's

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

novels are driven forwards by looking backwards. However, the author does not present the past as a place of retreat, neither as an alternative to the present. The past is an important burden with which people must come to terms. Like in *Waterland*, Swift rejects chronological order to tell *Last Orders*' story. Half of it takes place in the characters' minds as they remember episodes linked to Jack and their own lives; all Jack's actions are completed in flashbacks, his past is intertwined to those of his friends. The other half of the story is made of the stages of the burial journey towards Margate and they are always related by Ray Johnson, who is the main narrator in the novel. Ray was the closest of Jack's friends, despite the underlying rivalry and deceit that we come to know through the storytelling. It is Ray's thoughts that we hear most frequently as we follow the various characters' histories; the largest part of details derives from his account.

Whereas the titles of the chapters dedicated to the characters' inner thoughts and memories coincide with their names as telling the story, the titles of the other chapters, those describing the journey to Margate, tally with the names of the places they visit or pass by during the journey itself. Three are the journey detours: the hearse Mercedes stops at Wick's Farm in Kent, the War Memorial at Chatham and Canterbury Cathedral. Vince drives the car to Wick's Farm because it is the place where Jack and Amy first met: this is the beginning of their story and, thus, here he scatters some ashes from the jar. The decision to stop at Chatham comes from Vic's request to visit the naval memorial in order to remember the dead, not only Jack but also other dead fellows. He sadly considers:

A man is just a name. Which means something to him it attaches to, and to anyone who deals, same way, in the span of a human life, but it don't mean a monkey beyond that. It don't mean a monkey's to things that live longer.⁴⁹

During the Second World War, Vic was in the Navy: the Chatham memorial is an occasion to meditate on his past life and the losses in the war. In Swift's novels, the experience of the war is present and pervasive. War both passes and remains. The years of the Second World War frequently recur - suffice it to mention Prentis the father's adventure and his book on it; Crick's enrolment and European experience; and the Bermondsey friends' fighting in the army. War is experienced, missed, recalled and described: Swift continually returns to it. Rod Mengham observes that "the Second World War is the last great collective ending the

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 128.

English have known, the last end of the world within living memory”.⁵⁰ In *Last Orders*, the chapter on the Chatham memorial is closed by Ray’s observation:

It’s like it got built then forgotten. It’s like it was only half meant to be here and so were we, but here we are, together, on top of his hill. It’s like an effort at dignity, that’s what it is, it’s like a big tall effort at dignity.⁵¹

The journey proceeds and Lenny, who has never been to Canterbury, suggests that they should visit the cathedral all together, before reaching Margate. Vince agrees, so they stop to enter the cathedral. Both the War Memorial and the Cathedral give us a longer vista of history; they are symbols of national identity and history. They represent great history and collective experience against which little history and individual experience are outlined. What binds them is memory and the possibility for Swift’s characters to share common experience or exchange experience through storytelling.

On the whole, the novel is the tale of a male odyssey from the city to the sea, from Bermondsey to Margate. Once again, the element of water returns. Land and water constitute the fundamental opposition in *Waterland* to the point that they give the title to the book, and represent the beginning and the end of the journey in *Last Orders*, when the men dip their hands into the jar and Jack’s ashes are finally scattered into the sea. *Last Orders* is a frame story, describing a pilgrimage from the past to the present, from memories to occurrences and their results. Commonplace events and personal tragedies are the main ingredients of the novel. The characters contemplate the course of their own lives and are pervaded by a sense of an ending; faced with the sharp reality of death, the characters’ voices and memories sound like small currents in the tide of events which have carried them to the present. Human stories are plotted by the interaction between nature and history: could men have changed them? Can they change anything now? Brian Shaffer defines the novel as “a secular journey of postmodern pilgrims who have lost faith”. In its postmodern way, the novel provides, through the several lives and fortunes of its characters, the multiple possibilities for England after Jack Dodds’ death.⁵² The final message is however positive: both Amy and Ray believe in change: “life can change, it can, even when you think it can’t any more”.⁵³

⁵⁰ Rod Mengham, *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction: International Writing in English Since 1970*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999, p. 157.

⁵¹ Graham Swift, *Last Orders*, cit., p. 122.

⁵² Cf. Brian Shaffer, op. cit.

⁵³ Graham Swift, *Last Orders*, cit., p. 176.

3.2 Making History more Accessible: Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot - A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters - England, England*

Julian Barnes is, like Swift, an English author concerned with postmodernist scepticism towards universal history and any truth claim. He shares Lyotard's incredulity towards metanarratives, and challenges definitive answers and theories. His work meditates on knowledge and truth, and on human impossibility to achieve them completely. Like Swift's, his fiction problematizes our knowledge of the past, pinpointing the theme of the incompleteness of the facts, and the past itself. I have chosen to focus on three of Barnes's novels, *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989) and *England, England* (1998) and on the concept of history that they purport. My reading of those novels considers their different ways of dealing with the inadequacy of history and memory to offer reliable accounts of the past, and their insistence on gaps and absences, on fragments left behind in the historical record, following Foucault's idea of how to interpret and read history.⁵⁴ Barnes invites his readers to consider any representation of history as temporary and partial, not foundational. Any uncritical and univocal reading of history and reality is proved to be deceiving and dangerous. Throughout his work, history is questioned, studied and rewritten. Like Swift's *Waterland*, both *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* can be labelled as historiographic metafiction: they contain learned discussions and philosophical inquiries on knowledge, art, and the nature of history. They self-consciously comment upon the historical material they fictionalise, posing questions on how we can know what is true or real, and claiming that it is impossible to represent the past, either personal or collective, with absolutely objective accuracy.

Barnes writes his stories in order to speak about writing itself, including criticism, and deals with the idea of narrative; like Swift, Barnes creates literary fiction, playing with words, forms, biographies, and dissecting the writer's role. He uses different discursive forms and his novels are deeply intertextual. He is more daring and experimental than Swift

⁵⁴ Foucault argued that history should be analysed taking discontinuity into account and avoiding any teleology. Cf. *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969), Engl. trans. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1972.

and his inventive and playful technique has often made critics wonder if some of his books, such as *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, can be qualified as novels at all. As David Sexton declares,

Barnes writes books which look like novels and get shelved as novels but which, when you open them up, are something else altogether. *Flaubert's Parrot* was for the most part a set of studies of Flaubert and his parrot. *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* is even odder. The 10 chapters contain 10 quite different stories, some factual, some not. They are related only by image and theme.⁵⁵

Far from following a chronological narration and from spinning around a definite plot, both the novels deviate from conventional structure, being made of separate and diverse parts: *Flaubert's Parrot* consists of letters, diaries, scholarly papers, anecdotes, stories, a dictionary and a bestiary; *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* is a collection of ten different stories and also contains an essay on love. It is clear from their construction and textual hybridity that Barnes wants to challenge the limits of the genre of the novel itself.

Flaubert's Parrot, published in 1984, is the story of a retired English doctor and amateur literary scholar, Geoffrey Braithwaite, who is fond of, and obsessed with, Gustave Flaubert. He presents Flaubert's life and works through his narration, from different perspectives. However, the fascination and admiration for Flaubert are Barnes's own; in an interview Barnes comments: "he's the writer who I think has spoken the most truth about writing".⁵⁶ Barnes, whose parents were teachers of French, demonstrates a deep interest in France and French literature and considers Flaubert as one of the best writers. His novel is a way to pay him homage. The title of the novel refers to the parrot that, perched on top of Flaubert's writing desk during his drafting of *Un Coeur Simple* (1877), inspired the French author for the creation of Loulou, the fictional parrot of his story. In *Un Coeur Simple*, also called *Le Perroquet*, the stuffed parrot Loulou is the object in which the devout servant, Félicité, invests most of her religious sentiments - the simple woman confuses her parrot with the Holy Spirit. *Flaubert's Parrot* starts and ends with the protagonist's attempt to find out the truth about the stuffed parrot that Flaubert once borrowed. It takes two years to Braithwaite to 'solve' the case of the stuffed parrot, two years between the question is arising and dissolving. Indeed, the book ironically revolves around the dilemma of which the authentic Flaubert's parrot is and on the inconclusiveness of the narrator's pursuit.

⁵⁵ David Sexton quoted in Merritt Moseley, *Understanding Julian Barnes*, South Carolina: University of South Carolina, 1997, pp. 8-9.

⁵⁶ Cf. Merritt Moseley, *Understanding Julian Barnes*, cit., p. 78.

Braithwaite does not manage to achieve a definite answer and his failure is emblematic of the difficulty of knowing the truth.

Both in this novel and in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, Barnes raises the question of whether we can know the truth. He shares the belief that certain and absolute truth does not exist, and objectivity is only a pretension to our possibility to know and represent the world around us. Barnes, like Swift, does not offer definitive solutions, but only contingent facts and hesitant truths. Through his novel, he conveys the message that his protagonist's attempt to find the real parrot is as futile as any attempt to find the truth about the past or a veridical account of the past. "The past is a distant and receding coastline"⁵⁷ and can be known only partially, from restricted and subjective perspectives. On his visit to Normandy, Braithwaite discovers that two Flaubert museums claim to display the authentic stuffed parrot: which one is genuine? A Flaubert expert informs Braithwaite that the original parrot was borrowed by Flaubert from the Museum of Natural History and then returned to that museum. The curators of the Hôtel-Dieu and Croisset museums chose the parrot (at the Museum of Natural History) which most resembled Flaubert's description, but not necessarily picked the right one among the equally plausible candidates. Besides the two contending stuffed parrots, one at the Hôtel-Dieu (once a hospital) and the other at Croisset (once Flaubert's home), Braithwaite comes to know of the existence of other fifty exemplars at the Museum of Natural History, each of which might have been the model for Loulou. The situation gets complicated: the supposedly original parrots are fifty, of which only three are now kept at the municipal museum. At the end of the novel, which has been hailed as a postmodern tour de force of "parody and parrotry"⁵⁸, Braithwaite accepts to live with the mystery of the "true" parrot, as no solution can be found out. Bran Nicol argues that Braithwaite's dilemma is a metaphor for the problems at the heart of historiographic metafiction, i.e. the limits to our effort to know the past and the role of mediation. The past is a dead thing and we can recover its sense only through documentation; there is no direct access to it, but only textual documents which help us read and understand it and, at the same time, divert us away from the real object or event. "Either of the parrots may be the

⁵⁷ Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*, London: Pan Books, 1984, p. 101.

⁵⁸ Jackie Buxton, "Julian Barnes's Theses on History", in *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, volume 41, 2000, p. 56.

real one, but, equally, as Braithwaite realises, Flaubert may just have invented the idea of the parrot sitting on his desk”.⁵⁹

However, the parrot is only Barnes’s pretext to engage in a larger quest on facts of life and fiction, on the separateness between art and life and on the role of writing and reading. Geoffrey Braithwaite lives in Essex and is over sixty, widowed with two children. In the narration he claims that he has three stories to tell: Flaubert’s, his own, and his wife Ellen’s story. The narration follows the steps of his journey to France and the several places related to Flaubert. He decides to visit Rouen in search of Flaubert’s memorabilia, and finds himself dwelling on not only the life of the nineteenth-century French master, but also on literary criticism, the art of fiction and its relation to experience, and his own history. Indeed, his meditations on Flaubert’s life is just a way to meditate on his own. Like Prentis and Crick, Braithwaite is both the narrator and the protagonist of the novel and, like Swift’s characters, he pursues the truth, trying to uncover and discover more about Flaubert, his parrot and himself. The novel includes an invented story about the fictional character Braithwaite and literary criticism on writing biography and reading history. Whereas the role of history is discussed in the narration, facts and fiction are purposely mixed. Braithwaite ponders:

How do we seize the past? How do we seize the foreign past? We read, we learn, we ask, we remember, we are humble; and then a casual detail shifts everything. [...] We can study files for decades, but every so often we are tempted to throw up our hands and declare that history is merely another literary genre: the past is autobiographical fiction pretending to be a parliamentary report.⁶⁰

Throughout the novel, Barnes engages with similar, postmodern ideas on history, historiography, contradictions and pieces of evidence. Braithwaite’s research and way of presenting Flaubert implicitly deconstructs the traditional approach to the past and the genre of biography itself. There is no way to know Flaubert directly and completely; his story must be created out of texts, chronology, bestiary and letters by and on him, and it is also necessary to meditate on what is absent and has gone lost.

The novel treats literary form as playfully as it treats literary history. It is miscellaneous and discontinuous in form; it is made of disparate materials, which are arbitrarily arranged. It moves between Braithwaite’s trips to Rouen in the present and the

⁵⁹ Cf. Bran Nicol, *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: a Reader*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002, pp. 114-115.

⁶⁰ Julian Barnes, *Flaubert’s Parrot*, cit., p. 90.

historic Flaubert's life and travels. Whereas the plotline is Braithwaite's search for the original parrot, many chapters are independent from it; they are Braithwaite's cogitations on Flaubert's love life, on the animals in his works, with which Flaubert identified, and on trains and transportation systems. The narrative is continuously retarded by many disruptions. In the first chapter, the narrator describes Flaubert's statue in Rouen and reflects on the image of the French author that the statue conveys. Rouen is the place which commemorates Flaubert and here Braithwaite asks: "Why does the writing make us chase the writer?"⁶¹. Flaubert did not want posterity to take any interest in him, but in his work only. Flaubert's claim is the starting point for Braithwaite's criticism on biographers and historians: books and language do not refer to the world of real people. Language cannot directly represent reality and truth, which it arbitrarily constructs according to its own rules. Braithwaite shares postmodern scepticism on the referential function of language and admits that history and biographies are forms of fiction. The novel deals with the end of the historian's and the biographer's tasks: what can they write and claim if everything is fiction? Braithwaite confesses that he is not sure of what he believes about the past - the implicit recurring question is: what really happened? Throughout the novel, Barnes shows how understanding is difficult and fragile, and establishing meaning hard and tricky. Truth is elusive and any attempt to represent experience is a construction; Braithwaite yet engages in several journeys to France to follow the steps of his favourite author and to create a story on him.

What Braithwaite does is somehow writing criticism: he also parodies it, at the same time. Through his character, Barnes both celebrates the literary past and treats it with irony. The book, and its original form, consists of Braithwaite's research, notes, speculations and musings on different subjects, among which Flaubert's biography. It is informative, encyclopaedic, made of discussions on Flaubert's body of work and literary connections. Barnes presents a work that is, at the same time, fiction and literary history. The second chapter is a list of dates and connected events from 1821 to 1880. There are three sections corresponding to three possible biographies on Flaubert: one is optimistic, alluding to his success and conquests; one is negative and focuses on failure and bereavements in his life; the last is a personal diary, a heap of quotations from Flaubert at different moments in his life. They provide three different images of Flaubert: what is the most truthful and accurate? Braithwaite appears to be suspicious of the very genre of biography: it contains, as well as

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

misses, a lot of information. Despite his obsessive quest for the truth about Flaubert's life, Braithwaite learns that life cannot be rationally explored and contained in a book, and that Flaubert can never really be known. As an alternative to the genre of traditional biography, Braithwaite offers a clutter of textual fragments in the belief that the principle of chaos is more suitable to mirror life than that of order. Barnes thus focuses on the fact that people are not stable, consistent unchanging characters, like a statue or a portrait, but made of a large variety of different parts, which match and clash with each other.

Chapter four is a bestiary⁶²; Braithwaite provides the reader with a list of animals which appeared in Flaubert's works and letters, and with which the French author identified - parrots are obviously included in the inventory. The Flaubert Bestiary is one of the narrator's numerous digressions whose function is to stress the uselessness of biographers' search for some details in Flaubert's life. The novel expresses Barnes's idea of the writer as a *bricoleur*, who assembles different materials; both the biographer and the historian tackle numerous, diverse fragments and traces, out of which they try to reconstruct an original wholeness. Chapter six is built on the critical debate about Emma Bovary's eye-colour; here Barnes offers a parody of literary criticism and shows Braithwaite's tendency to poke fun at academics. The narrator describes the case of Enid Starkie, who was Flaubert's most exhaustive British biographer and who noticed that, in *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert attributed different colours to Emma's eyes: "On one occasion he gives Emma brown eyes; on another deep black eyes; and on another blue eyes"⁶³. Barnes deplores the literary biographer and takes the chance to denounce professional criticism; the novel itself is a fictional pretext for its author's own literary criticism. Is the different eye-colour fruit of Flaubert's carelessness, a mistake from his own, or has it been intentional? Does it make any difference for our reading and appreciating the novel? According to Barnes and his character Braithwaite, the point is that biographical truth is impossible: it will never be clear what Flaubert had in mind, the real author like the authentic parrot can never really be known. Biographies report the main events in the lives of people offering a portrait of people themselves, but can never be reincarnations of their subject. They are detached from life as any other form of literary

⁶² Barnes recurs to the literary genre of a medieval bestiary, but uses it in a postmodern way. Whereas medieval stories were based on a description of certain qualities of animals or plants and presented Christian allegories for moral and religious instruction and admonition, Braithwaite's bestiary shows that there is no moral message associated to the animals in Flaubert's life; its only aim is to mock the biographers' obsession for truth and their loss of time in search of insignificant details.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

art.⁶⁴ The discussion on the difference between art and life return in chapter fourteen, which is an examination paper on this subject. In chapter nine, entitled “The Flaubert Apocrypha”, the protagonist meditates on the books that authors might write, or could have written, and on Flaubert apocryphal bibliography: once again, Braithwaite focuses on what we can never know about a real person, on lacks and gaps of information in his life. He suggests that biography is like a fishing net, defined as a collection of holes tied together with a string. There is always far more of what the net catches and the same similitude can be applied to history in its relationship with the past: the net with its holes is what history offers of the past. Much has been lost and Braithwaite is interested in it.

Chapter twelve is a dictionary made of a list in alphabetical order of people, places and things associated with Flaubert and Braithwaite’s definition of them. On the whole, Braithwaite appears to be unable to create an accurate and internally consistent account of Flaubert’s life. The same can be said of his own story; references to his bereavement and the secret life of his wife are intermittent throughout the novel. It is only in chapter thirteen, entitled “Pure Story”, that he confesses the truth about his wife Ellen, who died in 1975, at the age of fifty-five, committing suicide out of boredom. Despite his wife’s secret life and lovers, Braithwaite loves and misses her. It is his unhappy marriage and personal circumstance that brought him to start the investigation on Flaubert’s life and works: being faced with chaotic reality, Braithwaite looks for a certain feeling of security in literary history. The death and revealed adultery of his wife partly explains his obsession with the French author and his character Madame Bovary. Braithwaite finds an affinity between Ellen and Emma: infidelity, boredom and suicide link his story to Flaubert’s masterpiece. Literature seems to compensate for his wife’s loss; being engaged in his research on Flaubert helps Braithwaite not to think about his wife. Besides, his account on Flaubert is a way of delaying his story about Ellen. Like Tom Crick in *Waterland*, Braithwaite uses his representation of the past for personal aims: he examines history to derive some truth that helps explain his own life. Understanding Flaubert and Ellen is a way to make sense of his life.

The last chapter of the novel returns to the mystery of the parrot. Facing a series of stuffed parrots all looking identical, Braithwaite grasps the vanity of any attempt to find out a biographical truth. The parrot represents both the past and the impossibility to catch it: any

⁶⁴ Cf. Frederick Holmes, *Julian Barnes*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, p. 74.

search for a veridical and reliable account of the past is unsuccessful and thus remains inconclusive. Gašiorek argues that Braithwaite

is unable to draw any decisive conclusions from his detective work, he seems to take a positively Barthesian pleasure in the multiplicity of interpretations available to him.⁶⁵

Through the ploy of the parrot, Barnes conveys his idea that the past is not limited and concrete, and cannot be collected and possessed in each of its part. Braithwaite engages himself in a vain attempt to gain a meaningful whole; events cannot be represented in their wholeness, but only in an inescapable partiality. He cannot decide which parrot is real, which one an impostor; the conclusion is that it is impossible to solve the dilemma of Flaubert's parrot and, what's more, is completely useless. The question of how to achieve true understanding based on memory, narrative and history is a theme that returns in Barnes's following novel, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989). Barnes offers a philosophical commentary on the difficulties and problems we meet by trying to reconstruct and preserve history (the focus of attention shifts from literary to global historiography). Like in *Flaubert's Parrot*, he presents meditations on the nature of history and the relations between history and fiction, showing that knowledge of the past seems to be a form of fabulation. Once again, Barnes intermingles fictional and historical narratives in order to question traditional concept of history and interpretation of events. Thus doing, he focuses on man's need and search for answers that explain his interaction and position within the grand narrative and purpose of history.

In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Barnes suggests that the end of history is a world of parrots and replicas, with which his protagonist (and his reader) has finally to face. He ponders on the fact that museums are the place where history is consumed and reproduced, where it is flattened and becomes all identical, monotonous and contemporary. He shows how, in museums, the sense of history and history itself peter out; what remains is imitation. Barnes's notion that the end of history tallies with its reproduction and reproducibility returns also in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* and in *England, England*. Barnes seems to apply Benjamin's thesis that through mechanical reproduction a work of art loses its 'aura'⁶⁶ to history and its representation. In museums, history is flattened into an eternal present and is finally emptied of its content and temporality. To the end of history and to the

⁶⁵ Andrzej Gašiorek, op. cit., p. 160.

⁶⁶ Cf. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, cit.

flattening of history, Barnes opposes a series of little, diverse accounts, a myriad of dissonant interpretations of the past and of alternative viewpoints; in both *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, the author celebrates uncertainty and plurality.

Before analysing *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, I put forward two considerations about its title. First, we can but notice that it is very ironical: no book can contain the history of the world in three hundred pages and it is funny that Barnes resorts to a half chapter. The title is also challenging, as it evokes a huge subject, and a bit contradictory if we think that the novel is a work of fiction, but at the same time claims to be a history. There is no doubt that we can call it historiographic metafiction. As far we learn from its title, the novel could be a scientific or philosophical treatise too. Actually, it is a jumble of short stories which apparently do not connect to one another and which are related in different styles. Secondly, Barnes does not claim to write "History", but only one of the possible histories and, for this very reason, he has chosen the indeterminate article for the title. There is no plot which the story follows and, actually, there is not a single story for the reader to follow: Barnes's history of the world is told through several little stories, separated and independent. Thus, the author seems to agree with the postmodern concept that there is no single history, no overarching metanarrative, but multiple histories only. Barnes publishes his "History of the World" in the same year of Fukuyama's article "The End of History?" (1989), yet Barnes distances himself from an optimistic proclamation of the end of history and, unlike Fukuyama, does not look at history as a linear succession of triumphant human advances; he rather offers his readers with a parody and interrogation of universal history as a grand narrative. In many chapters, he illustrates that our perception of history relies on interpretations, which vary depending on the interpreter, and that history is recorded as subjective experience, and can never be told objectively; any account of the past derives from cultural and ideological components of the historian who tells it.

Here below, I quote two extracts from the novel, which are part of the half chapter entitled "Parenthesis"; I deem them to be indicative of Barnes's attitude towards history and storytelling and to display affinities with Swift's perspective. Besides conveying the idea that history is a construction and does not tally with reality, Barnes suggests that human beings need stories and fabulation to cope with difficulties and pains of life.

History isn't what happened. History is just what historians tell us. There was a pattern, a plan, a movement, expansion, the march of democracy; it is a tapestry, a flow of events, a complex narrative, connected, explicable. One good story leads to another. [...] All the time it's connections, progress,

meaning, this led to this, this happened because of this. And we, the readers of history, the sufferers from history, we scan the pattern for hopeful conclusions, for the way ahead.⁶⁷

The history of the world? Just voices echoing in the dark; images that burn for a few centuries and then fade; stories, old stories that sometimes seem to overlap; strange links, impertinent connections [...] We make up a story to cover up the facts we don't know or can't accept; we keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them. Our panic and our pain are only eased by soothing fabulation; we call it history.⁶⁸

History is what we are told that happened, not what really happened; for this very reason it is unreliable: there will always be a discrepancy between facts and fiction. Barnes repeatedly calls his reader's attention to the frayed boundary between fact and fiction, and ridicules those who think they can precisely state the difference. Historians look for relations of cause and effect, and attempt to explain everything with logics. Yet, history teaches us that it is very often not logical, but whimsical and inconsistent. In an effort to create a coherent historical account out of the accessible evidence, historians rely upon their imagination: their activity is thus endless, since the archive can always be reconfigured imaginatively.⁶⁹ Furthermore, Barnes questions chronology and linearity, refusing to follow these two principles in his fiction. He claims that "dates don't tell the truth. They want to make us think we're always progressing, always going forward"⁷⁰; thus implying that we are not.

In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Braithwaite asks: "does the world progress? Or does it merely shuttle back and forth like a ferry?"⁷¹. In *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, Barnes delves into the subject, attempting to answer his character's question. He challenges any eschatological representation of history and jettisons any idea of historical progress; Barnes's utter suspicion of universal accounts of the history of the world, and of the optimistic tenets of classical historicism, can be compared to Benjamin's conception and

⁶⁷ Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, London: Pan Books, 1990, p. 242.

⁶⁸ Ibidem.

⁶⁹ Cf. Frederick Holmes, *The Historical Imagination: Postmodernism and the Treatment of the Past in Contemporary British Fiction*, Victoria: English Literary Studies, 1997.

⁷⁰ Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, cit., p. 241.

⁷¹ Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*, cit., p. 105.

interpretation of history.⁷² Buxton argues that Barnes, like Benjamin, puts forward a model of human history dictated by a perception of violence and destruction; Barnes's fictional analysis of the contemporary condition is pertinent to the apocalyptic tenor of Benjamin's philosophy:

Taken as a whole, Barnes's "theses" – like Benjamin's – proffer an apocalyptic philosophy of history rooted in a vehement disavowal of the concept of historical progress.⁷³

The history of the world is made up of human errors and catastrophe; how is it possible to imply that it progresses? Barnes represents the flux of history and its ravages, he tells stories of cataclysm, human danger, escape and survival. He deals with human history, from its beginning to its end, from Genesis to Paradise, but without indicating any development or improvement. Despite he opens his text with the biblical Flood and concludes it in heaven, he is far from describing a journey from Genesis to salvation; he does not provide the reader with a redemptive historical progression. Like Swift in *Waterland*, Barnes here depicts history as recursive, as following a cyclical pattern. The novel is made of ten chapters, narrated by different characters, and also the above-mentioned "Parenthesis", that is the half chapter to which the title alludes. As Gašiorek notices, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* promotes "a view of history as a vast compendium of different *petits récits* which can never be encompassed by an overarching metanarrative".⁷⁴ Barnes splits history into some episodes (somehow interconnected) on individual characters. Such a structure draws our attention to the idea that history is narrative: it changes in each chapter, depending on the character that tells it and the point of view s/he offers. From a chapter to another, the perspectives and the authorial voices vary; yet, in many points the different stories that make up the novel allude and refer to each other. Barnes scatters linking threads through the book and it is the reader's task to connect them and draw some conclusions.

⁷² Both Andrzej Gašiorek in "Postmodernism and the Problem of History" (Cf. *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After*, cit., pp. 164-165) and Jackie Buxton in "Julian Barnes's Theses on History (in 10 ½ Chapters)" remark striking similarities between Benjamin's fragmentary reflections of the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and Barnes's diagnosis of, and approach to, history in his novel, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. Buxton claims that Benjamin's premises offer a historico-philosophical framework for assessing Barnes's fictional project.

⁷³ Jackie Buxton, op. cit., p. 58.

⁷⁴ Andrzej Gašiorek, op. cit., p. 163.

Like in *Flaubert's Parrot*, Barnes here mixes literary and cognitive form. He aims at unsettling the reader's confidence about the difference between truth and fiction, between history and story. Historical and fictional chapters follow one another: the woodworm's version of the Great Deluge in chapter one; the account of a cruise liner hijacked by a group of Arabs in the Mediterranean in chapter two; the transcript of a fifteenth-century trial of woodworms who were accused of having eaten a bishop's throne in chapter three; the story of a woman who has survived a nuclear war in chapter four; an analysis of the 1816 sinking of the *Medusa* and Théodore Géricault's 1819 painting on that subject in chapter five (which also contains a treatise on the connections between art and life, and meditates on how tragedy can be aestheticised and catastrophe can be turned into art); the account of a woman's trek to Mount Ararat to locate the Ark's remains in chapter six; three stories which rely on facts about Lawrence Beesley, the Titanic passenger who sneaked into the Lifeboat 13 and survived the disaster; James Bartley, a man swallowed by a whale in 1891 – this story is anticipated by some allusions to the Biblical story on Jonah and the whale; and the Jewish refugees on board the ship *St Louis* in 1939 in chapter seven. In the last three chapters we find a bundle of letters and telegrams from an actor playing in a movie shot in South America; the story of a fictional astronaut's ascent to Mount Ararat; and the dream of an afterlife. Despite its miscellaneous shape, Barnes planned the novel as a whole piece. All the stories are somehow linked; we find repeated elements and motifs, among which there are those of history and voyage, which function as central threads.

The first chapter, ironically entitled "The Genesis", is a comic fantastic account of the Flood and the journey of Noah's Ark by a narrator who turns out to be a stowaway woodworm. Barnes mockingly questions the traditional account of history and gives voice to that individual 'who' has never been listened and recorded. The narrator argues: "you don't have to believe me, of course; but what do your own archives say?"⁷⁵. The reader is asked to compare the written tradition with a new possible version of the same story; nonetheless, the woodworm wisely acknowledges that people believe what they want to believe and blames human species for forgetting things or pretending to forget. The narrator argues that ignoring bad things makes it easier to carry on, but, at the same time, it makes people end up believing that bad things never happen, and this is very dangerous. The story of Noah, narrated in this chapter, is very different from the traditional account we read in

⁷⁵ Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, cit., p. 16.

the Bible: it is a story about Noah's drunkenness and refusal to accept the woodworms on the Ark, because he thinks them as impure and insignificant:

That doesn't tally with your account of things? You've always been led to believe that Noah was sage, righteous and God-fearing, and I've already described him as a hysterical rogue with a drink problem?⁷⁶

The woodworm confesses the bad things that have been omitted from the Biblical account of the Flood, such as Noah's unpleasant character and unhygienic habits:

I don't know how best to break this to you, but Noah was not a nice man. I realize this idea is embarrassing, since you are all descended from him; still there it is. He was a monster, a puffed-up patriarch who spent half his day grovelling to his God and the other half taking it out on us.⁷⁷

In this chapter, Barnes opposes a funny history of accusation to the official history of self-congratulation; the woodworm's account reveals deception and oppression and sheds light on an oppressed past that demands acknowledgement. It tells of Noah's fourth son Varadi, of whom we have never heard because nobody kept record of him, and questions his mysterious death. It also describes the disappearance of hundreds of animals, eaten by the human passengers; the woodworm sarcastically observes: "as far as Noah and his family were concerned, we were just a floating cafeteria".⁷⁸ Through this funny revisionist telling of Noah and his Ark, Barnes suggests that history is the tale told by the winners and reflects their interests, and that the Bible may not be a historically accurate text at all. He thus plays with one possible alternative version:

Whose truth do we prefer, the victor's or the victim's? Are pride and compassion greater distorters than shame and fear?⁷⁹

Some years before the publication of Barnes's novel (1989), also the Canadian author Timothy Findley and the British novelist Jeanette Winterson dealt with postmodern retelling and rewriting of the Deluge in the Book of Genesis, in *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984)⁸⁰ and *Boating for Beginners* (1985) respectively. Like Barnes, Findley describes Noah as a petty, prejudiced man who follows an unattractive deity; he is an archetypal

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

⁷⁹ Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, cit., p. 246.

⁸⁰ Timothy Findley, *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, Markham: Penguin, 1984. For an analysis of Findley's novel and of its similarities with Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, cf. Jackie Buxton, op. cit., pp. 62-63.

fascist, who persecutes both his family and the animals in his care, in order to maintain his power and his particular version of history.⁸¹ Winterson presents an alternative version of Noah's story, suggesting that there is so much more between the lines of the story we read in the Bible and in other popular textbook.⁸² In Winterson's novel, "Noah was an ordinary man, bored and fat, running a thriving little pleasure boat company called Boating for Beginners", who had been chosen "to lead the world into a time of peace and prosperity under the guidance of the One True God"⁸³. Noah and God were collaborating on a manuscript that would be a kind of global history from the beginnings of time, showing how the Lord had always been there and always would be there; the book started with a part called "Genesis, or How I did it".⁸⁴ Besides the project of the manuscript, Noah was going to shoot a movie on his ocean-going ark, without asking God's permission. Instead of giving his consent to the movie, God decided to flood the world for real; therefore, fiction (the unrealised movie) became fact (the Biblical history):

Did this mean the world was about to come to an end, just when everyone thought they were making a movie?⁸⁵

Barnes shares Winterson's ironic tone and, like her, he uses intertextuality to comment our postmodern condition. In both *Boating for Beginners* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* parody and paradoxical rewriting are subversive elements.

Through his fictional choices, Barnes attempts to democratise history: there is no main character, no unitary voice, no single plot: he opts for heterogeneity. He denounces both tradition as transmitting the victors' accounts and historicism which records the triumphal process of rulers; in fact, he opts for a revisionist perspective. Barnes rejects the modernist idea of historical development and of a unifying viewpoint imposed upon history; instead, he celebrates the partiality, imperfection and openness of history. History, like reality, cannot be explained by giving it a simple and one-sided meaning. In order to gain a realistic view of facts, the author invites the reader to look at history from contrasting points of view. There is no teleology and no totality in the book. Barnes plays with a variety of stylistic registers and with different perspectives, particularly focussing on the outsider, turning the outsider's account of the history of the world into an early example of

⁸¹ Ibidem.

⁸² Cf. Jeanette Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, London: Vintage, 1999, p. 12.

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 12-13.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

⁸⁵ Ibidem.

marginality. Salman Rushdie defined Barnes's novel "as footnote to history, as subversion of the given, as brilliant, elaborate doodle around the margins of what we know we think about what we think we know".⁸⁶ Similarly, Barnes's way of proceeding complicates things, rather than simplify them; reality is never simple and therefore the best approach to it is complex, not simple.

In *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, the theme of journey is a metaphor both of individual existence and of collective human history, and includes the shipwreck. Chapter five, entitled "Shipwreck", consists of a factual historical account of the disastrous voyage of the *Medusa* in 1816-1817 and of a description and interpretation of Géricault's famous painterly translation two years later of that catastrophe in "The Raft of the Medusa"; the chapter's conclusion is that "catastrophe has become art: that is, after all, what it is for"⁸⁷. Somehow, almost each chapter of Barnes's novel describes the journey of a failed ark: Noah's ark in chapter one; the *Santa Euphemia* (a cruise liner) in chapter two; the stolen boat in chapter four; the raft of the *Medusa* in chapter five; the *Titanic* and the *St. Louis* in chapter seven; the Indians' raft in chapter eight. Barnes depicts human history as "a flotilla of shipwrecks"; his ships are all in some sense ark-like vessels, whose course is never redemptive. Buxton challengingly defines Barnes's historiographic approach "ark-ological" and notices that, for Barnes, the human voyage is an unpiloted drift from disaster to disaster and history is merely one retreat from catastrophe that blunders into another.⁸⁸ Barnes's perception of history as one single catastrophe can be compared to Benjamin's angel of history, i.e. an allegorical figure that Benjamin invented with the role to allude to the complex problem of history. Benjamin took inspiration from a painting made by Paul Klee in 1920, which is called "Angelus Novus": in the painting, the angel is about to move away from something that he is staring at, his eyes are wide-open and his wings are stretched. Benjamin's angel of history must have the same appearance of the angel in Klee's painting, he looks at the past and (in it) sees an accumulation of wreckage: "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet".⁸⁹ Like Benjamin, who avails himself of Klee's "Angelus Novus" to produce a famous historical

⁸⁶ Salman Rushdie quoted in Freiburg and Schnitker, "Do you consider yourself a postmodern author?": *Interviews with Contemporary English Writers*, Münster: LIT, 1999, p. 42.

⁸⁷ Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, cit., p. 137.

⁸⁸ Buxton claims that disaster is the engine of Barnes's historical continuum and that Barnes's reflections on human history suggest a fictional response to Benjamin's historiographic imperative: "The concept of progress should be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things just keep on going *is* the catastrophe." Jackie Buxton, op. cit., pp. 61; 66.

