

Postwriting – Intertextuality and the End of History in Durrell, Swift and Barnes

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Children, do you want to hear about — ? Then let me tell you that...

history is coming to an end. There has always been a new beginning, but let's not fool ourselves any longer, these beginnings were only returns. Yes, history moves in circles. And we know, in fact, we've known it all along. But now, it's over, we've seen through history's cunning passages. It is not a matter of "cutting down on history," as the headmaster informs the self-indulgent history teacher Tom Crick in Graham Swift's *Waterland*. It is not a matter of choosing your camp: progressive (revolutionary) or nostalgic (reactionary). Even that is past, or has become indistinguishable. No, it's much worse: we're 'post': postmodern, postcolonial, poststructuralist, posthistoric... But what does it mean to say 'we' in this context anyway?

It all started when history became a 'text' and a 'narrative'. But history is not like any other story, but a 'metanarrative' that has been trying to disguise itself as 'natural' since the beginning of time. Postmodernism, as is well known by now, is (not the end, but merely) the incredulity towards metanarratives, precisely because they are only narratives — stories trying to hide behind facts, documents, testimonies, 'sources,' that we should read as 'texts' or 'myths'. History's narration is not essentially different from fiction. History is fiction, and postmodernist fiction is fiction about this fictionality — also, maybe ironically, termed 'metafiction'. But

postmodernist fiction is in fact not about any kind of fictionality, or any form of metafiction (because metafictionality is as old as fiction itself); it is “historiographic metafiction.”¹ It is fiction writing about the fictionality of writing history (it plays with historical discourse). It is not only aware of the discursivity of historiography but also of its own process of writing a (hi)story. Nothing new so far in this. Is that it? you will ask. The end? Is that all — a discourse that is conscious of writing about an impossible end, conscious about its own impossibility to end by ending (thus constantly “replenishing” itself)?²

If only we could be sure that there was indeed an end to/of history (but already the ambiguity of the genitive makes this less than certain). If only there was an apocalypse, a ‘real’ apocalypse, you know, the end of the end, absolutely... nothing. But since it’s impossible to imagine it I can only ‘invoke’ it, endlessly. And who am/is this ‘I’ anyway? ‘I’ will have to tell this ‘I’ to stop here, or else, I’ll have to tell you another... About postmodernism, intertextuality and the end that would not come. But let me write — for telling and writing are not the same — a history of postmodernism, which is also a history of the future. And since I cannot write on my own — for everything has already been said, written and done — because (inter)textuality is here to haunt ‘me’, let me call upon others to assist...

I.

Lawrence Durrell, Graham Swift and Julian Barnes — three ‘contemporary’ novelists writing about and rewriting history.³ Durrell’s *The Alexandria Quartet* was modernist by reception. It was widely read and discussed when it appeared (1957-1960) because it

“satisfied the taste of readers raised on the moderns.”⁴ Seen from another angle, however, the *Quartet* may be called “the missing link to postmodernism,” whereby postmodernism is understood as:

both a period in literary history (the latter half of the twentieth century – 1960 and beyond) and as a theoretical model that posits certain literary traits: metafiction with its emphasis on the imaginative process of storytelling and the mixing of literary and critical concerns; often baroque or neo-baroque style with accompanying linguistic artifice and self-consciousness; a recognition of the collaborative role of the reader as interpreter; a privileging of form as integral content; tolerance of paradox and ambiguity; an awareness of the ideological underpinnings of rhetorical ‘truth;’ use of irony, parody, and intertextuality as defamiliarisation techniques; attention to a destabilized reality; a dynamic subject/object relationship; and a sensitivity to context/historicity.⁵

As far as Durrell’s experimentalism is concerned, seen from a non-British perspective, his work seems to belong rather to a tradition that is opposed to the radical formalist early twentieth-century avant-garde (as continued, for example, by the French *nouveau* and *nouveau nouveau roman*, or American postmodernists). In fact the evolution within Durrell’s *oeuvre* runs counter to any modernist radicalisation (if anything the formal development from the early days of *The Black Book* to the final *Avignon Quintet* suggests a certain (neo)conservative turn), and instead remains in a state of moderate tension between innovation and tradition, which defies any simple chronological or consecutive movement from modernism to postmodernism in Durrell’s work.

The most striking feature of *The Avignon Quintet* is its “transformation of history/ies [*Geschichte(n)*].”⁶ Fiction and reality become indistinguishable because the authorship of the *Quintet* is claimed by several narrators in the text and several characters claim independence from their narrators. They tend to become more ‘real’ than their creators, until, in the end, the reader is confronted with the kind of illusion that according to Patricia Waugh (using Steven Kellman’s phrase) constitutes a “self-begetting novel.”⁷ This does not lead, however, to total chaos but to a recurring of similar configurations, abysmal structures, a proliferation of specular reflections and increasing intertextuality. Playing out various possibilities of given constellations and types is to bring about the dissolution of what Durrell (following D.H. Lawrence) calls the belief in the “discrete ego.” Instead his characters embrace the absence of their individuality and live (more or less) happily according to the motto: “Be ye members of one another.” The recurring of events, the mixing fictional levels and the floating of characters into and out of each other, create a very dense intertextual network that is meant to emphasise the prevalence of imagination over reality.

