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Histopias :
Narration, Narrativization, and Interpretation of History
in Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*
and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*

Mémoire

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Résumé

Comme beaucoup d'autres romans historiques postmodernes, *Une histoire du monde en 10 chapitres et ½* de Julian Barnes et *Cartographie des nuages* de David Mitchell misent en fiction une vision personnelle sur l'histoire et examinent la relation entre les narrations historiques et les fictions. Outre ces projets metahistoriques et metafictionnels, les deux romans proposent un récit historique original de la vie humaine sur la terre. Les narrations de Barnes et de Mitchell s'étendent sur des milliers d'années et sont caractérisées, à tour de role, par la continuité et par la discontinuité. Celle-ci est déterminées par une série de catastrophes, soit naturelles soit liées aux activités humaines, qui donnent aux diverses histoires constituant les romans une puissante note dystopique. Barnes et Mitchell ont une raison très pratique pour choisir le mode dystopique: un monde en crise, surtout un monde proche de sa fin ou de son commencement, est un phénomène qui peut être analysé plus facilement en même temps comme fragment de l'histoire et comme version à échelle réduite de l'ensemble de l'histoire. Une histopie est donc une fiction qui utilise de différents moments de crise, fictifs ou mis en fiction, en tant qu'épisodes d'une histoire fragmentaire du monde.

Abstract

Like many other postmodernist historical novels, Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* fictionalize a personal view of history and examine the relation between historical and fictional narratives. Apart from these metahistorical and metafictional projects, the two novels put forward an original historical account of human life on earth. Barnes's and Mitchell's narratives span millennia and are marked by the interplay of continuity and discontinuity. The latter is shaped by a series of natural and man-made catastrophes, which account for the dystopian character of the various stories that make up the two novels. Barnes and Mitchell have a very practical reason for choosing the dystopian mode: a world in crisis, and especially a world near its end or near its beginning, is a phenomenon that can be more readily analyzed as both a fragment of history and a small-scale version of history as a whole. A histopia is a piece of fiction that uses various moments of crisis, fictional or fictionalized, as episodes of a fragmentary history of the world.

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Introduction

Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (henceforward mentioned as *A History of the World*) and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* are fictional retellings of the history of the world. Several words of this brief definition should be further explained. The degree of fictionality varies from one novel to the other and from one novel section to another. *Cloud Atlas*, especially, could appear entirely fictional to some readers, particularly because two of its sections are set in the distant future. Yet, its starting point is an episode taken from a history book and one full section is a personal reading of real-life characters and situations seized from a 1930s autobiography. In *A History of the World*, real-life characters (including the novel's author) appear in fictionalized versions, while real events are summarized. The only truly nonfictional section is that in which Barnes analyzes a painting, itself the fictional and summarizing version of a real event. The worlds that are narrated in *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* consist mainly of humans, but other living creatures are not omitted – and an animal even becomes a narrator in *A History of the World*. The history of this world is discontinuous and deceptive.[1] So, too, is the narrative structure of the two novels – and this is based on the shared belief of the authors that this is the way in which the world tells itself. Their novels/histories are mere retellings.

I have just hinted at some important arguments I am trying to make in this thesis as well as at some of the terminology I have borrowed from Hayden White. Several commentators of the two novels and of contemporary historical novels in general mention

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[1] The two adjectives can be synonymous when applied to musical pieces like the "Cloud Atlas" sextet composed by one of Mitchell's characters.

White as a possible source of inspiration for the writers' perspective on history and history-writing (Kotte 80, Holmes 82-84, Rubinson 78-80). After careful consideration, I have decided that this approach is ineffective, if not simply fallacious: White writes about the way historians use literary techniques, so why would writers take the reverse route and find incentives in the work of historians? What I did do is use Hayden White's writings myself, since they are a prime example of narratology specialized in the analysis of historical narratives. White has shown that, in the works of historians, three discourses are competing with one another: the discourse that narrates, i.e., tries to record events as they occurred; the discourse that narrativizes, i.e., arranges the events in a certain order, establishing a beginning, a middle, and an end, on the basis of the hypothesis that this is how the world speaks itself; and a discourse that interprets, i.e., "emplots," giving the events a direction and a meaning that is consistent with a pregeneric plot and with a political ideology (White, "The Historical Text" 84-89).

From White's scheme I am less concerned with the political undercurrents (almost nonexistent in Barnes's novel) and in matters of interpretation I focus on the very peculiar ways in which the two authors see History rather than on the use of possible pregeneric plots. Furthermore, I have added if not another discourse, then at least another stage in the construction of a historical narrative, as suggested by the writings of the two authors under discussion here, as well as those of some of their precursors such as Borges and Calvino. If the discourse that narrativizes is based, as White suggests, on a (mis)conception of the way the world "speaks itself," then it follows that before any of the competing discourses in a historical narrative there must come, in (chrono)logical order, the discourse of the world itself. The world makes itself and tells itself in a certain way before being remade and

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retold in a human narrative, i.e., even before the more neutral effort of the discourse that narrates. Consequently, I have amended White's scheme to include a concept that I find very useful in understanding the way in which narratives such as those of Barnes and Mitchell are constructed. I am talking about Walter Benjamin's "flashes" through which History strives to communicate meaning. These "flashes" can be said to inform not only the way events and characters are selected by the discourse that narrates, but also the discontinuous pattern chosen by the two authors in their discourse that narrativizes.

Of the three human discourses that make up the object of my analysis here I start with the discourse that narrativizes not only because the two authors admit having first resolved to choose a certain narrative structure, but also because this structure seemed to have been shaped first by the way in which the authors thought that the world told itself. The fact that I have granted the discourse that narrates a full chapter, thereby placing it on equal standing with the interpretation of History, comes from the fact that the two authors seem convinced, just as much as Walter Benjamin, that History can be recounted with a certain kind of objectivity, if one is to listen carefully to the discourse being made by the world itself. Also, for too long have History (I am capitalizing the initial to emphasize the distinction) and historiography been seen as epistemologically equivalent since the former is supposed to be known only under the guise of the latter, at least since E.H. Carr's influential *What Is History?*, first published in 1961. Holding them together as a single object of analysis is a fruitful and often necessary exercise. However, so is keeping them apart. To be sure, authors like Barnes and Mitchell are concerned with the way men construct their discourse on history, but they are equally eager to unravel History and determine its fundamental nature.