⁸⁹ Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, cit., IX.

image that conveys his gloomy understanding of history, Barnes uses Géricault's "The Raft of the Medusa" to illustrate his catastrophic view of human history. For Barnes, Géricault's painting sheds light not only on a particular human voyage, but also on the universal one; it represents an allegory of human history.⁹⁰ The narrator argues:

What is their chance of rescue? A drop in the ocean. [...] We are all lost at sea, washed between hope and despair, hailing something that may never come to rescue us.⁹¹

As above said, Barnes proves that people drift through life not only in chapter five but throughout the novel: the subject of shipwreck serves as an example of human history's disaster and catastrophe, and epitomises Barnes's apocalyptic historiography. Frederick Holmes observes:

Like Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History", Barnes's novel depicts the forces of history as violent and apocalyptic. Whereas Benjamin imagines history as one long catastrophe that "keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage", Barnes employs the recurrent metaphor of human history as a desperate voyage by boat or ship on which people are seeking deliverance from various kinds of disaster.⁹²

From the very beginning of the book, Barnes concerns himself with the possibility that the world ends. Noah boards the ark to survive the Deluge and save humanity and the animal species. Instead of representing the end, this first voyage corresponds to the beginning of the history of the world. Yet, the menace of the end lies in wait. In chapter two, entitled "The Visitors", the focus is upon the worldwide balance and the complex situation in the Middle East. The pleasure cruise of some tourists on the *Santa Euphemia* is tragically interrupted by a faction of Arabs, called the Black Thunder group, who asks for justice from the Western Powers and uses violence against the passengers of the cruise liner. The Arabs want to call attention and oblige the Western governments to negotiate with them. Speaking of historical inevitability, they believe some sacrifices are necessary; the tourists are thus shot dead: "From five o' clock to eleven o' clock, punctually on the hour like some terrible parody of a municipal clock, gunfire pleaded. Splashes followed, as the bodies were flung over the rail in pairs".⁹³ The incident echoes the historical one, which happened on the cruiser *Achille Lauro*, in October 1985: the Mediterranean cruise ship was hijacked by a group of armed

⁹⁰ Cf. Jackie Buxton, op. cit., p. 78.

⁹¹ Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, cit., pp. 134; 137.

⁹² Frederick Holmes, *Julian Barnes*, cit., p. 149.

⁹³ Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, cit., pp. 57-8.

men, members of the Palestinian Liberation Front, who demanded the release of fifty Palestinians held in prison in Israel. They threatened to kill the people on board and in the end shot an American Jewish passenger, Leon Klinghoffer.⁹⁴

Struggle and hatred reappear in chapter four, entitled “The Survivor”. What the protagonist is supposed to survive is the end of the world. Barnes presents the peril of a nuclear holocaust through the adventure of Kathleen Ferris, a thirty-eight years-old woman, who tries to escape from it. After the 1986 Chernobyl disaster and the pressing threats of nuclear war, the woman gets in a boat with two cats (a female miniature ark) and leaves the north. It is the end of the world and she decides to travel to the south to remain alive, believing that “it’s the duty of those of us who care about the planet to go on living”⁹⁵, but the disaster follows her.

I look at the history of the world which is coming to an end. Who made that happen?⁹⁶

This is a rhetorical question, since she perfectly knows it was human responsibility. It was human beings who, supported by their reason and way of thinking, provoked the disaster. Kath dismisses the causality of historical progress and identifies it with the triumph of tyranny. She maintains that we must free ourselves from the old way of thinking, because it led us to ruin. In what does our chance of survival as a species lie? According to Kath, we have to rediscover the old ways of doing things. More than once, she claims that the future lies in the past:

They’d had to break the cycle. Start making things simple again. Begin at the beginning. People said you couldn’t turn the clock back, but you could. The future was in the past.⁹⁷

She seems to be promoting Benjamin’s belief that redemption is to be found in the past, rather than in the future; she is like the angel of history, horrified by the present and by the storm of progress. According to Benjamin the need for redemption is expressed by the position of the angel of history, who looks at the past. Kath is facing the disaster, the end of history and of the world, and suggests that people should start from the past and make a new beginning.

⁹⁴ Cf. the article on the *Achille Lauro* on the BBC website: www.bbc.co.uk

⁹⁵ Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, cit., p. 107.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

Here, Barnes offers a chance to meditate on the world situation. A cloud of poison and the problem of global warming are described in the first pages; then the character tragically refers to the extinction of the planet. Kath feels the need to do something before it is all over, but what can she do? She undertakes a journey by boat and leaves the world behind, thinking that she has to try to escape, whatever the result.

Now it's abandon land. There's danger everywhere, but more on land. We all crawled out of the sea once, didn't we? Maybe that was a mistake. Now we're going back to it.⁹⁸

Kath alludes to Noah and the ark: this is one of the recurrent themes of the novel. Man first escaped from the sea, now turns back to it for protection. The element of water and the return to the sea appear in Swift too, both in *Waterland*, whose oxymoric title suggests the struggle between water and land in a metaphor for the struggle between man and nature, life and death, and in which the protagonist's brother, Dick, finally dives into the river not to resurface anymore, and in *Last Orders*, where the dead protagonist is cremated and scattered into the sea.

Another linking element among the short stories of *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* is the presence of animals and their relationship with men. Kath ponders on the violence perpetrated against nature and animals; in particular, she is fixated on reindeer which were poisoned and later butchered as a result of a Russian nuclear accident. Kath's observation that men have been punishing animals from the beginning of history recalls our attention to the woodworm's remark in the first chapter. The woodworm also claims that "man is a very unevolved species compared to the animals. We don't deny, of course, your cleverness, your considerable potential. But you are, as yet, at an early stage of your development"⁹⁹. Kath blames men for killing and torturing animals and throwing our guilt on to them; in the same way, the woodworm charges Noah and human species for punishing and tormenting animals. A recurrent motif is also a shared disregard for time, dates and progress: Kath blames names, dates and achievements. She hates dates, defining them as bullies, know-alls.¹⁰⁰ At the end of the world, she experiences that the sense of time changes:

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 94.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 99.

I don't keep count of the days. We aren't going to measure things in days any more. We'll have to go back to some older cycle, sunrise to sunset for a start, and the moon will come into it, and the seasons, and the weather.¹⁰¹

We must aim to have the key to living with nature, follow the natural cycle. Kath believes we should give ourselves back to nature. What caused the peril we are in at the moment was the human wish to keep the mind under control:

It was the mind, she decided; that was the cause of it all. It was the mind that invented these weapons, wasn't it? You couldn't imagine an animal inventing its own destruction, could you? [...] The mind just got carried away. Never knew when to stop.¹⁰²

Kath's account is intertwined with that of an impersonal narrator; her dream's interlocutor presents another version of her story. The two stories are incompatible: so, who says the truth? The narrator maintains that Kath suffers from PVS (persistent victim syndrome) and adds that "there are many others in the same boat"¹⁰³. He is a doctor, who explains her illness and affirms that nuclear war did not occur, because they finally sorted things out. The world was about to end, but men managed to solve the problem. Where was Kath in the meanwhile? She was travelling, escaping. She has been found and rescued a hundred miles east of Darwin, going round in circles. She ironically argues that going round in circles is what the world does.¹⁰⁴ However, why did she invent the whole story? Inventing stories helps to go on. The doctor clarifies:

Well, the technical term is fabulation. You make up a story to cover the facts you don't know or can't accept. You keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them.¹⁰⁵

The same words are uttered by Barnes in the "half chapter": like Swift, he believes that history functions to fill a void and dispels fear. Human beings in fact are storytelling animals, who try, through fabulation, to give a meaning to the void in their existence and to feel themselves protected from the attacks from reality. Barnes leaves us in uncertainty about Kath's story, about the end of the world and what really happened. Is Kath alone on a desert island with two cats or is she a psychotic in a world that has survived catastrophe? Kath ambiguously concludes:

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 93.

¹⁰² Ibid., pp. 102-103.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem.*

You mustn't fool yourself, that's what most people did. We've got to look at things how they are; we can't rely on fabrication any more. It's the only way we'll survive.¹⁰⁶

The tragedy of history is evoked in chapter seven through the account of real events; the final instalment of the “Three Simple Stories” is about the 1939 voyage of the German transatlantic liner *St Louis*. The ship, which sailed from Hamburg for Havana, was crowded by almost a thousand Jews fleeing from the Third Reich and seeking political asylum in America. The passengers on the *St. Louis* had applied for U.S. visas and had planned to stay in Cuba only until they could enter the United States; yet, Cuba denied entry to the passengers and also the U.S. government did not permit them to disembark. The passengers were thus compelled to return to Europe and only half of them was saved from a miserable destiny, just before the outbreak of the Second World War. The narrator compares the Jews' flight from Nazi Germany to Jonah's miraculous one from the whale, which is recorded in the previous story (within the same chapter). He then refers to the *St. Louis* as a contemporary Noah's ark: history presented the possibility to save only a small part of the passengers of the *St. Louis* (250 out of 973 Jews, to be precise) thus recalling Noah's possibility to embark most (but not all) animal species on his ark. The narrative voice cynically asks: “But how would you choose the 250 who were to be allowed off the Ark? Who would separate the clean from the unclean?”¹⁰⁷ Once again the narrator mentions the separation of the clean from the unclean, which also appears in the chapters “The Stowaway”, “The Visitors” and “The Survivor”. On the whole, the novel, though written in a jumbled form, is fraught with interlocking themes and motifs.

Do the stories contained in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* demonstrate that history progresses or that it is getting worse? They seem to hint at regression and deterioration. Barnes agrees with the postmodernist idea that history does not lead towards a better future, that it is not a linear movement aiming at a definite goal. Like Benjamin, he claims that human history has transmitted a concept of false progress and that it is made up of repeated disasters. Barnes suggests that history is cyclical, repeating itself. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Braithwaite observes human degradation and wonders about good qualities and values:

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 184.

As humanity perfects itself, man becomes degraded. When everything is reduced to the mere counter-balancing of economic interests, what room will there be for virtue?¹⁰⁸

Darwinist scientists and theorists have declared that life amounts to the survival of the fittest, and the fittest proved to be the most cunning. In chapter seven of *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, the narrator invites us to consider the case of one of the Titanic survivors, Lawrence Beesley. The man cross-dressed in order to be accepted in a lifeboat¹⁰⁹ and thus eluded death; his story shows that:

the heroes, the solid men of yeoman virtue, the good breeding stock, even the captain – they all went down nobly with the ship; whereas the cowards, the panickers, the deceivers found reasons for skulking in a lifeboat. Was this not deft proof of how the human gene-pool was constantly deteriorating, how bad blood drove out good?¹¹⁰

The narrator's conclusion is a bitter one; history gets worse and the human gene pool deteriorates as cowardice substitutes nobility.

Besides, chapter seven also provides the reader with some reflections on life and art, tragedy and its representation: whereas in the previous tale "The Shipwreck" the commentary is on a painting, here it is on a movie. Lawrence Beesley experienced the Titanic catastrophe and then wanted to take part in the film dedicated to that event; yet, the director did not allow him to have a token role and asked him to leave the set: for the second time in his life, Beesley left the *Titanic* just before it went down.¹¹¹ Beesley would have liked "to undergo in fiction an alternative version of history"¹¹², because the depiction of history somehow becomes a part of history; yet, his experience in the film version is nothing but a repetition of his original counterfeit performance. In reporting Beesley's anecdote, the narrator argues:

I was familiar with Marx's elaboration of Hegel: history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.¹¹³

Beesley's anecdote offers a very illustration of Marx's elaboration on Hegel, showing that farce rewrites tragedy in its own image. Also chapter six "The Mountain" and chapter nine

¹⁰⁸ Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*, cit., p. 179.

¹⁰⁹ Since the Captain's order was to save women and children first, Beesley secured his escape from the sinking ship by donning women's clothing.

¹¹⁰ Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, cit., p. 174.

¹¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 175.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

“Project Ararat” demonstrate the farcical historical repetition. *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* is all constructed on a network of ironic repetitions and self-reflexive quotations. The above-quoted citation is indicative of the way history works and draws the reader attention to Barnes’s belief that history is farcical and that it ends in sneer, imitation and consumption. But how far can art (either a painting, or a book, or a movie) prove the truth of history? The qualities of history are dubious and deceitful. Our only chance is to be consciously sceptical about historical knowledge and truth.

Chapter eight, entitled “Upstream!”, resumes many of the discussed themes; a movie is to be shot by a director who wants to create a ‘Truthspiel’ piece and this gives the chance to Barnes to linger again on the boundary between reality and its reproduction. The woodworm, the raft and the ark come out again. The return to nature and the feeling of going backward in time are what the protagonist, Charlie, experiences in a South American forest, where he finds himself with the TV troupe. The director wants to find an Amazonian primitive tribe and involves some of its members in the filming, in order to recreate the same atmosphere of the real event which occurred two centuries before and to which the movie is inspired. He asks his two main actors, Charlie and Matt, to play the role of two nineteenth-century Jesuit missionaries who encounter and try to convert a tribe of Indians.¹¹⁴ The story is written in epistolary form; yet, Charlie’s messages to her lover are one-way communication, a sort of monologue as he never gets an answer from her. The character provides the reader with his consideration on art and life, facts and fiction, and maintains that history repeats itself. He particularly ponders on the Indians’ inability to distinguish between reality and the scenes of the movie in which he plays. The Indians are like children, they are ‘innocent’: they do not know how to act because they do not pretend; they think the movie is reality. Their incapability to understand when Charlie and Matt are playing and when they are not, leads them to kill Matt in one of the final scenes of the movie. The Indians provide the very disaster that the film crew wants only to imitate. After this appalling story, the collection is interrupted.

Two chapters before the end, Barnes introduces the half chapter “Parenthesis”, which is an essay on love. Here, the narrator is Barnes himself. Besides history, which is the main focus of the novel, Barnes lingers on love and proffers it as the only hope which can

¹¹⁴ In factual history, the two Jesuit missionaries were finally killed by the Indians. In Barnes’s story, the Indians have to play their ancestors so that the tragedy of history can be represented in a movie - as we have seen, Barnes refers to the same process in chapter seven with the Titanic catastrophe and its representation in a movie. Yet, history and tragedy repeat themselves; the Indians kill one of the actor for real, not only pretend.

oppose an endlessly catastrophic historical loop. The history of the world includes love. Love and history are somehow related; the author ponders on the meaning of history and the function of love. He argues that love is the remedy for history:

Is love what will survive of us? It would be nice to think so. It would be comforting if love were an energy source which continued to glow after our deaths.¹¹⁵

Barnes does not think that it is love to survive but something else, without specifying what it is. However, it is important to love as it gives the strength to bear the burden of history. The author does not maintain that love will solve everything and that catastrophes will cease to occur, but he claims that we must believe in love, or we are lost:

I can tell you why to love. Because the history of the world is ridiculous without it. The history of the world becomes brutally self-important without love. Love won't change the history of the world, but it will do something much more important: teach us to stand up to history.¹¹⁶

Love is what we can put up against history; it is the means by which an oppressive history can be resisted and overcome. Buxton argues that Barnes's advocacy of the belief in love and truth provides the "theoretical alternative to a despairing descent into postmodern historical relativity".¹¹⁷

We may not obtain it, or we may obtain it and find it renders us unhappy; we must still believe in it. If we don't, then we merely surrender to the history of the world and to someone else's truth.¹¹⁸

In spite of the importance of love and the message the author wants to convey, the novel does not end with this essay, two chapters follow.

Chapter nine, "Project Ararat", functions as linkage to the previous stories, in particular the one told in "The Mountain", where Amanda Fergusson's pilgrimage to Noah's mythic resting place cost the woman her life.¹¹⁹ Partly set in North Carolina and partly in Turkey, "Project Ararat" tells the story of a fictional astronaut, Spike Tiggler, who hears God's voice asking him to search for Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat. The story opens exactly

¹¹⁵ Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, cit., p. 228.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

¹¹⁷ Jackie Buxton, op. cit., p. 85.

¹¹⁸ Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, cit., p. 246.

¹¹⁹ The tragedy of the story in "The Mountain" reappears as a contemporary farce in "Project Ararat": once again, Barnes is here demonstrating that "history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce".

with the image of an ark on the way to the village Kitty Hawk: the ark's function is not that of a ship but of a worship centre, it is a church. Tiggler's vision of it makes him think about God's words heard on the moon; he decides to make an expedition to the summit of Mount Ararat, near the border between Turkey and Iran, in order to recover the remains of the Ark. What Tiggler finds is not the Ark, but what he believes to be Noah's bones.¹²⁰ Yet, carbon dating shows that the bones belong to a woman died in the nineteenth century; the reader deduces that the dead woman is Amanda Fergusson, the protagonist of chapter six, who engaged in a similar expedition. Both the characters' divine illumination are ironically treated with scepticism.

The last chapter of *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* is a parodic dream about the end of history; it provides both the protagonist of the story and its reader with an idea of how history might end in a never-ending place of commodities and of how people would come to terms with, and live in, such a place. For the first time in the novel, the end of history is not described as a disaster or a catastrophe. Nick Bentley comments: "at the end of history things do not end with a bang, with finitude and finality."¹²¹ The protagonist of chapter ten dreams that he inhabits a paradise of conspicuous consumption, he lives enjoying every pleasure and desire he can imagine of and feels "that sense of being pleasantly full"¹²². His condition recalls Kojève's description of the American way of life at the end of history: people have fast and easy satisfactions, they can have everything they want. Like at the supermarket, in Barnes's satirical description of a bourgeois heaven, clients get what they want. The protagonist is told that heaven is "democratic": everyone chooses the kind of paradise that s/he likes. In his dream, he experiences a comfortable after-life in an eternal present, in a timeless paradise. It is the Hegelian "Sunday of life": the character laments he cannot discern the days anymore, it is always Sunday. All his wishes are fulfilled: he meets beautiful women, historical characters (among which Noah and Hitler) and successful football players; he plays golf, goes shopping and eats more animal species

¹²⁰ Cf. the story in Jeanette Winterson's *Boating for Beginners*, where the validity of God's miracle is discussed from the very beginning: the epigraph to the novel is an extract from *The Guardian* (28.8.84): "Bags of rocks and chunks of Ararat, Turkey, that Biblical archaeologists believe are relics of Noah's Ark have been taken to the US for laboratory analysis". Cf. also the irony of the dialogue between Noah and Japeth: "Did you pack those bits of gopher wood I told you about?" Noah asked Japeth "What do you want bits of old gopher wood for?" "I'm going to plant them on the top of Mount Ararat when we get off this crazy ship so that future generations can discover them, and then they'll think this thing really happened the way I've told it." Jeanette Winterson, op. cit., p. 151.

¹²¹ Nick Bentley, *British Fiction of the 1990s*, London: Routledge, 2005, p. 31.

¹²² Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, cit., p. 292.

than those embarked in the Ark. However, there is no redemption in his paradise-experience, and no aim in what he does, except pleasure itself. Buxton claims that

the novel's history of repeated disasters appropriately and parodically concludes with a heaven that becomes a cyclical living hell, an endless present.¹²³

As suggested above, the narrator's life in heaven can be compared to the kind of life described by Kojève at the end of history: man is completely satisfied, but satisfaction finally renders him unsatisfied. Bentley argues that

in Julian Barnes's story of paradisiacal utopia of 1980s consumption things seem to be getting better and better until the escalation of improvements exhausts desire and aspiration: things become boring. Worn out, fed up with repetition-escalation-exhaustion, the narrator has simply had enough of it all, wanting only the good old-fashioned final consumption of real death.¹²⁴

At some point, the protagonist of "A Dream" starts asking questions about where he is and how long this kind of life can last. He is plagued with anxiety that everything ends and finally with boredom that it does not. He is thwarted by his own desire for perfection, by a world that becomes irritatingly too good to be true. He learns by one of the paradise assistant that people can live in paradise (namely a place of endless consumption) for years, centuries or millennia, but that, at some point, they conclude that they have had too much of a good thing and decide to die. The final meaningful revelation is the recognition of one's desire to die: everyone, sooner or later, bores of her/his own desires and wishes to die. People get tired even of perfection and eternity:

After a while, getting what you want all the time is very close to not getting what you want all the time.¹²⁵

The protagonist enjoys every minute of it, but finally looks for a way out:

It seemed a pretty arid life, at least compared to life itself, and not one worth prolonging.¹²⁶

Therefore, to die is desirable; death appears as the only authentic and unique experience. The ironical message that Barnes's last story conveys, is that human beings need to think

¹²³ Jackie Buxton, op. cit., p. 82.

¹²⁴ Nick Bentley, *British Fiction of the 1990s*, cit., p. 31.

¹²⁵ Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, cit., p. 309.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

there is something after the end of life and the end of history (and need to dream about it), but, if the after-end does not end, they want to wake up. The story ends with the same sentence with which it opened: “I dreamt that I woke up. It’s the oldest dream of all, and I’ve just had it”.

Swift’s and Barnes’s novels epitomise contemporary debate on history, its end and the ways to tell it. My reading of their novels develops the focus upon their questioning of absolute certainty about the past and any claimed objectivity from historians in its depiction. In *Waterland*, the history teacher Tom Crick puts away the book of history in front of his pupils and starts his storytelling from a non official perspective; official historiography and the content of history, which are taught at school, are only one version among many others, equally possible. Swift’s novel invites the reader to meditate upon accepted ideas of history and the way it has been told. In *Flaubert’s Parrot*, the protagonist Geoffrey Braithwaite shows that reality cannot be univocally and exhaustively interpreted; around each event there is always a series of questions and hypotheses that hinder a definitive understanding of the event itself. Words neither reproduce things directly nor replace them; any biography on Flaubert cannot be a surrogate for the French author himself, as well as in Swift’s *Shuttlecock* the memoirs “Shuttlecock: The Story of a Secret Agent” cannot be a surrogate for Prentis’s father. Flaubert’s presence is distant in time and there is not a direct and univocal way for Braithwaite to refer to him. Prentis’s father is represented by the book he wrote but Prentis finally discovers that the story recorded in the book is false. Both *Shuttlecock* and *Flaubert’s Parrot* convey the idea that complete and definitive understanding of things and people in the past is impossible; yet, such impossibility does not infer that reality does not exist or that historical events did not really occur. In their work, both Swift and Barnes suggest that, even if history and reality cannot be completely known and fully described, they still continue to be the subject of the writer’s inquiry. Their novels provide alternative viewpoints, celebrating plurality. There is no means to define history in a simple, univocal and definitive way; instead, they look for many partial, fragmentary, complex and uncertain truths. These paradoxically grant a more realistic view of the world for the very reason they do not claim to be absolute.

The last of the three Barnes’s novels here analysed is *England, England*, published in 1998. It deals with the history of a nation and its fate, and epitomises Barnes’s ironical idea of making history more accessible through its being sold to tourists in a place similar to Disneyland. Barnes shows how history becomes consumerised and people end to be unable

to distinguish between what it is real and what it is not. In *England, England*, the fusion of fact and fiction becomes complete and the characters believe that the difference between fact and fiction does not matter any longer. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, the scholar Braithwaite tries to shed light on the past through a variety of documents and fictional reconstructions; in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, a plurality of voices describes imaginary and historical experiences, providing multiple interpretations of the recorded past. In *England, England*, the theme of how to deal with the representation of the past returns with the industrialist's project of creating a model England for tourists' pleasure on the Isle of Wight:

It was his original stroke of lateral thinking which brought together in a single hundred-and-fifty-five square mile zone everything the Visitor might want to see of what we used to think of as England.¹²⁷

The focus of my reading is the value of history and tradition in a postmodern society where history seems to have come to an end, absorbed into the realm of simulation, and tradition is destroyed by its reproduction. Barnes plays with the idea that a tycoon might trade away English history to foreign tourists in a place where the hyperreal manages to replace the real. The novel echoes Baudrillard's theory on hyper-reality and mirrors the historical experience of the postmodern, which continually imposes the knowledge that we are surrounded by representations of truth rather than truth. The characters in *England, England* live in the world of the spectacle, in a reproduced reality, that Baudrillard called the space of postmodernist simulation. The advancement of science and technology has made possible to produce replicas which are indistinguishable from the original. Fake objects are experienced as real, and vice versa.

We must demand the replica, since the reality, the truth, the authenticity of the replica is the one we can possess, colonise, reorder, find *jouissance* in, and finally, if and when we decide, it is the reality which, since it is our destiny, we may meet, confront and destroy.¹²⁸

The staff for the project 'England, England' is convinced that the replica is to be preferred to the original, the reproduction of the work of art to the work of art itself. Living and experiencing the hyperreal is for them a conquest, a victory, not a loss or a source of regret. Within the staff only the female character of Martha Cochrane, a forty-year-old woman with a degree in history, proves at last to be persuaded of the opposite.

¹²⁷ Julian Barnes, *England, England*, London: Vintage, 1998, p. 179.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

The novel is made of three parts: “England” which focuses on Martha Cochrane’s recollection of her childhood, “England, England” which, echoing the title, is most of the book and deals with Sir Jack Pitman’s project of creating a theme park of English history on the Isle of Wight, and “Anglia” which describes Martha Cochrane’s return to old England. The magnate Sir Jack Pitman is a central character and the most scorned in the novel, but is not its protagonist. The story is narrated following Martha’s incidents, from her childhood to retirement. In the first part of the novel, she is presented as a child playing with a jigsaw puzzle of England and fitting all the counties into their right places. Her father used to hide a piece of the puzzle in his pocket and, when he abandons her and her mother for another woman, he inadvertently keeps a piece of it. Martha waits for him to return and make her complete the puzzle, but this never occurs. Her memories of the past are curtailed and incomplete like her childhood puzzle of England. Since the past hurts, “she did not know whether she was meant to remember or to forget” it.¹²⁹ However, her father’s abandonment of her has marked her attitude towards people, whom she does not trust; she grows suspicious, sceptical and cynical. Because of these very aspects of her character, she is hired by Sir Jack Pitman as one of his special consultants, precisely as his ‘Official Cynic’.

Barnes is concerned with the sense of history that English have, with national identity, and with the issue of commercialised culture. The main part of the novel is about England that offers its heritage and its history for profit. Sir Jack Pitman decides to duplicate the tourist spots of England on the Isle of Wight, where passports will be examined for credit-worthiness, and employs specialists to make copies of everything that is deemed to be genuinely English. The novel testifies human capacity not only to pile images from the past randomly and eclectically, but even to transform them into material simulacra in the form of built environment, events and spectacles:

You – we – England – my client – is – are – a nation of great age, great history, great accumulated wisdom. Social and cultural history – stacks of it, reams of it – eminently marketable, never more so than in the current climate. Shakespeare, Queen Victoria, Industrial Revolution, gardening, that sort of thing.¹³⁰

Barnes mockingly deals with the theme of identity and Englishness through the survey, which engages Pitman’s employees, on what it means to be English. The book offers a list of fifty possible answers to what the word English suggests - among which, for instance,

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 39.

there are Royal Family, Big Ben and House of Parliament, pubs, cricket, white cliffs of Dover, snobbery, Queen Victoria, breakfast and Shakespeare. In a satirical way, Barnes shows how history and tradition might end to be held in very low esteem and a nation can be reduced to its saleable aspects and put on the market. On the Isle of Wight, worldly known as The Island or as 'England, England', the history of England becomes an item to offer and consume like any other product is at the supermarket, Englishness becomes a show. Barnes looks specifically at the likely end of English history: the past is absorbed into the present and the future is nothing else than the trade of English culture and heritage. Pitman believes that, in order to preserve tradition, it is necessary to commodify and market it. Barnes blames entrepreneurial capitalism by describing Pitman as "a chancer, a gambler, a financial illusionist who for that brief and necessary moment convinced you that money was real and before your eyes"¹³¹; the island is his plausible and well-planned means of making money. England is Pitman's new client: he thinks of a way to embrace time and change and age, and this tallies with selling England's national heritage to other nations.

The difference between real England and virtual 'England, England' is that in the latter tourists do not need to travel and move from one place to another to sample what England is, but they can find everything within easy walking distance. On the island, Pitman offers replicas of Big Ben, Princess Diana's grave, Harrods, Stonehenge, and the white cliffs of Dover - everything at hand. All the main cultural-commercial aspects of England are imported into the island, where all tourist attractions are conveniently close:

The best of all that England was, and is, can be safely and conveniently experienced on this spectacular and well-equipped diamond of an Island.¹³²

A visit to 'England, England' makes tourists save time and money: to cover the originals it would take people three or four times as long: "if given the option between an inconvenient original or a convenient replica, a high proportion of tourists would opt for the latter".¹³³ Pitman's creation is a perfect replica of real England, it is its simulacrum. 'England, England' is an example of how history has terminated in, and with, its representation:

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 57.

¹³² Ibid., p. 185.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 181.

All that once directly lived has become mere representation. [...] There remains nothing, in culture or in nature, which has not been transformed, and polluted, according to the means and interests of modern industry.¹³⁴

Reproduction and representation constitute reality: reality and illusion mingle to the point that both the tourists and the inhabitants of the island cannot distinguish between one another. In 'England, England', history is depicted by and through images, which finally reach an autonomous state and become completely independent of their origin. Characters from history, like Robin Hood, Lady Godiva or the King, may be encountered in the flesh (with help from actors) and famous scenes from English history are re-enacted several times a day. The past has been made into a vast soap opera. The problem is that very soon the living replica forget their role and start to believe in their authenticity (for instance, Robin Hood and his band start hunting their own food in the parks and farmyards of the Island; smugglers really start smuggling, and so on). Reality and performance become the same thing, up to the point that performance substitutes reality. Barnes satirically shows how the replica, or the simulacrum, after a certain time gains autonomy, and art triumphs over reality.

On the island, tourists are provided with a virtual reality, like if they were visiting Disneyland. Real England is abandoned and replaced by the fake 'England, England'; reality is 'disneyfied' in a sort of dystopia. Everything is transported into an invented realm: simulation destroys the real England by creating the virtual one. The book calls into question the idea of replicas, truth versus fiction and reality versus art. The national heritage is reduced to a collection of commodities which Pitman buys and sells. History is regarded as an agreed-upon fiction both by the Island's inhabitants (who become all Pitman's employees) and foreign tourists (who are Pitman's clients). Pitman asks a history professor to be part of the staff for his project and be responsible for history; Dr Max is thus hired as 'Official Historian' to find out what people actually know about the history of England. Dr Max observes that people recall history in the same way they remember their childhood; the reader is invited to infer that Martha Cochrane's case confirms Dr Max's theory: "it was like a country remembering its history: the past was never just the past, it was what made the present able to live with itself"¹³⁵. Once again, Barnes proves to be concerned with the ways we remember and reconstruct the past, and offers a comparison between the way in which England and Martha Cochrane shape their own histories.

¹³⁴ Ibid., pp. 54-55.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

Pitman explains to Dr Max that the old approach to history is ineffective; he needs to attract people, not to bore them with pedantic lessons of history:

The point is that most people don't want what you and your colleagues think of as history – the sort you get in books – because they don't know how to deal with it. [...] They'll come to us to enjoy what they already know.¹³⁶

On the island, history is supposed to become a source of pleasure and enjoyment. Barnes hints at the end of historians' original task, that is to find important facts in the national past and to account them for present and future generations. In a world where everything is faked, the character Dr Max is asked to think about history in terms of Western consumerism and customers' pleasure. Pitman's project rewrites English history and culture, whereas Barnes encourages his readers to mediate upon authenticity and phoniness, and human propensity to fabricate the past. Within Pitman's project, the past is reproduced in its accumulation of images, fragments and spectacles, without the possibility of discovering an essential order. In the consumer culture of 'England, England', which is reduced to a world of goods, there is no room for authentic experience and uniqueness; consumption and leisure are meant to be the only possible experiences. It is difficult to preserve a sense of historical continuity in the face of all the flux of accumulated images of the past. The sense of history and temporality breaks down: the past disappears, its different epochs are all included in the present:

In our time-strapped age, surely it makes sense to be able to visit Stonehenge and Anne Hathaway's Cottage in the same morning, take in a 'ploughman's lunch' atop the White Cliffs of Dover, before passing a leisurely afternoon at the Harrods emporium inside the Tower of London (Beefeaters push your shopping trolley for you!).¹³⁷

This passage from the novel stresses postmodernist tendency to collect and overlap different things, anachronistic and inconsistent with each other. Pitman is the promoter of a postmodernist representation of history and, for a while, even Martha Cochrane believes that "it is empowering and democratic to offer people a wider choice, whether it's in breakfast food or historic sites"¹³⁸, merely following the logic of the market.

Fredrick Holmes defines Barnes's novel as "a satiric fantasy designed to show how England is losing the knowledge of its own history by following what Fredric Jameson calls

¹³⁶ Ibid., pp. 70-71.

¹³⁷ Ibid., pp. 179-180.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 182.

the postmodernist cultural logic of late capitalism”.¹³⁹ Pitman aims at restoring England’s international prominence: in the post-empire age, England appears as “a nation fatigued by its own history”¹⁴⁰; so, the best thing to do for Pitman is to sell its history and to profit from it. Barnes focuses on the excesses of a free-market economy and on the danger of commercialising even culture. He shows the negative consequences of approaching the past under the influence of the market and the investment in history reproducible as style. The island, offering the quintessence of England, ends to appear even more English than the “old country”:

The world began to forget that ‘England’ had ever meant anything except England, England, a false memory which the Island worked to reinforce; while those who remained in Anglia began to forget about the world beyond.¹⁴¹

Old England thus slides into decline; economy collapses and the country retreats into a primitive, pastoral past. It is not called England any more, but transformed into an isolated and impoverished Anglia:

Old England had lost its history, and therefore – since memory is identity – had lost all sense of itself.¹⁴²

Through Martha Cochrane’s story, *England, England* examines personal and national history, individual and collective identity. Barnes provides the reader with two alternatives at the end of English history: the first is to accept it and earn some money by selling its remains, like Pitman does; the second is to return to a primitive past where history might start again. Martha Cochrane, who at first agrees with the idea of the ‘England, England’ theme park, finally decides to retreat to Anglia, a backward nation that becomes depopulated and gradually regresses into its own rural past. The more Martha thinks what England really is about, the more she realises that England, England can never be her home; instead, she chooses the landscape of England’s lost origin and past. In this way, Barnes puts forward the cyclical nature of history: when it gets to its end, it starts from its past again.

¹³⁹ Frederick Holmes, *Julian Barnes*, cit., p. 91.

¹⁴⁰ Julian Barnes, *England, England*, cit., p. 253.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 251.

3.3 Is This the End? An Analysis of Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, Anthony Burgess's *The End of the World News*, and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow, or the Nature of the Offence*

The novels here analysed try to provide a means of coming to terms with history and its end; they offer a narrative that deals with social and cultural ending, a narrative of apocalypse. The prospect of an imminent and actual end to history was represented first by the horrors of the Holocaust and second by the threat of nuclear extermination: writing after the Second World War made some authors like Lessing, Burgess and Amis, become concerned with vision of social collapse and imagination of world ending as a likely historical event. As Randall Stevenson comments,

the age of Cold War and atomic armament beginning in 1945 sustained a more or less imminent possibility of an end to all history and all human time.¹⁴³

The pressures of history affect literary forms. Nuclear experience made contemporary writers aware of the possibility that tomorrow might not come; some of them decided to delve into the past to find some meaning of what has happened or stress the fact that there is no meaning in what happens; others dealt with the future in visionary images of how it might look like after the end. Whereas Swift's and Barnes's novels are focussed more upon the tangled relations to the past and its influence on the present, Lessing's, Burgess's and Amis's novels engage with the possibility of narrating and representing the future in the actual menace of absolute ending. Both Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor* and Burgess's *The End of the World News* are concerned with the end of history by depicting post-apocalyptic worlds. The end of civilization might have come through nuclear war, plague or some other general disaster; the two novels are set in a world approaching such a disaster, where the existence of pre-catastrophe civilization has been forgotten or become simply memories for the survivors. In Amis's *Time's Arrow, or the Nature of the Offence*, the future is the past, the apocalypse is the here and now. The novel offers a different narrative treatment of the end of history, which occurs with the Holocaust; it presents a way to invert the order of history by treating its end as its beginning and vice versa.

¹⁴³ Randall Stevenson, *The Last of England? 1960-2000*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 434.

The three novels, published respectively in 1974, 1982 and 1991, are the products of three different authors in three different decades; nonetheless, I suggest to consider them together as they are all examples of the fictional assault on the legacy of the Enlightenment faith in the rationality of man and the inevitability of historical progress. They jettison an easy humanist claim for the progress of our culture, by showing how rationalism has produced weapons of horrifying destructive potential and how human beings try to survive to what they have created. Their authors share Adorno and Horkheimer's belief that the Enlightenment's concept of reason led to the domination over nature and man, and, in the end, to their destruction.

Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is a first-person account, made by a female narrator, of the breakdown of society and her experience of it after an unspecified disaster. The context is that of a post-nuclear holocaust, the time is a near future when savagery and anarchy are supreme. However, the narrator never makes clear what kind of global crisis provoked such circumstances. It is possible to find some common elements between Lessing's novel and the later story "The Survivor" contained in Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989). Despite the fact that Barnes's tale is only one chapter within an extensive account of the history of the world and that Lessing's novel instead is wholly dedicated to the subject of the end and of what survives after it, I would consider their similarities. Both narrators are women and survivors who account the end of the world in their narrative; they both describe a sort of collapse in contemporary world: cities are beleaguered, the air is polluted, the atmosphere is degraded, and famine is looming large. Lessing's narrator looks at the world falling apart outside her window and contrasts it with a world of her own situated in the room where she lives and in her mind. Barnes's character, Kathleen Ferris, tries to escape from apocalypse on a boat, but finally we are left with the ambiguity that she might have created all in her mind and that the end of the world has not actually occurred. Both the stories share the possibility and the wish for humankind to start afresh, from the very beginning, and to form a new civilization. Lessing's novel ends with a picture of hope; the message of the whole account seems to be the importance of love: we must care, take responsibility and preserve what is left. The narrator conveys the idea that what saves us from savagery is the act of taking care of other people, avowing human fundamental need for love and protection. The same message returns in the half chapter "The Parenthesis" in Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, where Barnes seems to agree with Lessing's suggestion that only love can save us from total destruction.