Although the *Quintet* alludes frequently to historical events of the Second World War (which seem much more ‘present’ than in the *Quartet*, even though it is set in the same period), history is understood as a special kind of fiction. It is not a recording of what actually happened; the focus is rather on the non-realised possibilities within history, on imagination and the structural implications of historical alternatives (or what has elsewhere been called “virtual history.”⁸ Conflicting world views or cosmologies, and therefore different concepts of history are competing within the *Quintet*: the writer figures, the gnostics, the psychoanalysts and Taoists differ in their concept of history, but they are also united in the underlying motive of the quest for Reality. It may be tempting to see the various ‘discourses’ as a reflection

of the radical postmodernist plurality and the power-struggle for (historical) meaning which is essential to the idea of democracy:

[Postmodernism] is the historical period in which radical plurality is realised and accepted as the fundamental condition of societies, and in which, therefore, pluralistic patterns of meaning and action become urgent, dominant and necessary. This pluralisation would, however, be grossly misunderstood if taken as a mere process of dissolution. It rather represents a deeply positive vision which is inseparable from real democracy.⁹

What this pluralisation (and maybe democratisation) of history therefore represents is the crisis of legitimation and the fragmentation of the apocalyptic discourse within history. There are different ends to history. This is what Durrell's *Avignon Quintet*, Graham Swift's *Waterland* and Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* share: they are interrogating and parodying not only the end of history, not only the meaning of apocalyptic discourse, but the very plurality of their meaning. And as such they are questioning the openness of the concept of (inter)textuality in general.

This is of course in conjunction with the complex (chrono)logical structures that are inscribed within the prefix 'post' and the ways in which it qualifies the nouns 'modernism,' 'modernity' and 'modern:' the question of continuity, discontinuity and dialectics in history. How to 'overcome' the modern, how to leave modernity behind? This is the tantalising question of surpassing the unsurpassable or of transcending transcendence or being newer than the new. Hence the increasing impatience and frustration with modernity's interminability and the constant surprise that events keep taking place. It is not so much a question of the end of history, but of what can be

done for this end of history to begin at last. Postmodernism is the time of this epilogue in which:

on the one hand, modernity can only envisage the worst coming after itself; on the other hand the worst lies precisely on its own course which it forbids itself to change because it holds an alternative to itself as unthinkable.¹⁰

But when even the epilogue lasts too long, the story of the end becomes incredible. Postmodern is the sentiment of this untrustworthy end or of living somehow already after the end, in a state of *survivance*.¹¹ This epilogical time, however, may also be valorised as a gift as the time gained in the ‘mean-time’ [*Zwischenzeit*]. It is the time of the Event [*Ereignis*], namely of the birth of the Other (of) history (“*Die Geburt der Geschichte aus dem Geist des Aufschubs*” — the birth of history from the spirit of deferral¹²). Could this be the mystical moment of Benjaminian *Jetztzeit* in which not only the “historical materialist” but also the postmodernist writer starts his (and it must be of some significance that this form of postmodernist writing should be dominated by male authors) work, the “time of the [here and] now” which is “shot through with chips of Messianic time:”¹³

But what is this much adduced Here and Now? What is this indefinable zone between what is past and what is to come; this free and airy present tense in which we are always longing to take flight into the boundless future? How many times do we enter the Here and Now? How many times does the Here and Now pay us visits? It comes so rarely that it is never what we imagine, and it is the Here and Now that turns out to be the fairy-tale, not History, whose substance is at least for ever determined and unchangeable. For the Here and Now has more than one face.¹⁴

It is clear that the “Great Narrative” of History — “the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears in the dark” (*Waterland* 62), the inescapable and self-reproducing cycle of (inter)textuality — is the bait for man, the “story-telling animal.” But it is equally clear that (mystical) Reality lies in the Here and Now, which, however, remains inexpressible, for it lies outside the story-telling and beyond (inter)textuality. Between these fragmentary moments of “Messianic time,” which repeatedly crush the individual under their intensified feelings of joy or terror and “announce that time has taken us prisoner” (*Waterland* 61), is only the Void. This void between moments of Reality, which are the moments of true revolution, has to be filled; and this is done by telling stories. The problem is that these surprise attacks of the Here and Now only become accessible *après coup*, that is, in memory. And what else is memory than a story. So it happens that by the very attempt to arrest history in the here and now, it is necessary to tell the story of an end as a never-ending story.

Since reality always remains covered by layers and layers of story-telling which are responsible for the concept of intertextuality, it is understandable that one should come to the conclusion that reality can only be reached in imagination, and that truth is stranger than fiction. What started as a critique of the ‘realism’ underlying historiography (a certain ideology that conveys the myth of history as being the ‘natural’ course of events, verifiable through the evaluation of ‘facts’), easily lapses into a critique and negation of reality itself. The moments of the Here and Now are all too often merely a “slap in the face,” a destiny inflicted upon man by a malicious godhead. This is where postmodernist fiction finds its affinities with gnosticism. The pitiless God who is watching the Fenlanders being swept away by the watery element or running to meet their doom is a cruel demiurge. He is either indifferent or at best helpless, considering the continuing self-destruction of the world and human

suffering. In that he is not unrelated to Benjamin's angel of history, who is blown away from the paradise into the future by the wind of progress, while facing the past and its "pile of debris before him grow[ing] skyward."¹⁵

This problem of theodicy — the paradox of vindicating divine justice in the face of evil and suffering — accounts for the tragic note of absurdity and the gnostic motives in the texts of all the three authors. The God of History (and by implication any historicism) is a fallen angel, and man has inherited this deep ambiguity caused by a dark divinity. He is, in fact, merely a reflection of this demiurgical power. Let us take the example of a history teacher:

What is a history teacher? He's someone who teaches mistakes. While others say, Here's how to do it, he says, And here's what goes wrong. While others tell you, This is the way, this is the path, he says, And here are a few bumbles, botches, blunders and fiascos... It doesn't work out; it's human to err (so what do we need, a God to watch over us and forgive us our sins?). He's a self-contradiction (since everyone knows that what you learn from history is that nobody —). An obstructive instructor, a treacherous tutor. Maybe he's a bad influence. Maybe he's not good to have around ... (*Waterland* 235-236)