This concern is common in many postmodernist historical novels, although it rarely becomes the central theme of such narratives. Also true is that few other narratives make the history of the world – past, present, and future – their subject. This is why I have treated *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* as examples of a special type (or subgenre) of fiction. Perhaps the most conspicuous and genre-specific kind of narrative experiment in such fictions is that of (re)constructing moments from the remote past or future of the world, which often involve the (re)birth of mankind. Such an experiment allows for a purely world-historical perspective, since the entire human population (or the new population that will replace the old) makes up the cast of characters. Modern utopias and dystopias also use history on a world-scale to show how humanity might progress or regress (Vieira 14-17). However, if in the utopian/dystopian discourse "the imagined society is the opposite of the real one, a kind of inverted image of it" (8), in *Cloud Atlas* and *A History of the World* real history is juxtaposed against its inverted image. Mitchell does this quite literally, in the way the first half of his narrative is mirrored by its exact opposite, i.e., the second half, in which the story goes backwards, amending and rectifying itself. In his own half-chapter, Barnes offers to set history right by opposing it to ahistory. Because they borrow the techniques of utopia and dystopia in order to study world history, I have called such narratives "histopias." This is an example of what has been called a "puncept," i.e., a concept which is also a pun on an already existing concept.[2] Some forms of utopia (in Barnes's final chapter and Mitchell's central narrative) or dystopia (Barnes's recurring Deluge and Mitchell's genocides and genetic disasters) have been quite obvious

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[2] The puncept "is not a gathering or collecting of properties at all, as in the concept, but a scattering, a dissemination, a throwing of the dice" (Ulmer 188).In fact, both J.S. Mill's term of "dystopia" and More's term of "eutopia" (introduced at the end of *Utopia*) are also puncepts. Mill started from – and changed – More's second term, which had used the prefix "good" ("ευ") rather than "no, without" ("ου").

to commentators. What might be less evident but is, I will argue, at the heart of Barnes's and Mitchell's original projects, is that History as a process, rather than mankind or a particular society, is the object of the utopian/dystopian fictional reconstruction. The techniques of the utopia/dystopia genre are used to show the ways in which history originates, ends, and is reborn. In a histopia it is History itself that succeeds or fails in time.

Like many pre-nineteenth-century "histories of the world," Julian Barnes's novel begins with the Genesis, or, more exactly, with one of its episodes: the Deluge. In what looks like a radical example of revisionist historiography, the story of Noah's ark is told by a woodworm, that is, by a creature so marginalised that it had not been welcome on the all-rescuing ship: it is a stowaway.[3] From then on, in each new chapter the reader is invited to change vessels, settings, time periods, and narrators. In the second chapter, fear compels the guide of a Mediterranean cruise ship in the 1980s to side with the Palestinian hijackers who are killing Israeli tourists. Chapter three goes back in time to late-medieval France where lawyers defend or prosecute woodworms, which are being accused of breaking a bishop's chair in a cathedral's "ship," the nave. In chapter four, an Australian woman leaves civilisation in a small boat when she is convinced of the imminence of nuclear disaster. Chapter five both retells the story of the famous wreck of the *Medusa* in 1816 and analyzes its equally famous depiction by the painter Théodore Géricault. In chapter six we are still in the nineteenth century, where a Scottish woman roams through Turkey in search of the remains of Noah's ark. Chapter seven is made of three odd sea tales that are sometimes left out of history books: a passenger of the *Titanic* survives because he dresses up like a

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[3] Barnes's first narrator is a representative of the first stage of life itself, since the woodworm is not an animal, but the larva of an animal (it is also perhaps a ghost, since "larva" is Latin for ghost). Barnes never states explicitly that the woodworm is in fact a larva, but in a later section of the book he introduces the deathwatch beetle, into which the woodworm normally evolves.

woman; a late-nineteenth-century sailor is swallowed up by a whale and then saved when the animal is killed and taken aboard; in 1939, a ship filled with Jewish refugees wanders from one distant port to another, but no one wants its cargo, which ends up back in Europe. In chapter eight, an actor sends letters from South America, where he meets the river people who are hired as extras in an upcoming movie. In chapter nine, a former astronaut funds a new search for Noah's ark, but only finds what appear to be the remains of the lady from chapter six. In between chapters eight and nine, there is a self-reflexive "Parenthesis," in which a narrator called "Julian Barnes" discusses art, history, and love. He appears to be identical with the unnamed narrator of the final chapter, who dreams he goes to heaven.

Cloud Atlas starts off in the middle of the nineteenth century, in the Chatham Islands, off the coast of New Zealand, where an American discovers the remnants of the Moriori, recently exterminated by a Maori invasion. The story is interrupted in mid-sentence, and a new chapter begins in Belgium in 1931, where a young Englishman gains entry into the house of an old composer and starts working as his amanuensis. His letters are also interrupted to make way for the third story, a pulp mystery in which a woman journalist about to uncover a corporate plot is followed by the company's henchmen. When her story stops abruptly, that of an aging British publisher, some years later, begins. He is held captive in a very restraining nursing home, but the reader does not find out enough about his "ghastly ordeal," because the fifth story intervenes. This time we are a few centuries in the future, somewhere in Korea, where an enslaved clone is interrogated on the issue of her emerging rebelliousness. The sixth intervening story, the only one told in one breath, is set even further in the future, after an undisclosed catastrophe, when the few survivors have started a new civilisation in Hawaii. After we learn they worship the rebel

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clone, the novel goes back in time to Korea to finish the fifth story, then the fourth, and so on.

Both *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* revisit history in a fragmented, self-reflexive way. They both exhibit quite clearly features that are common to metafictions, namely they "consciously and systematically [draw] attention to [their] status as . . . artefact[s] in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh, *Metafiction* 2). Up to a certain point, they both seem to be historiographic metafictions, because they are both informed by a certain "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs" (Hutcheon 5). Like the historiographic metafictionists, Barnes and Mitchell "turn away from traditional methods that 'correspond to this ordered reality,' in particular those relating to chronology, the omniscient narrator and questions of narrative linearity" (Waugh, *Metafiction* 7), they draw attention to the "process of turning events into facts . . . of turning the traces of the past . . . into historical representation" (Hutcheon 57), and they are highly interested in the issue of representation in history. A very important difference between the two novels in question and historiographic metafiction is that in the latter, more often than not, historiography and the way it pretends to know and show truth is an opportunity to talk about fiction, about narration in general and the ways in which it can relate to extratextual realities. On the contrary, fiction (a Romantic painting, a feature film very similar to Roland Joffé's *The Mission*, in *A History of the World*; a sextet for "overlapping soloists," a mystery novel, oral legends, in *Cloud Atlas*) in Barnes's and Mitchell's novels is an opportunity to discuss historiographical issues. It is the same journey, but in reverse. Or, to put it in terms of power relations: in historiographical metafictions history is ancillary; in Barnes's and

Mitchell's novels it is fiction that is in a subaltern position inasmuch as fiction with its techniques becomes a chance to talk about History and the way it generates itself and/or is generated by men.