In *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, the narrator is a middle-age unnamed woman who gives an account of her personal experience of a sweeping collapse of social order. Society degenerates into anarchy, facing disintegration and disorientation. From her window she witnesses an evolutionary degeneration, the breakdown of rules and habits, of law and order. Most services have stopped; people and even young children are fighting for survival. The narrator records the deterioration of society, the disappearance of moral values and justice: barbarism becomes the norm since everyone has to struggle to survive. Death and destruction prevail. There were “new diseases; mysterious deaths; exhaustions and listlessness”.¹⁴⁴ Out of the narrator’s shelter, it is the landscape of apocalypse; violence is everywhere, streets are crowded by cruel and aggressive gangs of children who have randomly gathered, abandoning their houses and families. While old people stay at their homes, groups of youths devastate an area and then move on. The narrator depicts a nomadic, tribal organisation, recording the decline of urban and technological civilisation. Families have broken down and groups of people band together for self-protection and basic survival. The narrator observes that “nuclei of barbarism took hold and spread”¹⁴⁵, and illustrates the formation of new communities: “people no longer in neat little families, but huddled together in groups and clans whose structure evolved under the pressures of necessity”.¹⁴⁶ The dominant feeling is that of a huge disillusion with technological culture and city life; ordinary life has undergone an extraordinary mutation, it has dissolved away or found new shapes. Lessing’s character refers to a crucial and irreversible historical change that has made twentieth-century life come to an end. Yet, the causes and effects of such a collapse remain unknown. Modern way of life with its comfort and technology is abandoned and life reverts to the primitive, to the past of human race.

In the first pages of the book, the narrator claims that she shall begin her account at a time before they were talking about ‘it’. Paradoxically, from that moment on, ‘it’ becomes the central thread of the narrative and, despite her first claim, she soon starts describing the period when everyone was talking about it. She never explains what ‘it’ exactly is, because it appears to be impossible to represent it in its essence. She suggests that ‘it’ survives the end. We might argue that ‘it’ is the human fall and decadence, the process of social and

¹⁴⁴ Doris Lessing, *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, London: Picador, 1976, p. 138.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibidem.*

cultural ending. Almost at the end of the book, 'it' is indicated as a consciousness of something ending:

'It' is the secret theme of all literature and history [...] it is in crisis 'it' becomes visible. For 'it' is a force, a power, taking the form of an earthquake [...] 'it' can be, has been, pestilence, a war, the alteration of climate, a tyranny that twists men's minds, the savagery of a religion. 'It', in short, is the word for helpless ignorance, or of helpless awareness. It is a word for man's inadequacy? [...] 'It', perhaps – on this occasion in history – was above all a consciousness of something ending.¹⁴⁷

Steven Connor observes that "if 'it' is the name for the altering force of any kind of visible crisis or disaster (such as pestilence, a war, the alteration of climate, a tyranny), it is also the name for a sense of the hidden, impersonal process of history".¹⁴⁸

The narrator describes a society assaulted by a storm of decay, by a sense of an ending. "I feel bad inside and everywhere. It was an illness, a tiredness".¹⁴⁹ Civilization disappears, or better, it returns to barbarism; humanity collapses into savagery, people are brutalised by necessity. Apocalypse reduces men to be wild animals which only worry about biological needs: they live in a condition of spiritual indifference and suffer from shortage of food to the point that they become cannibals, thus ending their days not by consuming goods like Kojève foretold, but by eating each other. At the end of history, the historical man turns into a cruel beast. The novel puts forward the thesis of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and reveals Lessing's distrust of rationalism and human progress: our intellectual apparatus, our rationalisms and logics, our thoughts and deductions have failed. The narrator observes:

as we sit in the ruins of this variety of intelligence, it is hard to give it much value: I suppose we are undervaluing it now as we over-valued it then.¹⁵⁰

Lessing indicates the spiritual and moral bankruptcy of a society which has blindly committed to a narrow and instrumental concept of rationality. The city the narrator describes is only an example of any city of the West: Lessing wants to show how Western political economy has been disintegrated and materialism exhausted, and, in order to do so, she focuses on the failure of rational political thought. Reason is seen as a part of the impulse to control the world and humanity, which leads to violent forms of oppression.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 136.

¹⁴⁸ Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History: 1950-1995*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 229.

¹⁴⁹ Doris Lessing, op. cit., p. 139.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 182.

Reason produced violence, which destroyed the world. The same thought is expressed by Barnes's character Kathleen Ferris. Violence is the effect of the emotional repression required by instrumental rationality; Burgess deals with this same topic in *The End of the World News* by describing a group of scientists and their leader Paul Maxwell Bartlett in an attempt to survive the imminent destruction of the world.

In Lessing's novel, political systems and theories crumble: the real historical world is collapsing and a general sense of dissolution spreads. The author emphasises the individual's sense of powerlessness in the face of social institutions, which have become inadequate and ineffective. The technologically advanced world is thrown back by a holocaust into primitive tribal mentalities and into the blank minimalism of the survivor. To the disintegrating world outside, Lessing juxtaposes the room where the narrator resides; the inner place coincides with the narrator's inner psyche. Despite her nightmares and weird visions, her interior life is preserved from ruin and degradation, and finally reveals possibilities of survival. The novel is a fable or an allegory: Lessing disrupts realist narrative and shows how the real world can be illuminated by dreams and perceptions, whereas the imaginative realm remains uncontaminated from barbarity and offers the possibility to escape the end of the world. The narrator describes both real surroundings and imaginary rooms or scenes, and ends her account with the entrance into an imagined landscape. She eventually records her experience of a sort of paradise post-mortem, but she is still alive. The reader is thus confronted with the apex of fiction and pretence; the character narrates the end of history when the end has already occurred. Steven Connor suggests that

the transformation which has been undergone and survived in order to enable the narrator to look back in these memoirs involves some move beyond the linearity in which the concepts of ending and historical memory themselves have meaning. The narration that survives the end seems to involve the end of narrative as such, or history-as-narrative.¹⁵¹

The story starts with the arrival of a small child, Emily Cartwright, in the narrator's flat. Emily is left in her care by a middle-age man who then disappears. The narrator does not say anything about the connection between her and the man, or between him and Emily. She finds them in her flat, unable to understand how they have got in, and accepts the stranger's decision: from that moment on, she becomes responsible of Emily, calling herself her guardian. She takes care and loves Emily and, in turn, Emily takes care of, and loves,

¹⁵¹ Steven Connor, op. cit., p. 232.

her pet called Hugo, half-dog and half-cat. Emily, Hugo and the narrator are depicted like a family, but the picture will be completed only in the end with the presence of Emily's boyfriend. Since the scarcity of resources and the general famine, Hugo risks to be captured and eaten: it therefore needs to be hidden and protected. Emily grows and starts to go out with other teenagers, so it is the narrator who takes care of her pet and starts pondering on the fact that animals are more human than people:

I think that all this time, human beings have been watched by creatures whose perceptions and understanding have been so far in advance of anything we have been able to accept, because our vanity, that we would be appalled if we were able to know, would be humiliated. We have been living with them as blundering, blind, callous, cruel murderers and torturers, and they have watched and known us.¹⁵²

Similar observations on man's brutality towards animals return in Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, both in the first chapter "The Genesis" and in the fourth "The Survivor". In Lessing's novel, people behave like wild beasts, whereas Emily's pet, which is an undefined creature, acquires human traits. The narrator refers to Hugo using the personal pronoun 'he' and maintains that it possesses the capacity for deep thought. Hugo is humanised, thus its behaviour functions to contrast human transformation into animals at the end of history.

Lessing's narrator uses the account of Emily's growth to describe a profound social collapse. Days, months, years pass: everything is in change, movement, destruction. Despite the fact that life has undergone a profound transformation, she observes that people pretend to carry on like in the old times:

It was amazing how determined, how stubborn, how self-renewing, were the attempts to lead an ordinary life. [...] We can get used to anything at all; this is a commonplace, of course, but perhaps you have to live through such a time to see how horribly true it is. There is nothing that people won't try to accommodate into 'ordinary life'.¹⁵³

Even at the last stage, there was a level of our society which managed to live as if nothing much was happening, maintaining an illusion of security, permanence and order.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Doris Lessing, op. cit., p. 75.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

Even at the end of history, people try to convince themselves that there is a meaning in what happens and in what they do. The narrator thinks they live in delusion. Past reality seems to be individual imagination, the real is uncertain and perplexing:

There were moments when the game we were all agreeing to play simply could not stand up to events: we would be gripped by feelings of unreality, like nausea. [...] For us the enemy was Reality, was to allow ourselves to know what was happening.¹⁵⁵

The narrator refuses to think that nothing has changed; she rather takes refuge in the mystical realm of her room and her mind in order to survive. Consciousness, memories, imagination allow her to look into the past and escape from the gradual disintegration of the real world. Whereas she always remains at home, Emily makes experience of the world outside. Realistic frames follow supernatural ones: the descriptions of the outside world alternate with memories or fantasies of Emily's infancy, which has been very sad. The narrator alludes to an unspecified trauma in Emily's past; from her dreams we understand that the child might have suffered from sexual abuse by her father, while her mother was indifferent. Emily seems now to have overcome the childhood pains; she is ready for a social life with her contemporaries and falls in love with a boy called Gerald, a gang leader who takes care of homeless children. From that moment on, a change in the narrator's and Emily's life in common occurs: Emily spends most of her time outside and decides to enter in the collective with Gerald and his group.

Emily and Gerald are representatives of those, among the youths generation, who want to act and change present circumstances. Whereas the narrator claims that she has no alternative but to go on doing what she is doing, that is watching and waiting, Emily and Gerald try to salvage the remains of civilization. The two teenagers attempt to set up a society, a kind of democracy where order is imposed on chaos, where all the children are equals, with the same rights and the same duties. The narrator focuses on the difficulty to establish democracy even in a small society like the group of children surrounding Emily and Gerald. The children react to what they are told by Emily and Gerald like people respond to authority. The girl bitterly reflects on the impossibility not to have a pecking order. The narrator claims that "the old patterns kept repeating themselves, reforming

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

themselves”, that “it is a trap and we are all in it”.¹⁵⁶ She explains to Emily that she cannot create democracy by passing resolutions or thinking it is an attractive idea:

that’s what we have always done. On the one hand institutions and hierarchies and a place in the pecking order, and on the other passing resolutions about democracy, or saying how democratic we are. So there is no reason for you to feel so bad about it. All that has happened is what always happens.¹⁵⁷

Despite the narrator’s attempt to console her, Emily feels disheartened: she has really believed in the possibility to make a new start and not to fall once again into a competitive and hierarchical order, yet everything has gone wrong. The society, to which Emily and Gerald give life, is destined to fall back into hierarchies and stereotypes. In her analysis of Lessing’s novel, Waugh argues that

Gerald and Emily try to rebuild the material world on the basis of an enlightened collectivist politics, only to find themselves burdened with, and frustrated by, the ‘old forms’: the seemingly inevitable institutional drift towards hierarchy, the unconscious reconstruction of a ‘pecking order’, the revalidation of racial and gender stereotypes.¹⁵⁸

They run up against those categories that in the past led to the present circumstance of break down and collapse. Their model, based on the notions of autonomy and reason, keeps alive the impulse to own, dominate, and control others and the world. It seems impossible to avoid the perpetuation of the will to power. However, as Waugh observes, Lessing never implies that humans do not have to avail themselves of reason, she rather suggests that we should look for a new mode of reason, avoiding forms of subjective dominations:

Lessing does not imply that we should abandon reason, but she does reveal that the over-generalisation of instrumental forms of it may have produced the very violence and irrationalism against which it was supposed to protect.¹⁵⁹

Like a caring mother, the narrator follows Emily’s falling in love and the following love pangs, Emily’s enthusiasm with, and her participation in, Gerald’s collective, her friendship with June and the betrayal from her, her sense of failure and final disillusionment. Emily’s friend June, a young girl of whom Emily takes care because she is very ill, proves to be petty and worthless. As soon as June feels better, her opportunism becomes evident: she abandons Emily and the narrator, without thanking and saying goodbye. Emily wonders

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁵⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁸ Patricia Waugh, *Practicing Postmodernism: Reading Modernism*, London: Edward Arnold, 1992, p. 83.

¹⁵⁹ Ibidem.

why and cries desperately for the loss of her friend. Besides June's betrayal and abandonment, the children in the communal seem to be able and wishing, at any moment, to break the rules and revert to stealing, to little jealousies and deception. More and more of them refuse to respect the collective's principles and procedures, preferring to fight and assault people in their houses. No one knows what to expect from these gangs; children are wild, difficult, problematical, able to kill even at the age of four. Emily and Gerald doubt they can handle the crisis of the collective once more. The situation seems to have worsened; the only means of survival tallies with leaving the city and trying to begin a new life somewhere else.

The novel thus prepares for its ending. The new family, made by the narrator, Emily, Hugo and Gerald, escapes reality and the mechanized Western culture and enters an imagined landscape. They all walk through the walls into another reality, which we may deduce is a better world and is beyond history. Their salvation is finally accomplished. The book ends with a visionary departure from, and transcendence of, deteriorating history. The narrator, Emily, Gerald and Hugo together cross the threshold separating the imagined from the actual world. "It all came to an end" the narrator finally tells us, paradoxically suggesting the possibility of renewal and continuity. Also Burgess invites the readers of *The End of the World News* to consider the unrealistic prospect of a new generation and civilisation after the end of the world which lives and spreads into the space. His novel is a parody of the end of history and the end of literature; the author suggests that narrative can survive the ending of history in many forms and he uses three of them to write his book (as we will see, the libretto, the novel ripe for a television series, and science fiction). Connor maintains that Burgess's book "attempts to put the condition of the ending of history at the disposal of narrative".¹⁶⁰ *The End of the World News* explores the idea of survival beyond a cataclysm in order to focus on the relations between narrative, endings and history.

Burgess plays with the form of the novel in a postmodern way; he avails himself of three different genres and creates three tales which are cut, fragmented and interweaved during the narration. He combines a story on apocalypse and the need to colonise the hyperspace with the ups and downs of life of two historical characters, such as Sigmund Freud and Leon Trotsky. Burgess opts for science fiction for his end of the world tale, which is set in the future around the year 2000 and is finally revealed to be the link to the other two narratives; he resorts to the novel form resembling the script for a television series

¹⁶⁰ Steven Connor, op. cit., p. 213.

for Freud's memories and thoughts; and to the libretto for the record of Trotsky's journey to New York in 1917. There is no chronological order with which his three stories are assembled and they are continuously intermixed: the book is not divided into chapters, there are no breaks. The three largely independent narratives do not come together before its very end: the reader learns of their connection only in the last pages of the book. Burgess claims that the stories "are all the same story: they are all about the end of history as man has known it". Yet, the stories are not all the same: they involve diverse subjects and are written in different forms. Burgess engages himself with literature, psychoanalysis, politics and science fiction. The Freud story is a fragmented biography, dealing with the genesis of psychoanalysis and the ways the mind affects the body (and vice versa); the Trotsky's section is about his stay in New York and the coming Russian Revolution; the third account is that of an imminent extinction while many political and scientific associations in the world are busy building space shuttles which can escape the end of the world on earth and travel into space for indefinite time. During the narrative, the three randomly intermingle; what they share is the feeling of ending, they are all dreams about ending, about changes, about old worlds that are disappearing.

The practice of representing the end of the world is not a recent one: writers have built ends by exaggerating current situations, by taking them to their logical extremes. In *A History of the END of the World*, Rubinsky and Wiseman provide two examples of novels about the end of the world coming from the nineteenth century: *The Last Man* (1826), written by Mary Shelley, is a story of a great plague that annihilated nearly the human race, and *The Time Machine* (1895), written by H. G. Wells, is a short novel about a traveller into the future that finds that the earth has stopped spinning and evolution has gone in reverse.¹⁶¹ The end of the world is the great theme of science fiction; both Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor* and Burgess's *The End of the World News* at some point belong to this genre. In his novel, Burgess plays with metafiction by including a university class on science fiction and the students' discussion on the topic of writing about the end of the world. The task of science fiction is that to prepare people about what could happen in the future, to make predictions, to make the future in the present. Not by chance, the protagonist of Burgess's science fiction story, Valentine Brodie, is himself a writer of science fiction. Valentine's first novel is about the end of the world and ironically functions as a draft for the political

¹⁶¹ Cf. Yuri Rubinsky and Ian Wiseman, *A History of the END of the World*, New York: William Morrow and Company, 1982, pp. 139-140.

and scientific project on which Burgess's narrative is based. Valentine's book is examined during his university seminar on science fiction: his students blame his story for lacking any closure, for ending without saying what the form of the end of the world is, for only claiming indeed that nobody expected it to be that way. According to Valentine, anyone can interpret the end with his own imagination. Since every kind of end of the world has been thought, Valentine prefers to leave it to the fantasy of his readers. He talks about science fiction not only with his students, but also with his wife. Being an expert of the field, he explains that the end of the world is a banal, frequent topic of the genre and that if the story does not end in a total hecatomb, people build a kind of Noah's Ark for a few elected, who are deemed to be the best representatives of humankind and are charged with the species preservation. After some time travelling into the space, the modern ark will find a new planet where to settle down.¹⁶² Valentine's description of the rules of science fiction constitutes a prediction for the development of Burgess's story: a spaceship will be built and launched into the space, and a group of fifty scientists will be the heirs of the end of the world and the beginners of a new one.

The purpose and the title of the novel are explained in the prologue by the fictionalised editor John Wilson. Wilson claims to be the author's dearest friend in charge of the manuscript and of its publication. He explains the structure of the novel and argues that, despite the heterogeneity of its contents, it was intended as a single work. The book includes the most important discoveries of modernity, i.e. sexual impulses within the unconscious, the possibility of a worldwide socialism and cosmic journeys. The title comes from the formula used by BBC World Service newsreaders: "That is the end of the World News". Wilson focuses on the ambivalence of its interpretation: the title means both the end of the world news, like the expression from which it comes, and the news about the end of the world. So, the novel both concerns the end of the world and also gives some news about it. Burgess suggests that, after the end of the world, it is still possible to find some surviving principle of newness. Connor observes that Burgess dramatises the end of the world by a return to history to reveal the ways in which the principles of apocalypse and annihilation of the past are themselves generative principles.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Anthony Burgess, *The End of the World News: An Entertainment*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984, p. 82.

¹⁶³ Steven Connor, op. cit., p. 217.

Burgess narrates the survival of the ending, and the survival of narrative, by showing the ways in which history is made up of endings.¹⁶⁴

The novel opens with History: it is March 1938 and Nazi Germany annexes Austria in the *Anschluss*. Because of violent outbursts of anti-Semitism in Vienna and some visits from the Gestapo at their home, Sigmund Freud and his family decide to abandon the city and, at Ernest Jones's invitation, they accept to go to London. In June, they leave Vienna aboard the Orient Express train, to stop first in Paris and finally reaching London. Freud's tale of his last years of life and career includes his own description and meditation on his relationships with his wife Martha and daughter Anna, his mother Amalia, and his supporters, among which his friend and rival Carl Jung. Freud remembers episodes of his own life and that of psychoanalysis so that most of his story is rendered through retrospect. He recalls some of his patients' cases and his solutions for their neuroses. During all his life, he obsessively smokes cigars and does not give up even when he is told to have a cancer at his jaw. He is operated several times and hears the cancer talking to him, convincing himself that it is the body's revenge on the mind. The section dedicated to his biography ends with his death and the image and voice of his mother calling him.

The second and most extensive story presented in the novel is not set in the past, but in the future: starting just before the impact of the giant meteor Lynx with the Earth, it records apocalypse and the life after the end of the world. Unlike Lessing's novel, here the end of the world comes because of a natural cataclysm, a catastrophic collision. Scientists maintain that following a period of earthquakes and seaquakes, Lynx will come into collision with the Earth. The final clash will mark the end of the historical man: people will then start things again, from the very beginning, like after the Deluge.¹⁶⁵ The scientific idea that can prevent the disappearance of humankind is the creation of a self-sufficient spaceship containing a microcosm, a nation in miniature, which can travel for centuries, and even millenaries if necessary, into the space. The science fiction story focuses on the project of the space shuttle *America*, an Ark which does not land at Ararat, but is destined to an endless cruise into the space. The American scientist Frame with the help of his daughter Vanessa has planned the way for fifty selected people to survive into the space aboard the space shuttle. Aware of the imminent cataclysm, Frame wishes civilization not to perish and works with application for the creation of the *America*. The spacecraft will move towards

¹⁶⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁵ Anthony Burgess, op. cit., p. 97.

Jupiter and then towards the cosmic hyperspace, laden with the fittest people to create a new generation and instruct children, until the landing on a new planet and a new beginning for humankind will be possible.

Vanessa Frame and her father look for the best parameters for the choice of the people to embark on the spacecraft, which are knowledge, competence and intelligence, and they opt for the same number of men and women for the creation of a new human race who has never known the earth.¹⁶⁶ Vanessa is a very clever scientist and beautiful woman, married to Valentine Brodie, the university teacher and science-fiction writer to whom I previously referred. Vanessa is one of the fifty people selected for the project and asks her father to include also her husband, even if he is not a scientist. Valentine thinks not to be adapt and qualified to leave the earth and be saved from the end of the world. He does not want to be cut in on the deal and prefers spending the final days of the earth drinking together with his friend Courtland Willett. Valentine does not believe in the *America* project and does not want the kind of civilisation chosen by his wife and father-in-law to survive.¹⁶⁷ He believes that humankind is imperfect and thus rejects a rational and faultless model. Willett agrees with Valentine, claiming that nobody should be able to answer the question of who can enter the shuttle and escape the end and who cannot. Vanessa tries to convince her husband to leave with her and be saved from the end of the world; she explains to him that the role he can hold on the spaceship is that of archivist, historian and chronicler of the last days of the world and of their mission into the space. She believes the project is the only possible way to salvage a civilization and never thinks of it in terms of an hypocritical way to save only a few selected and privileged lives.

Some hours before the Frames' departure to the scientific and technological centre in Kansas, where the construction of the spaceship is to be finished, Valentine goes out drinking at the Jack's Tavern and never returns home. At his usual pub, he meets his half English and half Dutch friend Willett, who works as an actor and occasionally plays Falstaff. Willett is ten years older than Valentine and Burgess depicts him like a comic, honest and sensitive character to whom Valentine can confess that he does not want to take part to the *America* project, but wants to stay on the earth. After a brawl between some customers breaking out in the bar, the two friends are involved and arrested: Valentine thus misses the plane to Kansas. Vanessa's father, who feels antipathy towards his son-in-law and deems

¹⁶⁶ As we have seen, the theme of a personalised principle of "natural selection" is recurrent in Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989).

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Anthony Burgess, op. cit., p. 186.

that he is not the right man for his daughter and for the new generation into the space, convinces Vanessa that Valentine is dead. Hence, Vanessa and her father fly to the scientific base, where the other chosen people are waiting for instructions. Vanessa's father dies when the spaceship *America* is ready, confessing the failure of his project about the creation of a perfect humankind into the space and his lie about Valentine's death. Surrounded by environmental catastrophe, Valentine and Willett fight to survive and move from a place to another, in order not to be drowned by exceptional high tides. They finally try to reach the base in Kansas and get aboard the spaceship before it takes off.

The third story within *The End of the World News* is about Leon Trotsky's journey to New York shortly before the Russian Revolution of 1917 and is written as the libretto of a Hollywood musical, complete with songs and lyrics. This section provides an implicit critique of both capitalism and communism. Trotsky arrives in New York in January 1917 and stays there for nearly three months. At the editorial office of the Russian magazine *Novy Mir*, meaning "New World", he meets the editorial staff made by Chudnorsky, Volodarsky and Bokharin and starts working with them. He stirs the American proletariat not to take part in the First World War, explaining that it is a war between rival capitalistic systems, and that the only right war in which it is worth fighting is the class struggle.¹⁶⁸ Trotsky firmly believes that the course of history must be shaped by people and aims at building a fair and impartial society; he blames capitalism and American wealthiness, observing that some poor workers are starving. Olga, the woman he meets at the editorial office and of whom he falls in love, is a socialist who rejects violence and believes Trotsky's real motivation is power, not an altruistic desire as he maintains. She observes that he will be the leader of the proletariat until the moment it will enjoy the self-government.

Despite their different political perspectives and several arguments, Olga and Trotsky finally become friends. Olga incites him to leave New York and go to Mexico because he is wanted in Russia, under investigation for betrayal. He does not listen to her and thus ends to be arrested by Sasha, a man working as a Russian spy at the editorial office. But the February Revolution has already started and has overthrown Tsar Nicholas II: therefore, Trotsky is released and supposed to become one of the leaders of the Russian new order. In one of the last passages dedicated to this story, Trotsky talks about the end of history: he is speaking to his eleven years-old son, Seryzha, explaining that the proletarian struggle against the capitalistic system puts an end to the course of history. This struggle is

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 150.

the last synthesis which makes it possible to establish a society without class divisions and lets history get its goal. There remains nothing else to do.¹⁶⁹ Burgess seems to disagree with an optimistic vision of the end of history, reaching the best of the possible political systems. He rather depicts it as part of a historical continuum: the end of the world is an event included within history. What happens after the end? The author infers that the world is renewed: a new system and order follow the old one.

Throughout the novel, besides the question of ending, Burgess focuses on human desire for power. Each of the three subplots deals with the problem of holding power at crucial moments in history: Freud is at the head of the psychoanalytic society in Vienna and things get very complicated when he presents the Swiss Carl Jung as his successor to the group of his followers; Trotsky is the leader of a new political system wishing to become one of the heroes of Russian history; and the scientist Bartlett directs the *America* project but loses control of his power and reason and becomes a tyrant. As Connor notices, “all three of the narratives in the book contain a version of the powerful leader and all present versions of the attempt to take hold of and control the fact of ending”.¹⁷⁰ Freud envisions the beginning of a new era for the study of mental disorder and the development and diffusion of psychoanalysis; Trotsky claims that history has attended his goal and welcomes the end of its course; and Bartlett, the God-scientist, firmly believes to incarnate humankind and to be the means for its survival, yet his ideal of civilization is paradoxically inhuman, lacking any sense of justice, sympathy, faithfulness and happiness. Bartlett thinks emotions, literature, art and music are nonsense, and that, without them, man will have the chance into the space to understand the nature of power. He assumes that a totalitarian period is necessary for a following era of eternal freedom, and that the end justifies the means.

The End of the World News' narrator speaks to a group of children who are those born on board the spaceship *America*, after the destruction of the Earth, after the end of the world. However, the reader learns it only in the last pages of the chronicle, when at the same time understands the way in which Freud's and Trotsky's biographies are enveloped in the science fiction story. The heart of Burgess's novel is a modern story of Noah's Ark, a theme which we have seen both in Winterson's *Boating for Beginners* and Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*. A group of American scientists take it upon themselves to do a list of the fittest fifty people to guarantee the survival of the species aboard a space shuttle.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 445.

¹⁷⁰ Steven Connor, op. cit., p. 214.

They assume the responsibility to decide who is to go and leave the rest to the exploding end, who is to start a new civilisation into the space. They choose the people for the space shuttle claiming to follow objective parameters only, but their selection, far from being natural, is arbitrarily artificial. They have the task to distinguish between pure and impure, good and bad qualities, virtues and vices, but something in their analysis goes wrong. Burgess argues that people who claim to know the truth and the best solution are those whom we must distrust. The leader of the spaceship project, Bartlett, imposes a fascist domination threatening to extinguish all the virtues of civilisation that should be preserved. One of the selected scientists for the *America* project, Nat Goya, is married and his wife is pregnant. Since one of the rules of the project is that married people are not welcome aboard the space shuttle, Nat wants to renounce to take part in the project and join his wife. Bartlett affirms it is impossible and that Nat cannot leave them; when Nat tries to escape from the base, Bartlett disposes to follow, capture and kill him. He establishes a totalitarian regime in order to realize his rational project. Despite his initial presentation like a perfect man, very clever, healthy and with no vices, the author implies that we should not trust Bartlett and people like him, because they finally reveal themselves to be cruel and very dangerous. Bartlett's aim is to create a race at any cost, the race of the future, and his efficiency is finally imposed with tyranny. The author suggests that even gifted and rational scientists are not the fittest to decide: a perfect world does not exist and a purified breed makes no sense. Humanity is flawed at its core and along the course of history proves not to improve but to remain flawed.

In all the three stories, history does not progress, but falls back into imperfection. However, as Swift's, Barnes's and Lessing's above-analysed novels show, the course of history stops only to start then again. In his three tales, Burgess deals with the epochal coming to an end of earlier ways of thinking and being, and shows how new solutions and possibilities are in store. He puts forward the reversibility of beginnings and ends, and meditates on the equivalence between the beginning of finality and the finality of every new beginning.¹⁷¹ He uses and mixes different pasts and, in doing so, he alludes to contemporary world and its possibility of having so much history simultaneously and unresponsively available for consumption and amalgamation. The multiple, instantaneous culture of contemporary world works to flatten and homogenise history. The children who listen to the whole story are indifferent and believe history has no force, since their present state is all

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 214.

there is. They belong to a generation born in a space shuttle and have never known things different from those they do: they are unable to distinguish between History and stories, they believe History is a Myth.¹⁷² They are told about a journey to go somewhere, but they do not interrogate themselves about their destination, because for them the journey itself is the only possible circumstance. History is finally flattened in a perpetual present and the children of the spaceship think it is impossible that long ago there existed something different from what they experience now. The past is so distant that appears fictional; the hyperspace exists beyond history. The present is all that they have and all that they believe in, the rest is a fairytale. Burgess shows that the world comes to an end in a flattening of history and survives in the condition of forgetfulness aboard the ship.

The ploy Burgess uses to connect the three stories is that of some records that Willett gives to Valentine to bring into the space: the tapes are of the Freud's memoirs and the musical about Trotsky. Genuine Willett refuses to mount aboard the *America* and thus leaves his friend offering a summing up of the most serious concerns of the human race: the nature of the mind and soul, and the question of the best form of government. In the last pages of the book, the reader learns that the narrator of the stories on Freud and Trotsky is Willett, who reads their biographies and records his voice on a tape to finally hand it to Valentine and the ones who survive. Valentine and Vanessa think it would be better to leave the tapes behind, abandon them like the other evidence of the past since they strive for a new culture fitting the new conditions of humanity.¹⁷³ Witnessing the extinction of the planet, people aboard the spaceship make a toast to their health and their endless future, not to the dying past that they are going to forget. Nonetheless, Burgess claims that to forget history is very dangerous: the end of the novel ironically refers to Valentine's and Vanessa's descendant, Maria Brodie, who asks her teacher to know more about the myth of the bad man called Fred Fraud, who fastened people to his couch, and the good man called Trot Sky, who wanted people to follow him and run into the space.¹⁷⁴ Characters and episodes of history have become confused, juxtaposed, and misunderstood. History has become a fairy tale which changes any time it gets retold.

Valentine O' Grady, the history teacher on the space shuttle, tries to convince his pupils that past, origins and history must be told and remembered - his ideas (and his

¹⁷² Anthony Burgess, op. cit., Epilogue.

¹⁷³ Steven Connor, op. cit., p. 215.

¹⁷⁴ Anthony Burgess, op. cit., Epilogue.

invitation to the children of the *America*) seem to be the starting point for the storytelling of Swift's character, Tom Crick, in *Waterland* (1983). The shared message of the two novels is that, in order to understand who we are now and the world we live in, we have to go back to who our forefathers were and how the world, which they built and then destroyed, looked like. Aboard the *America*, the end of the world occurs in indifference and forgetfulness, but there is still who, like Valentine O' Grady, wants to recur to storytelling in a survival and revival of history.

I have already noticed how it turns out to be indispensable for contemporary writers to deal with history and its storytelling; the last novel I here analyse is Amis's *Time's Arrow*, which offers a particular example and treatment of these two subjects. Martin Amis is a postmodern writer who engages himself with the depiction of contemporary society and with what Jameson defines 'the cultural logic of late capitalism'. He belongs to a younger generation than that of Burgess (born in 1917) and Lessing (born in 1919). Considering himself a writer grown up in the shadow of the Holocaust, he believes that such an episode stands at the origin of contemporary society and is a great burden on human shoulders. According to Amis, Hitler is the evidence that we are living in the aftermath of disaster.¹⁷⁵ The end of history should have already come, but there might be worse in the store. Not only does Amis see himself as representative of those who came soon after the Holocaust and perceived that sense of an indelible shame, but also of that generation who experienced the threat of nuclear annihilation. These two conditions have influenced his fiction and made him delve into the three dimensions of past, present and future. The collection of short stories *Einstein's Monsters* (1987) and the novel *London Fields* (1989) focus on a nuclear holocaust that threatens postwar civilization. *London Fields*, in particular, is ridden with references to the threat of nuclear apocalypse; yet, the fictional nuclear disaster foretold for New Year's Eve in 1999 does not finally occur. The novel I here consider, *Time's Arrow* (1991), is not set in the future, but still deals with the apocalypse, with the past years of the Second World War and the Holocaust. It provides another example of contemporary fiction showing that modernity led civilization to self-destruction. The book indicates that the origins of the West's drive to implode lie in the Holocaust. History is the subject of the novel and the end of history is the source for its beginning. Amis puts forward an inverted world: life begins when it ends and death coincides with a second birth.

¹⁷⁵ Gavin Keulks, *Martin Amis: Postmodernism and Beyond*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006, p. 101.

While in *London Fields* Amis ponders on the grim future and the threat of nuclear disaster, in writing *Time's Arrow* Amis expresses the postmodern concern with history and its narrative construction. Although our idea of history and our approach to it have definitely changed over the last century, the writer still engages himself with the representation of the past and the possibility to deal with its worst episodes stamped in our memory. In order to do so, Amis recurs to a ploy: in the narrative, the arrow of time, which is that of the title, is reversed. History does not proceed, it goes backwards. Amis uses a retrospective tendency to face a violent and troubled history: asking himself how to represent the evil of the Holocaust, he opts for an escape from the past's wrongdoing, an attempt at redemption, by depicting the Holocaust in reverse. James Diedrick defines the novel 'a poetic undoing of the Holocaust, all the more poignant for the reader's knowledge that it can never be undone'.¹⁷⁶ Amis's notion of redemption tallies with an undoing, with a return to zero. He writes on the assumption that the horror of the Holocaust would be undone only if the course of history could be inverted. The sequence of past, present and future does not make any sense; there is no progress, so Amis presents it by turning it round. History inscribes itself in the novel at the level of form as much as of theme. The novel offers an exploration of both history and chronology; the past is reworked as fiction. The dimension of time is shattered, its continuity is broken: throughout the novel, time is running backwards.

In *Time's Arrow*, the story is that of a Nazi doctor's life: it starts from his death and old age in America, returns to wartime work in Auschwitz and finally moves towards his birth in Solingen, Germany.¹⁷⁷ The novel traces the steps of Tod Friendly's life backwards, tragically revealing his participation in the horror of Auschwitz, where he worked in the medical section during the Second World War and from which he fled to America after it. The reader is asked to understand the reversed logic of the text and its backward process, while taking part in the narrator's reconstruction of the protagonist's past. Amis's novel requires its reader to be an active co-creator of meaning rather than a passive consumer; while reading the text, we have to interpret it. The narrator, describing himself like a 'parasite' or a 'passenger', is not Tod Friendly, but his double, probably his consciousness or his soul, who witnesses Tod's activities but has no power to influence his decisions. The *doppelgänger* remembers Tod's future and has only glimpses in dreams of his past, because,

¹⁷⁶ James Diedrick, op. cit., p. 134.

¹⁷⁷ The narrator observes that Solingen is also the home town of Adolf Eichmann, the infamous Gestapo overseer responsible for deporting and then murdering Jews at concentration camps.

after the war, the Nazi doctor attempted in many ways to erase his past. For his double experiencing his life backwards, it is difficult to reconstruct it: Tod moved from one country to another and took on different names and identity, desperately trying not to be recognised. Finally, he wishes to die in anonymity, but Amis does not make it possible. The past must be recalled and revisited; therefore, at the moment of Tod's death, his double comes into existence in order to relive all his life in reverse, from America to Europe, from old age to childhood, from death to birth, and in order to make us witnesses.