The half-blaming half-indulging superstitious belief of the Fenlanders in a ubiquitous but indifferent or malicious God also seems to inspire the parodical counter-history of the woodworm in Barnes's *A History of the World*. The irresponsible God of animal cruelty who "drove Noah to drink" is the irascible and envious Jehovah of the Old Testament who gives man only the illusion of a free will: "God holds all the cards and wins all the tricks. The only uncertainty is how the Lord is going to play it this time."¹⁶ God is also the misguiding voice, Spike, the astronaut,

hears on the moon, telling him to go and find Noah's Ark (and then cruelly ridicules the whole project Ararat by providing the wrong archaeological proof). And He is of course responsible for the whole tragedy of Mary kidnapping a child from the supermarket in *Waterland* (a grotesque parody of Nativity).

Durrell's *Quintet* equates history with an entropical process to which even the demiurge (a.k.a. Monsieur or the Prince of Darkness) is subject. The satanical death drift of entropy is at once a post-apocalyptic and a pre-apocalyptic vision of a world compromised from the very beginning (the Fall, or the death or absence of the benign and just God); and a world that ever since has been repeating its dialectic of (re)construction and destruction:

For the historian everything becomes history, there are no surprises, for it repeats itself eternally, of that he is sure. In the history books it will always be a Friday the thirteenth. It is not surprising, for human folly is persistently repetitive and the issues always similar. The moralist can say what he pleases. History triumphantly describes the victory of divine entropy over the aspirations of the majority — the hope for a quiet life this side of the grave. (*The Avignon Quintet: Constance* 933)

This endless repetition of the same must be resisted. History as the endless war of humanity against itself (after the war is only before the next war) must end. But how to stop a cycle on which one's own being and even one's thinking is dependent? How to stop telling stories? How to escape into the absolute Alterity of Un-History? History can only come to an end after the 'death of man,' the annihilation of the subject, following the paradoxical phantasm of a world of a finally subjectless object (who would live to see it? Only the absolute gaze of the psychotic).¹⁷ This would be the ultimate ('posthumanist') triumph of technology and the machine in its eternalised

self-presence symbolised as “the abandoned but vigilant... motor-cycle” (*Waterland* 358) forsaken by the self-destructive messiah who happened to be a tragic “potato-head” with a too big ‘Dick’.

The cultural pessimism of Durrell’s *Quintet*, and Tom Crick’s warning about the frailty of civilisation which is about to destroy itself, have themselves a long history, of course. Durrell, in *Tunc* and *Nunquam*, openly declared his allegiance with (the proto-fascist and gnostic) Oswald Spengler, author of *The Decline of the West*. Just as the *Quintet* draws on Denis de Rougemont’s *L’Amour et l’Occident*, Barnes’s “Parenthesis” (a moment of Here and Now within *A History of the World*) sets up an antithesis between love and history, in which love is the anti-dote to the historical world (which is also the material world of the fallen God, according to Gnostic belief). “Love and truth, that’s the vital connection, love and truth” (*A History of the World* 240). And just like for Lawrence and Durrell — and a whole tradition inspired by neo-platonic ideals — this love is knowledge, knowledge of a truth beyond history. The curiosity that at once causes history to progress and to be transcended, this desire located in human sexuality, is the desire for knowledge (“sex isn’t acting... sex is about truth;” *A History of the World* 241); and this knowledge is the knowledge of the Other (the absolute alterity of the other or absent God). Ultimately it overlaps with the Freudian death drive and with death as the ultimate knowledge of alterity and unicity (within absolute self-presence), which is at once the source of destruction and of redemption from history.

The symbolism of the war and the terror brought about by revolution therefore form necessary sources of ambivalence in all three texts. The Second World War as a stagemaster of events which from time to time crash in on the individual (even in the remote English Fens), or war as a mythical background to Durrell’s cities (Alexandria,

Avignon, Geneva, London and Paris), represent a time of ‘self-forgetting’ or amnesia: the loss of self in the pure presence inspired by danger: “Yet the danger gives a strange unreality to everything — the quality of amnesia. Actions become automatic” (*Constance* 650). In *Waterland*, Dick, the “Saviour of the world,” is characterised by this automatism of absolute amnesia which makes him resemble the machines he “loves” (his motor-bike and his dredger “Rosa II”; *Waterland* 38):

He’s here. He knows his place. He knows his station. He keeps the ladder turning, the buckets scooping. The noise of the churning machinery drowns the fleeting aerial clamour of global strife. He hears no bombers, sees no bombers. And this smell of silt is the smell of sanctuary, is the smell of amnesia. He’s here, he’s now. Not there or then. No past, no future. He’s the mate of the *Rosa II*. And he’s the saviour of the world. (*Waterland* 355)

Dick, who is not only the saviour of the world, but also represents the apocalyptic figure of the end of history — he is the product of the madness of incest, the parody of another immaculate conception: he has no father and no mother, because the one he believed to be his mother is also the daughter of his father; he upsets the generation game of revolution: he must not have either parents nor children of his own. Indeed, everything would have been fine, had it not been for ‘woman.’ It is no coincidence that gnostic apocalypticism should normally coincide with strong misogynistic tendencies. Everything may have (re)turned to nothing, if woman did not have this amazing capacity of engendering reality out of “nothing:”

Children, women are equipped with a miniature model of reality: an empty but fillable vessel. A vessel in which much can be made to

happen, and to issue in consequence. In which dramas can be brewed,
things can be hatched out of nothing. (*Waterland* 42)

“Our business is children,” Tom Crick says, asking the headmaster who wants to cut down on history: “Do you believe in children?” (*Waterland* 156). How is an end of history conceivable, as long as there are children? And if one speaks about the end of history, of the relentless beginning of the end of history, can one believe in children?