From this perspective, *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* may seem closer to what has been called the "metahistorical novel" (Foley 25). But the great difference between these two narratives and metahistorical novels is that they engage History, instead of looking back to a particular era. Each chapter of Barnes's novel is a different discussion of the history of the world, rather than being a part of the history of the world. *A History of the World* is rather a ten-and-a-half-chapter history of the history of the world. In *Cloud Atlas*, the historical moments, whether in the past or in the future, inform and also include each other. They seem to fit better one particular feature that David Price thinks common to many postmodernist historical novels: "they do more than 'dialogue with' the past. On the contrary, these novelists try to *think* history" (11). Postmodernist writers have often felt encouraged to assume the stance of the historian, to re-write the past, and even "open it up to the present" (Hutcheon 110), which means that time itself is often re-structured in contemporary novels in ways that are incongruent with those of traditional historiography. But the image of reality that the novelist constructs "is meant to correspond in its general outline to some domain of human experience which is no less real than that referred to by the historian" (White, "The Fictions" 22).

The profuseness of historical fiction today might obscure the somewhat anomalous fact that it is regarded by critics as "new." It is in fact a newly accepted genre. For a long while, the historical novel in Britain had lingered in the condemned state of "genre fiction."

This changed dramatically with the advent of postmodernism in British letters.[4] British

postmodernist fiction follows an international trend of scepticism towards the power of

reason, the inevitability of progress, and the commitment to originality. Its predilection for

self-reflexivity and intertextuality is synchronous with the contemporary distrust in

teleologically conceived metanarratives and their conventional demand for dialectical

closure.[5] Many British novels of the last few decades include a commentary on the practice

and/or the functions of narration. While this commentary may be explicit or implicit, it is

usually accompanied by a de-structuring and re-structuring of conventional plots. Some of

these novels also include a commentary on the past. No longer understood as a collection of

events, but rather as a protean discourse on facts, the past is a convenient topic for the

metanarrative intent of contemporary novelists.

Postmodernist writers exploit the "crisis in representation" which Hans Bertens has

recognized as the "common denominator to all these postmodernisms, [that is] a deeply felt

loss of faith in our ability to represent the real" (Bertens 11). As a result, most of the works

of fiction produced in the past few decades exhibit an explicit form of narratological self-

consciousness and may thus be seen as works of the "theory of fiction through the writing

of fiction" (Waugh, *Metafiction* 2). The incredulity towards master narratives (identified by

Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*) quickly generated incredulity towards

scientific historicism, powered by the postmodern idea of history expressed in the works of

Hayden White, Keith Jenkins, and Richard Slotkin. Traditional historiography does not

recognize that organizing events into any kind of narrative requires the use of literary

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[4] See de Groot for a detailed account of the transition.
[5] The most useful analyses of this paradigmatic shift are: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984); Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987); Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 1995).

conventions, whereas postmodern theorists stress the fact that "events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific representation, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like – in short, all the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play" (White "The Historical Text," 84). The incredulity towards human representation and towards history understood as inevitable progress has given rise to a kind of "historical turn" in British fiction: "Since the end of the Sixties new kinds of revisionist, metafictional, and self-reflexive historical fiction in England have appeared to the extent that a paradigmatic shift in this genre can no longer be overlooked" (Nünning 217). Alluding to a famous conception of the world at the turn of the twenty-first century, Malcolm Bradbury writes that "[t]he End of History proved to be a Return to History" (451). Indeed, through their fictions, British postmodernist novelists are sometimes simply trying to "fill a vacuum" left by contemporary historians, as Barnes says in an interview (Guppy 72).

To date, the amount of critical commentary on Julian Barnes's novel is considerably larger than that on *Cloud Atlas*. The fact that *A History of the World* was published 15 years before *Cloud Atlas* (the latter a mere decade ago) only partly explains this. Another reason is that Julian Barnes has been perceived as a highbrow author, writing for a more select audience, and has become a darling of academia ever since the publication of *Flaubert's Parrot* in 1984, whereas David Mitchell is often seen as a best-selling novelist and his reputation has suffered from double-edged triumphs like winning the Richard and Judy Book of the Year Award for *Cloud Atlas*. The first major academic conference dedicated to his work only took place in September 2009, its proceedings being published in 2011 and

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by a highly fringe press, no less, not exactly a prestigious university press or something along the lines of Palgrave or Routledge.[6] This amounts to the fact that there is a remarkable discrepancy between what and how much has been said about the two novels. In any case, both the critical reaction to *A History of the World* and the comments raised by *Cloud Atlas* focus on three key issues: the much debated problem of the genre to which the two novels belong and/or of the several genres that they include (especially whether the two literary works are novels or rather short-story collections); the degree of postmodernity in each of these novels; and the divisive issue of the precise commentary on history that each of the novels in question is supposed to make.

In what follows, I have undertaken a close reading of the two novels, as well as a comparative analysis of characters, situations, and perspectives on History and history-writing. The comparison, I think, will help shed more light on all the issues that have been raised, including the two novels' narrative structure, their commentary on the history of the world, and their relation with postmodernist historiography. As stated above, the work of Hayden White and Walter Benjamin has guided me in the effort to determine both the structural elements of the historical narratives the two authors have built and their own specific idea of History. Another comparison that has proved helpful and which needs perhaps a special mention here is that with previous histopias, that is, with other fictional retellings of the history of the world, whether their typically experimental inquiry is set at the beginning or at the end of History. Novels and plays by Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Roberto Calasso, and Bernard Shaw can help show why *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* may be seen as a special type of historical fiction.

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[6] Sarah Dillon, ed. *David Mitchell: Critical Essays* (Canterbury: Gylphi).

1. The Past, the Post, and the Meta

Julian Barnes: "I've never heard of Hayden White, I'm afraid."

(Freiburg 42)

Spanning thousands of years of history, real and imaginary, *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* include countless explicit comments on time, history, and man's place in it. Furthermore, they include other comments on history that are implicit. Critics have taken into account the unusual narrative structure in both texts and the way this relates to contemporary views on historical narratives. In what follows, I will try to show that the structure, including its most puzzling features, is not only a commentary on history-writing, but that it is also consonant with the special kind of fiction that Barnes and Mitchell are producing, namely one that recounts an all-encompassing history of the world, past, present, and future.

Genre Trouble

A most striking structural feature of *A History of the World* is the apparent lack of connection between its constituent parts. The novel's "chapters" (including the so-called "half-chapter") can easily seem as nothing more than a collection of short stories. The same can be said about *Cloud Atlas*: the six parts have different casts of characters and they are set decades or centuries apart from each other. It comes as little wonder that some of the

first commentators of *A History of the World* have seen it as an "ostensibly ludic

compendium" (Buxton 59), or simply as "ten short stories" (Coe 27), but certainly "not [as]

a novel, according to the staider definitions" (Taylor 40). Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* has struck

many as "a series of stories" (Hensher 34) and, in at least two interviews (one granted to an

online magazine in 2005, the other to *The Paris Review* in 2010), Mitchell himself has

called the six narratives of *Cloud Atlas* "novellas" (Barry; Begley).[7]

Others have insisted that *A History of the World* is, on the contrary, not "a merely

arbitrary collection of stories . . . there are recurrent points of contact" (Kotte 76n224).