Throughout the narration, the doctor of torture is given many names: born 'Odilo Unverdorben' (the surname is a German word meaning uncorrupted, innocent) in Germany, he becomes 'Hamilton de Souza' in Portugal, 'John Young' in New York City and 'Tod Friendly' on his last days in New England. The last alias in the doctor's life (but the first with which Amis introduces his protagonist) is very significant: if we read even the name in reverse it sounds as 'friendly death', since 'Tod' is the German word for death. Instead of curing and healing, in the inverted world of *Time's Arrow* the doctor gives death, as his name suggests. The chronological reconstruction of his life is the following: born Odilo Unverdorben in 1916 in Solingen, he lost his father when he was a baby and was raised by his mother, a nurse who aroused his early interest in medicine. He entered medical school and after graduation he went to work at Schloss Hartheim¹⁷⁸, where Nazi doctors experimented with various means of medical killing. He married a young secretary, Herta, and they had a baby who soon after died. After helping the SS to force the Jews into ghettos, he moved to Auschwitz in 1942. Here he worked under Josef Mengele, who is called 'uncle Pepi' in the book, killing inmates with injections of phenol and performing other gruesome experiments. In the meanwhile, his wife wrote him letters questioning his actions and asserting that he had become a stranger to her. They finally separated, but Odilo seemed not to suffer from it, as he was busy with, and devoted to, his work. His precept was "you do what you do best, not what is best to do". By 1944, Odilo assisted the mass exterminations by inserting pellets of Zyklon B into the gas chambers; he was helping killing the Hungarian Jews, 'at an incredible rate, something like 10,000 a day'.¹⁷⁹ Before the Russian troops arrived, he flew to escape prosecution, first to the Vatican, then to Portugal in 1946, and

¹⁷⁸ In those years Schloss Hartheim was a Nazi "Euthanasia" killing centre where physically and mentally handicapped people were killed by gassing and lethal injection.

¹⁷⁹ Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow*, London: Vintage Random House, 2003, p. 137.

finally to America in 1948. He worked for more than ten years as a surgeon in a New York hospital, and then was compelled to flee New York and change identity because of the accusations against him. He eventually worked at a Health Maintenance Organization in an American suburb somewhere in New England, where he died from a car accident, old and remorseful.

Amis inverts ordinary logic, the relationship between cause and effect, between before and then. The narrator thus misinterprets events in a world that has no sense. “This is a world of mistakes”¹⁸⁰, he claims: people become younger and healthier; when they move and travel, they look where they have come from, not where they are going; they regret doing things they have not done yet; refuse collectors arrive every morning to dispense trash and every night pimps give their call girls plenty of cash; gas gets cheaper and cheaper, while cars become slower and less efficient. Tod takes smile and toys from children on the street, money from the Church bowl on Sundays. His work at the hospital is shocking and horrifying; the hospital itself is “an atrocity-producing situation”, from where patients are sent away in worse shape than when they arrived and, in return, are rewarded with money. The narrator does not know history and thus fails to understand the irony of the replay of Tod’s life. His experience coincides with what he himself calls ‘a terrible journey, towards a terrible secret’.¹⁸¹ He wonders what the sequence of his journey is and what its rules are; at some point, he realizes that chronology is inverted:

It goes like this. After October 2, you get October 1. After October 1, you get September 30. How do you figure that? [...] It just seems to me that the film is running backwards.¹⁸²

Yet, he does not comprehend what the logical consequences of such an inversion are; he feels that Tod’s secret has to do with a central mistake about human bodies, but, ignoring history, he is not able to foretell what it is.

I don’t know where we’re going: our ticket bears the name of our starting-point, not our destination.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 71.

The protagonist's secret is revealed in the second part of the novel, which is the only one to make sense in the reversed account of facts:

He is travelling towards his secret. Parasite or passenger, I am travelling there with him. It will be bad. It will be bad, and not intelligible. But I will know one thing about it (and at least the certainty brings comfort): I *will* know *how* bad the secret is. I will know the nature of the offence. Already I know this. I know that it is to do with trash and shit, and that it is wrong in time.¹⁸⁴

Time will tell, and I put trust in time, absolutely.¹⁸⁵

Although Tod Friendly has spent the war years as a doctor of torture at Auschwitz, the Auschwitz section opens with the narrator's paradoxical words: "the world is going to start making sense...".¹⁸⁶ The journey backwards into history offers us the possibility to experience the crazy logic of an upside-down world, where temporality, rationality and causality do not exist. This kind of world ironically starts making sense only in the Auschwitz section of the book. The novel inverts the relationship between good and evil by presenting events the wrong way round. Therefore, in a fictional world where the arrow of time does not fly point-first, the perverted logic of the death camp is suggestively described as the only one to make sense. Throughout the novel, doctors mutilate and destroy people's bodies, but at Auschwitz they heal and create them, performing apparent acts of resuscitation. The Nazi doctor is not a mass murderer but a healer, who in the past had to be cruel to be kind now. Patients are brought back to life and health, the ashes of Jews are converted into whole humans, wounds are healed, the ghettos are dismantled, Jews are provided with clothes, gold and money, and sent to freedom. The Holocaust is paradoxically presented as altruistic:

Our preternatural purpose? To dream a race. To make a people from the weather. From thunder and lightening. With gas, with electricity, with shit, with fire.¹⁸⁷

The atrocious extinguishing of a race is rendered in celebratory terms as the creation of a people.

Instead of following a teleological course, history has led to barbarity and destruction, and has finally stopped in nonsense. The Holocaust is the most illogical event

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 72-73.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 128.

of the twentieth century: Amis takes it at the centre of his investigation on how to represent the past and deal with history. “Time’s arrow moves the other way”¹⁸⁸, because only in a completely upside-down, backward world, Auschwitz facts become comprehensible. Amis’s manipulation of time enables us to face the unbearable, to grasp the unthinkable. He has already used the device of time reversal in two stories of *Einstein’s Monsters*: in “The Time Disease”, he playfully swapped age and youth around; in “Bujak and the Strong Force” he ended the story with an extended epiphany of reversals, murder victims born again in blood, adults shrinking until they fold into their mothers.¹⁸⁹ However, in *Time’s Arrow* the use is extreme: dialogue, narrative and explanation are inverted. The narrator hears reversed speech and conversations begin with the last uttered words and end with the first ones; his descriptions of eating, drinking, love-making are in reverse. His upside down account and perspective allow the writer to include obscene logic and horrific events, and to come to terms with awfulness. On the one hand, Amis’s technique is a way to focus on absurdity and irrationality of the Holocaust, of a place where there is no why; on the other hand, it is a means to imply the danger of ignoring, abandoning, or forgetting history. Far from being a playful parody of history, the novel aims at conveying a moral message.

Time’s Arrow deals with the theme of responsibility and the need for moral vision. Wondering about the way a writer may relate the atrocities in concentration camps creating a world of fiction, Amis chooses the Nazi doctor’s participation in the death camps as the subject for his novel and employs the narrative technique of temporal reversal to describe it. Confronting the horror of the past, Amis claims his need as a writer for morals. He faces the problem of how to write about incomprehensible terror and suffering at Auschwitz, and aims at dealing with the Holocaust without risking to aestheticise it. Therefore, he rejects a realistic representation of historical events - his postmodern solution is to revisit the past with bitter irony, using an unreliable narrator and the technique of temporal reversal. Forcing the reader to experience time passing in reverse, Amis attempts to make sense of a world that does not make any, conveying the message that the only way to ‘comprehend’ the Holocaust is by looking at it backwards.

Far from inferring that events in the past never happened, Amis calls for a serious concern with history, which figures as collective trauma that needs to be acknowledged and worked through. The end of the novel tallies with the narrator’s death and the doctor’s birth,

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁸⁹ Odilo Unverdorben will crawl into his mother’s womb and be killed by his father’s body.

suggesting that the course of history will start again and unfortunately the other way round. It is a moment of reflection on what occurred in the past and on our duty to face and recall it. Keulks observes that Amis rejects closure because the narrative of the Holocaust should never be forgotten, but endlessly retold. Readers are not released in the final paragraph, because

the narrative condemns them to share with the narrator an endless oscillation between past and present, incorporating the past into our sense of modernity.¹⁹⁰

Despite any attempt to play with its meaning and construction, despite any question about its truth and significance, all postmodern writers dealing with history leave us with the message that we can never manage without it. The reconstruction of the past might be difficult and uncertain; yet, we cannot renounce it because the past is an integral part of modern experience. We need history to understand who we are, what we can do and what we do not have to do, and if this is the end, let us ask how its rebirth will look like.

¹⁹⁰ Gavin Keulks, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

Chapter Four

A Question of Roots and a Way to Multiculturalism

- 4.1 National History and Individual Fate in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*
- 4.2 Englishness, Tradition and Hybrid Identities in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Andrea Levy's *Small Island*

4.1 National History and Individual Fate in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

What direction can postmodern writers take after the deconstruction of grand narratives, and that of History in particular? On the postmodern assumption that absolute truth is impossible to reach and to affirm, and that one unified historical viewpoint with a unity of meaning has disintegrated, what can function as a point of reference for the individual? We have already noticed that dominant official history is jettisoned in favour of individual and personalised history; postmodern literature claims the need for a new way of looking at older historical forms and deals with history by presenting not a History but many little stories. Postmodern writers undermine conventional forms of history, narrative and truth, and focus on the local, on individual experience and personal histories; they produce a multiplication of different kind of histories in a range of different forms. Whereas contemporary culture moves into an era of multiplicity, plurality and many truths (instead of a single and absolute truth), the writers I examine here illustrate that postmodern condition is premised on the acceptance of such plurality of cultures and discourses. Postmodern novels pose questions about myth and culture, truth and reality, about the blurring of fiction and history, and the inescapability of the past. The novels I analyse in this chapter, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004), show the effects of history on a particular people and focus on the ways in which origins and tradition shape human existence.

The insistence on, and obsession with, history in postmodern English novels stemmed from the fact that, in the post-war era, "Britain seemed progressively to lose possession of its own history" together with "its confident belief that it was the subject of its own history".¹ After the Second World War, the process of mass migration towards the United Kingdom achieved its peak; whereas the countries that once made up the British Empire gradually gained independence, Britain started dealing with the ethnic question and the consequent re-elaboration of the concept of identity and nationhood. The idea of what Englishness meant came apart, and instead the concepts of cultural hybridity and

¹ Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History: 1950-1995*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 3.

multicultural identities stood out. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* focuses on India's transition from British colonialism to independence; yet, the interest is not so much in Indian history itself, rather in the relationship between official history and personal story, and in the way cultural memory links the individual to her/his own origins and tradition. The meditation on the past is a process of redefinition of identity as well as of historical revision; the protagonist of Rushdie's novel looks for a sort of meaning by linking his own history to that of the nation: the construction of his personal identity is placed side by side to the creation of post-independence Indian society. The novel's central metaphor is the fusion of the protagonist's individual body with the Indian subcontinent and his personal biography with its political history.² Rushdie ponders on the controversial relationship between private and collective history, and on the ways in which individuals perceive and revise history in search for their own cultural identity. *White Teeth* and *Small Island* tackle the problem of cultural differences, mass migration and integration in Britain, showing how the meaning of British identity is revised in a multicultural society, which has been transformed by historical changes. Both Smith's and Levy's novels meditate on the profound changes that have taken place in what it means to be English and help deconstruct and re-build the value of being English and living in contemporary Britain.

Rushdie's work aims at investigating the role of the writer as a public historian, dealing with the fictional representation of national histories. Among his novels, *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* (1983) are the most valid examples of Rushdie's "political fictionalization of history"³, of his questioning national histories, and shattering the false unanimity of a simple, unique national voice and literature. Both his novels focus on the difficulties of gaining reliable knowledge of the past and on the limitations of any given account of the past. Both the difficulty of knowing the past with any reliability, and the author's constant drawing attention on historical uncertainty, discontinuity and confusion, are a common theme in English historiographic metafiction.⁴ Rushdie deals with cultural, literary and socio-political history by exploring notions of time, writing, and history itself; his work is based on the refusal of any single, immutable construction of the world (i.e. of any metanarrative). Through storytelling, he engages himself with a revision of history and brings into relation the traditions of both colonizer and colonized. Whereas *Midnight's*

² Cf. Jean M. Kane, "The Migrant Intellectual and the Body of History: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*", *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, volume 37, 1996, p. 95.

³ Cf. Patricia Waugh, *The Harvest of the Sixties*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 51.

⁴ See the analysis of Graham Swift's and Julian Barnes's novels in previous chapter.

Children mainly focuses on India and the story of its nation-building following the gained independence from Britain, *Shame* is concerned with the political history of Pakistan and its nation-building, by including two historical Pakistani characters such as the Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who is fictionalised as Iskander Harappa, and the General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, fictionalised as General Raza Hyder. Both the novels use the family history as a metaphor for the country; they are both written between the folds of history and imagination, and in both the texts personal history intersects with political history.⁵ Rushdie's writing does not seek to represent the social past as a knowable totality, he rather presents his fiction as an unburied possibility of the historical account. In his work, history proves to be superabundant; it never ends, it is prolific: indeed, Rushdie's novels continually demonstrate the excess and the multiplicity of history. Like literature and culture, history is something shifting and multiple; for Rushdie, the problem of history lies in its omnipresence and bewildering multiplicity.⁶

Midnight's Children is the result of Rushdie's journey to India in 1975 and, in general, of the shards of his memories on India; it is also a product of its history and time.⁷ The novel was begun during the period called 'the Emergency', when the prime minister Indira Gandhi suspended political opposition, and it was finished in mid-1979, though its publication came almost two years later, in 1981. *Midnight's Children* is the conjunction of the fictional story of the narrator-protagonist Saleem Sinai and his account of Indian history from 1915 to 1978: indeed, the narrative spans over more than sixty years, from the time before the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, is born (he relates two generations of family history before he reaches the events of his life) until he is thirty years old (and he is literally decomposing). The narrator Saleem, who is turning thirty-one, is going to marry and says he is nearing death; therefore, he decides to record both the story of his family and that of India, before everything is forgotten. The two stories intersect as he is inscribed into the fate of the subcontinent: his autobiography merges with India's history. In the first page of the novel, the narrator claims: "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country". This is because he was born precisely at the

⁵ Also in *The Satanic Verses* (1988), historical reference is interwoven with imagination throughout the text; here Rushdie presents a distorted fantasy of the history of Islam which caused him the fatwa, a decree calling for death of Rushdie, by the Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of Iran, in 1989.

⁶ Cf. Jago Morrison, *Contemporary Fiction*, London: Routledge, 2003, 9, "Imagining Nations: Salman Rushdie's Counter-histories", pp.133-154.

⁷ In the 'Introduction' to his novel, Rushdie explains he conceived it after "having drunk deeply from the well of India", and that, like all his novels, it is touched and shaped by its time. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, London: Vintage, 2006, pp. IX; XVII.

stroke of midnight, on 15th August 1947 – the exact date that history records as marking India’s arrival at independence. Saleem being handcuffed to history is the first of many suggestions, which we find throughout the novel, that the individual is intertwined with the threads of history. Saleem is - metonymically - the new nation and, therefore, he defines himself by his relation to India’s history. Rushdie plays with the idea that all the major events in his protagonist’s life correspond to important political events in Indian history:

National events had a direct bearing upon the lives of myself and my family.
[...] My private existence was shown to be symbolically at one with history.⁸

Rushdie describes his character’s story and Indian history as one only, because Saleem embodies the history of the subcontinent, and interrogates the pathway of large-scale political history in the improbable incidents of his protagonist.

Saleem’s body undergoes transformations and operations in correspondence with the fate of the nation: in this way, Rushdie ironically suggests that the individual and the historical fates are inseparable. Saleem is a physical embodiment of India; his face is depicted as a map of the nation: he has two birthmarks, which he describes as being on the west and east sides of his face, and a nose shaped like a cucumber. Saleem’s spots correspond to the locations of Pakistan and Bangladesh on the map of India; while his ever-running nose echoes the shape of the subcontinent, with Ceylon dripping from the end. While the nation is scarred by conflicts and its boundaries shift, Saleem’s body gradually splits and cracks, he loses a finger, then part of his scalp and hair. The workings of history become imprinted on his body, which literally somatizes the schisms and clashes following India’s independence. The novel focuses on History and its relationship with Saleem Sinai’s life, the Sinai family, and Indian people on the whole. Like Swift does in *Waterland*, Rushdie uses *Midnight’s Children’s* complex structure to display “how the patterns of history impact directly on the lives of individuals”.⁹ The Sinais’ saga epitomises the clash between History and individuals. The trials and tribulations of Saleem’s body and his family are inextricable intertwined with those of his country – the numerous births, labours and deaths in the book correspond exactly to major events in Indian history, like the Amritsar massacre, Independence Day itself, Indira Ghandi’s rise to and tenacious hold on power, her

⁸ Salman Rushdie, op. cit., p. 331.

⁹ Cf. Bran Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, cit., p. 125.

Emergency Rule and her trial. Saleem claims: “historical coincidences have littered, and perhaps befouled, my family’s existence in the world”.¹⁰

Midnight’s Children is an example of historiographic metafiction: it deals with history and the writing of that history, and challenges traditional belief about the reality of history and memory. Rushdie absorbs the genre of historical novel and concurrently offers a critique of it, stressing the difficulty of reconstructing history, of distinguishing fact from fiction, and of developing a complete and exhaustive account of the past. Rushdie’s conception of history is postmodern; he uses history and fiction exposing them to be alternative, each producing some meaning. Like Swift and Barnes, Rushdie does not provide his reader with easy answers to the problem of historical representation: history is the main subject of his novel, it is questioned as well as it becomes interrogative. History is a kind of storytelling and Saleem argues that his version of events is as valid as any other. The pretext that the narrative presumes is national history; among the historical events which the narrator mentions in the novel, there are included the 1919 massacre in the Jallianwalla Bagh in Amritsar, in the Punjab province of India (where Indians were shot by British soldiers); Indian independence on 15th August 1947 and the following tumultuous period; the division of India (a process known as Partition) into two separate countries (the Islamic nation of Pakistan and the secular, mostly Hindu nation of India), due to political and social tensions between Hindus and Muslims; the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965; the rule of Indira Priyadarshini Gandhi¹¹; and the so-called ‘State of Emergency’, which Indira proclaimed on 26th June 1975 and which lasted until the announcement of the general election of 21st March 1977.

Rushdie confronts official colonial history with cultural memory and oral Indian narratives; he presents an alternative way of accessing the truth of the past through his representation of the magical and irrational, and through Saleem’s storytelling, which depends upon Saleem’s subjective and partial memory and upon the stories he is told by the members of his family. Saleem is particularly influenced by the tales of his nanny, Mary Pereira, and by those which his grandfather, Aadam Aziz, heard from the old Tai, a

¹⁰ Salman Rushdie, op. cit., p. 28.

¹¹ Indira Gandhi was the prime minister of India from 1966 to 1977, then again from 1980 to 1984, a term that ended with her assassination by her Sikh bodyguards. She was the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister. In Rushdie’s novel, she is a fictional character called ‘the Widow’ – in reality she was the widow of Feroze Gandhi, an Indian journalist and politician. Saleem describes her as his destroyer and the responsible for the destruction of midnight’s children: thus Rushdie holds her accountable for eradicating the promise and hope of a new future for India.

Kashmiri boatman and oral storyteller. Throughout his narrative, Saleem continuously draws attention to the act of writing, inviting the reader to consider numerous possible alternatives to traditional records of historical truth. He is self-conscious and playful in the process by which he tries to come to terms with midnight children's personal and national histories as colonized people¹²; he avails himself of elements of fantasy in order to deal with the children's different, chaotic historical experiences.

Saleem judges twentieth-century Indian history with recourse to heterogeneous and plural ideas of the Indian nation, by focusing on the great subcontinent multitude. This India-idea is Rushdie's own: "my India has always been based on ideas of multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity".¹³ Indian culture is presented as made up of mixtures: it is hybrid because, in its development, it has been influenced by many other cultures. India, with which Saleem identifies himself, is many-headed, polyglot and multicultural. In order to survive, Saleem's (and Rushdie's) idea of the nation must be based on the concept of multiplicity and tolerance, on the coexistence of plurality and contradiction. Saleem acts as the vehicle of Indian nationality: he embodies the story of India by being born on the very moment of its independence; this momentous accident of birth befalls other 1000 children too, who are the midnight's children of Rushdie's title:

during the first hour of August 15th, 1947 – between midnight and one a.m. – no less than one thousand and one children were born within the frontiers of the infant sovereign state of India. [...] History, arriving at a point of the highest significance and promise, had chosen to sow, in that instant, the seeds of a future which would genuinely differ from anything the world had seen up to that time.¹⁴

In the novel, the midnight of August 15th symbolically becomes the occasion for the creation of a post-imperial identity for those who lived under the British Empire. In Saleem's imagination, the midnight's children represent the hope of the nation as it should be. Jago Morrison observes:

Rushdie's midnight's children, with their diversity of backgrounds, creeds and castes and their plethora of magic powers, represent the vast potential of the new India that was reborn free at midnight on 14th August 1947.¹⁵

¹² Cf. Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin, *Past the Last Post: Theorising Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991.

¹³ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, London: Granta, 1991, p. 32.

¹⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, cit., p. 271.

¹⁵ Jago Morrison, *Contemporary Fiction*, cit., p. 143.

The midnight's children come to embody the new India; they represent the birth of a multitude of ideas of freedom: "a thousand and one children were born; there were a thousand and one possibilities..."¹⁶. The political potential of Saleem's account lies in his re-imagining the *status quo* and retelling imperial history. The midnight's children incarnate the idea of heterogeneity; they represent the promise of a new model of India where difference reigns. Rushdie focuses on the individual's sense of relationship to the movement of history; "the children of midnight were also the children of *the time*: fathered by history".¹⁷ The novel attests to the inescapability of the past, which insistently insinuates itself into the present, and to the frayed boundary between fiction and history. By describing a new history of India through the parable of the midnight's children, Rushdie's novel tries to take all the facets of the great nation into account.

The novel represents a self-conscious meditation on the nature of memory, writing and identity. It is a tale of individual and national fragmentation, and portrays the struggle for identity that links personal life with national history. The protagonist strives to make sense of the chaotic events which surround him: his fate is caught up with that of his country by the very moment of his birth, when India became independent from British colonial rule. His autobiography mingles with national history; Saleem insists that national history is as often an allegory of his life as his life is an allegory of national history.¹⁸

How, in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of a nation? I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively.¹⁹

Throughout the novel, the protagonist questions official history and its being representative of a people or a culture.

In his writing, Saleem rejects linear narrative: he skips back and forth in time, refusing to adopt the cause and effect sequence. Yet, he struggles with a chronological view of history, passed on by the ruling British and now part of the Indian national consciousness. By using the genre of the historical novel, at the beginning Saleem is apparently supporting this conventional or traditional view of history; however, he subverts such a view in his

¹⁶ Salman Rushdie, op. cit., p. 278.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 159.

¹⁸ Neil Ten Kortenaar, *Self, Nation, Text in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children*, Québec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004, p. 31.

¹⁹ Salman Rushdie, op. cit., p. 330.

troubled struggle with his own story's form and structure.²⁰ Although he wishes to fulfil his nation's and his own longing for form, and to record the history of his nation for the following generations, Saleem does not write like a historian, that is through linear narrative. He creates his own version of history, his personalised history; he interprets events from his particular point of view and his limited knowledge. The new reality, which he provides the reader with, serves as an alternative to historical facts. As Jago Morrison and Susan Watkins write,

Rushdie is here the historian of the people's voices raised in fierce, personal witness against the elitist histories of the Ghandi clan and the bureaucratic/military/intellectual complex of a country whose history has stubbornly resisted subaltern voices. Rushdie grants the power to his characters to wrest and re-form history in their own images.²¹

Like Tom Crick in Swift's *Waterland*, or Geoffrey Braithwaite in Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*, Saleem experiences past events and tries to understand them; fiction must serve him as a mirror to his condition. His history is a pastiche, a mixture of several forms, genres, voices, and approaches. Rushdie uses Saleem to undermine the conventional ideas of history and to posit a multiplicity of historical identities: for the author, history is forged not out of the silence of the past, but out of its cacophony.²²

Saleem is an unreliable narrator because he is part of the story he is telling and he is too close to the events that he records, and he often recurs to the postmodern ploy of emphasising the artificial quality of his personal story. He is in a hurry, as he wants to finish to write the story before his thirty-first birthday, which coincides with his wedding day and his death, and thus makes many mistakes in recording past events. India's history is subordinate to Saleem's consciousness; he appears to be a self-justifying postmodernist who is plagued by the problem of responsibility to history and attempts to find some meaning in history, yet he is afraid that his attempt will inevitably lead to a distortion of the past.²³ As he fears that death is imminent, he grows anxious to tell, and finish recording, his story; he seems he writes his thoughts down as fast as he can, without stopping to revise them. He actually muddles and distorts historical facts as he is writing his own story, because he

²⁰ Cf. Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin, op. cit.

²¹ Jago Morrison and Susan Watkins, *Scandalous Fiction: the Twentieth Century Novel in the Public Sphere*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006.

²² Jago Morrison, *Contemporary Fiction*, cit., p. 133.

²³ Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, *Literatures of Memory: History, Time and Space in Postwar Writing*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 66.

wants to find some meaning to his life; he thus adapts events so that the reader is forced to acknowledge his central role in them. He describes the inevitable gaps and errors in memory and shapes his history in a manner that provides him with a meaning, drawing the reader's attention to the necessity of re-imagining history, in order to have a concept of one's own past:

Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role? Today, in my confusion, I can't judge. I'll have to leave it to others.²⁴

Saleem's view of history is fraught with uncertainties and doubts. His account is the result of the distortion of his memory: he exemplifies what Rushdie argues in *Imaginary Homelands*, i.e. "we remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool".²⁵ Saleem creates history from broken, fragmented memories: his process of recalling memories produces an individual version of history. Memory "selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events".²⁶ Memory and forgetfulness are respectively associated with truth and falsehood; Saleem wants to retain a memory of the past as full as possible. He firmly believes in the need to preserve memory, even if memory creates individual perception and not an objective truth about the past. Memory reconstructs history, so man can catch history only through its subjective distortion. Saleem's fragmented view of history is the result of the imperfect and partial nature of memory; yet, through Saleem, Rushdie expresses the necessity of accepting the partialness of memory, since memory and individual perception are a means of grasping reality.

Postmodern intellectuals claim that history and historical events vary according to the person relating the information; history is subjective as it focuses on certain aspects over others, depending on the way a person communicates it. Historical events have a structure imposed by an ideologically conditioned historian: the act itself of creating histories is an ideological act, designed to support political and moral systems. People read the world availing themselves of individual perspectives so that different tellers of history put emphasis on different aspects of history. Saleem's narrative calls attention to the provisionality of all history, by exposing its mediation through a subjective consciousness:

²⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, cit., p. 230.

²⁵ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, cit., p. 24.

²⁶ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, cit., p. 292.

“my narration becomes self-conscious, like an incompetent puppeteer, I reveal the hands holding the strings”²⁷. Saleem breaks the frame of his narrative to question the stability of his version of events; he often addresses the audience directly and admits that errors may be possible in his recording of histories: “I have immortalised my memories, although distortions are inevitable. We must live, I’m afraid, with the shadows of imperfection”²⁸. Although Saleem continuously appeals to his reader to discern the meaning of his narrative, it would be a mistake to think that the reader’s task is to bring together the pieces and fragments of the novel into a coherent biography of its narrator or an alternative history of India. The novel does not aim at providing a valid alternative to the official, colonial narrative of India and is not to be read for its accuracy: for instance, Saleem makes a mistake in his account of Gandhi’s death and also in recording the date of the election of 1957. However, Saleem’s memory refuses to alter the sequence of events; the primacy of his story impels him to move on and follow his own version of reality:

Re-reading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time.²⁹

Saleem’s announcement of some errors in his recording of events invites the reader to approach his story as fallible, as only one possible version of events. At the same time, his drawing our attention to his errors is a way to draw our attention to history itself.

The leading idea in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* is that there are infinite ways to tell a story, but no grand narrative:

There are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well.³⁰

The novel demonstrates how postmodernity allows for the proliferation of stories, refuting any single claim to truth. The narrator rejects a position of universality from which to theorise; he refuses totalising structures and continuously reminds the reader of the constructed reality and the textuality of the text he is writing. However, while *Midnight’s*

²⁷ Ibid., p. 83.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 642.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 229-230.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

Children repeats the message of historiographic metafiction, i.e. history is purely a narrative entity, it also affirms the opposite: personal narratives are legitimate forms of history. The novel implies that fiction can determine history and that the fabric of narratives is the only chance we have of determining any meaning.³¹ For Rushdie, the writing of fiction can help the achievement of some notion of truth, however ironic it might be.

Midnight's Children is a good example of both postmodernist and postcolonial fiction. As a postmodern text, the novel celebrates multiplicity of perspective and plurality of vision in its treatment of the past, where fiction and reality intermingle. It provides the reader with a tangled chronology which demonstrates that history is never dead; in Saleem's account, not only does history repeat itself, but also comes back. Also fantastic imagination, conflicting perspectives and self-conscious commentary are postmodern ingredients in the novel. As a postcolonial writer, Rushdie does not deny history; he has to reconstruct it and continuously refer to it; he stands between European textuality and local context(s), partaking of both. The narrator Saleem is the author of a subversive rewriting of history, and his approach contests dominant master narratives. The novel merges together a set of conventional genres to challenge the notion of a single overarching metanarrative.³² The focus of the novel is on Saleem's way of conceiving and constructing his personal and collective history; Saleem objects to the notion of a single, universal, authoritative viewpoint, and suggests that many versions of historical truth and many realities may be available and accepted. His text is disrupting and disturbing: he disallows the past from sliding quietly into history; the reader is presented with a challenging, multi-layered, discontinuous, even rhizomatic³³ narrative.

Midnight's Children is a fusion of realistic novel, a genre which is associated to European worldliness, and fairy tale, which is rather linked to Indian folklore - Saleem claims that "sometimes legends make reality and become more useful than facts"³⁴. The novel parodically marries the conventions of the European genre of the *Bildungsroman* and those of the Indian oral narrative tradition; as a result, the protagonist's identity stands

³¹ Cf. Bran Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 130-131.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 121.

³³ I here use the adjective 'rhizomatic' to convey the idea of a narrative which resists chronology and linear organization. For a definition of rhizome as a philosophical concept and an image of thought that apprehends multiplicities, cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, London: Continuum, 2004, vol. 2 of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

³⁴ Salman Rushdie, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

between Europe and India. The concurrence of the European and the Indian can be interpreted in terms of Rushdie's playful celebration of cultural hybridity. Hutcheon writes:

A novel like *Midnight's Children* works to foreground the totalizing impulse of western – imperialistic – modes of history-writing by confronting it with indigenous Indian models of history. Saleem's intertexts for both writing history and writing fiction are doubled: they are, on the one hand, from Indian legends, films, and literature and, on the other, from the west – *The Tin Drum*, *Tristram Shandy*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and so on.³⁵

The narrative is formed by a mixture of influences, such as Indian oral tradition of epic storytelling for the novel's open structure, and European literary models, such as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* for the significance of Saleem's nose and time-play birth date, Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* for using the protagonist's private life to reflect on public events and availing of an unreliable narrator, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* for its use of magic realism. Considering that Indian tradition is based on fantastic myths and stories, in fact, Rushdie uses magic realism in order to tell it; fantasy is for him a guideline in his interwoven representation of Saleem and India. Fiction is spun into history in Saleem's head, who claims:

Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence: but I seem to have found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in my knowledge, so that everything is in my head, down to the last detail.³⁶

Magic realism is a way of approaching the truth through other means, of telling reality from a particular, non-verisimilar point of view. It is a form of representation of facts which is based on realism (events are presented how if they existed) combined with stories which are clearly fanciful, linked to imagination and fairy tales. Rushdie narrates India's complex history through magic realism, symbolism, metaphors and analogies, arguing that the magic belongs to the Indian worldview and realism to the Western one, but that after all the two are not as separate as they seem to be. In his analysis of Rushdie's novel, Neil Ten Kortenaar argues:

The magic and realism in Rushdie's novel are mutually constitutive: they are both equally Indian and equally modern. They are not separate functions that Rushdie combines in a postcolonial hybrid but are each required in order to

³⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1989, p. 62.

³⁶ Salman Rushdie, op. cit., p. 17.

think the other and to think the nation. It is a mistake to divide magic and realism, myth and history, along national lines.³⁷

In his account, Saleem fuses the past of myth, the world of story, folktale and religion with the present of the news, the world of experience and the tragedies of history. He puts forward his version of events, which in turn is derived from other narratives. His magic realism is a hybrid of oral folktale (his models are Mary and Tai, despite the fact that he does not share their mental framework) and learned history (Saleem declares to have inherited his grandfather's *forma mentis*; Aadam Aziz possesses a scientific education, has been to Germany and studied there, and has gone back to India with the ambition to build a modern nation).

The narrative framework of the novel consists of a tale which Saleem recounts orally to his wife-to-be Padma, who is both his audience and his muse. Storytelling gives Saleem a certain feeling of security when faced with chaotic reality; it is an attempt to keep hold of some unified self and a method of survival. Saleem's way of communicating and recording his story resembles the way in which history will be told by Tom Crick to his pupils. Rushdie suggests:

History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. [...] The reading of Saleem's unreliable narration might be, I believe, a useful analogy for the way in which we all, every day, attempt to read the world.³⁸

Padma is Saleem's companion and is illiterate; as soon as Saleem finishes to write a chapter, he reads it aloud to Padma, so that she is listening to the story as we are reading it. She is our vicarious hearer, i.e. the 'narrated' turned into a character. Saleem's whole autobiography is addressed to her, who proves to be impatient at his interruptions, digressions and narrative obfuscation, and insists on linear, teleological time, on "the universe of what-happened-next". Most of the time, she implores Saleem to get on with the plot: "You better get a move on or you'll die before you get yourself born" and claims that "it is a crazy way of telling your life story"³⁹. Nonetheless, Saleem is convinced that his way of telling his story corresponds to the way things and people intersect, and he insists on the

³⁷ Neil Ten Kortenaar, *Self, Nation, Text in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children*, cit., p. 24.

³⁸ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, cit., p. 25.

³⁹ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, cit., pp. 44-45.

past because it has dripped into him so that he cannot ignore it: everything that came before his birth and his family history contributed to make Saleem the person he is:

I have become, it seems to me, the apex of an isosceles triangle, supported equally by twin deities, the wild god of memory and the lotus-goddess of the present.⁴⁰

The result is a highly fragmented narrative, which oscillates back and forth between past and present, and is often interrupted by Saleem's veering off into tangents.⁴¹

Who does Saleem writes for? The memoirs are dedicated to his (non genetic) son Aadam, who, one day, will read about the story of his family:

My son will understand. As much as for any living being, I'm telling my story for him, so that afterwards, when I've lost my struggle against cracks, he will know. Morality, judgement, character...it all starts with memory...and I am keeping carbons.⁴²

Saleem's attempt to struggle against the cracks of time and to encapsulate the whole history of his family in a tale (which is finally the book we read) mirrors Rushdie's desire to constitute a national heritage of memories for future generations. Saleem narrates stories, selects temporal circumstances and dramatises them with the final aim to 'pickle' history – not by chance he is a worker in a pickle factory:

by day amongst the pickle-vats, by night within these sheets, I spend my time at the great work of preserving. Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks.⁴³

By night, he writes the fantastic story of his life; his voice is demanding, he tells us: "I have resolved to confide in paper, before I forget"⁴⁴.

Midnight's Children is a first-person narrative with multiple themes and numerous characters. The story is set in India and Pakistan and the narrator is Saleem Sinai, born on the midnight of 15th August 1947 and raised by a prosperous family in Bombay. The story is divided into three books: the first is about prior events to Saleem's birth, recording his

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 206.

⁴¹ The veracity of Saleem's account seems to be compromised by his numerous digressions. The narrator is not faithful to a clear and linear succession of events, either those of Indian history or those of his personal story; in fact, he provides Padma and the reader with a complicated and jumbled narrative.

⁴² Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, cit., p. 292.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 44.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 43.

grandparents' and parents' histories; the second is the largest one, it describes Saleem's first fourteen years of his life and is based on Rushdie's own experience of growing up in Bombay; the third book covers the last seven years in Saleem's life and ends with his thirty-first birthday. Although Rushdie's biographical elements can be found in Saleem's experience, there is an important difference, in that Saleem, unlike Rushdie, never leaves the subcontinent. Throughout the novel, Saleem questions his past, roots and identity; his family tree grows upon the idea of multiple parentage, with the roles of father (Nadir Khan, Ahmed Sinai, Wee Willie Winkie and William Methwold) and mother (Amina Sinai, Mary Pereira and Vanita) being multiplied.⁴⁵ Rushdie's obsession with genealogy and family trees, which is linked to personal and also national identity, returns both in Zadie Smith's and Andrea Levy's novels.⁴⁶ *Midnight's Children* is a family saga, in which the protagonist reconstructs the stories of his family, first through the generations of his grandparents, then of his parents, and finally describes the present. Saleem starts his narrative by going back to 1915, because he wants to explore his roots and thus tells the story of his grandparents, Nazeem Ghani and Aadam Aziz. Like Tom Crick in Swift's *Waterland*, Saleem traces his family's past in order to reflect on his identity and on the person he has become. The search for one's roots and the investigation of the past is a common feature in English historiographic metafiction; I will later analyse this theme also in Smith's *White Teeth*.