There is only one child in Durrell’s *Quintet*. He is a ‘special’ child, like Dick — an autistic, who is eventually cured by a psychoanalyst and will grow up to become an artist, another ‘saviour of the world.’ And there is also the intention of engendering a (gnostic) “love child” until Sebastian/Affad realises his folly: he, a gnostic, is perpetuating the material world of the demiurge (which would be the equivalent of wanting to make history):

And love had made him wish to turn his back upon reality and blinker himself with transitory passion. To wake and sleep with her. To engender a child — *a child!* What a trap he had prepared for himself.

(*The Avignon Quintet: Sebastian* 1011)

A similar ambiguity about procreation is displayed in the fourth chapter of Barnes’s *History of the World*, “The Survivor,” which leaves the question open whether Kath’s escape and parodical repetition of Noah’s journey in the Ark (her only company are a couple of cats) to an uninhabited island, is indeed a flight from the apocalyptic reality of a global nuclear catastrophe, or whether her’s is merely a phantasm of a madwoman. Kath’s radical environmentalist and technophobic concerns persuade her that the world is coming to an end and that “the future [lies] in the past” (*A History of the World* 96). But if she really is sole survivor — as she becomes more and more

convinced — she “should have got pregnant before [she] left.” Instead, it is Linda, the cat, that gives birth and assures the survival of (at least) the feline species:

[Kath] felt such love. The cat wouldn't let her touch the kittens, of course, but that was all right, that was normal. She felt such happiness! Such hope! (*A History of the World* 111)

In *Waterland*, the history teacher and his wife Mary remain childless, even though, as Tom Crick tells his pet-pupil Price: “[He] once had a child” (*Waterland* 259). Because Mary played Maria Magdalena in her youth with the saviour of the world (Dick), who was not supposed to have any children — she has an abortion leaving her sterile — she has to repent by turning into a “madonna”, nursing the elderly and being a mother to the orphaned history teacher. As a supreme irony, later she becomes Sarah when God promises her a child (that is, a future) — which she then steals from another woman while shopping at Tesco's. When she has to give the child back, she lapses into madness. This is, according to Durrell's ironic narrator, precisely how history always works: “In affairs of this sort there is always a missing child. In this way history manages to perpetuate itself” (*Constance* 942).

Revolution is a generation game which consists merely of a “turning round, a completing of a cycle;” thus it contains at once a “leap into the future” and an “idea of a return. A redemption; a restoration. A reaffirmation of what is pure and fundamental against what is decadent and false. A return to a new beginning...” (*Waterland* 137). The gnostic answer to halt or break this vicious circle is to abstain by various forms of *askesis*. This exercise in self-restraint can take two forms in gnostic practice: it is either the abstention (as far as possible) from procreation and material consumption, or the acceleration and exhaustion of this consumption by breaking every single law of the evil God. In both cases, the objective is an alchemical process of spiritual

purification and dematerialisation. Only asceticism and detachment can lead to a (re)unification with the mystical unity of the absent God in His (Its?) radical alterity; only a (re)union with this Alterity can hold the promise of an end of history. This is also the situation or condition postmodernist fiction describes.

II.

By invoking the arrival of this absolute alterity — the Other (of) history — writing becomes ‘performative’ in its exercise of asceticism. Writing becomes writing about the end of writing, about its own exhaustion, or its (impossible) abstention while waiting for the Event which would transcend all writing. This concept would be best described as ‘postwriting’ and is a kind of opposite to the Derridean notion of *archi-écriture*. How may this apocalyptic waiting that constitutes postwriting be filled? By telling stories, of course.

So let me tell you... about the history of the end of history, or the postmodernist history of *askesis*, and about the theory of the postmodern. Postmodernism is sometimes also seen as a liberation or a return of the historical. In a certain undogmatic manner tradition re-enters the stage. The postmodernist ‘presence of the past’ is not an imitative but a transformative and plural engagement with tradition(s); it is by no means a neo-historicism, and it is not teleological as such. It is precisely the eschatological *telos* which postmodernism sets out to debunk and criticise in modernism, the modern and modernity. Postmodernist tradition always involves a translation of the old into the contemporary, thereby creating a multilingual

plurality of historical synchronicity; it re-opens a historical dimension for the critique of the modern.

With its pluralist ideals, postmodernism is radically opposed to a return of universalist historiography, because historical discourse always depends on the exclusion of its silent others.¹⁸ Never, however, has so much attention been given to other histories, provoking an inflation of historiographies of ‘othering’ and difference; never has the acceptance of alternative, oppositional and repressed histories been so great. To preserve the futurity of the event as the experience of the other, and as the possibility of history, revolution and justice, involves an “affirmative experience of the coming of the other as other.”¹⁹ This is not in opposition to modernity, or a rejection of the past as inheritance or tradition; rather it is an affirmation of memory as essential in the process of working through the modern for “the moment at which the worst threatens to return is also the moment when the worst is being remembered... One ghost recalls another.”²⁰ For Jacques Derrida the un(re)presentable moment of non-contemporaneity of the present with itself [Swift’s slippery ‘Here and Now’] opens up the historical possibility for the very idea of justice as a trace or *différance*, and it also makes the process of history possible, establishing a new relation with repetition and deferral.²¹ But this historical moment cannot be thought of as unity or oneness; it is the always “more-than-one” [*plus d’un*] of the ghost that inhabits the untimely [*l’intempestif*] always escaping the present moment. What therefore comes ‘after history,’ is the return of this ghost; and postmodernist theory must therefore specialise in “hauntology” (or, spectral ontology):

Repetition *and* first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost... Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time* makes of it also a

last time. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a *hauntology*... How to *comprehend* in fact the discourse of the end or the discourse about the end?... After the end of history, the spirit comes by *coming back* [*revenant*], it figures *both* a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again.²²

Repetition starts with the return of a ghost [*revenant*, literally “one who returns”], by a feeling of *déjà vu*; and it is in the difference created by repetition that the singularity of the event can be perceived as an echo or trace. The discourse of the end of history is itself belated and merely announces the end of a certain concept of (the end of) history. In the promise of the end of a certain history the final becoming historical of history is announced.