Moreover, what connects the stories in *A History of the World* might be the very

"omnipresent themes of connecting and patterning" (Bernard, "Hermeneutic Slant" 170).

The same theme of connecting and uncanny patterning has struck some reviewers of *Cloud

Atlas*: "connections, and odder, inexplicable undercurrents; characters recur, everyone has a

comet-shaped birthmark" (Hensher 34). Of course, one can argue against the recurrence of

characters in *Cloud Atlas*: Sixsmith, who plays a major part in "Half-Lives," appears only

as Frobisher's addressee in the "Letters from Zedelghem," whereas the idea that Meronym

in "Sloosha's Crossing" is none other than Sonmi-410 from the previous narrative only

rings true for Zach'ry, the often delusional narrator. Nevertheless, even if one were to

consider the existence of recurring characters and themes, the question is whether that is

enough to make *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* full-fledged novels. Short-story

cycles often have "points of contact" and recurring themes.

Finally, the successive plots that make up the two works have appeared to some

critics to be enough proof of the narrative unity of *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas*.

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[7] The same number of *The Paris Review* provides a manuscript page from one of Mitchell's later novels,
which the author also divides into numbered "novellas."

In Barnes's book, the first chapter sets the tone and the "apparently self-contained, later chapters echo and exploit the woodworm's observations on the arbitrariness of historical election and damnation" (Buxton 65). In *Cloud Atlas*, the "narrative structure is surprisingly stable. Mitchell has one of his narrators [Cavendish] make this explicit: 'all that ruddy fiction! Hero goes on a journey, stranger comes to town, somebody wants something, they get it or they don't, will is pitted against will'" (Adams 107), but then that is exactly what happens in all the "novellas." Yet, this is hardly enough to make of *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* novels: short stories of the same collection could (and sometimes do) have similar plots.

A brief glance at the recent theories of the short story might prove helpful. Especially useful should be the distinctions between short-story cycles and novels that are organized as a succession of autonomous narratives. However, as Suzanne Ferguson warns, very often nowadays critics are too quick to interpret short-story collections as short-story cycles/sequences, just as well as, lately, short-story cycles have been read as "composite novels" (103-105).[8] The first and most obvious difference between a short story and a novel is, of course, the length. Looking for ways of explaining the "significance" of brevity, one of the foremost theorists of the short story, Charles E. May, has made use of an idea of Claude Lévi-Strauss from "The Science of the Concrete," the first chapter of *The Savage Mind*. Lévi-Strauss suggests that the reduction in scale reverses the natural tendency of the beholder to divide the whole into parts in order to understand it. What follows is that the knowledge of the whole (or, rather, the illusion of it) precedes the knowledge of its parts. This illusion becomes the primary narrative device of the short-story writer (May 14-15).

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[8] For a list of names that have been granted this in-between genre, such as story-novel, storied novel, fragmentary novel, episodic novel, etc., see Lundén (12-16).

As one would expect, the reader is invited to participate in this ploy and to accept, largely on the basis of his own "genre memory" (Ferguson 114), whether the piece of fiction laid in front of him is a short story, part of a short-story sequence, or a novel. As Ferguson suggests (113-115), the difference between a sequence of interconnected short stories and a novel (albeit a "composite" one) is always the geometrical locus of the author's intention and the actual experience of the reader as he pores through the written lines. There is, in other words, a kind of complicity between the two.

Barnes's and Mitchell's intentions have been made quite clear in interviews. Shortly after the publication of *A History of the World*, Barnes formulated a crisp definition of the novel in an interview with *The Sunday Telegraph*: "an extended piece of prose, largely fictional, which is planned and executed as a whole" (Sexton 42). Mitchell also makes it explicit that he did not start with any of the novel's parts, but rather with the whole: "The novel really began with the structure, the Russian Doll structure" (Barry). In an interview with a French journal, Barnes professes his attachment to Lermontov, one of his "predecessors," and author of a single novel, *A Hero of Our Time*: "It's a novel, but it looks like short stories. In the first story, the hero is just glimpsed . . . Then in each story he has slightly larger parts, so he gets nearer to you, through this series of stories, and you realize that he is binding the whole thing together. It's a wonderful narrative ploy . . . Idiots say, 'Oh, it's not really a novel'" (Guignery, "History" 57-58).

The issue of the generic differences between novels and short-story cycles remains open for debate as long as authors like Barnes and Mitchell prefer to write genre-ambiguous books. The traditional concepts of narratology (plot, characters, focalization, etc.) do not seem helpful enough in deciding whether *A History of the World* and *Cloud*

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Atlas can or cannot be considered novels, their authors' claims notwithstanding. Instead, a concept that has originated in cognitive psychology and has become more and more popular in post-classical narratology might aid in settling the debate. I am referring to the concept of *storyworld*, which is precisely that complicit form of representation of the fictional world that is suggested by the text and reconstructed by the reader. Storyworlds are "global mental representations enabling interpreters to frame inferences about the situations, characters, and occurrences either explicitly mentioned in or implied by a narrative text or discourse" (Herman 72-73). Unlike concepts such as plot, story, and diegesis, which are supposed to exist objectively within the confines of the text, the storyworld needs the participation of an extratextual element, i.e., the reader, who interprets the "cues" left by the author. These cues – and their role in guiding the reader – can become the object of narratological analyses, since they can be found in the text. In David Herman's terms, the narrative discourse provides a blueprint for storyworlds, which ultimately become "mental models" (73) of the situations narrated in that discourse. The reader enters a world that she co-creates and that will forever be her brightest memory of the book, more so than the story and the plot.

"Semiotic cues" (Herman 75) are used in the narrative discourse to assist the reader in constructing the storyworld, in situating it, as well as in interpreting it. They range from the disposition of space on the printed page to full sentences and paragraphs. Story openings play an important role because they provide the first sketch of the blueprint, they accommodate the reader with their use of deictics, and they put forth the genre to which the following text is supposed to belong. In *A History of the World*, for example, the reader is wooed from the first sentence – "They put the behemoths in the hold along with the rhinos,

the hippos and the elephants" (3) – into accepting the storyworld through a long series of deictics. This is all the more necessary, since the incipit brings about absolute estrangement: the reader is ushered into a cargo hold where there are mystical beasts. However, the next sentence – "It was a sensible decision to use them as ballast; but you can imagine the stench" – already suggests that the following piece of revisionist history is satirical.