However, the family Saleem describes for more than a hundred pages is not his family at all: Saleem is not Nazeem Ghani's and Aadam Aziz's biological grandson, because his nurse, Mary Pereira (who then becomes Saleem's ayah), switched the tags of the names of the born children Saleem and Shiva. Who is Saleem Sinai then? He is an illegitimate child, whose identity is uncertain, both as an individual and as an image for the newly independent Indian nation. He is not Ahmed's and Amina's natural child, he is a changeling, taken at birth from his cradle and exchanged for the baby of a well-off family by Mary Pereira. Saleem is the illegitimate son of an Indian peasant and an English man, who left India when it achieved independence. His biological mother is Vanita, a poor woman of low birth who dies in labor; Vanita is married to Wee Willie Winkie, however

⁴⁵ The idea of the role of mother multiplied returns in Rushdie's third novel, *Shame* (1983): the protagonist Omar Khayyam Shakil is described as the son of three mothers, the three Shakil sisters, Chhunni, Munnee, and Bunny.

⁴⁶ It is worth noticing that in Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), most chapters of the second part of the book, entitled 'Jamaica', are followed by a parent tree: the novel is a tale of roots and reveals the genealogy of the protagonist's family.

she became pregnant by an English lover, William Methwold. Saleem has the blood of the colonizer in his veins and has inherited blue eyes and a large nose from his English father (not from his grandfather Aadam Aziz, as he makes the reader believe at the beginning of the novel). Saleem has a double identity: he is an Anglo and an Indian, being the son of William Methwold and Vanita. Despite his impure origins, Saleem becomes the symbol of India itself - the novel ironically celebrates impurity in a country obsessed with purity (for instance, through the perpetuation of caste system).

Amina's and Ahmed's genetic son is Shiva, who becomes Saleem's antagonist, even if he never discovers the truth of his parentage. Being a baby switched at birth, Saleem leads a life of luxury, which instead would have been reserved to Shiva.

All the time, Padma wails angrily, you tricked me. Your mother, you called her; your father, your grandfather, your aunts. What thing are you that you don't even care to tell the truth about who your parents were? You don't care that your mother died giving you life? That your father is maybe alive somewhere, penniless, poor?⁴⁷

What seemed to be true, and Saleem has described as his family and roots in minute detail, is revealed to be fiction. However, fiction, even once it is revealed as such, proves impossible to shake off completely, it has created its own reality. Saleem justifies himself by so arguing:

When we eventually discovered the crime of Mary Pereira, we all found that *it made no difference!* I was still their son: they remained my parents. We learned that we simply could not think our way out of our pasts...⁴⁸

Despite the narrator's claim in the opening pages of the novel that he commences the business of remaking his life from the point at which it really began, that is his birth, the story in *Midnight's Children* begins with Aadam Aziz's return to the Kashmir region of India in 1915, after receiving his medical degree⁴⁹, and his falling in love with Naseem Ghani, Saleem's grandmother. The way Aadam and Naseem meet is rather peculiar: Aadam

⁴⁷ Salman Rushdie, op. cit., p. 158.

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁹ Rushdie calls his character Aziz, borrowing the name from E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924). In Forster's novel, Dr Aziz is the main character: he is a young Muslim/Indian physician who attempts to establish friendships with several British characters, trying to bridge the gap between the East and the West. In Rushdie's novel, Dr Aziz is a character in-between the East and the West: his stay in Europe deeply influences his perspective of the East, once back in India he lives inner conflicts and grows sceptic about faith and religion, superstition and tradition.

is asked by Naseem's father, a wealthy landowner, to treat her, but Aadam is not allowed to look at her, except through a seven-inch hole in a sheet that is held by attendants:

You will understand that you cannot be permitted to see her, no, not in any circumstances; accordingly I have required her to be positioned behind that sheet. (...) You will kindly specify which portion of my daughter it is necessary to inspect. I will then ensue her with my instructions to place the required segment against that hole which you see there.⁵⁰

For three years, Naseem stands in front of Aadam always covered by the perforated sheet, which is moved to expose the part of her that is sick; Aadam sees her face only in 1918: "on the day the World War ended, Naseem developed the longed-for headache"⁵¹. The following year, in March, Saleem's grandparents finally get married and move to Agra, where Adam is offered a job at the local university. They are in Amritsar where, on 13th April 1919, British Indian troops, under the command of Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer, open fire on an unarmed crowd of Mahatma Gandhi's followers in the largest compound called Jallianwala Bagh and massacre hundreds of Indian nationalists. Yet, Aadam miraculously survives.

The narrative jumps to the Summer of 1942: Aadam and Naseem still live in Agra and have five children: three daughters, Emerald, Alia and Mumtaz (Amina Sinai) and two sons, Mustapha and Hanif. Aadam is the embodiment of modern Europe, he leaves Kashmir for Germany to study medicine for five years (Western medicine is described as objective truth), he discovers secular humanism and loses his religious faith⁵², he is no longer a believing Muslim (however, alongside his desire for progress, he also reveals a nostalgia for tradition); Naseem is the incarnation of traditional India (from the third chapter on, she is referred to as 'Reverend Mother'). Their marriage epitomises the union of the modern and the traditional, whose product through the generations is Saleem, the emblem of Indian nation. Saleem's narrative approaches the union of tradition and modernity with the self-consciousness of parody. The marriage of modernity and tradition is only a starting point for Rushdie's novel and his description of India as a nation.

In the 1940s, Aadam Aziz becomes a follower of the social activist Mian Abdullah, known as 'the Hummingbird'. Abdullah heads the Free Islam Convocation, which opposes the creation of a separate Muslim state. After Abdullah's assassination by government

⁵⁰ Salman Rushdie, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵² The religious doubt that Aadam experiences is the result of his scientific training, of his stay in Europe and his attending European friends. It is also associated with the forces of Empire and European Enlightenment.

agents, Aadam decides to help Abdullah's personal secretary and assistant, Nadir Khan, by hiding him in a room in the basement of his house. Disagreeing with her husband's decision and fearing for their daughters' safety, Naseem promises never to speak again (she ends her silence the same day America dropped the atomic bomb on Japan: August 9, 1945).⁵³ The whole chapter entitled "Under the Carpet" is dedicated to the story of Nadir Khan, the impotent idealist and Communist with whom Mumtaz (Saleem's mother) falls in love. After Nadir and Mumtaz are secretly married, they remain in the basement room (yet, their marriage is never consummated). Khan, politically persecuted after Abdullah's assassination, is finally obliged to leave the Aziz house and run away when Mumtaz's sister, Emerald, informs an officer in the Pakistani army, Major Zulfikar (who becomes Emerald's husband), of his hiding place in the house. Abandoned by Khan, Mumtaz agrees to marry the merchant Ahmed Sinai (Saleem's father) and changes her first name to Amina. At the beginning, she does not feel happy with her new husband, because she is always thinking of Nadir Khan, but then she tries to train herself to love Ahmed:

she divided him, mentally, into every single one of his component parts, physical as well as behavioural [...] she fell under the spell of the perforated sheet of her own parents, because she resolved to fall in love with her husband bit by bit.⁵⁴

Ahmed and Amina move to Delhi; she gets pregnant and decides to consult a fortune-teller, Ramram, who gives a cryptic prophecy about her unborn son:

A son who will never be older than his motherland – neither older nor younger. There will be two heads – but you shall see only one – there will be knees and a nose, a nose and knees. Newspaper praises him, two mothers raise him. Voices will guide him, blood will betray him!⁵⁵

As Saleem describes, the prophecy will be fulfilled in each of its words, but his mother dies without discovering the whole truth (i.e. Saleem's magic powers). As the partition of India

⁵³ In Smith's *White Teeth*, the character Alsana Begum similarly resolves not to speak anymore to her husband Samad, after his decision to send his son Magid back to Bangladesh. Her revenge lies in not speaking directly to Samad; for eight years she never says yes or no to him, forcing him to live never knowing, never being sure. Cf. Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, London: Penguin Books, 2001, p. 214.

⁵⁴ Salman Rushdie, op. cit., p. 87. This quotation is an example of Rushdie's notion that history repeats itself.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 114. Saleem's birth coincides with that of India; two children are born on the stroke of midnight, Saleem and Shiva, and 'knees and a nose' are the parts of their body with which they are identified; Saleem receives a letter from the prime minister Nehru because of the moment of his birth, and an article on the newspaper the *Times of India* is dedicated to him and to the other children born on August 15th 1947; Saleem is raised by two mothers, Amina Sinai and Mary Pereira (neither of which is his biological mother); Saleem has the magic power to hear other people's thoughts, thousand voices crowd in his head; his blood type reveals that he is not Ahmed's and Amina's child.

into two separate nations is announced, Amina and Ahmed move to Bombay, where they buy a house from a departing Englishman, William Methwold (Saleem's real father). At the Methwold estate, which is made up of four identical mansions, there is another couple, Wee Willie Winkie and Vanita (Saleem's real mother), expecting a child. The *Times of India* announces a prize for any child born at the exact moment of Indian independence. Amina and Vanita both go into labour and lie in adjacent rooms at the nursing home; exactly at midnight, each woman delivers a son. In order to accomplish her communist lover, Joseph D'Costa, the nurse Mary Pereira does her own private revolutionary act: she switches the nametags of the two newborn babies, giving the poor baby Saleem a life of privilege and the rich baby Shiva a life of poverty. Consumed by remorse, Mary gives up her job at the Nursing Home and becomes Saleem's ayah. Thus, book one ends.

Book two opens with the picture of a Victorian painting hung in the room of young Saleem, which is based on the real work "The Boyhood of Raleigh" (1870) by Sir John Everett Millais. Millais depicted a fisherman, presumably pointing west to the New World, and two children (one of them is Raleigh) who are listening to him. Saleem reads the pointing finger of Millais's fisherman as a sign of his own inescapable destiny: he is confident he is someone with a destiny, without whom the world cannot be understood. Since in the painting the fisherman points off into the distance, Saleem wonders what the finger might be pointing at. Besides the print, there hangs the congratulatory letter from India's first post-independence prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who wrote:

'Dear Baba Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own'.⁵⁶

Therefore, Saleem argues that the fisherman's finger points at the prime minister's letter in the frame, or maybe at the dispossessed city out of the window, or it just draws attention to itself.⁵⁷

As a child, Saleem hides in a washing chest in the bathroom, so feeling protected from insults and mocking expressions of his classmates about his big cucumber-nose and facial birthmarks. During a lesson in Geography, Saleem is humiliated by his geography teacher; yet the episode is a way for Rushdie to ironically emphasise that Saleem is India.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 167.

⁵⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 168. Saleem's reflections on the picture shed light on the diverse possibilities of his destiny.

The sadistic teacher, Mr Emil Zagallo, asks his pupils: “In the face of thees ugly ape you don’t see the whole map of *India*?” “See here – the Deccan peninsula hanging down!”, which is Saleem’s nose. “These stains are Pakistan! Thees birthmark on the right ear is the East Wing; and thees horrible stained left cheek, the West! Remember, stupid boys: Pakistan ees a stain on the face of *India*!”.⁵⁸ One day, buried himself in the laundry bin of dirty clothes, Saleem sees his mother sitting down on the toilet: she is crying and whispering the name of her previous husband, Nadir Khan. When Amina discovers Saleem hidden in the washing chest and spying her, she punishes him to one day of silence. For the first time, that day, Saleem hears a babble of voices in his head; he soon realises he has the power of telepathy and can enter anyone’s thoughts.

At the age of nine, Saleem discovers his paranormal powers and becomes a sort of ‘All-India Radio’:

at a crucial point in the history of our child-nation, at a time when Five Year Plans were being drawn up and elections were approaching and language marchers were fighting over Bombay, a nine-year-old boy named Saleem Sinai acquired a miraculous gift.⁵⁹

However, Saleem keeps these voices a secret because is afraid of not being believed by his parents. He manages to represent the entirety of India within his individual self and, banned from washing chests, begins hiding in an old clock-tower where he enters the thoughts of strangers all across India. He soon worries about the confusion inside his head and quickly tires of eavesdropping on strangers. He thus abandons All-India Radio for the ‘Midnight Children’s Conference’ (MCC), which he establishes on his tenth birthday:

I found that it was possible not only to pick up the children’s transmissions; not only to broadcast my own messages; but also to act as a sort of national network, so that by opening my transformed mind to all the children I could turn it into a kind of forum in which they could talk to one another, through me.⁶⁰

Saleem uses his talent to convene the intelligences of the other midnight children in his head, in a fantastic kind of parliament.

When Saleem is ten years old, his parents discover he is not their son. He is at the hospital after an accident at his finger and may need a blood transfusion: when the doctors

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 321.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 238.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 314.

ask for his blood type, his parents learn it is impossible Saleem is their biological son, because their blood types are A and O, and Saleem's is neither.

Suddenly you are forever other than you were; and the world becomes such that parents can cease to be parents.⁶¹

After this shocking discovery, Saleem is sent to spend five weeks with his uncle Hanif and aunt Pia; Mary Pereira follows him in his first exile. When Saleem returns home to live with his parents again, Mary declares herself responsible for Saleem's being switched at birth and confesses her guilt. In the meanwhile, Saleem engages himself with communicating with midnight's children: he is able to turn his mind into an open forum in which all the children can speak to each other. Every night, between midnight and 1 a.m., they telepathically communicate with each other through Saleem's mind.

The Midnight's Children Conference is primarily a meeting place, disorganised and formless; it gives the impression of a superabundant crowd of voices, devoid of a controlling super-structure. The chaos of the crowd unsettles Saleem, who attempts to impose some structure. The convention of midnight's children in the parliament of Saleem's brain concerns the issues of cultural, linguistic, religious and political differences, resembling those which India is facing. Saleem describes how India becomes organized into fourteen states and six territories, based upon common language; Bombay remains a multilingual state. The Midnight's Children Conference is a model for pluralism and for the potential power of coexisting diversity, representing a just, democratic, and unified government. Saleem also describes the midnight children's various powers, and notes that the closer to midnight the child is born, the more extraordinary the power s/he has. Shiva, born with Saleem on the stroke of midnight and with whom Saleem has been switched at birth, will become a warrior. He has a pair of enormous, powerful knees (opposition between knees and nose), and becomes Saleem's rival. Saleem has the ability to look into the hearts and minds of people and embodies enlightenment and creative forces (he represents the god of creation, Brahma); Shiva represents destructive forces (he is named after the god of destruction and is described as a violent destroyer), he embodies brute strength.

Ahmed invests in the manufacture of tetrapods to be used in land reclamation for Bombay, but loses all his money; he starts having problems with alcohol and becomes

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

violent with Amina. Amina finally decides to move to Pakistan with Saleem and his sister, nicknamed Brass Monkey, and goes to live with her sister Emerald and General Zulfikar. Relationships between India and Pakistan deteriorate. In Pakistan, Saleem is unable to communicate with the other children: “exiled once more from my home, I was also exiled from the gift which was my truest birthright: the gift of the midnight children”⁶². Four years later, Amina and the children move back to Bombay, as she decides to take care of her ill husband: during Ahmed’s recovery, the two fall in love with each other once again. In 1962, India goes to war with China and is badly beaten by Chinese forces (on October 20th); Saleem undergoes a medical operation to his congested nose and, as a result, he loses his telepathic powers. However, he gains a new power, an incredible sense of smell: “I, Saleem Sinai, possessor of the most delicately-gifted olfactory organ in history”⁶³. His nose can now detect emotions, feelings, and lies, as well as smells. After India’s military loss to China, Saleem’s entire family leaves Bombay and moves to Pakistan.⁶⁴ In the “Land of the Pure”, the Brass Monkey takes up singing and acquires the role of a talented artist, known as Jamila Singer, the voice of Pakistan. Unlike Saleem, who is the mirror of India, his sister comes to identify with Pakistan. Saleem misses Bombay and does not feel at home in Karachi, where he is forced to spend his adolescence. In Pakistan, Saleem falls in love with his sister, but he is rejected as a lover and considered only a brother with the irony that he is not his brother actually.

During the 1965 war between India and Pakistan to get control over Bangladesh, all of Saleem’s family, with the exception of Jamila and himself, die under the bombs dropped by the Indian armed forces in the span of a single day (on September 22nd):

It is my firm conviction that the hidden purpose of the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 was nothing more nor less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth.⁶⁵

In the conflict, Saleem’s house is destroyed and he himself gets hit in the head by the silver spittoon that originally belonged to the Rani of Cooch Naheen (whose name means ‘princess of nothing’) and then was given by the Rani to Mumtaz Aziz and Nadir Khan as a wedding gift. As a result, Saleem remains victim of amnesia, forgetting his name and

⁶² Ibid., p. 394.

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 43-44.

⁶⁴ This episode is autobiographical: Rushdie’s family moved from Bombay to Pakistan in 1964. (Then Rushdie lived in England, but he spent summers with his family in Pakistan.)

⁶⁵ Salman Rushdie, *op. cit.*, p. 469.

identity.⁶⁶ Saleem survives the bombing campaign but retains no memory of his past. Eventually he finds himself conscripted into military service and witnesses several atrocities in the belligerent events of 1971. Because of his keen sense of smell, Saleem is an excellent tracker. It is not clear how he has joined the Pakistani Army; Saleem suspects that Jamila sent him there, as a punishment for having fallen in love with her. He works for a unit of the Pakistani army and witnesses the disturbing violence in Dacca perpetrated by Pakistani troops in their attempt to stop the secession of Bangladesh. In 1971, the East Wing of Pakistan declared itself Bangladesh and ten million refugees fled across the borders of East Pakistan-Bangladesh into India.

In an attempt to escape the violence around him, Saleem travels into the Sundarbans with other three Pakistani soldiers, Ayooba Baloch, Farooq Rashid, and Shaheed Dar. The jungles of the Sundarbans, whereto Saleem leads his unit, are on the border of Bangladesh and India. Here, the soldiers cannot escape the grip of the past, which they are condemned to encounter in a ghostly form. The journey is a kind of descent into hell: Ayooba is haunted by the spectre of a peasant he has shot, and he is later visited by images of his mother, who metamorphoses into a monkey; Farooq has a vision of his brother running through the forest, and becomes convinced that his father has died; Shaheed is also visited by a monkey, who, he considers, resembles his father. For each soldier, the past will not relinquish its hold on the present. Through a serpent's bite, Saleem regains the memory he lost during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war and he is thus rejoined to his past: "what you were is forever who you are"⁶⁷. In the jungle, he regains all of his memory, except the knowledge of his name. In the meanwhile, India has joined the war, led by Shiva.

After leaving the jungle, Saleem meets Parvati 'the witch', one of the midnight's children, who reminds Saleem of his name and helps him escape from Pakistan back to India, by magically transporting him in her basket: "On December 16th, 1971, I tumbled out of a basket into an India in which Mrs Gandhi's New Congress Party held a more-than-two-thirds majority in the National Assembly"⁶⁸. Saleem also meets Picture Singh "the snake charmer"; Parvati, Saleem and Picture Singh live in the magicians' ghetto (the bourgeois Saleem becomes a slum dweller). After being refused by Saleem, Parvati has an affair with Shiva, who has become a war hero during the 1971 war between India and Pakistan. She

⁶⁶ This is the end of book two and also the end of hostilities between India and Pakistan (September 23rd, 1965). Six years later, there is another Indo-Pakistani war and Saleem finds himself in the middle of it.

⁶⁷ Salman Rushdie, *op. cit.*, p. 513.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 538.

gets pregnant but is still unmarried; she is ashamed by the ghetto's inhabitants until Saleem agrees to marry her (February 23rd, 1975). In June, the prime minister, Indira Gandhi, declares a State of Emergency, in which she has nearly unlimited power: "India is Indira and Indira is India". Through Saleem's storytelling, Rushdie emphasises how the government perceives the presence of the midnight's children as a threat to its power, as political enemies (except for Shiva). Indira Gandhi, fictionalised in the novel as 'the Widow', is responsible for political and human rights abuses, she suspends civil liberties and arrests her opposition. She is portrayed by the narrator as a bearer of death, responsible for slum clearance and mass sterilization.

In 1976, Major Shiva captures Saleem and takes him to Benares, on the shores of the Ganges: here Saleem is tortured until he tells his interlocutors where the midnight's children can be found, revealing their names, addresses, and physical descriptions. Since in their multiplicity and diversity of powers, the midnight's children represent a menace to a single-ruler state, the Gandhi government destroys the ghetto and begins a sterilization campaign: one by one, the midnight's children, Saleem included, are sterilised, and denied the possibility of reproducing themselves.⁶⁹ They also lose all their magical powers and hopes (January 18th, 1977). Rushdie focuses on midnight children's castrations during Gandhi's State of Emergency, in order to include a strenuous political attack in his work of imagination. The Emergency signals the end of the potency of the midnight's children and the failure to sustain the spirit of tolerance and difference. Parvati dies and Picture Singh takes care of her child. In 1977, Saleem is released, "no longer connected to history, drained above-and-below"⁷⁰. At the beginning of 1978, the prime minister calls for a general election and loses; Shiva is arrested. Back to Delhi, Saleem meets Picture Singh with Parvati's son, Aadam, who has the same name of Saleem's grandfather and is his true grandchild:

Once again destiny, inevitability, the antithesis of choice had come to rule my life, once again a child was to be born to a father who was not his father, although by a terrible irony the child would be the true grandchild of his father's parents; trapped in the web of these interweaving genealogies, it may even have occurred to me to wonder what was beginning, what was ending,

⁶⁹ For Saleem writing becomes the compensatory means for his impotency: he cannot have children of his own, but can write his story and Indian history for the children of future generations and for his adopted child Aadam.

⁷⁰ Salman Rushdie, *op. cit.*, p. 617.

and whether another secret countdown was in progress, and what would be born with my child.⁷¹

Aadam is born during the State of Emergency, at the beginning of a new era in Indian history. He is born at midnight, like his fathers Saleem and Shiva; in this way, Rushdie again suggests that history repeats itself:

Aadam Sinai arrived at a night-shadowed slum on June 25th, 1975. On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. At the precise instant of India's arrival at Emergency, he emerged. He was mysteriously handcuffed to history, his destinies indissolubly chained to those of his country.⁷²

Picture Singh, Saleem and Aadam go to Bombay, where Saleem eats some chutney that tastes exactly as the one made by Mary Pereira. The chutney comes from the Braganze Pickle factory in the north of the town; Saleem visits it and finds out that it belongs to Mary. Padma works at the factory, she is a chutney maker and also the listener to Saleem's story. The circle is complete: Saleem returns to Mary, the woman who raised him, and meets Padma, who is his muse; the story ends where it began. Saleem returns first to India, then to Bombay, and finally to his ayah; he has undergone many changes, mutilations, suffering, movements, but ends up almost exactly where he began, at the house on Methwold's Estate, where his son Aadam is in the care of Mary Pereira, who once was Saleem's ayah. Padma proposes to Saleem and he accepts; the wedding day will be on Saleem's thirty-first birthday and the honeymoon will be in Kashmir. After Saleem's decision to marry Padma, he gives the prophecy that, on the day of his wedding, he will die disintegrating into six million particles of dust. "I am falling apart": Saleem claims that his body, which has been devastated by time, history, and fatigue, is destined to crumble into approximately 630 million particles of dust, a cipher that corresponds to India's population in the seventies. Once again, his destiny reflects that of his country, which is here the disintegration of India's hopes for national unity.

The novel is based on three layers of history: Saleem's personal history, factual History, and fictitious history. The narrator tries to arrive at a synthesis of them three, providing the reader with a combination of the stories, experiences and events that have made him, and joining his personal tragedy with India's political one. Saleem writes his

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 580.

⁷² Ibid., p. 586. The words used to describe Saleem's birth are almost the same, cf. *ibid.* p. 3: "I was born on August 15th, 1947. On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country".

memoirs to prove how intimately linked his fate has been to that of the nation; he is deeply connected to history but, finally, wants to escape from it. After all he has suffered, that is amnesia, the massacre of his family and friends, the horrors of war, Saleem is no longer proud of being the motor of events; he rather complains that he has witnessed so much history:

I no longer want to be anything except who I am. Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each 'I', every one of the now six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world.⁷³

Saleem's self is made up of many selves; in the end, he appears to be breaking into millions of constituent parts. He claims that history-making involves the swallowing of all those bits, of his many lives, thus reflecting Rushdie's understanding of history, i.e. "a perpetual oscillation between consolidation and fragmentation" in the process of forming and re-forming of cultural, racial and religious identities (the oscillation is between wholeness and dismemberment).⁷⁴ The novel ends with Saleem's nightmare of falling apart: the threat of dissolution is Saleem's greatest fear – death means the loss of self; in order to preserve it, he writes down his story. His chronicle alone remains as the material container of national meaning, for the nation dies with Saleem's body.⁷⁵ By writing his autobiography, Saleem hopes not only to prevent his own inevitable decay and death, but also that of his country: storytelling is, like in Swift's *Waterland*, the optimistic counterweight to the apocalypse, to the end of history.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 383.

⁷⁴ Cf. Rod Mengham, *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction: International Writing in English Since 1970*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999, Introduction.

⁷⁵ Jean M. Kane, op. cit., p. 96.

4.2 Englishness, Tradition and Hybrid Identities in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Andrea Levy's *Small Island*

“If religion is the opium of the people, tradition is an even more sinister analgesic, simply because it rarely appears sinister. [...] To Samad, as to the people of Thailand, tradition was culture, and culture led to roots, and these were good, these were untainted principles”. - Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (p. 193).

The three novels I analyse in this chapter present storytelling as the constitutive force in identity creation; the characters, created by Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith and Andrea Levy, reflect on the complexities of their origins and experiences through the accounts of their lives and of some important events in the history of their country (India, England, Bangladesh, Jamaica). These novels are set in a global arena of historical events: fiction, imagination, invention are the ways through which the novelists face complex, turbulent past and troubled history. Randall Stevenson concludes his 1993 essay by arguing that “the twentieth-century British literature not only reflects but tries to compensate for the problems and anguish of history, reshaping in imagination what is lost or intractable in fact”.⁷⁶ Fiction (here historiographic metafiction) allows contemporary writers to approach history and meditate on its problems and contradictions, and becomes a surrogate for what has been buried or forgotten in official historical records. In my examination of the novels written by Rushdie, Smith and Levy, I must consider the authors' different background, age, experience. Nonetheless, what they share is an acute interest in exploring and representing the immigrant's experience in a postcolonial and multicultural world, by opening a space from which the subaltern subject can speak. They all shed light on the role of national past and personal history in shaping the immigrant's existence and his/her understanding of such a world; my investigation into *Midnight's Children*, *White Teeth* and *Small Island* focuses on these issues.

⁷⁶ Randall Stevenson, *A Reader's Guide to the Twentieth-Century Novel in Britain*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 127.

Rushdie was born in Bombay in 1947 to Muslim parents and left for England at the age of fourteen: he is a migrant who has experienced the sense of displacement from an early age and, in his fiction, he continuously calls his reader's attention to the immigrant status and his/her condition of rootlessness, instability and homelessness.⁷⁷ After the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Rushdie's life has radically changed: there was a considerable amount of protest by Muslims against his book, which was considered offensive and sacrilegious for presenting a critical portrayal of Islam and an irreverent depiction of the prophet Muhammad, to the point it was banned in many countries with large Muslim communities (among them, India, Bangladesh, Sudan and Thailand) and publicly burned.⁷⁸ On 14th February 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa, calling for the death of Rushdie and his publishers, and declared Rushdie guilty of apostasy. From that moment on, Rushdie was driven to live in secrecy and under escort - the British government put him under secret intelligence protection - and was forced to continuously move. However, for the nine years the fatwa lasted (it was lifted by the Iranian government in 1998), Rushdie has refused to be silenced, to give up his life and his sense of self-worth. Because of this tragical experience of his own, he can be regarded as the contemporary migrant author par excellence and he is largely acknowledged as spokesperson for freedom of speech and thought.

Andrea Levy was born in London in 1956 to Jamaican parents: she is a black British-born child of Jamaican emigrants and her work is often autobiographical, including his family's life and incidents in her fiction. Levy records the experience of post-war England not only from the perspective of Jamaican characters, but also from that of English people, and deals with the problematic identity construction in post-colonial times, with the new and altered appearance of British identity. Her work summarises what Rushdie maintains in his essay "The New Empire within Britain" (1982):

⁷⁷ In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie explicitly presents the theme of migrancy, as Saleem embodies the discontinuous history of the postcolonial, and in *Imaginary Homelands* the author claims the importance of migrancy to his depiction of Indian history (cf. p. 10). While "the past is a country from which we have all emigrated", the experience of loss for the migrant writer is more concrete because of "the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being elsewhere" (cf. p. 12).

⁷⁸ In *White Teeth*, Smith records the scene of a thousand Muslim protesters burning several copies of Rushdie's book in front of the police station in Bradford, in January 1989. Her fictional character Millat Iqbal is the leader of an Islamic group called KEVIN, whose members take part in the manifestation against *The Satanic Verses* and its author, even if they have not read the book and know almost nothing about Salman Rushdie.

I believe that Britain is undergoing a critical phase of its post-colonial period, and this crisis is not simply economic or political. It's a crisis of the whole culture, of society's entire sense of itself.

By writing about Jamaican immigrants' experiences after the Second World War, Levy deals with the end of British Empire and the following reassessment of what it meant to be British.

Zadie Smith is the youngest of the three authors, belonging to a more recent generation. She was born in North London in 1975 to an English father and an immigrant Jamaican mother: as a result, she is half English and half Jamaican, and represents the synthesis of two cultures – Smith's own struggle with a dual identity is mirrored in her novel through her fictional character, Irie Jones. Smith's portrayal of British society is realistically multicultural and critical towards the white mainstream perspective: it claims to reflect the world accurately as it is, i.e. not exclusively white. In *White Teeth*, Smith draws our attention to the fact that contemporary society in London is made up of mixed races, cultures, languages and customs; multiculturalism is not artificial, it is normal.

Randall Stevenson claims that "black or immigrant authors are centrally involved in rescuing the novel from the decay or approaching death. The empire sailed back, with immigrant writers among those most committed to renewing the imagination of England".⁷⁹ These writers give a more accurate picture of contemporary society by describing hybrid and multicultural identities. Both Smith and Levy face new complexities of culture and identity within Britain; their novels reflect on the effects of immigration and the profound changes that have taken place in what it means to be English at the end of the twentieth century. Since the 1960s, Britain has supported a steady flow of immigration and it has been massively subjected to foreign influences⁸⁰; throughout the mid-seventies the country has finally given up its imperialistic pretensions and begun to see itself as a middle-sized European state; by the end of the 1990s, it appears as a "disunited kingdom", England has to consider itself as a distinct unit, politically and culturally.⁸¹ Questions about English identity and traditions are on the agenda; the modern notion of identity gives rise to a politics of

⁷⁹ Randall Stevenson, *The Last of England? 1960-2000*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 5.

⁸⁰ See the controversial 'Rivers of Blood' speech about immigration, which was made on April 20, 1968 by the British right-wing politician Enoch Powell. Powell criticised Commonwealth immigration and pictured black and Asian immigrants as alien invaders; his nationalistic outline of citizenship and his reading of British identity had an enormous influence throughout the rest of the century.

⁸¹ Cf. Randall Stevenson, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

difference. English literature becomes the product of different identities and ‘nations’: it is made of local, national and international influences:

This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow, and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment. [...] Names that secrete within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checks.⁸²

Smith and Levy look into a new concept of Englishness, or, better to say, a developing concept of Englishness, based on inclusivity and plurality; they ponder on, and make fun of, class and race differences, through their characters’ understanding of British society and focus on the construction of ‘new’ identities and their equal dignity. Their novels epitomise Jago Morrison’s observation that “the cultural diversity of modern society means that new ways of thinking about both national and personal identity”.⁸³ *White Teeth* and *Small Island* describe the process of cultural assimilation and conceive a more culturally and racially inclusive British identity, by giving voice to groups typically excluded from previous historical accounts.

Smith’s and Levy’s novels offer new ways of interpreting Britain’s relationship with its colonial past, and explore the creation of contemporary ethnic, racial and religious identities. They deal with the relationship between fiction, reality and the writing of identity, and they both play with the meaning of Englishness; Smith, for instance, ironically entitles one of her novel’s chapters “More English than the English” and one of her characters, Alsana Begum, claims that being English, really English, is a fairy tale:

you go back and back and it’s still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It’s a fairy-tale!⁸⁴

Indeed, *White Teeth*’s satirical tone revolves around what it means to be English in contemporary London and shows that Englishness is now made up of hybrid identities: the Chalfen family, which is supposed to represent ‘white’ Englishness in its pure form, is ironically revealed to consist of immigrants too (third generation immigrants from Eastern Europe). Both Smith and Levy face the problem of identity construction which is influenced by historical past (origins and national past) and trans-cultural interaction, and deal with the immigrants’ search for their place in a multicultural England. Levy’s work reproduces the

⁸² Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2001, p. 326.

⁸³ Jago Morrison, *Contemporary Fiction*, cit., p. 62.

⁸⁴ Zadie Smith, op. cit., p. 236.

experiences of black Britons, who are confronted with Britain and its changing population, and reflects upon the connections between British history and that of the Caribbean. In both Smith's and Levy's novels, the Second World War is presented as a great watershed that has led to the migration of many people (Indian, Bangladeshi and Caribbean as described in their novels) to Britain, who left their countries for political or economic reasons in search of freedom or a better standard of living. All of which resulted in the formation of contemporary British multicultural society.⁸⁵

Whereas, in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie writes about India's history of independence, considering the period between 1915 and 1970s, in *White Teeth* Zadie Smith offers a picture of postcolonial London from the 1970s to the millennium. She portrays a wide range of backgrounds, of mixed families in north London, particularly focussing on the lives of three of them, the Anglo-Caribbean Jones, the Bangladeshi Iqbals and the English Chalfens. Smith describes the multicultural city and provides the reader with social satire, by narrating the stories of these three ethnically different families living in the same area, which is the north London borough of Willesden (a multicultural suburb where Smith herself grew up), and by investigating their roots and their past. Like Rushdie, Smith avails herself of repetitions and digressions, and, like *Midnight's Children*, her novel is characterised by humour and playfulness. The Jones are represented by the working class Englishman Alfred Archibald Jones, his Jamaican immigrant wife, Clara Bowden, and their half English and half Jamaican daughter, Irie; the Iqbals by the Bengali Muslim Samad Miah Iqbal, his wife, Alsana Begum, and their twin sons, Magid and Millat; and the Chalfens by the English, Jewish-Catholic middle-class Marcus and Joyce Chalfen and their four children. Like *Midnight's Children*, *White Teeth* is a family saga, with the difference that in Smith's novel we do not have a single protagonist like Rushdie's Saleem, but many (Archie, Samad, Irie, Millat, Marcus and Magid), and that the families around which the narration pivots are three.

Before analysing Smith's novel, I would like to linger on its table of contents, in order to show how the structure itself is very significant to understand the novel's themes and the author's intents. Unlike Rushdie and other postmodernist writers, Smith does not break the traditional literary experience (she does not force the reader to consider that her story is only a work of fiction and that her characters are not real people but are only made

⁸⁵ In 1948, the British Nationality Act confirmed the right of entry to Britain for the citizens of Empire, referred to as "the Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies" (CUKC), who were deemed British subjects.

of ink, nor she avails herself of an unreliable narrator who claims that his historical account is as valid as any other) nor plays with the narrative perspective. Smith's construction of the novel is ordinate and precise, and presents a confident narrator. Three chapters are entitled "The Root Canals of ..." and focus on the individual past and tradition which make one's identity (Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal, Mangal Pande, and Hortense Bowden). Smith investigates the intricate relationship between historical past and the present, lingering on the gaps in history and in any attempts to recreate it in writing or through her characters' memories. In *White Teeth*, root means genetic inheritance, cultural origins and prehistory: Smith takes into account each of these aspects and seems to agree with the urgent need to preserve personal and national past, and not to forget one's history. Like those of Graham Swift, Martin Amis and Salman Rushdie, her characters cannot escape their past. The quote from Shakespeare at the beginning of *White Teeth* recites: "The past is prologue"⁸⁶, thus revealing the importance of looking back in order to see forward, and of her characters' pre-history and origins.

The root; blood; whispered asides; lost conversations; medals and photographs,
lists and certificates, yellowing paper bearing the faint imprint of brown dates.
Back, back, back.⁸⁷

Like in *Midnight's Children*, references to past, origins and roots permeate every chapter of the novel. The insistence on one's roots is also emphasised by the image of teeth, which gives the title to the novel and is linked to the characters' history and identity. Smith uses the image of teeth as a metaphor for roots: not by chance, three chapters are named in ways that resound the title's teeth: "Teething Trouble", "Molars", and "Canines: The Ripping Teeth". The first of these chapters revolves around the story of Clara Bowden, a Jamaican immigrant who arrives in London with her mother Hortense in 1972 and, soon after, runs away from her mother's house to marry an Englishman. What we know of this character from the first page is that "Clara was from somewhere. She had roots"⁸⁸; then Smith describes how the girl loses her teeth in a moped accident and ironically how, from that moment on, her life begins to change: she openly rejects her mother's religion, distances herself from her, and finally ends into the arms of Alfred Archibald Jones and his secular Englishness.