The (postmodernist) historical feeling of *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness) calls for a messianic philosophy in the Derridean, Levinasian and Benjaminian sense. It is only by embracing the problem of repetition that postmodernism can dissolve the teleology of the modern. For repetition involves difference, which is to say a critical distance, a ‘twist’ or ‘turn’. But this is always already a transgression of mere repetition and can be appropriated by parody or irony.²³ Repetition is also the very condition of knowledge, according to Gilles Deleuze, who reverses Freud’s idea of the compulsion to repeat: it is not because one forgets/represses that one is forced to repeat or that the repressed returns, but it is because one repeats that one forgets. Repetition in this sense is a selection in which only difference returns while the same is eliminated during this process of selection. Only by affirming the process of repetition does one gain access to the different. It is only the third repetition, the third occurrence, that gives birth to difference:

Only affirmation returns — in other words, the Different, the Dissimilar. Nothing which denies the eternal return returns, neither the default nor the equal, only the excessive returns: how much distress before one extracts joy from such a selective affirmation? Only the third repetition returns.²⁴

The logic of the psychoanalytic cure with its transference processes is based on this idea of repetition of the different and of a recognition *après coup* (by the doubling of the occurrence). Paradoxically, history can thus only be articulated in the future, and within the process of this articulation, a reorganisation of the past and the future can occur. By transference the past becomes the present so that the future can once more be an open question. The primal event needs a ‘double articulation’ of *Nachträglichkeit* to give away its meaning. Repetition and trauma mutually create each other, so that memory can alter past events *après coup* by transforming the repressed into traumatic post-eventness. The symbolic process that takes place during the analysis realises the anachronistic paradox of *Nachträglichkeit* in the future perfect: this will have been ‘it.’ Thus, one has to travel into the future to encounter the repressed:

From where does the repressed return? (...) From the future. Symptoms are meaningless traces, their meaning is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively — the analysis produces the truth; that is, the signifying frame which gives the symptoms their symbolic place and meaning. As soon as we enter the symbolic order, the past is always present in the form of historical tradition and the meaning of these traces is not given; it changes continually with the transformations of the signifier’s

network. Every historical rupture, every advent of a new master-signifier, changes retroactively the meaning of all tradition, restructures the narration of the past, makes it readable in another, new way.²⁵

Knowledge is presupposed in the other, by which the subject hopes to gain insight into his/her own meaning. This knowledge is a necessary illusion (for the other 'lacks' it) until one finds out and constitutes it oneself *après coup*. The journey into the past, the historical enquiry can only occur on the symbolic level of the signifier, and only in language (or writing) can one know and bring about the past:

This, therefore, is the basic paradox we are aiming at: the subject is confronted with a scene from the past that he wants to change, to meddle with, to intervene in; he takes a journey into the past, intervenes in the scene, and it is not that he 'cannot change anything' — quite the contrary, only through his intervention does the scene from the past *become what it always was*: his intervention was from the beginning comprised, included. The initial 'illusion' of the subject consists in simply forgetting to include in the scene his own act ...²⁶

This describes the form of historical repetition that gives rise to historicism as self-fulfilling prophecy. The subject necessarily overlooks his/her blind spot, in the way his/her acting is already part of the state of things he/she is looking at, the way his/her error is part of the truth itself. Truth arises from this misrecognition, by a change of the symbolic status of the event; repetition recreates the traumatic event as symbolic necessity *post factum*. It is a retroactive justification through repetition as interpretation: "the interpretation always sets in too late, with some delay, when the event which is to be interpreted repeats itself; the event cannot already be lawlike in

its first advent.”²⁷ Unfortunately, there seems to be no short cut to the processes of truth-finding than through this form of misrecognition and repetition.

Bearing the question of ‘initial’ repetition in mind, postmodern historiographies can be said to resist the modern dialectic of the same and the other; instead they evoke the different and give testimony to the incommensurable and excluded alterity. Postmodernism’s task is thus to re-open the question of history (beyond the end of history). Postmodernist fiction and postwriting may be evaluated according to three structural ‘devices’ used to invoke the kind of (re)writing of history discernible in the three texts selected here. This paper will refer to these three devices as rhizome, *mise-en-abyme* and *Verwindung* (or twist). The first concept might be explained as a synchronic, spatial, syntagmatic and non-hierarchical (‘rhizomatic’) spreading out in every possible direction at any given moment in historiography, according to a “logic of the and,” as described by Deleuze and Guattari:

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb ‘to be,’ but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and... and... and...’²⁸

The incredulity towards grand metanarratives creates space for alternative and lateral, small (local) narratives. Against the “myth of the root” (on which traditional metanarratives and universal history are based) postmodernism sets the polymyth of the rhizome. It is an “ex-centric” process of generating difference and stressing discontinuity within a coexistence of different time spheres.²⁹ This does not mean, however, that the (remaining) metanarratives and the various local narratives exist in monadic isolation from each other:

If these are local narratives, it is by virtue of positions that are always changing and historically specific. No special way of telling can guarantee that today's local narrative will not become tomorrow's narrative master.³⁰

The reluctant narrator in Swift's *Waterland*, the parasitical narrator in Barnes's *A History of the World* and the competing narrators in Durrell's *Quintet* struggle with such conflicting world views. The *Quintet* in its very structure — five narratives/volumes circling around similar and partially overlapping events — reflects the chaotic and 'autopoietic' structure of historical reality:

The most haunting thing about human reality is that there is always something unexpected happening in the room next door about which one will only find out later on! Moreover it will prove surprising, totally unpredictable, and more often than not unpalatable. (*The Avignon Quintet: Sebastian* 1148)

Conflictual versions of fictional narratives are built into the *Quintet* as roads that could have been taken, histories *in potentia* so to speak. A rhizomatic way of writing histories thus stresses discontinuity and generates (or rediscovers) other histories and counter-histories, while emphasising the singularity within the open-ended series of events. In the *Quintet* the lateral movement is inscribed within the centrifugal force of fragmentation and dispersal to which the characters are subjected. This relates as to their own unstable identity as well as their nomadic restlessness.

The aspect of location and the place of the narrator within history must therefore also be subject to pluralisation. A 'nomadic' history involves a prismatic view in which changing one's location also changes one's history and thus leads to the (implied) endless proliferation of prismatic openings in time and space, as symbolised

in the five volumes of the *Quintet* (thus continuing and radicalising the Einsteinian/relativity project of *The Alexandria Quartet*). By playing off various patterns of actions and constellations against each other the *Quintet* renounces any singularity of the event. It blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality to such an extent that it becomes a “transformational system” [*Transformationssystem*] which rehearses historical meaning according to an endless “strategy of textualising” [*Vertextungsstrategie*].³¹ History becomes not only the recording of events that actually ‘happened’ in the past but also embraces the non-realised possibilities of historical ‘imagination.’

The second conceptual structure underlying postmodernist theories and fiction about history is a kind of radicalised ‘*mise-en-abyme*.’ It corresponds to a paradigmatic axis (as opposed to the syntagmatic axis of ‘rhizomatic’ history), insisting on a diachronic view or rather on a ‘specular’ relation of events. In establishing a difference from a past (which nevertheless remains present), historiography, and indeed every epistemological act on which historiography relies, performs a repetition in the form of a ‘*mise-en-abyme*’ that leads to an *emboîtement* of time in a complex past-present-future.

According to Lucien Dällenbach a *mise-en-abyme* is “any enclave which entertains a relation of similarity with the work that contains it.”³² In Barnes’s, Durrell’s and Swift’s work this haunting, specular process of writing (of history) is subject to (the spirit of) place. Already in *The Alexandria Quartet* the characters experienced the city as “capital of memory”, as a many-layered palimpsest through which centuries of history seem to inform their actions. In the *Quintet* the spirit of place acts like a prism on the characters’ sight and identity. This creates very dense ‘mythical’ moments of organic unity, *déjà vu* and the nascent future. It is the

uncanniness which derives from the superposition of time-layers contained within spatial localities or landscapes which fascinates Durrell throughout his work.

In *Waterland*, it is the land of the Fens that contributes to the haunting of history and the characters' compulsion to repeat. It is the force of "Natural History" which "perpetually travels back to where it came from" (*Waterland* 205). The antagonism between human curiosity and that something in nature which longs to go back is symbolised in the continual self-renewal of the drainage process, of claiming land with the help of ever more sophisticated technology, followed by the regular reclaiming of the land by water. History to the Fenlanders is like the scooping of silt:

Because silt, as we know, is the builder and destroyer of land, the usurper of rivers, the foe of drainage. There's no simple solution. We have to keep scooping, scooping up from the depths this remorseless stuff that time leaves behind. (*Waterland* 346)

The Fens are "magical" because they remain watery land — water as the element of *Urgeschichte* but also the force "which seeks to make all things level, which has no taste or colour of its own, but a liquid form of Nothing" (*Waterland* 13).

The *History of the World* also follows a cyclic trajectory which always comes back to the same place. It describes the re-enacting of the Deluge and Noah's foundational act — the recurring end and self-renewal of civilisation. In this sense the 10 ½ chapters illustrate the proleptic notion of the myth they describe:

For the point is this: not that myth refers us back to some original event which has been fancifully transcribed as it passed through the collective memory; but that it refers us forward to something that will happen, that must happen. Myth will become reality, however sceptical we might be. (*A History of the World* 181)

This combination of linear, progressive and cyclic notions of history leads on to the third structural concept of history in the context of postwriting. This third aspect is directly engaged in the question of how to surmount the insurmountable, that is: how to break out of the logic of continual self-transcendence and teleology which is the driving force of modern history and modernity itself. While the emblem of the first movement is the rhizome and that of the second the *mise-en-abyme*, the third might be referred to as that of the ‘twist’, or the (Heideggerian) notion of *Verwindung*.³³ Whereas the proliferation of histories leads towards an emphasis on the incommensurability between different historical discourses, the historical *mise-en-abyme* stresses the element of similarity in the form of repetition and mythical and cyclic continuity, on which any metaphysical notion of history depends. The third concept of the twist is a ‘combination’ of both rhizome and *mise-en-abyme*. Ultimately, however, it is concerned with the radical alterity of the Other (of) history and with the outside of (the modern notion of) time.