What is probably more important is that all narrators of all sections of the two novels start in medias res. Here is, for example, the first sentence of Mitchell's book: "Beyond the Indian hamlet, upon a forlorn strand, I happened on a trail of recent footprints" (*Cloud Atlas* 3). In *Cloud Atlas*, all sections are also interrupted and then restart in the middle of the action. The paradoxical fact is that, although the transition to each story in the two novels is abrupt, this is intended to facilitate the understanding of the book as a unitary text. The reader is denied the accommodation with a new storyworld for each new section. Barnes's and Mitchell's readers are, in fact, invited to read the two books as unitary texts even before the actual "piece of prose" begins. *Cloud Atlas* has no table of contents and no other clear indication of how the text will be divided. A dedication page is followed by one stating "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing," but the reader has no reason to believe that this is more than a chapter title. In *A History of the World*, the unity of the sections is proclaimed by the book cover: the text inside is "a history" (the indefinite article suggests oneness rather than division) in "chapters" (that is, parts of the whole).[9] Consequently, the reader of both novels expects each section to be not an independent story but a section of a

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[9] Barnes seems to establish a different kind of complicity with his intended readers in France, since the French version of *A History of the World*, published by Mercure de France, is subtitled "short stories" ("nouvelles"). Given the strong ties between Barnes, arguably the most Francophile of all contemporary British writers, and the French literary establishment, it seems reasonable to assume that he sanctioned the subtitle himself.

novel. As such, she does not experience the "knowledge of the whole," as May suggests it happens with short fictions; rather, she experiences them as parts of the whole and she expects to look in retrospect only after the last page of the book.

Keeping the illusion (and the reader's complicity) alive without compromising the programmatic fragmentariness is not always easy and either the effect of continuity or that of discontinuity of the narrative may suffer. To Frank Kermode, who read *A History of the World* for the *London Review of Books*, the illusion of unity is not quite effective: "'In proportion as it lives,' said [Henry] James, 'it will be found, I think, that in each of the parts' – of 'any novel worth discussing at all' – 'there is something of each of the other parts.' And that was what Julian Barnes must have intended. To bring it off he had to settle for a risky method, and this time, though very honourably performed, the trick didn't quite work" ("Stowaway" 20). For Kermode (whose opinions on the novel must have been, as I will show, eagerly expected by Barnes), "The connections between the stories, lectures, episodes are often coyly subtle. Some are provided by repeated appearances of woodworm and deathwatch beetle, some by subtle Noachian allusions, some by exiguous plot links as when the girl who saw the Géricault on exhibition in Dublin becomes the woman who goes absurdly in search of the Ark. . . . The strain on those links, however marked by the jokiness, seems too great" (20).

Kermode's point is very well made and he is probably right to dismiss, in part, *A History of the World* as aesthetically effective (which is beyond the reach of my intentions here). He does not, however, reject the fact that the parts make up a whole; in fact, he writes that "he [Barnes] and we quite properly call the product a novel" ("Stowaway" 20). What Kermode finds too strained are the very connections between the parts, which he

exemplifies in recurrences of woodworm and beetles, allusions to Noah and the Ark, as well as "exiguous plot links" such as the fact that the main character in "The Mountain" has seen the painting that is the subject of "Shipwreck." Unlike Kermode, I will make a distinction between mere coincidences (however labouredly inserted) and allusions on the one hand, and plot links on the other. In the narrative discourse, the direct references to previous (or, more seldom, future) events and characters belong both to the story and to the storyworld. The allusions and the apparent coincidences, which play no real part in the story currently experienced by the reader, belong (almost) exclusively to the storyworld. For example, when Franklin, the focalizer in "The Visitors," makes a cynical comparison between the passengers of *Santa Euphemia* and the animals on the Ark, he is not directly referring to the previous narrative of the woodworm, which he could not have known, but rather to the narrative in the Bible. Yet, his mention of the Ark posits – or rather keeps – "The Visitors" in the same *storyworld* as "The Stowaway," even though the *story* is different, with a different plot and different characters.

I was able to identify only three actual plot links in all of Barnes's novel: when only seventeen, in Dublin, Miss Fergusson from "The Mountain" sees "Monsieur Jerricault's Great Picture" from "Shipwreck" (*A History of the World* 144); the woodworm in "The Stowaway" mentions that Noah "founded a village (which you call Arghuri) on the lower slopes of the mountains" (16-17), which is also a prolepsis (i.e., a future event is being foreshadowed), since the village becomes an important locale for the events in "The Mountain"; and the film actor in "Upstream!" remembers American astronauts becoming religious after being on the surface of the moon, which is an analeptic insight (a past event is being referenced), since this story, although placed before "Project Ararat," is in fact

anterior to it in terms of plot (200). As for allusions, I have counted thirty-three, all of which are analeptic, with one exception: a dying Miss Fergusson sets herself as forerunner of the astronaut in "Project Ararat" when she unexpectedly asks her companions not to move her, "'so that I may see the moon'" (165). Numbers provide an interesting insight into the ways Barnes guides the reader through the storyworld. No fewer than twenty-six allusions are to "The Stowaway" (although some are versatile and can refer to other stories as well), which shows that all the other chapters are glosses to the first one. The reader might have guessed as much from the beginning, since all editions of *A History of the World* display a drawing of the Ark on the cover, but she needs to be reminded of it and that is why Barnes inserts all these cues. By far the most allusions are in "The Mountain," which is the sixth chapter, i.e., the middle one, if one counts "Parenthesis" among the chapters of *A History of the World*. Out of the 33 allusions, almost half (15) are in "The Mountain."

Unlike in Barnes's novel, plot links abound in *Cloud Atlas* and even some of the smallest coincidences end up by playing a real, albeit minute, part in the story. If only one or two characters belong to more than one story, places and objects travel freely from one story to another, as do the stories themselves, which are read, listened to, or watched as film adaptations by the characters of other sections. Instead, mere allusions are rare. Twice, Adam Ewing's "Pacific Journal" shapes Robert Frobisher's discourse in his "Letters from Zudelghem": first, he mentions that "Dr Egret gives me the creeps. Never met a quack whom I didn't half suspect of plotting to do me in as expensively as he could contrive" (*Cloud Atlas* 457), then, looking down from Bruges's clock-tower, he notes: "Sunlit strip of North Sea turned Polynesian ultramarine" (468). The first observation foreshadows the true

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character of Henry Goose, which has not yet been revealed to the reader, without a direct mention of Ewing's journal. The second mentions it, but the San Francisco lawyer had never described the Polynesian landscape as "ultramarine." Instead, Vyvyan Ayrs, the composer whose amanuensis Frobisher is at the time he is writing to Sixsmith, is both the author of a piece called *Society Islands* and the owner of a painting by Gauguin (*Cloud Atlas* 52). The third allusion has "Letters from Zudelghem" referenced in "The Ghastly Ordeal," when Timothy Cavendish watches a documentary about Ypres on TV. The reader is invited to remember that Frobisher's brother had died on a Belgian battlefield in the First World War.