⁸⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act II, Scene I.

⁸⁷ Zadie Smith, op. cit., p. 83.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

In the chapter entitled “Molars”, the protagonist is the Bangladeshi immigrant Samad Iqbal, who tries to preserve the moral values of his home country. Yet he somehow fails to it. This chapter as well deals with the losing of tradition and opens with the sentence: “And the sins of the Eastern father shall be visited upon the Western sons”⁸⁹. It also includes an episode in which, once more, the image of the teeth is evoked: Samad’s children, Millat and Magid, and Irie Jones visit an old man, Mr Hamilton, during the Harvest Festival, and bring him some food. Yet, Mr Hamilton has no teeth and cannot eat anything the children offer him; he invites them to take care of their teeth and starts a long speech on the significance of one’s teeth.⁹⁰ “Canines: The Ripping Teeth” is dedicated to the Chalfens, their tradition, exhibited superiority and Englishness. However, they have changed their surname “Chalfenovsky” into “Chalfen”, in order to be as English as possible. The chapter’s title alludes to the very funny definition of the Chalfens, which is provided by the character Alsana Begum, mother of the twins Millat and Magid. Alsana is very jealous of the time her children spend with this English family: “I’ll call them Chaffinches – little scavenging English birds pecking at all the best seeds! They are like birds with teeth, with sharp little canines – they don’t just steal, they rip apart!”⁹¹.

Smith deals with the topics of destiny and identity, but also with those of history and religion, science and technology (genetics in particular). Almost at the end of the book, we find a chapter called “The End of History versus the Last Man”, which parodically echoes Fukuyama’s essay *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). To deal with the topic of the end of history in Smith’s chapter is Brother Ibrāhīm, the founder of the Islamic group called KEVIN, during a speech on 1st December 1992; for him, the so-called democracy has led to nothing but oppression, persecution and slaughter. Unlike Fukuyama, Brother Ibrāhīm does not praise Western democracy, science and freedom; he rather shows how the world is now facing chaos, disorder and confusion.⁹² However, Smith proves Brother Ibrāhīm’s perspective to be more religious than political; her character is a fundamentalist, concerned with the endless struggle between religion and science, between the act of faith and the conceit of human intellect:

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 161.

⁹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 171-173.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 344.

⁹² There is no clue in the text suggesting that the character Brother Ibrāhīm has read Fukuyama’s essay. Yet, the whole chapter can be read as the author’s subtle parody of Fukuyama’s ideas.

The colonial powers wish to convince you that it is human intellect and not Allah that is omnipotent, unlimited, all-powerful. They will try to convince you that your minds are not to be used to pronounce the greater glory of the Creator but to raise yourselves up equal to or beyond the Creator!⁹³

The occasion for Brother Ibrāhīm's speech is the launch of Marcus Chalfen's project, which consists in an experiment into genetic manipulation (the ageing of cells) on a mouse, the so-called 'future mouse', which will live for exactly seven years on display, suffering from predetermined genetic defects, including a cancer, purposely planted in it by Chalfen. According to Muslim communities, the scientist and geneticist Marcus Chalfen is to blame and denounce, because he consciously takes on a God-like role, believing that he can improve upon the creation of Allah. Also Samad accuses Marcus's work:

Marcus Chalfen has no right. No right to do as he does. It is not his business. It is God's business. If you meddle with a creature, the very nature of a creature, even if it is a mouse, you walk into the arena that is God's: creation. You infer that the wonder of God's creation can be improved upon. It cannot.⁹⁴

Moral and political implications of playing God with life is a theme discussed throughout the novel. The science book, written by the novelist Surrey T. Banks with the collaboration of Marcus Chalfen, and entitled *Adventures in our Genetic Future*, is another occasion for Smith to return on the theme of science. It represents an ironical way for Smith to show how science can become very close to science fiction. While he is waiting for Magid at the airport, Marcus meets one of his readers, an Asian girl, who claims that the West will use genetic engineering in the East, on the Arabs. The girl does not share Western idea of progress and defines genetics' improvement 'fascist':

I mean, they talk about progress, about leaps and bounds in the field of medicine, but bottom line, if somebody knows how to eliminate 'undesirable' qualities in people, do you think some government's not going to do it? I mean, what's undesirable? There's just something a little fascist about the whole deal. Where are we going here? Millions of blonds with blue eyes? Mail order babies? I mean, if you're Indian like me you've got something to worry about. Then they're planting cancers in poor creatures; like, who are you to mess with the make-up of a mouse? Actually creating an animal just so it can die – it's like being God.⁹⁵

On the one hand, Marcus Chalfen - and any scientist who agrees with him - can be considered the last man of the chapter's title, against whom Brother Ibrāhīm invites his

⁹³ Zadie Smith, op. cit., p. 475.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 455.

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 417-418.

audience to rebel; on the other hand, we can deduce that the last man is to be read as “the one born not of a woman but from a man’s intellect alone”⁹⁶, that is the product of Chalfen’s genetic engineering.

White Teeth is divided into four main parts: *Archie 1974, 1945*; *Samad 1984, 1857*; *Irie 1990, 1907*; and *Magid, Millat and Marcus, 1992, 1999*. Each of these sections is named after a character, contains five chapters and begins with an epigraph. As we evince from those dates, only the last section proceeds forward, revealing an interest in the future of science and humankind, through the launch of the FutureMouse. On the contrary, the other narrative sections go backwards, into the mysteries of the past which Smith’s characters are supposed to unveil not only for us readers, but also for their coming to terms with their own identity. Smith offers multiple storylines, spanning a long period of time: the time of the narration moves back and forth between the end of the Second World War, in which the protagonists Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal took part, and the 1990s, in which the story ends. The novel is fraught with numerous parallels and correspondences; in the four sections, events and history repeat, even if they are described and retold by different characters. Smith presents a plurality of voices, perspectives and knowledge. In spite of its structure and the precise distribution of the chapters, *White Teeth* conveys the (postmodernist) message that randomness and chaos triumph over order and closure; indeed, it exhibits and supports a postmodern perspective. Smith’s outlook is postmodernist as she rejects absolutes, and her novel shows “the inevitable failure of the fundamental truths that the characters pursue and the systems of order and control that underlie them”.⁹⁷

The first two parts of the book are dedicated to Archie and Samad; the last two to their children Irie, Magid and Millat. Such a narrative structure focuses on the differences and conflicts between parents and children, and their diverse perspectives and expectations. Immigrants of the first generation, represented in the novel by characters like Samad, Alsana or Hortense, have traditionalistic views, which clash with those of their Westernised children; they fear that their identity could disappear and force their children to preserve their native culture. Immigrants of the second generation, like Irie, Magid and Millat, are caught between different cultural spheres, sets of moral values and contradicting expectations: whereas their parents want them to preserve traditions and values of their

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 475.

⁹⁷ Tracey Lorraine Walters, *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*, New York: Peter Lang, 2008, p. 10.

home country, British society expects them to conform to the norms of Western culture. Like Andrea Levy in *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), Smith shows how immigrants' children are in a conflict between their family and their host society; at first they are dominated by the need to absorb British culture and Western values, in order to be included and accepted in their host society, then they get closer to their past and roots, in order to become aware of the people they are, of their unique identity.

Together with the generational conflict, a central issue in *White Teeth* is the individual's search for a personal identity; Smith investigates the characters' identity conflicts in front of the background of their family history. She focuses on the migrant's conflict of assimilating to the dominant culture and retaining his/her original cultural identity. The self-definition process for the younger generations is difficult because they have to connect two different cultural backgrounds: Smith depicts the preoccupation of young people who are trying to make their own history, and their failure to understand their parents' insistence on the traditions of the past. Irie, Magid and Millat represent the second-generation immigrants who rebel against their families, as they try to figure out who they are; the stories and anecdotes about their birth, childhood and adolescence are the occasion for the author to face the question of what Britishness is and the need to grant second-generation immigrants an identity that transcends their skin colour. Samad's twin sons and Archie's daughter suffer from problems with self-determination in relation to a white mainstream society: they are all born in England, but are deemed to be foreigners because they are not white⁹⁸, and because of their family past and cultural tradition. Therefore, they wish to break free from their parents, who are shackled to a past and traditions which they perceive as foreign (which come from elsewhere for the second-generation), and rather try to be integrant part of the society in which they are born. Both Magid and Millat want to free themselves from their Asian roots: Magid begins to call himself Mark Smith, behaves and wears clothes like an English boy, he is not interested in religion and becomes an atheist scientist; Millat's identity is fashioned by Hollywood and the gangster movies, he models himself on Robert De Niro's character Travis Bickle in the film *Taxi Driver* and is very fascinated by Western idols (by Goodfellas). Irie refuses his Caribbean look; being obsessed with Englishness and Western beauty values, she wants to shirk her body shape and Afro hair, she tries to lose weight in every way and has her hair straightened. However, Smith

⁹⁸ Their skin colour ensures their isolation and shapes their relationship with British society; for instance, the English Chalfens will take Irie's and Millat's skin colour as the defining characteristic of their status.

argues that history and the past are inescapable and her characters can be no *tabula rasa*. In spite of their attempts and wishes, immigrants (even those of second generation) “cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow”.⁹⁹

The novel opens on 1st January 1975 in Cricklewood Broadway, a district of North London, where the forty-seven years old Alfred Archibald Jones attempts to commit suicide by gassing himself in his car. “He was resigned to it. He was prepared for it. This was a decided-upon suicide. It was a New Year’s resolution”.¹⁰⁰ Archie’s decision is the result of the divorce from his Italian wife Ophelia, after a thirty-year marriage. However, Archie fails in his suicide attempt because he has parked his car in front of a butcher’s, the Hussein-Ishmael, and is urged by the owner, Mo Hussein-Ishmael, to free his loading dock. Archie is not a resolute person; he happens to be forced to act by other people, or resorts to flipping a coin when he has to take a decision, thus leaving the task of determining his life to chance. His second life-chance leads him to the remnants of a New Year’s Eve party – outside the house it was painted: Welcome to the ‘End of the World Party’¹⁰¹ - where he comes upon a young Jamaican woman, Clara Bowden, who is looking for a new life too and she is feeling the same way Archie is. Clara is nineteen, the most beautiful woman Archie had ever seen, with only an imperfection: a complete lack of teeth in the top of her mouth.¹⁰² After hardly a month from their first meeting, Clara and Archie get married.¹⁰³

Archie belongs to the working class, he has a job in a printing firm, and represents for Clara the chance to escape from her mother Hortense Bowden, a strict Jehovah’s Witness, and from her previous boyfriend Ryan Topps, funnily described as the Last Man on Earth.¹⁰⁴ Archie is humble and mild; he is not obsessed with the end of the world and thus seems to be Clara’s saviour from religious fanaticism. Yet, the young Jamaican girl

⁹⁹ Zadie Smith, op. cit., p. 466.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁰¹ The sign is a joke, yet Smith explains that there were eight million Jehovah’s Witnesses, including Clara’s mother, waiting for the end of the world on 1st January 1975. The theme of the end of the world returns many times in the novel.

¹⁰² This is only the first of the numerous references to teeth that we find disseminated throughout the text.

¹⁰³ There is a resemblance between Smith’s characters and her own parents: like Archie and Clara, Smith’s father was a white English man and her mother a black Jamaican woman; there was a big age gap between them and they met at a party.

¹⁰⁴ The epithet to Ryan Topps has nothing to do with the last man of Smith’s homonymous chapter, which is based on Fukuyama’s thought. Here it ironically refers to the expression: “If he was the last man on earth, I still wouldn’t” (p. 28), to suggest that Clara’s boyfriend is very unattractive. Smith explains that every school has its Ryan Topps, with the variations of Mr ‘Not for a Million Pounds’, or Mr ‘Not to Save my Mother’s Life’, or Mr ‘Not for World Peace’.

very soon realises that “Archibald Jones was no romantic hero”, “No white knight, this Archibald Jones. No aims, no hopes, no ambitions.”¹⁰⁵ However, Archie and Clara get on with each other, he buys her a nice house in Willesden Green, an area in north west London, and they have a daughter, Irie.¹⁰⁶ Through the Jones’ mixed family, Smith implies that racial differences are no longer insuperable obstacles within postcolonial setting; yet, she also shows how racial prejudice is still very present in London society. The first example in the novel comes from Archie’s colleagues: they do not approve that Archie speaks with Pakistanis and Carribeans, that he has married a black woman, bringing her to the office dinner without first referring to her skin’s colour, and that has finally mixed up his genes with hers. However, Archie does not bother with what they say, he is happy with Clara, and his friendship to the immigrant Samad appears to be the most important tie in his life.

Archie’s long-standing friendship introduces us to the second couple, the Bangladeshi Samad and Alsana Iqbal. Samad has emigrated to Britain twenty years after the Second World War, where he met Archie. His Bangladeshi family is highly religious and steeped in great tradition; once in London, Samad realises that the English system of values is very different from the Bengali one and soon feels corrupted by English society. England does not welcome him, he does not find a satisfying job, he is a frustrated waiter at his cousin’s restaurant and would like to wear a sign that says:

“I am not a waiter. I have been a student, a scientist, a soldier, my wife is called Alsana, we live in East London but we would like to move North. I am a Muslim but Allah has forsaken me or I have forsaken Allah, I’m not sure. I have a friend, Archie, and others. I am forty-nine but women still turn in the street. Sometimes”.¹⁰⁷

Samad’s marriage to Alsana has been traditionally arranged in Bangladesh: when he speaks of his might-be wife to Archie in 1945, Alsana is not yet born. Both Clara and Alsana are much younger than their husbands and both get pregnant in the same year: Alsana is expecting twin sons, Clara a daughter. Samad and Alsana move from Whitechapel to Willesden, where Archie and Clara live too. Alsana is doubtful about his husband’s friend: “You fight in an old, forgotten war with some Englishman...married to a black! Whose

¹⁰⁵ Zadie Smith, op. cit., p. 48.

¹⁰⁶ The name ‘Irie’ in patois means everything ok, no problem, cool. It is used also by Andrea Levy for one of her characters in *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999).

¹⁰⁷ Zadie Smith, op. cit., p. 58.

friends are they? These are the people my child will grow up around? Their children – half blacky-white?”.¹⁰⁸ However, Alsana’s initial racial prejudice soon vanishes and she becomes close friend with Clara. The two women begin to meet very often, as well as their children do when they grow up. In this way, Smith juxtaposes and makes people from different ethnic groups interact, showing how they attempt to understand each other, despite their cultural differences.

Archie and Samad first met on 1st April 1945: Archie was the driver on a tank, Samad a wireless operator. They had been assigned to each other. Archie had never seen a Bengali and, during the first days they spent together, he impolitely stared at Samad, unconsciously expressing his wonder and latent prejudice. However, unlike the other soldiers, Archie was mild and kind to Samad and they soon became ‘friends’. Samad told Archie that his great grandfather is Mangal Pande, the great hero of the 1857 Indian Mutiny and, from that moment, Pande’s story became a recurrent topic of discussion between the two men. Archie was excited about the idea of Samad’s having a hero in his family, a bit of history in his blood. He complained: “I’m a Jones, you see. ’Slike a ‘Smith’. We’re nobody”.¹⁰⁹ In Archie’s sentence there is a double irony implied by the author: first, Smith, which is a very common English surname, is also that of the author’s; second, Samad’s son, Magid, wants to change his surname Iqbal into Mark Smith, in order to sound more English.

The theme of racism runs throughout the novel: although racial mixing has become embedded and rooted in English society, Smith sheds light on the permanence of racial prejudices and discrimination. During the war, Samad addresses Archie his warning against English oversimplifying attitudes towards people from the East:

*Please. Do me this one, great favour, Jones. If ever you hear anyone, when you are back home, if ever you hear anyone speak of the East, hold your judgement. If you are told “they are all this” or “they do this” or “their opinions are these”, withhold your judgement until all the facts are upon you. Because that land they call “India” goes by a thousand names and is populated by millions, and if you think you have found two men the same amongst that multitude, then you are mistaken.*¹¹⁰

Samad is a kind of elder brother to Archie; he is very reflective and tries to make Archie ponder on important questions about his family and life. He does not know what to do after

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 99.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

the end of the war and shares his worries and problems with Archie, by calling his attention to the complicated immigrant condition:

Go back to Bengal? Or to Delhi? Who would have such an Englishman there? To England? Who would have such an Indian? They promise us independence in exchange for the men we were. But it is a devilish deal. What should I do?¹¹¹

Samad's condition of not being regarded as English by the English, and as Indian by the Indians, will impinge on the following generation.

The episode that marks Archie's and Samad's lives occurs in a tiny Bulgarian village bordering Greece and Turkey, when they lose their command, means of communication, transport and defence. It is the end of the war in Europe but they still do not know it; they are informed of it by a Russian soldier after a week - Archie and Samad are part of a History they ignore. They are blocked in a plundered village, the same place of a sick doctor who has to be caught and carried to Poland and then judged for his involvement in Nazi eugenics programmes. The doctor is Dr Marc-Pierre Perret, a young Frenchman who has worked for the Nazis on the sterilization programme since before the war, and, later, on the euthanasia policy. Samad and Archie are asked by the Russian soldiers to catch and bring him to Poland; yet, Samad feels that the right thing to do is to kill Dr Sick, considering it their special mission in History, their opportunity to fight the devil:

What is his science? Choosing who shall be born and who shall not - breeding people as if they were so many chickens, destroying them if the specifications are not correct. He wants to control, to dictate the future. He wants a race of men, a race of indestructible men, that will survive the last days of this earth.¹¹²

Samad, who identifies the England's future in Archie, expects and forces him to kill the French scientist. The first part of the novel ends with a shot heard by Samad and his belief that Archie has killed the Nazi doctor.

Part Two opens in the eighties and focuses on the Bangladeshi family of Samad, Alsana and their twin sons. Both Alsana and Samad are confronted with conflicts between

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 119. This theme returns in the novel's following chapters when the FutureMouse project is introduced and discussed. Marcus Chalfen has designed it with the help of Dr Perret himself, who reappears as Marcus's ageing mentor at the end of the novel. The attempt, which is first made by Perret and then by Chalfen, is to create the last man.

assimilating and preserving their cultures; through these two characters, Smith reveals the immigrant's fears of dilution and disappearance:

But it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, peanuts, compared to what the immigrant fears – dissolution, disappearance.¹¹³

Smith does not offer a white mainstream perspective, she rather provides her readers with one of the immigrants' perspectives, with which she takes side. Although she makes fun of her character Samad and of his close-mindedness, Smith is very attentive to show immigrants' suffering and feeling of displacement. Alsana is younger and more open-minded than Samad, she has a liking for changes, but she also fears the dissolution of her tradition and stock:

Alsana Iqbal would regularly wake up in a puddle of her own sweat after a night visited by visions of Millat (genetically *BB*; where *B* stands for Bengali-ness) marrying someone called Sarah (*aa* where 'a' stands for Aryan), resulting in a child called Michael (*Ba*), who in turn marries somebody called Lucy (*aa*), leaving Alsana with a legacy of unrecognizable great-grandchildren (*Aaaaaa!*), their Bengali-ness thoroughly diluted.¹¹⁴

Samad in particular stands for the generation of unassimilated immigrants in London: arguing with his wife Alsana, he blames her for being thankful they are in England and not in Bangladesh: "that's because you have swallowed it whole"¹¹⁵, whereas he is horrified at the possibility of absorbing English culture. Samad is obsessed with tradition, is worried about his sons, because he notices how it is easy for children to go off the rails in this day and age:

I don't know what is happening to our children in this country: take Alsana's sisters – all their children are nothing but trouble. They won't go to the mosque, they don't pray, they speak strangely, they dress strangely, they eat all kinds of rubbish, they have intercourse with God knows who. No respect for tradition. People call it assimilation when it is nothing but corruption. Corruption!¹¹⁶

For Samad, Britain is a morally bankrupt country, and he is the first to be corrupted: at Magid and Millat's school, Samad meets their music teacher, Poppy Burt-Jones (July 1984), with whom he starts an affair. Samad betrays his wife, lies to his family and the Bengali

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

people he meets when he is going to Poppy's house, thus being far from representing a good example of morality and rightness for his children.

The affair between Samad and Poppy Burt-Jones might appear paradoxical if we consider that Samad is conservative and close-minded, while she is busy working to convey a sense of respect for cultural diversity to her pupils, and promote multicultural exchange through her school's activities. Samad is not in favour of London's mixed society: he claims that the gradual loss or, even worse, the rejection of one's family heritage is the unavoidable consequence of living in a culturally mixed environment. He himself is torn between the pressures of the new country he lives in, and the old religious tradition of his homeland. Over the years, his increased attachment to faith is not motivated by a desire for righteousness, but is a spiritual remedy to resist English influence and corruption. Samad has never been a devout Muslim; in his case, Islam is a façade to adopt in order to protect the roots that he is so afraid to lose.¹¹⁷ His religious practices are a hypocritical way for him to resolve personal moral crises. He feels that his very temptations in the Western world (his drinking, or his unfaithfulness to Alsana) will increase in the following generation, that of his children, who even suffer from the lack of the background of Bangladesh traditions. Throughout the novel, Samad worries about the inevitable destiny waiting for his children, as they will be corrupted by the loose Western morals.

Smith observes that children are different from the generation of their parents, they all know that they have to respect other cultures and believe that difference has to do more with their parents than with them. During Harvest Festival, a day in which children take food prepared by their parents to senior citizens in the area, the Iqbal twins and Irie Jones go to Mr Hamilton's house and offer him some goods. When they knock at the old man's door, he first asks them to go away and then lets them get in: he finally shares his memoirs of fighting in the Congo with the children in a long speech full of prejudice. Through this episode, Smith shows how old generations are close-minded and that it is very difficult for them to embrace a multicultural perspective.

¹¹⁷ Samad's son, Magid, embodies the loss of such roots: not only does he begin to call himself Mark Smith while he is still a schoolboy (in order to sound more English), but also he eats bacon and sausage despite being a Muslim.

Samad's dilemma about the education of his two sons is taken into consideration also by Samad's friends at the pub O' Connell's Pool House, run by Abdul Mickey. Speaking to Archie, Mickey says that Samad has two options with Millat and Magid:

he can either send them back to the old country (Bangladesh), have them brought up proper, by their granddads and grandmas, have them learn about their fucking culture, have them grow up with some fucking principles. Or accept it. He'll have to accept it. We are all English, now.¹¹⁸

The pub plays an important role in the novel: it has been Archie's and Samad's meeting place for ten years, where to discuss everything from six (the time Archie finishes work) to eight (the time Samad starts). At the O' Connell's, customers feel secure: they feel at home, because nothing changes, things are only retold and remembered:

Everything was remembered, nothing was lost. History was never revised or reinterpreted, adapted or whitewashed.¹¹⁹

In order to protect at least one of his twin sons from what he perceives as 'English perversion and wickedness', Samad decides to send Magid to Bangladesh (he cannot afford to send them both). On the conviction that English culture is not adequate for Islamic upbringing, he determines that at least one of his twin sons will grow up a true and faithful Muslim; Magid is sent back to Bangladesh to be educated in the ways of his homeland. After Samad's decision, Alsana stops speaking to him, choosing passive resistance as her revenge to him. Whereas Magid is in Bangladesh, Millat remains in London and gets involved in drugs, gangs and sex. The second part of the book ends with New Year's Eve 1989, which Archie and Samad spend at O' Connell's, by discussing on the diverse versions of the story of Mangal Pande (i.e. history's official version and Samad's opinion); Archie has done research on Pande and learnt that Pande was most likely drunk when he attempted to shoot his English commander.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 191-192. In Mickey's words, the loss of homeland's traditions is something to accept and multiculturalism is a fact. By making her character ironically claim that people of different racial backgrounds, who live in England, are all English, Smith suggests that English identity has become multicultural. Nonetheless, she remains critical towards a multiculturalism conceived in terms of the imposition of some cultures (those of Western liberal societies) on others.

¹¹⁹ Ibidem.

¹²⁰ In the novel, Smith includes the Oxford English Dictionary definition of the word 'Pandy': "[Perh. the surname of the first mutineer amongst high-caste sepoy in the Bengal army.] 1 Any sepoy who revolted in the Indian Mutiny of 1857-9 2 Any mutineer or traitor 3 Any fool or coward in a military situation." (p. 251). Archie reports such a definition to Samad, while Samad claims that it is not a correct representation of the character Mangal Pande, as he was a mutineer but not a coward or a traitor.

In writing a book of historiographic metafiction, Smith includes some important historical events in her fictional narrative, such as the assassination of the Prime Minister of India, Mrs Indira Gandhi on 31st October 1984, the consequent tragedies of 4th November, when a thousand people had died, the Muslim protest against *The Satanic Verses* on 14th January 1989 in Bradford, and the fall of the Berlin wall on 9th November 1989. Indira Gandhi's assassination (cf. Smith, p. 197) and the protest in Bradford (cf. Smith, p. 233) can be read as a sort of tribute to Salman Rushdie and his work: the former recalls the story of *Midnight's Children*; the latter functions as a reminder of the controversy caused by the publication of *The Satanic Verses* and the consequent problems that Rushdie lived. Smith stresses that, when Millat travels to Bradford with other KEVIN members, in order to burn copies of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, none of the boys knows the writer or has read his book. Alsana is very upset by her son's intolerance, prejudice and discrimination, and decides to give him a lesson by burning his records, posters, T-shirts and videos, claiming that either everything is sacred or nothing is.

In *White Teeth*, Smith deals with History as well as with its end: she records the fall of the Berlin Wall and her characters watching it on TV. The fall of the Wall was an event which prompted the claim that the end of history had been reached and that democracy was man's greatest invention: "the last days of a regime. Political apocalypse, meltdown. It's an historic occasion".¹²¹ Smith shows how, at the apparent end of history, cultural difference and religious tensions are still very present. She explores British postcolonial society at the turn of the millennium, which proves to be multiethnic, and demonstrates that, with the end of history, what actually ends are the myths of national identity and pure Britishness. By describing multiculturalism in its most elemental form, i.e. "children with first and last names on a direct collision course"¹²², Smith deals with the establishment of a new national identity in postcolonial Britain. To make any sense, the end of history should bring a new political paradigm which gives way to a condition of political plurality: the final message in Smith's novel lies in the hope for the future that people manage to live together, in peace and harmony, not suffering from any forced assimilation and not losing their tradition. In her view, at the end of history, the politics of difference and identity should replace the former politics of repressive unity, because a coherent national identity is not based on homogeneity, but on recognition of difference as a means of cultural enrichment.

¹²¹ Zadie Smith, op. cit., p. 241.

¹²² Ibid., p. 326.

Part Three in the novel is about the character Irie Jones, Archie's and Clara's daughter. Irie is fifteen and has an inferiority complex towards English beauty-standards. Like the character Faith Jackson in Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), Irie's outer appearance is that of a black Jamaican girl, although she does not feel Jamaican and she has never been to Jamaica. She identifies herself by her experience in London, rather than in terms of her half-Caribbean roots and appearance. Despite her attempt at integrating into English society, Irie is pervaded by a sense of inadequacy, subdued by the belief in her ugliness, in her wrongness.

There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land.¹²³

Irie believes that she is too fat and wants to lose weight; she hates her rebellious Afro hair and desperately wants to have it straight. She dreams of looking like an English girl and having a chance with the boy she has fallen in love, Millat. Yet, Millat has several English girlfriends and never considers the possibility of going out with Irie because she is a real friend, they share history (that is childhood spent together and their fathers' long-standing friendship). Growing up, Irie finally comes to realise that she cannot change her Jamaican body into an English one and especially that there is no need to do it. She accepts herself for what she is: she accepts her half English and half Jamaican identity.

Irie, Millat and Joshua Chalfen attend the same class in Glenard Oak school: Irie loves Millat, Joshua loves Irie, Millat is fired with Islamic fervour. The remaining twin is introduced to the enthusiastic fundamentalist group called 'KEVIN', which is the (ironic) acronym for 'the Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation', and becomes the head of the Cricklewood branch. Millat's, Irie's and Joshua's lives get intermingled when the three boys are found in the act of smoking dope and punished with a two-month programme: the headmaster decides that, twice a week, Millat and Irie have to go to Joshua's house to study Maths and Biology, subjects in which Joshua excels. The white English Joshua Chalfen teaches the black second-generation immigrants Irie and Millat, as if Joshua, representing the middle class, took up the White Man's Burden and thus accomplished the civilising mission.¹²⁴ Through this ploy, Smith introduces us with the Chalfens and intertwines their lives with those of the Joneses and the Iqbals. The intellectual Chalfens begin to take an interest in the education of Irie and Millat: Joyce is a maternal

¹²³ Ibid., p. 266.

¹²⁴ My observation is obviously ironic.

person and grows fond of Millat and his problems at school, with his family and with religion; Marcus offers Irie a job as his personal secretary.

The Chalfens are a Jewish-Catholic family educated at Oxford: Joshua's father is an eminent scientist, a geneticist, and his mother is a horticulturalist, a botanist who has written numerous books on plants and human relationships. They represent the white middle class, they are clever, wealthy, and apparently without biases. They believe that middle classes are the inheritors of the enlightenment, the creators of the welfare state, the intellectual elite that is the source of all culture. The Chalfens think they have the monopoly on good and speak of their culture as the right one; therefore, their allegedly 'multicultural' position is fake, as they are actually convinced of their own superiority:

The Chalfens didn't need other people. They referred to themselves as nouns, verbs and occasionally adjectives: *It's the Chalfen way, And then he came out with a real Chalfenism, He's Chalfening again, We need to be a bit more Chalfenist about this.*¹²⁵

Smith treats them with irony and also ridicules their fascination with 'the exotic'; although they wish to be considered intellectual liberals, they often demonstrate complete cultural ignorance and lack of sensitivity towards the other.

Smith's emphasis on their fake multiculturalism recalls Žižek's attack on liberal multiculturalism, in which the other is accepted only in its postmodern aestheticization (for instance, through ethnic food, clothes and furniture).¹²⁶ Smith explains that Joyce's interest in other cultures and in different racial backgrounds is not real and deep, but only an effect of her boredom. The first question Joyce asks Irie and Millat, when they two go to the Chalfens in order to meet Joshua, is: 'you look very exotic. Where are you from?' As Irie and Millat simultaneously answer 'Willesden', Joyce insists by asking 'but where *originally?*', because she believes in an inextricable link between nationality, citizenship and race. Like many Britons, Joyce keeps an image of a fixed and exclusive British identity and is unable to prescind from the skin colour: to be British for her is to be a white Anglo Saxon. The ironic misunderstanding between Joyce and the two guys continues as Millat answers 'Whitechapel', which is the area where the Iqbals lived before moving to north-west London.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 314.

¹²⁶ Cf. Slavoj Žižek, 'Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multicultural Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 225 (September-October, 1997), 28.

¹²⁷ Cf. Zadie Smith, op. cit., p. 319.

Irie develops a devotion, indeed an overwhelming passion for the Chalfens, and decides to integrate more with English society by attending their house and learning their customs. She wants to merge with them:

She wanted their Englishness. Their Chalfishness. The purity of it. It didn't occur to her that the Chalfens were, after a fashion, immigrants too (third generation, by way of Germany and Poland, née Chalfenovsky). To Irie, the Chalfens were more English than the English. When Irie stepped over the threshold of the Chalfen house, she was crossing borders, sneaking into England.¹²⁸

In the novel, the Chalfens are supposed to represent Englishness; yet, Smith demonstrates that their 'genetic' purity is a fake by ironically putting emphasis on the fact that they are third generation immigrants from Germany and Poland. Smith's conviction is that "we are all hybrid post-colonials, biologically as well as culturally, and the pursuit of pure ethnic origins is a pointless objective".¹²⁹

Whereas Millat is under Joyce's care, Irie works for Marcus. Marcus Chalfen believes in the perfectibility of all life and in the possibility of making it more efficient, logical and effective; he considers that social and scientific progress are brothers-in-arms.¹³⁰ He is working on the FutureMouse project, causing the growth of tumours on mice, in an attempt to improve mankind artificially. His scientific ambitions embody western man's desire to control and dominate over nature; his project holds out the tantalizing promise of a new phase in human history where we are not victims of the random, but instead directors and arbitrators of our own fate:

No other roads, no missed opportunities, no parallel possibilities. No second guessing, no what-ifs, no might-have-beens. Just certainty.¹³¹

Marcus and Magid begin exchanging letters and feel mutual admiration, thus provoking Irie's jealousy. In a letter, Irie reads that Marcus has low opinions of her scientific abilities and thinks she should become a dentist.¹³² However, she is not offended by Marcus's words.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 328.

¹²⁹ Dominic Head, "Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*", in Richard J. Lane, Rod Mengham, and Philip Tew, *Contemporary British Fiction*, London: Polity Press, 2003, chapter 7, p. 114.

¹³⁰ Marcus Chalfen is the embodiment of the Enlightenment's thought: he firmly believes in rationality and scientific knowledge as a means to improve mankind's quality of life and promote societal progress.

¹³¹ Zadie Smith, op. cit., p. 490. Smith embraces a postmodern perspective by showing that certainty is impossible to achieve and that we are finally dominated by random and chaos.

¹³² Of course, it is not without reason that Smith chooses dentistry for her protagonist; in so doing, she calls our attention, once again, to the importance of roots and the metaphor of teeth.

She likes the idea of taking up dentistry, but first she wishes to take a year off and see the world: ‘I’m young, I want some experiences. I’ve lived in this bloody suburb all my life. Everyone’s the same here. I want to go and see people of the world...’.¹³³ Irie’s sentence that everyone is the same in Willesden Green sounds very ironical: she is so familiar with the difference of the people of her area that they do not seem different to her at all. She knows them all, whether they are white and solid middle class like the Chalfens, whether they are Bangladeshi, or mixed, or black – they are all Willesden Green lot.

Besides Irie’s discontent with what she is and what she has, with the place where she lives and the people she knows, which is after all only a transitory phase of her adolescence, Smith invites to consider Samad’s frustration as his living condition:

These days, it feels to me like you make a devil’s pact when you walk into this country. You hand over your passport at the check-in, you get stamped, you want to make a little money, get yourself started...but you mean to go back! Who would want to stay? Cold, wet, miserable; terrible food, dreadful newspaper – who would want to stay? In a place where you are never welcomed, only tolerated. Just tolerated. Like you are an animal finally house-trained. Who would want to stay? But you have made a devil’s pact ... it drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognizable, you belong nowhere.¹³⁴

Samad suffers from the physical immigrant’s condition of displacement: he does not feel at home, either in England or in Bangladesh, so he lives in-between and firmly rejects assimilation. Despite all his efforts, Samad fails to set a strong example for his sons, who end up adopting extreme viewpoints: Millat finds his calling in an organization dedicated to the Islamization of England, while Magid comes back from Bangladesh as a militant repudiator of religion. Ironically, the twins become exactly the opposite than what his father had foreseen: Magid grows up a man of science, as a sort of atheist who devotes his life to rationality, as an Anglophile with an interest in genetic engineering, a science that Samad and Millat repudiate. Sent to Bangladesh to be immersed in a past and tradition that were never his own, Magid turns into a ‘pukka Englishman’: he is rational, liberal and legalistic. Millat, remaining amid the corrupting western temptations of north London, falls into religious extremism and becomes a fundamentalist terrorist:

¹³³ Zadie Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 377.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 327. The image of the animal which is finally house-trained can be read as a reference to the future mouse, whose identity is predetermined and controlled by scientists.

There are no words. The one I send home comes out a pukka Englishman, white suited, silly wig lawyer. The one I keep here is fully paid-up green bow-tie-wearing fundamentalist terrorist".¹³⁵

Samad cannot determine what his sons will become through his choice; the reversal of his expectations exhibits the futility of attempting to play God with his sons' lives. Samad cannot control the future and Smith shows us that, when her character tries to do it, he runs up against the strength of fate. History and fate are intermingled throughout the narrative until the very end, when even Marcus's scientific project fails - and, with it, his attempt to play God - and the mouse manages to escape.

Smith shows that old and young generations have two different approaches to history and exemplifies them through the characters of Samad and Irie. Samad's insistence on his family history is almost obsessive, as he thinks that the present is determined by the past. For this very reason, he tries to rewrite the story of his traitorous great-grandfather Mangal Pande, restoring him to the central place that Samad thinks he deserves in Indian history. He attempts to control his interaction with history and believes that if he understands his history, then he will be able to understand and determine his present and future. Irie feels rage against history, destiny and the bonds of family; she wants to cast her past aside, rejecting the belief that history shapes the present. She thinks that if she ignores the past, then she will not be influenced by it in her present and future. Yet, she finally understands that it is impossible to escape one's personal history and that its effects are preponderant on her life. Through the example of Irie's daughter, fathered by either Magid or Millat (the good and the bad uncle)¹³⁶, Smith's conclusion in the novel is that we cannot control the way in which our roots reach into our lives. Tracey Walters argues that the novel demonstrates the impossibility of escaping history or of living entirely outside of its influence:

In the end, the interaction of the past and the present is messier and less predictable than the characters want it to be; the roots provided by history can neither be studied as a faithful forecast of our future, nor can they be entirely pruned away.¹³⁷

In the chapter entitled "Chalfenism versus Bowdenism", Irie learns about her family's history, of which she was unaware because her mother, Clara, made a clear break

¹³⁵ Ibidem.