Verwindung implies a repetition with a twist or a loop, an elliptic, spiral movement that evokes the psychoanalytic model of history at work in the postmodern mourning [*verwinden*] of modernity outlined above. While the dominant tenses of the first and the second movements are the present (synchrony) and the past (diachrony) respectively, the adequate linguistic expression for the time relation within the *Nachträglichkeit* of the twist is the (anachronistic) future perfect. This mode of (re)cognition *après coup* involves the historical experience as a whole and constitutes the moment of undecidability (the Here and Now) as the moment when revolution “(re)volve:”

It goes in two directions at once. It goes backwards as it goes forwards.

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. Do you remember, I asked you — a riddle — how does man move? One step forward, one step back (and sometimes one step to the side). Is this absurd? No. Because if he never took that step forward —
(Waterland 135)

Within the time sphere of the loop, modern and postmodern are free from any linear relation, so that one can indeed say, with Lyotard, that the ‘post’ comes before (*and* after) the ‘modern.’ The oppressive experience of the modern as being inexhaustible leaves the postmodern, as contained within this hermetic inescapability, with only one option, namely an anamnestic process of ‘re-writing’. The modern, which designates the incapacity to finish (with itself), can thus be understood as that which is (always already) finished by containing its own end. Which means that in the beginning there was always already the post. This is the literal paradox of the *prefix post-* as the ‘after’ which comes ‘before.’ The postmodern cannot be separated from the modern because it is always already contained in and thus anticipated by it:

[T]he postmodern is always implied in the modern because of the fact that modernity, modern temporality, comprises in itself an impulsion to exceed itself into a state other than itself. And not only to exceed itself in that way, but to revolve itself into a sort of ultimate stability, such for example as is aimed at by the utopian project, but also by the straightforward political project implied in the grand narratives of emancipation. Modernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity.³⁴

The relation between the modern and the postmodern is therefore anachronistic, according to the particular understanding of Lyotardian anamnesis as ‘initial’

repetition outlined above. This looping movement of one step forward, one step back and one step aside within the *Verwindung* of the unrepresentable (modern) is what Lyotard refers to as process in ‘ana:’

[T]he ‘post-’ of ‘postmodern’ does not signify a movement of *comeback, flashback* or *feedback*, that is, not a movement of repetition but a procedure in ‘ana-:’ a procedure of analysis, anamnesis, anagogy and anamorphosis which elaborates an ‘initial forgetting.’³⁵

The initial forgetting is the unrecoverable, absent origin of the modern and the illusion on which modernism with its avant-garde grounds its discourse of originality. Against this ideology of the new, postmodernism sets its feeling of belatedness and parodic repetition in order to achieve a ‘stalling’ of the continual process of anticipating the new as the (more) modern. The postmodern situates itself within the un(re)representable of the modern, and through the opening of this unsayable and unexpressible ‘sublime,’ it invokes the radical otherness of the Event. The postmodern is not so much concerned with the futurity (in its prophetic anticipation) as such but with the undoing, ‘unwriting’ or erasing of the (predetermined) future of the modern. What is beyond the edge of the postmodern future perfect remains the unnamable absence of the (messianic) future to come (cf. Derrida’s play on *avenir* and *à-venir*). The postmodern waiting for the ‘absolute arrival’ of the *Ereignis* (Event) is time gained for history to occur before the end of history. How far this tactics can serve as a universal value, especially in relation to postcolonialism and its children, is another question: “gaining time. Is this a universally valid end?”³⁶ But it may be time used for negotiation and the plural – the time of the other (but not the Other of time) – that can be set free by postmodernism.

III.

What does it mean to say that postmodernism is the time when history is coming to an end or when history becomes the telling of a story about its own impossibility to end? Whose and which history is coming to an end? Postmodernity (as distinct from postmodernism) – understood as the Other of history and the time after the end (of modernity), the radical Other of time, language, subject and identity, etc. – may just be another (neo-imperialist) ploy barely hiding its craving for a new beginning of the same. It may not only be a denial of otherness but, in its desire for a mystical alterity, it reiterates gnostic motives of unicity. Who has the right to speak of the end of history? Taking the relations of power within such a discourse into account, one may be justified in saying that “the concept of postmodernity has been constructed in terms which more or less intentionally wipe out the possibility of post-colonial identity.”³⁷ But is it true that postmodernist theory and fiction can either be categorised as enemies of or helpmeets to postmodernity?

The kind of postmodernist fiction (postwriting) dealt with in this paper remains ambiguous in relation to otherness, language and intertextuality. Durrell’s *Quintet* – designed as a “Tibetan novel” to repair the short-circuit between East and West and, on a biographical level, to mourn Durrell’s colonial Indian childhood – indeed forecloses ‘real’ otherness by invoking the realm of a mystical (gnostic) Other, in which East and West can be united beyond (material) reality, language and time. In *Waterland*, on the other hand, the decline of curiosity in the characters is reflected in the decline of British imperialism. The concept of the end of history is perverted in the very pedagogy of the situation which involves a history teacher arousing (preserving)

the curiosity of the next generation (something in which he succeeds). But it is a cautious and self-conscious continuation of history, taking into account the (postmodern) twist [*Verwindung*] within the “vigilant business of reclaiming land.”

There’s this thing called progress. But it doesn’t progress, it doesn’t go anywhere. Because as progress progresses the world can slip away. It’s progress if you can stop the world slipping away. My humble model for progress is the reclamation of land. Which is repeatedly, never-endingly retrieving what is lost. A dogged, vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business. But you shouldn’t go mistaking the reclamation of land for building empires. (*Waterland* 336)

This seems to leave time for otherness, and opens up the possibility for a radical plurality of history (and its ends). At the same time it also acknowledges a certain inevitability of colonialism (which lies within the very notion of culture). The outlined (chrono)logical structures of the ‘post’ also inform the concept of the post-colonial, of course. Of all the three fictional texts, *Waterland* is the least nihilistic. It is the least ‘posthistoric’ because it is not concerned with the end of history (which is a purely anthropocentric, Western and neo-colonial concept), but with phantasm and the representation of ‘the end of history’ as the end of language and of writing. It opens up the question of the end of history as otherness within (inter)textuality.