The need for more "plot links" probably originates in the peculiar structure of *Cloud Atlas*. Since five of the six stories are interrupted and then restarted, *Cloud Atlas* includes eleven sections, much like *A History of the World*. However, what is different here is that, with the exception of the middle story, all sections are supposed to be perceived not only as parts of a whole, like Barnes's, but also as parts of parts. Once interrupted, a story does not restart for hundreds of pages (the two halves of "The Pacific Journal" are separated by 454 pages, and these, in turn, are divided into nine different half-sections). As she carries on through the novel, the reader needs to be reminded of the existence of the characters and situations from the previous stories. Ultimately, the reason for this difference between the two novels is Mitchell's decision to shape the book's narrative structure on the Matrioshka doll: "The novel really began with the structure, the Russian Doll structure. The main issue I had to approach was how to make the various novellas fit inside each other and to come up with ways of making the preceding narrative appear as an 'artefact' of the succeeding narrative" (Barry).

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The latter part of Mitchell's ploy is what makes it more elaborate than it might appear at first sight. There are in fact two series of Russian dolls: the story and the plot of *Cloud Atlas*. In terms of the story, "The Pacific Journal" is the largest "doll," which encloses "The Letters" and so on all the way to "Sloosha's," the smallest and the last of the "dolls," and this has been noted by commentators and stated by Mitchell in interviews. In addition, this model is validated by the material form of the book, in which the first story represents the beginning and the end, the next story is the second and the second-to-last sections, etc. However, the fact that each story appears as an "artefact" in/of the following one – and with an increasing degree of fictionality (Frobisher denies the reliability of "The Pacific Journal," but his letters could be the fruit of his imagination, "Half-Lives" is a dime novel for the character of a movie seen by a character whose actions are the stuff of legend for the last story) – creates the same conceit in reverse. In terms of plot, despite the apparent chronological order, the last story should be understood as a frame narrative and, as such, the largest Matrioshka doll, which includes "An Orison of Sonmi-451," inside which there is "The Ghastly Ordeal" and so on.

Although intricate, the connections between the sections in Mitchell's novel are also obvious when compared to those in *A History of the World*. One of the most distinguished commentators of Barnes's novel expressed the view of many when he wrote that *A History of the World* "eschews any pretence of continuity or comprehensiveness" (Finney 36). Nevertheless, I think a closer look at the eleven sections might show Barnes's novel in a different light. A constant theme in *A History of the World* is that of the limited perspective on the world "out there." This is reflected in a narratological device: the discourse is focalized on a very limited narrative voice: the woodworm; the egocentric TV historian; the

delusional survivalist; the unreliable translator; the film actor ignorant of the ways of wild nature and of its indigenous inhabitants; the spinster and the astronaut, both ultra-religious; the human being in heaven; the writer thinking of life and love from the cosiness of his bed at night. The only sections trying to correct and enrich this limited perspective are five and seven ("Shipwreck" and "Three Simple Stories"), the only ones that make use of a perfectly covert narrative voice. In "Shipwreck" and "Three Simple Stories," the narrator, which one could safely identify with the author, opens up the perspective one might have of various events involving sea travel, whether it is factual or an artistic representation of facts. Sections two and ten (I am counting the "Parenthesis") make use of an internal focalizer and are unusually set in the present day. In brief, the structure of *A History of the World* appears thus: 1, 3-4, 6, 8-9, 11 are basically the same story about the tripartite relationship God-humans-animals (God might be represented at times by Nature); sections 2, 5, 7, 10 are commentaries/parables that are supposed to offer a re-representation of the same story, usually in contemporariness. The similarities in terms of themes and narratological devices between 2 and 10, 5 and 7, but also 1 and 11 and so on, as well as the centrality of 6 ("The Mountain," i.e., the section that includes the largest part of semiotic cues for the construction of the storyworld) give *A History of the World* a Russian-doll structure not unlike that of *Cloud Atlas*.

The Discourse That Narrativizes

The question now seems to be about the pertinence of these novels' unity-in-fragmentariness when it comes to their supposed commentary on history. Critics who have

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analyzed Barnes's perspective on history in *A History of the World* can be roughly divided into two categories: the larger group that see the novel as an illustration of Hayden White's theoretical writings on history; and the smaller group that think the novel is primarily an attempt on Barnes's side to put to work Walter Benjamin's ideas on history. Thus, some say that "Barnes's narrative forcefully stages what Hayden White has argued in theory, namely that history does not possess an imminent structure and that patterns and connections, ranks and orders are constructed by historiographers" (Kotte 80) or that "Barnes's point in blending the mythical with the historical is the same one that Hayden White makes when he argues that 'we can only know the *actual* by contrasting it with or likening it to the *imaginable*'" (Holmes 82). Others say that Barnes follows Benjamin's suggestion that "[t]he concept of progress should be grounded in the idea of catastrophe" (Finney 34) or go as far as to "constru[e] *A History of the World* as a fictional instantiation of Benjamin's concepts and methodology" (Buxton 59). Similarly, although the names of such theorists are scarce, critics have analyzed either the way each story, in Mitchell's novel, target "the meta-tyranny of a 'progress'" (Norfolk) or Mitchell's commentary on "history's intricate repetitiveness" (Macfarlane); some of the historiological commentaries in *Cloud Atlas* are compared to "Benjamin's redemptive, monadological reading of history as arrested dialectical image" (Edwards 193).

It is quite surprising that the references to Hayden White and Walter Benjamin come from different authors and that no one has yet thought to put them together, as if these were competing hypotheses. In reality, the two references can easily stand together because one is part of the discussion on Barnes's and Mitchell's ideas about the writing of history, or historiography (White), while the other belongs to the discussion of his ideas

about history proper (Benjamin); and Barnes, just like Mitchell, comments on both. This confusion is a good indicator that there may be important elements of the two novels that are yet to be understood properly. In this chapter I focus on the way historiography, especially its contemporary avatars (which Alun Munslow has called *The New History*), might be said to be reflected in *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas*. This is why the narrative structure of the two novels by Julian Barnes and David Mitchell, on the one hand, and contemporary theories of narrative in history (especially those belonging to Hayden White) form the basis of my discussion here. On the contrary, the second chapter of this thesis will analyze the place that History understood as series of events holds in *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas*.