¹³⁶ Like in Rushdie's novels *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, the role of parents is here multiplied: Irie's daughter has three fathers. The girl thinks that Magid and Millat are her uncles, while one of them is her real father, and grows up believing that her father is Joshua.

¹³⁷ Tracey L. Walters, op. cit., p. 15.

with her past and cut any contact with her mother, Hortense. Going to live with her grandmother Hortense in Lambeth, south London, is an occasion for Irie to have a closer look at her own half-Jamaican identity. Hortense uncovers the details of their ancestry and Smith shows that history is formative in Irie's experience. In order to shed light on the back history in Irie's life, Smith includes a genealogic chart: at this point in the novel, we are presented with Irie's family tree from her grandma's branch.¹³⁸ Irie's great-grandfather was an English sailor, Captain Charlie Durham, who made Ambrosia Bowden, Irie's great-grandmother, pregnant (May 1906), with the pretext to teach her how to read and write; then, Durham left her. Ambrosia became a Jehovah's Witness and refused to meet Durham when he returned to her. Hortense Bowden, Irie's grandmother, was born on 14th January 1907, the day of the terrible earthquake in Kingston, and never knew her English father. Irie's racially mixed background is thus explained: she descends from a black maternal line and a partially white paternal line (from colonial era in Jamaica to postcolonial London, from Charlie Durham to Archibald Jones).

Hortense lives in Lambeth with Clara's ex boyfriend, Ryan Topps, who is working with the Jehovah's Witnesses leaders to determine the true date of the end of the world - Hortense believes that the end of the world will come with an earthquake similar to the one in Kingston, when she was born. Irie, atheist, moves to Hortense's house and finds that her eighty-year-old grandma is still recruiting young people to join her faith; yet, Irie refuses to get involved in religion. The months she spends with Hortense serve her to learn her family's past and history: she finally realises that she cannot deny part of herself, but must accept both her origins, her biracial background.¹³⁹ In the novel, Irie is the spokesperson for the hope that, one day, maybe roots and cultural origins would no longer matter and racial difference might not be an issue.

In Part Four, Marcus has arranged for Magid to return to England, where he can pursue a degree in law. Magid is now seventeen: he has spent eight years in Bangladesh and looks forward to going back to England. Marcus and Magid meet at the airport - Smith calls the moment "a meeting of minds"¹⁴⁰. As agreed in letters, Magid starts working as Marcus's research assistant on his genetically engineered FutureMouse, thus supplanting Irie. His return changes the balance in all the three families: Alsana begins to speak directly to

¹³⁸ Cf. Zadie Smith, op. cit., p. 338.

¹³⁹ Andrea Levy describes the same process of coming to terms with one's roots and identity in her above mentioned novel *Fruit of the Lemon*; yet, the protagonist Faith Jackson, unlike Irie Jones, really travels to Jamaica and learns her past and genealogic chart not from her grandma, but from her aunt Coral.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 421.

Samad again; Millat refuses to see Magid and live in the same house as him, so he moves to the Chalfens'. Joshua refuses to live in the same house as Millat, and moves to the Jones'. The narrator ironically observes that the two brothers' genes, those prophets of the future, have reached different conclusions: while Magid engages himself with Marcus's experiment, which involves the growing of cancerous tumours on mice, Millat is struggling with his Muslim beliefs: he tries to live as KEVIN prescribes, studying the Quran and purging himself of the taint of the West, but it is difficult for him to abstain from drugs and women. Suffering from abstinence, Millat agrees to make love with Irie, who, in turn, will also make love with Magid on the same day (she gets pregnant and, ironically enough, will never know who the father is). In the meanwhile, Joshua joins FATE, a radical animal rights group¹⁴¹, to protest against his father's work as a scientist, and falls in love with Joely, the leader's wife of the group. KEVIN finds the mouse experiments obscene and contrary to religion (as an abomination to the sanctity of creation) and organises a protest against Marcus's project. Millat and the Islamic militants are against genetic engineering; Millat plans to shoot at both Marcus and his mentor, the old Nazi doctor, when they publicly present their project. Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses (among them, Irie's grandmother) and animalists (among them, FATE and Joshua himself) oppose FutureMouse as an interference to their own beliefs and plan to stop it.

The launch of the FutureMouse, engineered by Marcus Chalfen, on 31st December 1992 is the final crucial episode in the book. The novel ends on New Year's Eve, while the omniscient narrator observes that "Every New Year's Eve is impending apocalypse in miniature".¹⁴² Smith's characters are all heading for the same place, which is "the final place" like the homonymous title of the second last chapter. It is a big room in the Perret Institute: the name Perret recalls the critical episode in Archie's and Samad's lives at the end of the war. As Smith explains, "the end is simply the beginning of an even longer story"¹⁴³: like in other postmodern novels, in *White Teeth*, history repeats itself: events recur, or happen twice. Dr Perret, whom Archie saved once in the 1940s, is saved for a second time in the 1990s again by Archie. The narrative goes back to 1945 to explain that, on the night in which Samad heard a shot and convinced himself that Archie had killed Dr Perret,

¹⁴¹ "For three years, FATE conducted a terror campaign against animal testers, torturers and exploiters, breaking into labs, kidnapping technicians and chaining themselves to hospital gates". Zadie Smith, op. cit., p. 479.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 497.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 540.

Archie actually flipped a coin, thus letting the chance decide for him whether the doctor should live or die, and, while he was picking up the coin to see the result (head or tails, and that night was tails, meaning that the doctor should live), Perret grubbed the gun, shot Archie in the thigh and then disappeared in the night.

Only now Samad realises what really occurred between Archie and the doctor that night in the forties, when he sees that, in the big room of the Perret Institute, Dr Perret is alive and kicking. History returns and ends in repetition: Samad's son, Millat, wants to kill Dr Perret, as his father tried to do, but he too fails. Like their great-grandfather Pande, Samad and Millat have mutiny in their blood, but their attempts to turn history head over heels are unsuccessful. Once more, Archie saves the doctor and, in turn, is shot again in his thigh. Archie, the character with which the novel begins, is also the one with which the novel ends, suggesting that it is not possible to break from the past and start afresh. Archie is an anti-hero, introduced to us in his attempt at suicide, and then presented as the one who saves a man's life twice. He also rescues the 'future' mouse, giving it the possibility to live in freedom - the book ends with Archie's thought: "Go on my son!"¹⁴⁴.

After the attempted shooting, the twins Millat and Magid are totally confused by the eye-witnesses, so that it is not possible for police to decide who the culprit is. Both are sentenced to community service (they will serve as gardeners in Joyce's new project). Millat and Magid have been split by their religions and cultures, but their destinies are finally brought together: not only are they both punished by the courts, but they are also both considered the father(s) of Irie's daughter. Irie cannot decide who is the father of her child, because she slept with both the twins on the same day: such a confusion, as Claire Squires maintains, "proves a metaphor for the mess of multicultural experience".¹⁴⁵ Roots and identity become unsure and complicated; the novel suggests that there will be a time when integration will be pervasive:

In a vision, Irie has seen a time, a time not far from now, when roots won't matter any more because they can't because they mustn't because they're too long and they're too tortuous and they're just buried too damn deep. She looks forward to it.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 542.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Claire Squires, *Zadie Smith's White Teeth: A Reader's Guide*, London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002, p. 35.

¹⁴⁶ Zadie Smith, op. cit., p. 527.

However, the novel satirises a simple view of race relations leading to a present-future multicultural land: in portraying mixed-race and immigrant family life, Smith shows the diversity of religions, languages and traditions, and the problems which arise from their coexistence. Like Rushdie in *Midnight's Children*, Smith emphasises the ways in which diversity enriches humanity and leads to health and strength, but also the potential difficulties and problems that diversity brings about. For the author, representing multiculturalism and coexisting difference (that of skin-colour, class or religion) in her novel is an opportunity to shed light on the contradictions within British culture as a whole. She tackles the issue of what a multicultural society means; she argues that multiculturalism must be understood as a movement that embraces both racial and religious diversity. In Smith, multiculturalism is not complete assimilation and homogenisation, but means hybrid cultural life and “must be redeemed as an active and conflictual process”.¹⁴⁷ Despite the fact that she is dismissive of a happy multicultural land and that she rather focuses on its problems and difficulties, her novel is finally positive and optimistic. History does not end because the future cannot be predetermined; rather, the future depends on what people do, how they react and see their present history within the history of humankind.

Like *White Teeth*, also Levy's fourth novel, *Small Island* (2004), engages with the urgent postcolonial themes of immigration and multiculturalism in London, and it is with the analysis of this novel that I conclude my investigation into the relationship between roots and hybrid identity in English literature and society. Whereas Zadie Smith depicts London from the seventies to the nineties, when society is already and deeply multicultural, Levy sets her novel exactly at the time when Britain began to come to grips with the end of the Empire and with the decline of its power, and to change into a multicultural society. Levy focuses on the ways in which, after the Second World War, immigration led to inter- and multiculturalism, and entailed clash and accommodation, shock and conflict. Levy becomes a chronicler of Britain's convoluted relations with its former colonies, offering an account of the problems of post-war immigration and focussing on English bitter racism. Although the historical setting in *Small Island* is Britain of 1948, the time of the narrative moves before and after the war, and the stories shift from Jamaica to England and vice versa. Levy rejects linear temporality and avails herself of a 'Before and After' structure: she jumbles the sections named 'Before' with those named '1948', thus creating a series of parallels between past and present, Kingston and London. The novel is written in the first

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Dominic Head, “Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*”, cit., p. 108.

person and is based on the four main characters, the Jamaican Gilbert and Hortense, and the British Queenie and Bernard: every chapter is entitled with the name of the narrating character and the story is told from each of their points of view. The reader is presented with four individual stories, told in separate sections; what links stories and characters together is the 1948 narrative.

The title *Small Island* is indicative of the theme of the novel: Levy's story is centred on the history of two islands, Britain and Jamaica, which are proved to be 'small' - indeed, the title equally applies to them both. As Bernard Bergonzi notices, though "the English have not undergone the foreign invasions and the totalitarian rule that most other European countries have suffered", throughout the twentieth century they had to "make a long and painful process of adjustment from being the rulers of the most powerful Empire in the world to being a moderately important power of the middle rank".¹⁴⁸ Levy's novel precisely deals with the period in which the British Empire began to retract: after the Second World War, Britain shrank back to a small island, due to the decolonising efforts. The English character Bernard Bligh, who has volunteered for the RAF and has been posted to India during the war, returns to Britain and finds it changed, different, smaller. Jamaica, which is actually a big island, bigger than all the other islands in the Caribbean, appears small to Jamaicans such as Michael Roberts and Gilbert Joseph, who have enlisted in the Royal Air to help the Mother Country and thus have come to compare Jamaica to America and Europe. Both Michael and Gilbert define Jamaica a small island as far as opportunities are concerned, and decide to leave their homeland to chance in Canada (Michael) and in England (Gilbert). In the narrative, Levy shows how her characters, both the Jamaican and the English, become aware that they inhabit a small island. She also seems to suggest that smallness, as far as Britain is concerned, refers not only to the dimension of its territory, its vulnerability to invasion during the war, or the power it once held over the rest of the world and that it has finally lost, but also to the limited attitude of mind of the British people, their narrow-mindedness and feeling of superiority towards other races.

Andrea Levy writes also about her own experience; interviewed on the influence on her writing, she claims:

For me, writing has always been a journey of discovery about my past and my family. All my books look at what it is to be black and British, trying to make

¹⁴⁸ Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel*, London: Macmillan, 1970, p. 57.

the invisible visible and to put back into history the people who got left out – people like my dad.¹⁴⁹

Like Rushdie and Smith, Levy records history from the perspective of those people who were previously not allowed to speak, or were ignored in conventional historical accounts; as a postmodern writer, she engages herself in an attempt to democratise history, by granting otherness and difference, and making them pivotal in any discussion about Englishness. Levy's first novel, *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994) is semi-autobiographical, as it mirrors the story of her childhood and family; *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999) hints at her father's journey on the Empire Windrush¹⁵⁰ from Jamaica to Britain after the Second World War, through the adventures of Faith Jackson's parents. Levy's fascination with the story of her parents' immigration to Britain in 1948 returns also in *Small Island*, with the Jamaican couple Gilbert and Hortense. In her novels, Levy starts from her family's past and personal experience, in order to deal with cultural relations in post-war Britain. She particularly focuses on the diaspora of Jamaican immigrants, who left for England after the Second World War, because in Jamaica there was no job, no future, and tried their luck in the Mother Country:

Five hundred unwanted people, picked up by the trooper Empire Windrush after it had roamed the Caribbean, Mexican Gulf, and Atlantic for 27 days are hoping for a new life. The 430 Jamaicans are fleeing from a land with large unemployment. Many of them recognise the futility of their life at home.¹⁵¹

Levy describes the Jamaicans' admiration and fascination with their Mother Country, and their bitterness and disillusionment when, once in Britain, they were met with racism, mistrust and hostility.¹⁵²

Both in *Fruit of the Lemon* and in *Small Island*, Levy ironically highlights that, although Jamaica was part of the British Empire, few British knew where Jamaica is located, actually they believed it is somewhere in Africa:

¹⁴⁹ Cf. "An Interview with Andrea Levy" in Andrea Levy, *Small Island*, London: Headline, 2004.

¹⁵⁰ The SS Empire Windrush was a decommissioned troop ship that sailed from Jamaica to Britain in 1948, arriving at Tilbury on 22nd June and carrying 492 passengers from Jamaica. The Jamaican passengers, wishing to start a new life in the United Kingdom, were the first large group of West Indian immigrants to the UK after the Second World War. The Windrush had become a symbol of post-war immigration. For memories, impressions, and testimonies of West Indians on the Windrush voyage to England, see Mike and Trevor Phillips, *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-racial Britain*, London: HarperCollins, 1999.

¹⁵¹ *Daily Express*, 21 June 1948, quoted in Mike and Trevor Phillips, op. cit., p. 53.

¹⁵² After the Second World War, racial discrimination was a feature of British life.

Give me a map, let me see if Tommy Atkins or Lady Havealot can point to Jamaica. Let us watch them turning the page round, screwing up their eyes to look, turning it over to see if perhaps the region was lost on the back, before shrugging defeat.¹⁵³

Through Gilbert Joseph's words, who is one of the four protagonists in *Small Island*, Levy insists on emphasising the contrast between most British people's complete ignorance and carelessness about Jamaica, and Jamaicans' deep and detailed knowledge about, and love for, the 'Mother Country':

Ask her what she knows of Jamaica. Jam-where? What did you say it was called again. Jam-what? [...] But give me that map, blindfold me, spin me round three times and I, dizzy and dazed, would still place my finger squarely on the Mother Country.¹⁵⁴

At school, Jamaican pupils were taught everything about the United Kingdom and grew up loving and worshipping it:

I begin to recite the canals of England: the Bridgewater canal, the Manchester-to-Liverpool canal, the Grand Trunk canal used by the china firms of Stoke-on-Trent. I could have been telling you of the railways, the roadways, the ports or the docks. I might have been exclaiming on the Mother of Parliaments at Westminster – her two chambers, the Commons and the Lords. If I was given a date I could stand even taller to tell you some of the greatest laws that were debated and passed there. And not just me. Ask any of us West Indian RAF volunteers – ask any of us colony troops where in Britain are ships built, where is cotton woven, steel forged, cars made, jam boiled, cups shaped, lace knotted, glass blown, tin mined, whisky distilled? Ask. Then sit back and learn your lesson.¹⁵⁵

In *Small Island*, the revering attitude towards England is mirrored not only in the character of Gilbert Joseph, but also in Celia Langley, a young girl who dreams of going to live in England when she grows up, and in Hortense Roberts, who manages to live in London, instead of her friend Celia. All their ideas about England had been acquired in the context of a grandiose imperial imagery; nonetheless, England, which Levy's characters dream of, and are told about, does not correspond to the idealised 'Mother Country' at all. Whereas Celia will never leave Jamaica for England, Gilbert and Hortense succeed in their attempt, only to

¹⁵³ Andrea Levy, *Small Island*, cit., p. 142.

¹⁵⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 141.

find themselves humiliated and frustrated in the new homeland. Disappointed and disheartened, Gilbert asks:

But for me I had just one question – let me ask the Mother Country just this one simple question: how come England did not know me?¹⁵⁶

Also Hortense's cherished image of the Mother Country crumbles after a series of humiliations; she finally claims: "I have found that this is a very cold country"¹⁵⁷.

In both *Fruit of the Lemon*, through the parable of Faith Jackson's parents, and in *Small Island*, through Gilbert's and Hortense's experience, Levy tells the stories of cultured and ambitious Jamaican people, who have been raised to venerate the 'Mother Country', but are shunned and reviled when they finally settle in Britain. In so doing, Levy portrays the hardships, such as racial hostility and exclusion, which her parents' generation faced after the Second World War; immigrants came up against an ideology of race and racial superiority, which permeated British society and was deeply linked to Britain's past as an imperial power. *Small Island* ponders on the beginnings of Britain's multicultural society and on the prejudices, in terms of race, class and gender, which permeate it.¹⁵⁸ Britain did not welcome Jamaicans (neither Indians or Bangladeshis, as Smith shows): it was a cold and inhospitable land.

However, Levy's originality in *Small Island* lies in portraying not only the experience of a Jamaican couple, who wanted to make a new life in Britain, but also that of the people who already lived in Britain and had to accommodate the new arrivals. Levy maintains,

I have always been interested in the effect that the West Indian immigrants had on their white English neighbours.¹⁵⁹

Therefore, she aims at representing the experience of immigration and identity crisis from both sides, from the Jamaican point of view, which in the novel tallies with that of the migrant Gilbert and Hortense, and from the British point of view, through the eyes of the British couple Queenie and Bernard Bligh. *Small Island* is exactly the story of these two

¹⁵⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 466.

¹⁵⁸ 1948 is a significant moment from which to start the analysis on British multicultural society because it is the year of the arrival of the Windrush and also of the British Nationality Act. The act divided British citizenship into two categories: citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies, and citizenship of independent Commonwealth countries. The way to define the nature and the boundaries of British citizenship became unclear and there was a belief in the racial supremacy of whites born in Britain.

¹⁵⁹ "An Interview with Andrea Levy" in Andrea Levy, *Small Island*, cit.

couples, who happen to live in the same house in London, in 1948, when the Caribbeans start to become an integral part of British society, fundamentally altering Britain's image of itself. While Levy examines the effects of emigration on her four characters, through their life and experience, she also portrays post-war England with the conflicts and racist attitudes that existed at that time.

The novel begins in England with Queenie, christened Victoria Buxton, who recalls her childhood trip to the British Empire Exhibition. Levy deals with the themes of naivety, ignorance and racism: Queenie fails to understand that the exhibition is a reconstruction of 'the whole Empire in little' and that she has not travelled to Africa, but just visited the African Pavillion in England. Queenie describes the African man that she meets as follows:

A black man who looked to be carved from melting chocolate. A monkey man sweating a smell of mothballs. Blacker than when you smudge your face with a sooty cork. His lips were brown, not pink like they should be, and they bulged with air like bicycle tyres. His hair was woolly as a black shorn sheep. His nose, squashed flat, has two nostrils big as train tunnels.¹⁶⁰

Queenie, a farmer's daughter, has been told that Africans are uncivilized creatures and is shocked when the African man speaks perfect English.¹⁶¹ However, her cultural ignorance and insensitivity are deemed to fade out when she grows up. Her meeting and handshake with the black man at the Empire Exhibition foreshadow her following experience and involvement with black people, when she will be described as a fair and open-minded woman. Yet, in order to know Queenie's story, we have to wait nine chapters, because the prologue is followed by Hortense's and Gilbert's narratives, which focus on their black British experience.

It is 1948 when Hortense remembers Celia Langley's dream of living in England. Hortense and Celia were once friends; then Hortense got married to Gilbert Joseph, who was Celia's boyfriend, and left Jamaica to follow him in England. Hortense's and Gilbert's marriage was not a love match, but rather a business deal: she lent him the money for the journey to England, where he had to find a place for them both to live, so that she could then reach him. When Hortense recounts her first day in London, she cannot but think of Celia: "What do you think of that, Celia Langley?"¹⁶². Gilbert has been in London for six months, promising Hortense to pave the way for their new life together in England; yet, when she

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁶¹ During the war, even English people (adults, not children) are surprised when, in their English villages, they listen to Jamaicans in the RAF uniform speaking English. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

arrives in London to be reunited with her husband, he is not waiting for her at the dockside. Hortense has to hire a cab and faces some problems with the taxi driver, who does not understand 'her English'.¹⁶³ At the address 21 Nevern Street, Hortense is received by Queenie Bligh, who is the landlady. Hortense is a snobbish and conceited girl who looks down her nose at other people; yet, because of her expectation of a life of privilege at her arrival in England, she appears naïve and silly. Hortense thinks that Gilbert possesses the whole house at Nevern Street and is very disappointed when Gilbert explains to her that he just rents a small room in Queenie Bligh's boarding house. Both the house and Gilbert's room are shabby and rundown, and Hortense is disgusted with her husband's atrocious living conditions:

'Just this?' I had to sit on the bad. My legs gave away. 'Just this? This is where you are living? Just this?' 'Yes, this is it.' He swung his arms around again, like it was a room in a palace. 'Just this? Just this? You bring me all this way for just this?'¹⁶⁴

Hortense's mind cannot believe what her eyes see; she suffers from disillusionment and eventually comes to realize that England is not the utopia she imagined it would be. Her encounter with the reality of English life is a dislocating experience:

'Is this the way English live?' How many time she ask me that question? I lose count. 'This the way the English live?' That question became a mournful lament, sighed on each and every thing she see. 'Is this the way the English live?' 'Yes,' I tell her, 'This is the way the English live... there has been a war...many English live worse than this.'¹⁶⁵

Gilbert is a very polite and honest man; he is respectful to women, and intimidated by his wife. He tries to explain Hortense that he has been lucky to know Queenie during the war and now have the possibility to be her lodger, because Queenie is kind to immigrants in a land where other people are not. "Meeting up with Queenie Bligh was the best luck this Jamaican man had ever had"¹⁶⁶. When Queenie reassures Hortense by saying that she is not

¹⁶³ This is only the first episode in which Hortense speaks English, but she is not understood on the streets of London. Through her Jamaican characters, Levy reports the English as spoken in the colonies and focuses on the different pronunciations and expressions between Queenie's, Hortense's and Gilbert's English, as well as between Bernard's and the Indians' English. For instance, in chapter twenty-two, Queenie explains to Hortense the expressions 'cat got your tongue' or 'it's perishing', and tries to console the black girl, by saying that she will soon get used to their language (pp. 227-8).

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

like most English, because she is not worried by being seen out with ‘darkies’, Hortense is in a high dudgeon:

Now, why should this woman worry to be seen in the street with me? After all, I was a teacher and she was only a woman whose living was obtained from the letting of rooms. If anyone should be shy it should be I. And what is a darkie?¹⁶⁷

It takes a while to Hortense to understand how things stand in England and come to terms with the level of racism within English society. She has to struggle with her preconceptions; she has been taught many exaggerated facts about the niceties of English living and, once in England, she ends to knock the English off their pedestal and understands that not all what they do is necessarily good.¹⁶⁸ For instance, they are not as hygienic or clean as she expected them to be: she unbelievably describes the dirty hand of the baker who gives her a loaf of bread, without even wrapping it before putting it in the shopping bag; or the way the English eat fish and chips, straight from the newspaper, without using a plate. Whereas the English believe in their racial superiority and presume that Jamaican immigrants are ignorant and backward-looking, Levy shows that, to Hortense, English customs appear to be primitive and barbarous. So, through her characters’ eyes, Levy ridicules the very English feeling of cultural superiority. On the whole, she is very ironic in the way she describes how real England is in sharp contrast to her characters’ dreams about it. Rushdie, Smith and Levy share humour in their storytelling: the problems and tragedies faced by their characters are recounted through ironies and paradoxes.

Along many chapters, the novel focuses on the Jamaican Hortense and Gilbert, who sailed to England with a lot of hopes and dreams, but, once in England, find that the land they arrive does not tally with that of their dreams. The ‘Mother Country’ is far from being a land of opportunity, it is racist and very cold. Hortense is well mannered and is sure to have employment in a good school as a teacher, but, despite the two letters of recommendation she has, she is told she is not qualified to teach in England. She is full of

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

¹⁶⁸ Like Hortense, most Jamaicans believed that anything the English did was always right. See Jamaicans’ interviews in Mike and Phillips Trevor, *op. cit.*, p. 12: “England was the mother country: it was from England, therefore it was right and you had to agree to it and support it.” Caribbeans were brought up to perceive British power as part of the natural order of things and to believe in its righteousness and legitimacy.

ambitions and plans for her new life in London; yet, like her husband, she is met with prejudice and experiences herself racism:

I, as a visitor to this country, should step off the pavement into the road if an English person wishes to pass and there is not sufficient room on the pavement for us both.¹⁶⁹

The narrative shifts between past and present. We learn that Gilbert Joseph volunteered for the Royal Air Force to fight in World War II, like many other Jamaican boys who were called to perform their duty for the ‘Mother Country’. Among them, there is also Michael Roberts, Hortense’s second cousin, who plays a crucial role in the novel. Hortense grows up, and falls in love, with Michael, so she is very upset when he leaves Jamaica for England without even saying goodbye to her. Years pass and Hortense works as a teacher in a private school in Kingston, always dreaming of Michael and his return to Jamaica; yet, after some years, she is informed that Michael is dead, officially missing in action. She does not believe this can be true and continues to think of him somewhere in England. At the private school where she teaches, Hortense meets Celia, who becomes her friend and shares her fantasies on her future life in England. Celia goes out with Gilbert Joseph, who was in the RAF and now wants to return to England. The first time Hortense meets Gilbert, she mistakes him for Michael, because he really looks like his second cousin. Gilbert is very talkative, he speaks of Jamaica like a small island, which is very unlike England, where “opportunity ripened as abundant as fruit on Jamaican trees”¹⁷⁰. Hortense wants to escape from her ‘small island’ and, in three weeks, they agree to get married.

Queenie, the narrator, returns in chapter nine: her husband has been far from England for two years and she does not know if he is alive or dead. Since he did not return from the war and she has no means of supporting herself, she begins taking Jamaican tenants in her Earls Court house. The neighbourhood complains about her decision of accepting black lodgers, as “they would turn the area into a jungle”¹⁷¹, “these darkies bring down a neighbourhood, the government should never have let them in”¹⁷². Queenie does not share her neighbours’ racist attitude and ignores their disapproval of her choices: she is determined to treat the Jamaicans who live under her roof as equals and is kind and friendly with them. Queenie’s friendship with Gilbert dates back to the period when he was a RAF

¹⁶⁹ Andrea Levy, *Small Island*, cit., p. 335.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

recruit serving England and her husband was in India. Queenie and Gilbert meet thanks to her father-in-law, Arthur Bligh, who follows Gilbert mistaking him for Michael Roberts.¹⁷³ Arthur had fought in the First World War and has never recoiled himself from the shock: he does not speak anymore and behaves like a child. Queenie takes care of him during her husband's absence, and, since Arthur easily gets lost, she has written his name and address on a piece of paper that Arthur always has to bring with him. When Gilbert meets Arthur, the old man is in a confused state of mind and shows Gilbert the paper: "My name is Arthur Bligh. If you find me please return me to 21 Nevern Street, London SW5"¹⁷⁴. Gilbert goes with the old man to Nevern Street and the woman who answers the door is Queenie Bligh.

From chapter eleven to chapter nineteen, we are presented with Gilbert's narrating voice and point of view. He tells his story from childhood to 1948, from past to present, by focussing on his dreams of attending university, studying the law and acquiring a degree, and his bitterness when faced with the stark reality. In this section, Levy explores the idea of the Empire as Mother Country. In an English village during the war, a group of Jamaicans in their RAF uniform is approached by an English couple; while the woman asks them if they are American, her husband asks them: "Why would you leave a nice sunny place to come here if you didn't have to? Gilbert answers: "To fight for my country, sir"¹⁷⁵. According to the Englishman, such an answer makes no sense. But, like his friends, Gilbert has been brought up as a child of the British Empire:

Your own mummy talks of Mother all the time. 'Oh, Mother is a beautiful woman – refined, mannerly and cultured.' Your daddy tells you, 'Mother thinks of you as her children; like the Lord above she takes care of you from afar.' There are many valorous stories told of her, which enthral grown men as well as children. Her photographs are cherished, pinned in your own family album to be admired over and over. Your finest, your best, everything you have that is worthy is sent to Mother as gifts. And on her birthday you sing-song and party.¹⁷⁶

When, during the war, Britain requires its children of Empire to fight on behalf of British culture and its dominant ideology, the Jamaicans have no hesitation to leave their island:

Then one day you hear Mother calling – she is troubled, she need your help.
Your mummy, your daddy say go. Leave home, leave familiar, leave love.

¹⁷³ Gilbert Joseph is mistaken for Michael Roberts by Hortense, Arthur and Queenie. Almost after three hundred pages of narrative, Levy reveals that Queenie has had a love affair with Michael Roberts (who is Hortense's second cousin) and the child she carries in her womb is Michael's.

¹⁷⁴ Andrea Levy, *Small Island*, cit., p. 167.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

Travel seas with waves that swell about you as substantial as concrete buildings. Shiver, tire, hunger – for no sacrifice is too much to see you at Mother’s needy side.¹⁷⁷

Yet, Britain is not a welcoming mother, happy to be reunited with her children: immigrants from the West Indies are met with hostility and are regarded as outsiders. Despite their British citizenship, immigrants are excluded from British identity, because Britishness is built around an imagined community, a myth of a homogeneous and white British nation. Black men are regarded rather as second class people, they are called ‘darkies’, ‘negroes’, ‘niggers’: they have to bear hate and discrimination.¹⁷⁸ For example, at the cinema, Gilbert is asked to sit in the back rows, because customers do not like to sit next ‘coloureds’ and be all mixed up; during a brawl, policemen are ready to beat him only because of his skin colour. During the war, Gilbert bitterly argues: “We fighting the persecution of the Jew, yet even in my RAF blue my coloured skin can permit anyone to treat me as less than a man”.¹⁷⁹ London suffers from bombing and deprivation; the city is far from being a place of togetherness and understanding:

The filthy tramp that eventually greets you is she. Ragged, old, and dusty as the long dead. Mother has a blackened eye, bad breath and one lone tooth that waves in her head when she speaks. This twisted-crooked weary woman. This stinking cantankerous hag. She offers you no comfort after your journey. No smile. No welcome. Yet she looks down at you through lordly eyes and says, ‘Who the bloody hell are you?’¹⁸⁰

Levy shows that, after the war, the situation even worsens for Caribbean ex-servicemen like Gilbert, who do not wear the RAF uniform any longer; that uniform had partially made their skin colour acceptable:

So how many gates I swing open? How many houses I knock on? Le me count the doors that opened slow and shut quick without even me breath managing to get inside. Man, these English landlords and ladies could come up with excuses. If I had been in uniform would they have seen me different? Would they have thanked me for the sweet victory, shaken my hand and invited me in for tea?¹⁸¹

Despite Jamaicans had fought for Britain, considering it their ‘Mother Country’, they are looked at as enemies or even invaders; though English and Jamaicans had fought a common

¹⁷⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁸ Levy’s novel invokes a politics of difference and universal dignity, which denounces discrimination and refuses second-class citizenship.

¹⁷⁹ Andrea Levy, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

enemy, the latter are not treated on equal terms. Gilbert is not received as a hero, nor treated with respect and admiration for his service. Returning to England after the war, Gilbert is seen like one of the five hundred West Indians seeking accommodation and a job. He fortunately remembers the address of Nevern Street and so, after two years, he meets Queenie again, who lets him a room in her house:

Luck is a funny thing. To some only a large win of money at the pools is luck. Or finding a valuable jewel at your feet on a London street. That surely is luck. But during the war luck take another turn. The bomb that just miss you is luck. Only your leg blown off and not your head is luck. All your family die but your mummy is spared – congratulations, you a fortunate man. So, let me tell you what luck is for a coloured man who is just off a boat in England. It is finding Queenie Bligh. It is seeing she has a big house and is happy to take me and a few of the boys in as lodgers.¹⁸²

Gilbert faces many difficulties in his life as civilian: after many applications and interviews, many disappointments and frustrations (he always hears the same answer: no job for a Black), he finds a job as a postman driver for the Post Office.¹⁸³ His driving license finally saves him from ruin.¹⁸⁴ Nonetheless, Gilbert has to endure indignities from his English neighbours, who complain that “the street has gone to the dogs. What with all these coloured swamping the place. Hardly like our own country any more”¹⁸⁵. The same happens with his white mates, who refuse to cooperate with him: “when are you going back to the jungle?” “these coons are trouble - more trouble than they are worth” “I’ll have to wash my hands now I’ve touched you”¹⁸⁶. Gilbert is often subjected to humiliation, but, despite all that he suffers, he always tries to be funny and make other people laugh (Queenie and Hortense in particular). During the war, he once explains to Queenie: “Laughter is part of my war effort”¹⁸⁷.

From chapter twenty-three through chapter twenty-nine, we follow Queenie’s narrating voice. Her father was a butcher and did not take part in the War, because he was

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹⁸³ Gilbert’s and Hortense’s fictional experiences reflect those of Levy’s parents: Gilbert, like Levy’s father, finds work for the Post Office; Hortense, like Levy’s mother, is a qualified teacher who has to retrain in England and, in the meanwhile, accepts a job as a seamstress.

¹⁸⁴ His destiny is ironically to be a driver. Gilbert is used to driving from the age of ten when he helped his mother with the delivery of cakes. He then moved near Kingston, in order to go to school at night and study the law, and he instead drove his uncle’s truck and had no time to go to school. When he finally joined the war, in order to be a pilot, instead he was given a truck driver’s job: “Beside the name of Gilbert Joseph was written just one word – driver. All endeavours to erase, replace or embellish were useless.” *Ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 317-318.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

too old and had a weak heart; Queenie was nauseated by the butchery (blood, muck and stink) and soon became a vegetarian. She dreamt a future for her far from her parents' farm; when her aunt Dorothy asked her to go and live with her in London, and help her in the sweet shop, Queenie immediately left the farm and determined not to return there anymore. While working at her aunt's shop, Queenie met, and started to go out with, Bernard Bligh, a clerk at Lloyds Bank, who lived in Earls Court with his father, Arthur. Queenie was not sure of her feelings towards Bernard, but she agreed to marry him, because her aunt unexpectedly died and Queenie did not want to go back to the muck and stink of her parents' farm. In the forties, Bernard, Arthur and Queenie live together in 21 Nevern Street; yet, Queenie and Bernard are not a happy couple, because he wants children but she cannot get pregnant. World War II breaks out and several parts of London are bombed out: many families lose their houses, shops, factories. Queenie wants to do something to help people who are dislodged from their homes due to the bombing; she thus suggests to Bernard that they can use some spare rooms in their big house to give them refuge, but Bernard firmly disagrees. Queenie wants to be helpful and demonstrates to be very generous and sensitive; she starts working at Campden School rest centre, with the task of finding out who the bombed out people once had been and where they had once lived. War brings more and more dislocations:

I had to fight my way through an upside-down world. Roads that should have been familiar turned to wastelands strewn with mountains of wreckage, the displaced intestines of buildings spewing everywhere.¹⁸⁸

Queenie blames Bernard for living as if a war was not on and his answer is to volunteer for the Royal Air Force: "He left with no more ceremony than if he was going to the bank"¹⁸⁹. Bernard is sent overseas and returns home only after many years.

In the meanwhile, Queenie decides to let some spare rooms of her house to RAF officers, in order to earn her living, and thus meets the Jamaican sergeant Michael Roberts.¹⁹⁰ Michael is on leave for a couple of days in London, before going back on active duty at his airbase in Lincolnshire; during his short stay at Nevern Street, he plays cards with Arthur and sleeps with Queenie. The day Michael leaves, Queenie tries to reach him, in

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

¹⁹⁰ Once again, Levy stresses English ignorance about the colonies of the Empire. Like other characters in the novel, Queenie believes Jamaica is in Africa: 'Why every English person I meet think Jamaica is in Africa?' 'Is it not?' 'No, it is not. It is an island in the Caribbean'. *Ibid.*, p. 298.

order to give him the wallet that he lost in her room and that Arthur has found, but, on her way to the train station, she is victim of a bombing. Yet, Queenie survives the rocket attack. Two years pass, the war is over, and Michael Roberts knocks on her door again. He explains to Queenie that he does not want to go back to Jamaica - no small island for him; instead he is going to Toronto, Canada:

He had nowhere to go in London while he waited for his ship to sail. I was a piece of luck – no more, no less. A lonely pretty almost-widow to spend his last nights with. But I didn't bloody care.¹⁹¹

Queenie falls in love with Michael; she hopes he would ask her to go with him to Canada, but he never asks. They spend three days and three nights together, and, as a result, Queenie gets pregnant.