Let me close this story with an open ending, namely with a question and an appeal: granted that “[t]he concern that lies at the bottom of the *posthistoire* diagnosis is not the end of the world, but the end of meaning,”³⁸ what does it mean to read the work of three white male European authors, grouped under the label ‘postmodernist’,

or postwriting, who tell a story about the end of (his)story? Is this just another story of decline, new beginning and return?

Notes

¹See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988).

²See John Barth, *The Literature of Exhaustion and the Literature of Replenishment* (Northridge, California: Lord John Press, 1982).

³Lawrence Durrell (1912-1990) belongs of course to a different generation than Barnes and Swift, and his best-known work, *The Alexandria Quartet*, is usually regarded as a (late) modernist setpiece, an ‘oddity’ of (tempered) experimentalism within the predominantly realist context of the post-war British novel. His later works (*Tunc* [1979] and *Nunquam* [1972]) and in particular *The Avignon Quintet* (1974-1985) continue to fulfill but also depart significantly from this classification (this may be also the reason for the decline in Durrell’s fame after the *Quartet*). This is why Durrell’s *Quintet* is included here, but at the same time set against the texts of the two other writers, who are widely recognised as ‘postmodernists.’ I am providing a more detailed evaluation of Durrell’s place in the Western canon in my *Lawrence Durrell, Postmodernism and the Ethics of Alterity* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999).

⁴Reed Way Dasenbrock, “Lawrence Durrell and the Modes of Modernism,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 33, 4 (1987): 521. The fundamentally modernist feature of the *Quartet* is located, by Dasenbrock, in that “[t]he modern world is chaos and is presented as chaos, yet the artist can order the chaos through the complex structures of his art” (p. 518).

⁵Dianne L. Vipond, “Lawrence Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet*: The Missing link to Postmodernism,” *Deus Loci* ns. 2 (1993): 54-55.

⁶Hartwig Isernhagen, “Lawrence Durrell,” *Der englische Roman der Gegenwart*, eds. R. Imhof and A. Maack (Tübingen: UTB, 1987) 32.

⁷Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984) 18-19. This matches in particular with the “Envoi” at the end of the first novel of the *Quintet: Monsieur*, p. 294. (References are made throughout to the one-volume edition, *The Avignon Quintet: Monsieur, Livia, Constance, Sebastian and Quinx* [London: Faber and Faber, 1992].)

⁸ See Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, London: Papermac, 1988.

⁹Wolfgang Iser, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne* (Weinheim: VCH, 1991) 5 (translation mine).

¹⁰Peter Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoismus: Zur Kritik der politischen Kinetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989) 292 (translation mine).

¹¹See Jacques Derrida, “Survivre,” *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986) 117-218. Translated as “Living On – Border Lines,” trans. James Hulbert, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, eds. H. Bloom, P. de Man, J. Derrida, G. Hartman and J. Hillis Miller (New York: Seabury Press, 1979) 75-176.

¹²Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoismus* 277.

¹³Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Fontana, 1973) 264.

¹⁴Graham Swift, *Waterland*, first ed. 1983 (London: Picador, 1992) 60-61.

¹⁵Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 258.

¹⁶Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, first ed. 1989 (London: Picador, 1990) 176.

¹⁷ See Alain Badiou, “On a Finally Objectless Subject”, in *Who Comes After the Subject?* Ed. Eduardo Cadava, *et al.* (London: Routledge, 1991) 24-32.

¹⁸Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. T. Conley (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1988).

¹⁹Jacques Derrida, “The Destruction of Actuality: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” *Radical Philosophy* 68 (Autumn 1994): 36.

²⁰Derrida, “The Destruction of Actuality” 36.

²¹See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, intro. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York and London: Routledge, 1994) xix:

Without this *non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who *are not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question ‘where’? ‘where tomorrow?’ ‘whither?’

²²Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 10.

²³Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Athlone Press, 1994) 5.

²⁴Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* 299.

²⁵Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 55-56.

²⁶Žižek, *The Sublime Object* 57-58.

²⁷Žižek, *The Sublime Object* 62.

²⁸Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia 2*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 25.

²⁹Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 57 ff.

³⁰Kerwin Lee Klein, “In Search of Narrative Mastery: Postmodernism and the People Without History,” *History and Theory* 34.4 (1995): 297.

³¹Isernhagen, “Lawrence Durrell” 48-49.

³²Lucien Dällenbach, *Le Récit spéculaire: essai sur la mise en abyme* (Paris: Seuil, 1977) 18 (translation mine).

³³For further explanation of this term used by Heidegger as opposed to the metaphysical concept of overcoming [*Überwindung*] see Gianni Vattimo, *The End of*

Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture, trans. and intro. Jon R. Snyder (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), especially pp. 164-181.

³⁴Lyotard, "Rewriting Modernity," *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 25.

³⁵Lyotard, "Note on the meaning of 'post-,'" *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. and ed. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (London: Turnaround, 1992) 93.

³⁶Lyotard, "Memorandum on Legitimacy," *The Postmodern Explained to Children* 69.

³⁷Simon During, "Postmodernism and Post-colonialism Today," *Textual Practice* 1.1 (1987): 33.

³⁸Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Ist die Geschichte zu Ende?* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1989) 9.