I will start by pointing out two major misconceptions, which are apparent even from the brief quotations provided above. First – and this is a popular misconception – it might appear that Hayden White provides a recipe for history-writing (one that Julian Barnes, at least, follows closely), when in fact the American theorist simply teases out a pattern from the works of mostly classical historians. Second – and on this several critics have insisted – that White's idea that history is always "emplotted" with the help of narratological devices informs contemporary novels such as *A History of the World*. The fact that, in White's view, historians turn to instruments that have been traditionally seen as the novelist's (and the dramatist's) own appears to these critics as the model for Barnes's "history of the world." In reality, as White, I think, would be the first to point out, the debate whether or not Barnes follows White's analysis of historiography is made otiose by the fact that Barnes's text *is* fiction. *A History of the World* is not a piece of history-writing emplotted by tools which are specific to fiction writers, but a piece of fiction using the devices which

are specific to it. If anything, historians might be said to emulate the narrative discourse of *A History of the World* and not vice versa. However, Hayden White's ideas on narration and narrativization can be helpful in understanding the way novels about history such as *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* are built and function.

Although White suggested other important concepts earlier, I think his view on history-writing can be better understood if one makes mention first of *narrativization*. In any historiographical text, White says, the author makes use of "a historical discourse that narrates, on the one side, and a discourse that narrativizes, on the other . . . a discourse that openly adopts a perspective that looks out on the world and reports it and a discourse that feigns to make the world speak itself and speak itself *as a story*" ("Value of Narrativity" 2-3). As White goes on to suggest, "real events" should probably appear to us rather in the form presented by annals and chronicles, that is, "as mere sequence without beginning and end or as sequences . . . that only terminate and never conclude" (23). Instead, we *want* to (or *think* we) perceive them as "well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends" (23). Even a single event is often understood in a larger context, as being part of an ongoing process that is capable of speaking itself and of displaying itself as a story. Since we attach a beginning and an end to the process, we are invariably moralizing when we "narrativize." Feigning to make the world speak itself as a story means making it seem as if the events in the sequence presented by the narrative discourse were in a causal relation or at least, as we might say today, in the same storyworld. In other words, it means constantly leaving cues that would help the reader believe in the connectedness of all the events. Both *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* present a sequence of events,

thousands of miles and thousands of years apart, that are at the same time narrated and narrativized.[10]

Julian Barnes claims to be incurious about theories of literature and historiography but admits the possibility of being "influenced at second hand . . . by things that are in the air" (Freiburg 37). An author that may have influenced Barnes more directly is Frank Kermode who, writing before Hayden White, says that novels "have a fixation on the eidetic imagery of beginning, middle, and end, potency and cause. Novels, then, have beginnings, ends, and potentiality, even if the world has not" (*The Sense* 138). Hayden White makes a similar statement about histories and suggests that what the novelist (or the dramatist) and the historian have in common is that they both rely on *interpretation*, which, according to Nietzsche, was necessary in (re)creating the unity of the sequence of events. The historian's task, says White who quotes Friedrich Nietzsche, is "to think dramatistically, that is to say, 'to think one thing with another, and weave the elements into a single whole, with the presumption that the unity of plan must be put into the objects if it is not already there'" ("Interpretation" 53). Barnes, who has the narrator of a previous novel "declare that history is merely another literary genre" (*Flaubert's Parrot* 90), later explains in an interview that "if you try to write a more complete history, then you have to fictionalize or imagine. And so, to that extent, history, if it attempts to be more than a description of documents, a description of artefacts, has to be a sort of literary genre" (Guignery, "History" 53).

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[10] One of the commentators of *A History of the World* writes that "Shipwreck" is "the sort of historical writing that, according to White, does not so much narrate as it 'narrativize[s].' . . . In other words, writing of the kind quoted above serenely implies that it constitutes the complete objective truth, not a situated, fallible representation of the affair" (Holmes 83-84). However, the issue of objectivity is secondary in "narrativization"; after all, the discourse that narrates can be just as subjective (e.g., via the operation of selection) as the discourse that narrativizes.

If the world appears to "speak itself" as a story through "the discourse that narrativizes," *interpretation* turns this story into "a story of a particular kind" through a specific plot structure that purports to present the events as a comprehensible process: "In historical narrative, story is to plot as the exposition of 'what happened' in the past is to the synoptic characterization of what the whole sequence of events contained in the narrative might 'mean' or 'signify'" (White, "Interpretation" 58). In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye introduces the concept of *mythoi*, or generic plots, namely tragedy, comedy, irony, and romance, which he defines as "four narrative pregeneric elements of literature" (162). Hayden White uses Northrop Frye's *mythoi* to suggest that interpretation in history gives rise to the same plot structures as the poetical thought: "What one historian may emplot as a tragedy, another may emplot as a comedy or romance" (58). Before introducing the more neutral concept of "narrativization" (by which the sequence of events of annals or chronicles is made to appear as a story), White wrote that stories "are made out of chronicles by . . . 'emplotment.' And by emplotment I mean simply the encoding of the facts contained in chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures, in precisely the way that Frye has suggested is the case with 'fictions' in general" (White, "The Historical Text" 83). To review, for White representation in history is threefold: it narrates sequences of real events, it narrativizes them into a story, and it emplots them in a form that is familiar to the reader. Thus, the discourse that narrativizes "mediates between the events reported . . . on the one side and pregeneric plot structures conventionally used in our culture to endow unfamiliar events and situations with meanings, on the other" (88).

Some critics have gone very far to link *A History of the World* to the first views expressed by Hayden White on history-writing. Christina Kotte, for example, suggests:

In its refusal to "emplot" single, random events and thereby create some overarching structural pattern, Barnes' narrative forcefully stages what Hayden White has argued in theory, namely that history does not possess an immanent structure and that patterns and connections, ranks and orders are constructed by historiographers. Historical events, Barnes' narrative suggests, do not speak for themselves but have to be transformed into some narrative pattern in order to be meaningful. (80)

Not only could one argue that Barnes, in fact, emplots (more on this in the third chapter) but he certainly "narrativizes," i.e., turns the events narrated into a *story*, which is in fact exactly what White thinks any historian (as opposed to a chronicler) does before "emplotting." Actually, as White insists, events are "*made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like" (The Historical Text" 84), that is, exactly by the techniques a novelist or a playwright would use. This is certainly not such a novel idea and Barnes and Mitchell could have known, for example, from Carl Becker's classic essay "Everyman His Own Historian" that history is "a story that employs all the devices of literary art (statement and generalization, narration and description, comparison and comment and analogy) to present the succession of events [and] thus . . . derive a satisfactory meaning" (Becker 25-26).