Queenie has not heard from her husband since he left to join the RAF: she is ready to have Bernard officially declared dead, but he finally returns. It is 1948: Hortense has just arrived in London and Bernard returns to his house in Nevern Street. Yet, the 1948 narrative is here interrupted by a long section in which, for the first time, Bernard is the narrator. From chapter thirty-five through chapter forty-six, Bernard tells us his 'Before' story. Like Queenie, he describes his childhood: his father worked as a clerk in a bank, then there was the Great War, Arthur was sent to France and lost his mind; Bernard's mother died of cancer at the age of forty-two, asking him to look after Arthur. Then, Bernard meets Queenie, they get married and live with Arthur in Nevern Street. Queenie would like to have a hero at her side, but it is not for this reason that actually Bernard joins the RAF as a volunteer; rather, he does not want to be conscripted and sent to the army, where it is easier to die. Bernard is posted to India; it is his first time far from England. When he arrives in Bombay, he is shocked at the sight of brown people all around and at their stink. Bernard is the complete opposite of Queenie both in attitudes and personality: he is racist and close-minded, he fears, and feels contempt for, foreigners. Instead of opening his view on the world, the war experience in India increases his disdain for the other. He thus refers to The Great Calcutta Killing, on 16th August 1946:

Thousands were killed in Calcutta. Men, women, children, even suckling babies, it didn't matter who. They called it a riot. [...] Muslims butchering Hindus. Hindus massacring Muslims. Rumour said the wounded were too many to be counted, the dead too many to be buried. They were fighting for who should have the power when a new independent India comes. Made me

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 495.

smile to think of that ragged bunch of illiterates wanting to run their own country.¹⁹²

In Bernard's eyes, Great Britain is civilization, whereas India should be barbarity; for him, thinking of Indians ruling themselves is a kind of joke.¹⁹³ His service in the war as an erk in a repair and salvage unit (his unit will be burnt alive) teaches him that foreigners are not to be trusted, that they are mean and unscrupulous. Levy ridicules Bernard's oversimplifying attitude towards Eastern people and shows that his racist behaviour is addressed also and above all to immigrants from West Indies, whom he finds at home.

When the war is over, Bernard has to wait several weeks before returning to England; in the meanwhile, he sleeps with a prostitute in Calcutta. During the journey towards Great Britain, Bernard feels sick and, when he sees pustule on his penis, convinces himself to suffer from syphilis (which he thinks he has surely contracted from the prostitute in Calcutta). The sense of guilt and shame prevent Bernard to return home; he thus spends two years in Brighton, waiting either to die or to recover from disease. He finds employment as a waiter and then helps the owner of the café with his bookkeeping. After a flue, he is visited by a doctor, who assures him that he does not suffer from the venereal disease. Freed from his fears, Bernard goes back to Queenie and his father Arthur; yet, what awaits him at home is not what he expected. The mighty empire now appears a small island: "England had shrunk. It was smaller than the place I'd left"¹⁹⁴. It is unrecognizable, devastated and exhausted:

This war-torn England before me was now my welcome home. [...] Hard to believe this had been my home for most of my life. Nothing was familiar. Had it always looked so exhausted? So friable? Buildings decaying and run down. Rotting sashes. Cracked plaster. Obscene gaps where houses once stood.¹⁹⁵

The war has changed everything and it is hard for Bernard to recover from the shock: Arthur is dead, Queenie is pregnant, and the rooms in his house are rented by black people. Levy depicts the first wave of Caribbean immigrants to Britain in 1948 and describes how this

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 375.

¹⁹³ Through the character of Bernard Bligh and his account of Indian experience during the war, Levy criticises British colonialist attitude and sense of superiority.

¹⁹⁴ Andrea Levy, *op. cit.*, p. 424. The empire fades like a dream; Bernard faces the reality of a small and worn out island.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 428.

was met with racism in the Mother Country. Most British did not want to see black faces on the street, Bernard is one of them:

It was the darkie woman I saw first. What a sight! On our street. Never seen that before. I was dumbfounded to see that the white woman she accompanied was Queenie. What was going on?¹⁹⁶

Not only was his wife walking with a black woman, but agreed to live under the same roof as Jamaicans; Bernard cannot accept that foreigners live in his house and is determined to get rid of them. Queenie defends them, and, once again, she distances herself from her husband's racist attitude:

‘Listen to me Bernard! I had to get lodgers. I had no idea where you were. There was no one going to look after me. I had to bring people in.’ ‘I don’t doubt that, Queenie, but did they have to be coloured? Couldn’t you have got decent lodgers for the house? Respectable people?’ ‘They pay the rent. And on time. Gilbert was in the RAF during the war.’ ‘Well, they’ll have to go now I’m back.’¹⁹⁷

Bernard firmly believes that black people are neither decent nor respectable. Levy focuses on her characters' limitations, but tries to explain the complexity of such limitations; in the case of Bernard's racist views, Levy explains: “He’d been brought up to see the world, and his place in the world, in a certain way. When that world started to change and his position was challenged he responded in the only way he knew – by asserting his sense of superiority. I never wanted readers to see him as an evil man – misguided, foolish, bigoted and stubborn maybe.”¹⁹⁸

Queenie does not want to share the same bed with Bernard, but she does not say why: she is pregnant, but she has kept it secret. In the morning, Bernard inspects Hortense's and Gilbert's room and blames them for the shabbiness that he finds: “these coloured people don’t have the same standards. I’d seen it out east. Not used to our ways”¹⁹⁹. In Bernard's racist vision, he fought the war to live respectfully, and, for him, it means without black people around:

¹⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

¹⁹⁸ Cf. “An Interview with Andrea Levy” in Andrea Levy, *op. cit.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 468-469. Bernard fails to understand that Hortense and Gilbert are not to be blame for the squalor and misery of their room: it is the same in the whole house. Levy stresses that the years following the end of the fighting were extraordinarily tough on the British.

The war was fought so people might live amongst their own kind. Quite simple. Everyone had a place. England for the English and the West Indies for these coloured people. Look at India. The British knew fair play. Leave India to the Indians. That's what we did. (No matter what a hash they make of it.) Everyone was trying to get home after the war to be with kith and kin. Except these blasted coloured colonials. I've nothing against them in their place. But their place isn't here. Mr Todd thought they would only survive one British winter. I hoped it was right. These brown gadabouts were nothing but trouble.²⁰⁰

Bernard invites Gilbert to leave the house, the two discuss animatedly and Queenie reaches them, in order to take Gilbert's side. As she is pregnant, she starts having the contractions and asks Hortense to help her with the labour. Hortense wants to call a doctor, but Queenie insists they can do without him. Hortense ponders that "even the stupidest pupil would be able to tell that Mrs Bligh's come-lately husband was not the father of the soon-come child"²⁰¹, and when the baby is born, she sees it is a black boy. Both Bernard and Hortense think that Gilbert is the father of the baby:

She had weighed up the evidence and reached the same conclusion as the fool husband. The brown baby in Queenie's arms must be the child she had for me. Cha! Am I the only black man in this world? Why everyone look to me? I have been back in England for only seven months. Why no one think to use their fingers to count out that before they accuse?²⁰²

Queenie worries about the baby; now that Bernard is back, she cannot dream of going to Canada and reaching Michael any longer. She puts her fantasy aside and faces the stark reality: what will the neighbourhood say of a white couple with a black son, an illegitimate child? What will Bernard's reaction be when the baby grows up and asks them about his real father? Bernard thinks they might say the baby is an orphan and that they have adopted him; Bernard is sure they can bring him up and give him a home.²⁰³ Yet, Queenie does not want her child to suffer from discrimination, or to be assimilated to her and her husband's white culture, growing up by ignoring the Jamaican component of his identity. She rather decides that the best thing to do for her baby is to ask Gilbert and Hortense to raise him, as if he was their own son. She trusts the Jamaican couple, she knows that they are good and understanding people, who can give him a better life than she ever could. Levy

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 469.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 478.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 488.

²⁰³ Through Bernard's reaction to Queenie's decision to give away the baby, Levy implies that something is going to change even for a racist man like Bernard, who is firmly convinced of his white superiority. However, it is only the commencement of a slow and complex change in British sensitivity, in the acceptance of the other as part of Britishness, of national identity. It would be necessary for the whole country to reassess not only its own identity, and its history, but also what it means to be British.

here implies that there is a link between recognition and identity within society, fictionalised in her novel through the recognition of Queenie's baby as English and his identity as a black child. Michael's identity will be shaped by recognition or its absence, or rather by the misrecognition of others, so that he might suffer real damage and distortion (of his identity), if English society and white people around him mirror back a confining, demeaning, and even contemptible picture of himself.²⁰⁴

A Jamaican friend of Gilbert has bought a house in Finsbury Park, north London, and asks Gilbert to go and live there with Hortense, to make the place more suitable and let the rooms to other Jamaicans. The house is big, on four floors: Hortense is happy about the idea of moving there, and leaving Earls Court and the Blighs. Before Gilbert and Hortense move to their new house, Queenie invites them for a cup of tea and thanks them for their help and friendship. She shows them the baby, whom she has called Michael, and asks them to take care of him:

I never dreamed England would be like this. Come, in what crazed reverie would a white Englishwoman be kneeling before me yearning for me to take her black child? There was no dream I could conceive so fanciful.²⁰⁵

In Hortense's eyes, 'Mother Country' has proved to be preposterous; yet, she is now ready to start her new life in this country with her husband. Hortense and Gilbert finally decide to take Queenie's baby with them.

All three novels terminate with the birth of a baby: Saleem's son in *Midnight's Children*, Irie's daughter in *White Teeth*; and Queenie's son in *Small Island*. The protagonists' children represent the future; they are a symbol of hope for the following generations. While in Rushdie's novel the focus is on Indian independence and the future of the new-born nation, in both Smith's and Levy's novels attention is given to multicultural Britain. Irie's and Queenie's babies are hybrid identities and personify the problems of a multiracial society; both Smith and Levy are against assimilation and reveal the limits of taking on white culture to the exclusion of all others. However, the two authors examine the topic of Englishness and multiculturalism in their novels from two different perspectives: *White Teeth* is set in the seventies, and Irie's daughter is born at the end of the nineties,

²⁰⁴ Cf. Charles Taylor's thesis on the politics of recognition in *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 225.

²⁰⁵ Andrea Levy, op. cit., p. 523.

when England is made up of a variety of racial and ethnic groups²⁰⁶; *Small Island* is set before and after the Second World War, and Queenie's son is born in 1948, when Britain has just started to become multicultural, and racial prejudices and discrimination are pervasive within English society. Throughout *Small Island*, and even in its conclusion, Levy proves that, despite friendship between Queenie and Gilbert, in after-war Britain there is still a great divide between whites and blacks. Michael, who is black, is not raised by the white couple (Queenie is Michael's mother and Bernard offers to be his putative step-father), but is handed to the black one.

At the end of *Small Island* Gilbert gives vent to his feelings and thoughts about Bernard and all the arrogant and scornful white Englishmen like him:

‘You know what your trouble is, man?’ he said. ‘Your white skin. You think it makes you better than me. You think it give you the right to lord it over a black man. But you know what it make you? You wan’ know what your white skin make you, man? It make you white. That is all, man. White. No better, no worse than me – just white.’ ‘Listen to me, man, we both just finish fighting a war – a bloody war – you and me. We both look on other men to see enemy. You and me, fighting for empire, fighting for peace. But still, after all that we suffer together, you wan’ tell me I am worthless and you are not. Am I to be the servant and you are the master for all the time? No, stop this, man. Stop it now. We can work together, Mr Bligh. You no see? We must. Or else you just gonna fight me till the end?’²⁰⁷

Through Gilbert's words, Levy is here suggesting that what the English have to fight against, now that the war is ended, is their feeling of white superiority, which is nothing but an illusion. Gilbert explains to Bernard what the reality is: if the white man does not change his racist views and does not shed his superiority complex, he is going to fight a never-ending battle. I believe that Levy's novel shows that racism is one of the strongest pieces of evidence proving that the evolution of mankind has not come to its completion, that battles are still at stake, and multiculturalism is itself a conflicting and controversial process. Gilbert is the spokesperson for the belief that the master-servant relationship should not exist any longer and implies the need for mutual recognition between blacks and whites (and, on the whole, between people of different racial, political, and religious background).²⁰⁸ The need and demand for recognition are features of the politics of

²⁰⁶ Joshua Chalfen, the son of Englishness, is ready to grow Irie's black daughter as if she was his own.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 525.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Hegel's dialectics of master and slave and politics of equal dignity and Kojève's interpretation as discussed in Chapter One, 1.2.

multiculturalism, which should grant equality of cultures, races, and genders.²⁰⁹ The multicultural and multiracial Britain, for which Gilbert has fought the war and in which he wants to live and raises his children, reminds us of Kojève's universal and homogeneous state, which Kojève defines as the historical form of the end of history. Yet, Levy, like Smith, does not share Kojève's belief in the end of history: British society, which is satirically represented by both the novelists, does not appear as civilised and enlightened as it is in the Kojévian perspective.²¹⁰ From the immigrants' point of view, either Jamaican or Bangladeshi, Britain is not the land of their dreams, nor the best of the possible worlds; British politics and society are full of incongruences, limits and contradictions. Levy epitomises the development of multiracial Britain after the war, through Gilbert's and Hortense's story: she claims that after-war peace links different people (such as her Jamaican and English characters) together in a free society, and focuses on the problems they face, in order to make coexistence and mutual recognition possible. Like Smith, Levy portrays her characters' rich and complex history, and the experiences they share, by offering her aesthetic production as politics for a multiculturalism that not only recognises the equal value of different culture by letting them survive, but also acknowledges their worth.

The message which *Midnight's Children*, *White Teeth* and *Small Island* eventually leave to Aadam Sinai, baby Iqbal-Jones, and Michael Roberts-Bligh (and obviously to the reader too) is that history and the past must not be forgotten, but retold, recalled and finally preserved for the future, like in a pickle jar. Rushdie, Smith and Levy demonstrate that the investigation of history and the past is a means to define both national and individual identities. The postcolonial perspective from which their novels are written focuses on the importance of rejecting history as a grand narrative and embracing historical rewritings that readdress the way in which ethnic minorities have been constructed. They ask for histories told from new perspectives, with a changed focus. In their articulation of the experiences of immigrants, Smith and Levy show how immigrants, such as the Bangladeshi Iqbals or the Jamaican Hortense and Gilbert, retain a sense of their original cultures whilst adapting to English customs. Smith in particular, through her stories of first and second generation immigrants, stresses that the immigrant experience tends to involve a mixture of

²⁰⁹ Cf. Charles Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-227.

²¹⁰ Actually, Kojève does not refer to Britain alone, but to the whole Europe; he claims that the Second World War has the effect of bringing the backward civilizations of the peripheral provinces into line with the most advanced European historical positions (which include the British one). Both Smith and Levy focus on British hegemony, the loss of the Empire and the following fraying of Englishness.

assimilation and multiculturalism. She also suggests that categories of race like black and white are no longer accurate to define national or individual identities since Britain's ethnicity is made up of a series of identities that include both black and white races.

I have decided to conclude with the analysis of *Midnight's Children*, *White Teeth* and *Small Island* because they are three valid examples of the postcolonial concern with issues that relate to the construction of history, national identity (which is postcolonial Indian identity in *Midnight's Children* and multicultural British identity in *White Teeth* and *Small Island*), race, immigration, and multiculturalism. They all convey the idea that in history we can find the clues to the present, critical state and that, in order to rewrite histories and construct new identities, it is necessary to assimilate and incorporate difference(s).

Conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis I argued that the most characterising feature of the postmodern condition is a spirit of endings, which is determined by a widespread suspicion towards metanarratives. My understanding of metanarratives as organising frameworks grounded on transcendental truths has been informed by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, who has theorised postmodernity in philosophy by exactly defining it as ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’.¹ Postmodernists attack any claim of universal truths and positive affirmations: they declare that they cannot count on undisputed notions of truth, objectivity and universal knowledge any longer. They appeal for a tolerance of many truths and maintain that any vision of totality must be replaced by a plurality of perspectives. In particular, my interest has been in their rejection of history as a grand narrative, i.e. a single, truthful and eschatological account of the past. The idea of history has been subverted and pluralized: the modern concept of history as a linear and progressive sequence of events has been opposed to a postmodern concept of history as a web of cross-references, in which unity and linearity are impossible to be found. Whereas postmodernism jettisons the grand narratives and the end of history theory as a grand narrative, Alexandre Kojève’s doctrine can be read as an alternative to postmodernism itself. The end of history as professed by Kojève supports logics and linearity within historical course and endorses humankind’s progress and evolution by claiming its final completion. The originality of my work consists in dealing with the topic of the end of history from both a philosophical perspective (mainly as in Kojève’s dialectics and Fukuyama’s optimistic thesis) and the postmodernist reaction to such a doctrine, with the aim to investigate their influences on English historiographic metafiction.

Following Hayden White’s critical theory, postmodernists claim that historical accounts of the past are narrative discourses and that history can never be an objective reconstruction of the past. Accounts of past events are different according to the position from which they are viewed; they change according to the historian’s perspective. Historical knowledge is a subjective and culture-specific construction; what might appear an impartial view of historical events is nothing but the result of ideological agendas. Postmodernists

¹ Qtd. in Chapter Two, 2.2, p. 79.

question the specific ideological perspective from which history has been written and replace a single unified account of the past with a plurality of contrasting and competing histories. For instance, Graham Swift's *Shuttlecock* and *Waterland*, as well as Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, tackle many of the theoretical issues regarding the nature and limitations of history as a textual discourse. However, I have demonstrated that these novelists are not dismissive of history as a way of engaging with the past; in their ways of problematising history and pluralizing the idea of history, they encourage a sense of historical thinking.

Postmodern writers' approach to history and the past involves rewriting, revisiting and remembering them. The label 'historiographic metafiction' gathers narratives that engage with the past and self-consciously interrogate the way in which history is recorded. In response to Fredric Jameson's prognosis of the loss of the sense of historicity in postmodernity, historiographic metafiction actively promotes a sense of historicity and of thinking through our relationship with the past. All the novels analysed in this study reveal an endless desire and imperative to look at the past, by reviewing and reassessing received history. In particular, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* highlight the relationship between history and power (an area that has been addressed by the French philosopher Michel Foucault in *L'Archéologie du savoir*), and attempt to take account of the submerged narratives that have been discarded by the prevailing accounts of the past. In both novels the rewriting of history and the past is ironical; yet, it also reveals apocalyptic ingredients. I have suggested that such literary attempts can be interpreted in relation to Walter Benjamin's philosophical theses on history.² Benjamin maintains that historians have practised history mainly sympathising with the winners and, therefore, history is always a narrative written and told by the winner who legitimizes his victory. Rushdie reaches the same conclusion by arguing that history records facts and stories of the winners not those of the losers, of the masters not those of the servants.³ In his rewriting of history in fiction, Rushdie drifts away from grand narratives and official historical records, and focuses on the local and the limited. The narrator-protagonist, Saleem Sinai, reveals an unburied possibility of the historical account; what distinguishes his approach to twentieth-century Indian history is the recourse to heterogeneous and plural ideas of the Indian nation. He describes a new history of India

² Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (1950) in *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit.

³ Salman Rushdie, *Shame*, cit., p. 124. Qtd. in Chapter Two, 2.3, p. 93.

through the parable of the midnight's children and creates his own version of history. However, Saleem and his family are not winners, but common people who succumb to the force and violence of history: all of Saleem's family die in the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, while Saleem survives only to tell and record the whole story and finally declare that he is going to disintegrate into 630 million particles of dust (a cipher equivalent to Indian population in the 1970s).

In *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, Barnes intermingles fictional and historical narratives with the aim to question traditional interpretations of events and illustrates that history often comes in incompatible versions. He attacks historicism accusing it of transmitting and recording the winners' accounts and promoting a concept of false progress. To take one example, the first chapter of the novel, entitled "The Genesis", is a woodworm's version of the Great Deluge: here Barnes mocks the traditional account of the journey of Noah's Ark and opts for a funny revisionist perspective. However, throughout the novel, irony is accompanied by a gloom and apocalyptic outlook: Barnes represents history through ten short stories about people escaping from different kinds of catastrophes, thus recalling Benjamin's image of history as one long catastrophe that "keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage".⁴ In Barnes's novel, there is no redemptive historical progression as human history consists of repeated disasters.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor argues that "it is wrong to think that we have to choose between two readings of history, as progress or decline, fulfilment or loss. The most plausible view seems to be that it contains elements of both"⁵. In my survey of different kinds of approaches to history and its end in historiographic metafiction, I have suggested that the general and shared attitude among writers is apocalyptic; yet, in the final analysis, storytelling appears to be a sort of 'optimistic' counterweight to the apocalypse, to the end of history itself. In Swift's *Shuttlecock*, the narrator-protagonist Prentis sets his fragmentary diary (with his discoveries about the past) beside his father's memoirs written in the book "Shuttlecock". The novel suggests that the written records about the past may often be a personal construction of historical facts and do not correspond to the truth. Swift focuses on the ways in which his character is confronted with the false account of the past that the book "Shuttlecock" presents, and records a more verisimilar version of both his father's and his boss's experiences in the Second World War. However, the account with

⁴ Qtd. in Frederick Holmes, *Julian Barnes*, cit., p. 149.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 162.

which Prentis provides the reader does not aim to be a definite answer (a grand narrative) to what happened in the past and the question about “how much of a book is in the words and how much is behind or in between the lines”⁶ remains open (even if it sounds quite rhetorical). In *Waterland*, the narrator-protagonist Tom Crick embodies the postmodern historian arguing that everything is relative and can be interpreted from many different perspectives. The paradoxical feature of this character lies in the fact that he has worked as a history teacher for thirty years but is still unable to explain what history really is. Like Prentis, Crick digs up the past, without finding absolute certainties and reassuring truths about it. Crick rejects the possibility of both a universal history and a grand plot; instead, he offers his pupils a meditation on stories and storytelling.

The end of history in *Waterland* is evoked in many ways: it is the end of a certain concept of history as expressed by Tom Crick’s attitude towards the discipline he teaches (the end of history as a grand narrative, the end of the belief in history as linear and purposive); it is the end of the subject itself, which the headmaster, Lewis Scott, wants to dismiss because it does not supply pupils with technical and pragmatic knowledge and therefore is not useful; it is the end of the world as history might definitively end in a nuclear holocaust (the student Price claims that “history has got to the point where it is probably about to end”⁷). Crick concludes that the only means to resist the end of history and the entrance in a meaningless post-history is storytelling; he resorts to storytelling to counteract meaninglessness and invites his pupils to be curious about history and the past, about what happened, the ways and the reasons why it happened. Future generations have to continue to ask “why”; in fact, the lack of curiosity would coincide with the end of man’s attempt to inscribe significance on the cultural environment he inhabits and with his acceptance of things as they are.

Also *Last Orders* is imbued with the sense of an ending, of a dead end. In Brian Shaffer’s words, “the most acute source of anguish for the characters is the realization that we may be at the end of history”.⁸ The focus of the novel is on the meaning of the past, its influence on present and future circumstances, and death (Jack Dodds’ life and death are the occasion for the characters’ storytelling). The past is an important burden which all Swift’s characters attempt to come to terms with because their present condition appears to be determined and pierced by the past; in all Swift’s novels, the past is always present. Swift’s

⁶ Graham Swift, *Shuttlecock*, cit., p. 214.

⁷ Graham Swift, *Waterland*, cit., p. 14.

⁸ Qtd. in Chapter Three, 3.1, p. 121.

interest in history is not only in its residual and lasting elements, but also in its positive and therapeutic effects; history (its study and critical thinking of it) allows Swift's characters to endow their lives with meaning or, as in Crick's case, to be aware that most of the time there is no meaning in what happens. Unlike *Waterland*, *Last Orders* concludes with a positive message, that is the belief in change, in man's possibility to change his life and the world around him.

My selection of Julian Barnes's novels has aimed to highlight different facets of the end of history. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Barnes suggests that the end of history tallies with the flattening of history in museums: museums are the place where history is consumed and reproduced, compressed into an eternal present and thus emptied of its content and temporality. The protagonist, who is an amateur literary scholar, is finally left with a world of parrots and replicas and with the impossibility to distinguish between the real object (the stuffed parrot) and its copies. Barnes's suggestion that the end of history tallies with its reproduction and reproducibility alludes to Benjamin's thesis about the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction and preponderantly returns in *England, England*. Here, the idea of repetition and reproduction is conveyed by the title itself in which the term England is repeated twice. As we learn from the plot, "England, England" is the Isle of Wight which has been transformed into 'a second England' by the tycoon Jack Pitman. England is reduced to its saleable aspects and put on the market: history is absorbed into the realm of simulation while tradition is destroyed by its reproduction. The historian of the staff-project, Dr Max, has to think of history in terms of Western consumerism and customers' pleasure. Barnes reflects on the end of the historian's original task and on the postmodernist representation of history. Both the inhabitants and the tourists on the island become unable to distinguish between reality (authenticity) and hyper-reality (imitation). Jean Baudrillard's theory on hyper-reality and on the space of postmodern simulation has provided the frame for my reading of this novel.

In *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, Barnes puts forward the Marxist claim that history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy (wars and genocides), the second time as farce (capitalism, consumerism and commodification). He makes such a claim evident in many chapters of his novel: for instance, through the story on Lawrence Beesley, the Titanic tragedy and movie in chapter seven; through the tale about Amanda Fergusson in chapter six that reappears as a contemporary farce in chapter nine; and through the story about a movie shot in South America in chapter eight. Besides, the novel's last chapter, which is a

parodic dream about the end of history, can be read in terms of Kojève's reflections on the American way of life: indeed, the kind of life described by Kojève at the end of history is similar to the protagonist's dream about his (after-death) life in paradise. Barnes ironically describes how complete satisfaction of individual desires finally leads man to boredom: people get tired even of perfection and of a timeless paradise; eventually, they want to die.

A different notion on the end of history comes from Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*. His novel mirrors Theodor Adorno's thought that history ends with the Holocaust: instead of following a teleological course, history led to barbarity and destruction and finally stopped in nonsense. Amis mocks the idea of historical progress and reveals that the only way to find a meaning and a purpose in history would be to turn its tide. Hence, in his narrative, the arrow of time is reversed: history does not proceed, it goes backwards. In order to deal with incomprehensible terror and suffering at Auschwitz, Amis rejects a realistic representation of historical events: his postmodern solution is to revisit the past with bitter irony, through an unreliable narrator and the technique of temporal reversal. Through his postmodern narrative and daring exploration of chronology and history, Amis invites the reader to meditate on the horrors of the past and makes the narrator ponder on the Nazi doctors' healing-killing ideology. Amis offers a reversed world perspective and forces us to experience time passing in reverse by recording the story of a Nazi doctor starting from his death and ending with his birth. The novel traces the steps of the doctor's life backwards, tragically revealing his participation in the horror of Auschwitz, where he worked in the medical section during the Second World War and from which he fled to America after the war. In the reversed logic of the narrative, the mass extermination of a race is described as the creation of it: Auschwitz appears as a miraculous place where a race could be made from the weather. The story ends with the doctor's birth; in this way, Amis rejects a proper sense of closure and suggests that history is going to repeat itself, this time tragically, with the time's arrow that points first.

The figure of the Nazi doctor, together with the idea that his eugenics experiments have put an end to history (again I have referred to Adorno's perspective on the Holocaust), returns also in Smith's *White Teeth* with the fictional character of the French scientist Marc-Pierre Perret. Smith describes how Dr Perret, who collaborated with the Nazis on gruesome experiments on the Jews during the Second World War (and whom Archie Jones should have shot at), has changed his ways and, in the 1990s, founded the Perret institute in London, where he is the mentor of the genetic engineer Marcus Chalfen. The reader is left with the

bitter reflection that a Nazi war criminal has made Marcus Chalfen's scientific innovations possible and is invited to somehow link genetic experiments with man's wish to create a race of (perfect) last men. The creation of the last man and of a perfect race is a topic discussed in *The End of the World News*, *Time's Arrow*, *White Teeth*, and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (in the first chapter through the story about Noah's Ark). In Smith's novel, chapter eighteen is entitled "The End of History versus The Last Man" and offers many viewpoints on Marcus Chalfen's FutureMouse project and on political and moral implications of playing God with life and destiny. However, at the end of the novel, the fleeing mouse escapes from his torturer: thus, Smith conveys the message that man cannot control everything and that life and history are very unpredictable and chaotic.

In the analyses of Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor* and Burgess's *The End of the World News* I have highlighted that both the novels conceive the failed project of technological progress: they reject the Enlightenment faith in man's rationality and human development (the intertext for my reading has been Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialektik der Aufklärung*) and depict the end of history as a likely historical event. While in Smith's novel the apocalypse is ironical and fails to materialize, Lessing's and Burgess's narratives deal with social and cultural ending and represent post-apocalyptic worlds. In *Memoirs of a Survivor*, the context is that of a post-nuclear holocaust and men are deemed to be responsible for their own destruction (like in "The Survivor" of Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*). The narrator records the deterioration of society, which is assaulted by a sense of an ending, and evolutionary degeneration on the whole. Nonetheless, the novel conveys a positive message in two ways: on the one hand, Lessing focuses on the importance of love to save us from total destruction (also Barnes in "Parenthesis" of *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* opposes love to resignation and despair) and on the other hand, through the novel's ending, she offers a possibility of renewal for her characters in a world beyond history. Also *The End of the World News* explores the idea of man's survival after the end of history. Like Lessing, Burgess describes the end of history in terms of the end of the world, but he suggests that this is due to a natural cataclysm, not to man's actions. The post-apocalyptic and post-historical world is inhabited by a selected group of people: they are all scientists with the exception of the protagonist Valentine Brodie, a university teacher and science-fiction writer, who will be the historian and chronicler of the last days of the world. Burgess's character Paul Maxwell Bartlett is the leader of the scientists and, like Amis's Odilo Unverdorben and Smith's Marc-Pierre Perret, works for

the creation of “the future race” and accepts to establish a totalitarian regime in order to realize his rational project. Bartlett’s purified breed will live on board a spaceship, a sort of contemporary ark after the destruction of the Earth. I have demonstrated that the twelve novels discussed in my thesis often share a common concern with same topics and themes, such as Noah and the ark, science and evil, human desire for power, the apocalypse and the last man. In Burgess’s fictional post-history, new born generations believe that history is a myth; the past is so distant that it seems to be fictional and history is flattened in a perpetual present (like in Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot* and *England, England*). On the spaceship, the history teacher Valentine O’ Grady recurs to storytelling in an attempt to reconstruct the past and make history survive (like Tom Crick in Swift’s *Waterland*). Through the story about Leon Trotsky, Burgess deals with the end of history also as the philosophical doctrine that believes in the possibility to reach the best of the possible political systems. However, Burgess’s position on such an optimistic vision is sceptical and dismissive.

In all the examples of English historiographic metafiction here examined, the writers never strive for definitive answers and closure as represented by a grand narrative of history; they prefer uncertainties and difference(s) to the flattening of the end of history. They are concerned with the deconstruction of myths and new versions of history: in some cases they attribute the resetting of history to the Second World War and, in particular, to the tragedy of the Holocaust; in other cases, they locate the end of history in nuclear or natural disasters. In *White Teeth*, the end of history is also alluded at with the fall of the Berlin Wall and her characters watching the event on TV; the novel’s attitude to history is alternately earnest and mocking. In the novel, democracy fails to represent a perfect political system, as Fukuyama maintains, and, for instance, it is ironically challenged by the Islamic group called KEVIN.⁹ Unlike Swift’s *Waterland*, Amis’s *London Fields* and *Time’s Arrow*, in *White Teeth* the apocalypse is not a tragedy; Smith claims that the end of history is only apparent: what really ends is not history but the myths of national identity and pure Britishness. Contemporary novelists declare that the function of history must be rethought in order to renegotiate its uses for the postmodern age and that the investigation and reconsideration of the past are the means to look at identity and its construction. The construction of postmodern identity requires a critical and attentive approach to the past that questions conventional notions of truth and historical progress. In white English writers the end of history seems to tally with the end of Englishness as traditionally conceived: the

⁹ Cf. Chapter Four, 4.2, p. 229.

English old identity is lost and impossible. From the 1950s onwards, because of the mass migration of groups of people coming from parts of the Caribbean, South East Asia and Africa (and also from other parts of the world) towards the United Kingdom, Britain has developed into a multicultural nation: it has started dealing with the ethnic question and the re-elaboration of the concept of identity and nationhood. *White Teeth* and *Small Island* tackle the consequences of colonialism (like *Midnight's Children*), the effects of history and the past on post-war British society, as well as the birth of ethnic identities. In my analysis of these two novels, particular attention has been drawn to that process that has changed the face of British society and culture and to the construction of new multicultural identities. I have concluded my study on history and its rewriting with Smith's and Levy's ways of deconstructing and rebuilding the value of being English in contemporary Britain.

By no means have I attempted to be absolutely exhaustive in my choice of the novels to analyse; nonetheless, I believe that my selection offers a good representation of the theme of history, its end, and its postmodern and postcolonial rewriting. History and reality, particularly in postmodern times, demand to be interpreted, since they are central to postmodern society's understanding of itself. Historiographic metafiction confronts the difficulties of engaging with the past (recent history) and the present (post-historical, hyper-real reality), and acknowledges that we can only know (and therefore understand) reality as it is produced and sustained by representations of it. On the whole, postmodern novelists' attitude toward an increasingly meaningless world and the proclaimed end of history retraces a sort of realism in fiction: for instance, 'magic realism' in Rushdie, or 'hysterical realism' in Smith. Postmodern novelists attempt in different ways to retain certain aspects of realism, such as its attention to, and analysis of, social phenomena; yet, at the same time, they confront the problems of representation, the impossible correspondence between reality and its fictional reproduction. Thus, they take realism in new directions; they bring about a wide range of new contemporary realisms.¹⁰ Their final aim is to draw attention to the moral and political consequences of making sense of history and reality, and to counteract scepticism. Through several detailed case studies of historiographic metafiction, it has been highlighted that the end of history is a way to hint at the possibility of a new beginning of history itself, or, at least, postmodern novelists hope so.

¹⁰ Gašiorek argues that realism has been challenged and extended in post-war British fiction and he finally claims that "contemporary realism needs to be seen as an open-ended form". Andrzej Gašiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After*, London: Edward Arnold, 1995, p. 182.

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Estratto per riassunto della tesi di dottorato

L'estratto (max. 1000 battute) deve essere redatto sia in lingua italiana che in lingua inglese e nella lingua straniera eventualmente indicata dal Collegio dei docenti. L'estratto va firmato e rilegato come ultimo foglio della tesi.

Studente: Alice MANDRICARDO _____ matricola: 955487 _____

Dottorato: FILOLOGIA MODERNA _____

Ciclo: XXIII _____

Titolo della tesi¹ : ***The End of History in English Historiographic Metafiction*** _____

Abstract:

The main task in this thesis is to define the relationship between the philosophical concept of “the end of history” and postmodernist understanding and critique of history in English “historiographic metafiction”. I consider the end of history both as an important feature of postmodern culture and a suitable topic through which contemporary fiction can be analysed. I refer to Alexandre Kojève’s reading of Hegelian dialectics and to Francis Fukuyama’s optimistic interpretation of the end of history in order to introduce the philosophical debate on the end of history and explain the context within which postmodern novelists write. The novelists I examine jettison the end of history thesis as a metanarrative and produce critical histories through postmodernist modes of representation. I dwell particularly on twelve novels and their different ways to represent history and its end.

Estratto:

L’obiettivo principale di questa tesi è definire il rapporto tra il concetto filosofico di “fine della storia” e il modo in cui la storia e la sua fine possono essere interpretate nella “historiographic metafiction” inglese. Considero la fine della storia sia come un aspetto caratteristico della cultura postmoderna sia come un valido argomento per analizzare la narrativa contemporanea. Prendo in esame la lettura della dialettica hegeliana da parte di Alexandre Kojève e l’interpretazione ottimistica della fine della storia di Francis Fukuyama al fine di introdurre il dibattito filosofico sulla fine della storia e di spiegare il contesto in cui scrivono gli scrittori postmoderni. Gli scrittori a cui ho rivolto la mia attenzione respingono la tesi della fine della storia e producono delle riscritture critiche della storia attraverso tecniche di rappresentazione postmoderne. Mi soffermo in particolare su dodici romanzi e sul loro modo di raccontare la storia e la sua fine.

Firma dello studente

¹ Il titolo deve essere quello definitivo, uguale a quello che risulta stampato sulla copertina dell’elaborato consegnato.