Hayden White's "modes of emplotment" may be said to include without being limited to Lyotard's "master narratives." Still, if one were to accept the suggestion that Barnes refuses to emplot as a postmodernist reaction to paradigmatic histories, the idea that he does not "narrativize" would be unacceptable. In a text where he contradicts the famous

philosopher of history R.G. Collingwood, White writes that "no given set of casually recorded historical events can in itself constitute a story; the most it might offer to the historian are story *elements*" ("The Historical Text" 84). This is consistent with Barnes's own view of representation in history, including personal history:

> [Gotthold Ephraim] Lessing described history as putting accidents in order, and a human life strikes me as a reduced version of this . . . My mother, whenever exasperated by the non-arrival or malfeasance of some goofy handyman or cack-handed service engineer, would remark that she could "write a book" about her experiences with workmen. So she could have done; and how very dull it would have been. It might have contained anecdotes, scenelets, character portraits, satire, even levity; but this would not add up to narrative. And so it is with our lives: one damn thing after another – a gutter replaced, a washing machine fixed – rather than a story. (*Nothing* 185)

In the same place, Barnes concedes that human life might be a narrative, but insists that "it does not feel like one." His mother's "book" would have consisted of what Hayden White calls "story elements," without being a real "story." Just like Becker's Everyman or David Herman's self-absorbed narrator, recounting to himself the events of the day, Barnes's mother needs to narrativize the real events in her life history if she wants to turn the separate story elements into a unitary whole.

The fact that both Barnes and Mitchell organize their novels as sequences of separate sections, while at the same time carefully keeping all sections within the same storyworld, is perhaps the most important commentary on history in *Cloud Atlas* and *A History of the World*. In the view of both authors discussed here, history understood as a

sequence of seemingly unrelated events is (has to be) perceived as a story (one story), although the careful narrator should not discard the separateness of the events in the sequence. She has to find the balance between continuity and discontinuity, because the world speaks itself both as continuous and as discontinuous, both as it is captured in the annals and as it is later narrativized. This is what Mitchell, for example, does when he keeps the marks of continuity (perhaps much too obviously symbolized by the birthmarks of his main characters) as a permanent reminder of the continuity throughout discontinuity. The way Barnes keeps the same delicate balance has made commentators think that there are not "enough logical connections to justify calling [*A History of the World*] a novel, rather than a clever collection of linked stories of startlingly mixed quality" (Seymour 35) or that "several times the connections between the tales offer no enrichment; they're just links" (Rushdie 242).

Another important – and related – issue is that of the chronology of events in the novels, especially *A History of the World*. It "follows no obvious chronology" (Guignery, "Julian Barnes" 111) or, as one critic has put it, "Not only is *A History* discontinuous. It is achronological" (Finney 36). However, as I have shown above, several of the sections in Barnes's novel (2, 4, and 8) are set in the contemporary 1980s and can be understood as commentaries on the other, more "historical" sections, while 9 and 11 are parenthetical or oneiric. If we are to count section 7 ("Three Simple Stories") as three stories, we are left with eight narratives: the first one is set thousands of years ago; the second one in the 1520s; the third, in the 1810s; the fourth, in the 1830s and 1840s; the fifth covers Lawrence Beesley's life, from 1877 to 1964, although the main event occurs in 1912; the sixth story is set in 1891; the seventh, in 1939; and the eighth in the 1970s. So, with the only exception

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of the slight misplacement in "Three Simple Stories," all the strictly historical tales are told in chronological order. What makes this harder to notice is the intercalation of the contemporary Ark-like stories that comment on the episode narrated by the woodworm.

The structure of Mitchell's novel, although quite different from that of *A History of the World*, might shed even more light on Barnes's ideas about history-writing. If we set aside the Russian-doll device (which, as we shall see, is more a commentary on History than on historiography), the storyline in *Cloud Atlas*, understood as one single narrative, comes full circle. It is a round trip, decoded by the image of time as a boomerang (contrary to the traditional one of time as an arrow), but only the one set in the distant future is complete. This means that, while earlier events undoubtedly help to explain later ones, the reverse is at least just as true. If the meaning of the beginning is often revealed or at least better understood at the end of a narrative, in *Cloud Atlas* the beginning itself is completely and materially revealed in the end. Understood linearly, rather than as concentric circles, the structure of *Cloud Atlas* takes the reader first through a chronology, then through a reverse chronology, so that first the future then the past are better understood. *A History of the World* takes the reader through a serpentine chronology, moving seemingly "haphazard[ly]" (Buxton 65), but with the same purpose of constantly making the past, the present, and the future illuminate each other.

Histopias (1)

Most commentators agree that both novels are, to a degree, metafictional. *Cloud Atlas* appears to tell a "further story, a quest conducted among genres, languages and

witnesses for the means to represent worlds, familiar or remote, historical or imaginary"

(Norfolk 22) and "rarely has the all-encompassing prefix of 'metafiction' seemed so

apposite" (Turentine BW03) as it does when applied to *Cloud Atlas*. Similar observations

have been made of Barnes's novel, not least because of its "metafictional half-chapter"

(Kotte 81). Commentators from academia have often taken it for granted that *A History of*

the World is a "historiographic metafiction" (Rubinson 78, Kotte 73-116, and several

articles by Onega), with one even admitting that she "take[s] it for granted" (Lozano 117).

This has happened, at least in part, because Barnes's earlier novel *Flaubert's Parrot* has

seemed such a perfect example of historiographic metafiction and has been analyzed as

such in Linda Hutcheon's *Poetics of Postmodernism* and many others, for example in

Alison Lee (29-79). The idea has been rejected by Ansgar Nünning (234), who ultimately

prefers the ambiguous formula of "paradigm example of postmodernist historical fiction,"

probably because *A History of the World* does not seem to fit exactly into any of the

subcategories that he identifies within the "postmodernist historical fiction" genre.

While the fact of belonging to British postmodernist literature is made obvious in

the discussion of genre ("historiographic metafiction" is, after all, another name for

postmodernism in Hutcheon's theoretical work; and an author like Nünning sees Barnes's

novel as "paradigmatically" postmodernist), some commentators insist on analyzing

postmodernist features of these two novels, such as the treatment of master narratives, or

the fragmentation. Frederick M. Holmes does it from a discourse analysis perspective, and

observes that "[s]ome of Barnes's discourses strive to be authoritative in other ways, but

each is undercut by virtue of the overall context in which he places them: a postmodern one

in which foundational or master narratives do not exist" (83). A good example is that of the

way in which Barnes incorporates a legal transcript in the chapter "The Wars of Religion" and then fabricates the proceedings of a sixteenth-century trial: "All parties (the woodworms excepted, of course) accept scripture as a master narrative, something which the implied reader constructed by Barnes cannot do, for the satirical first chapter of *A History* totally discredits the account in Genesis on Noah's voyage, on which the arguments of both lawyers rest" (Holmes 85).

That *Cloud Atlas* works at undermining the very idea of a master narrative has also been obvious to the first commentators of the novel, who have identified "a set of immaculate pastiches mechanically joined together by a cascade of ontological downgrades, each 'real world' becoming an artefact in the next" (Norfolk). The novels' postmodernist distrust in master narratives is mirrored in their fragmentariness. Barnes's novel "eschews any pretence of continuity or comprehensiveness. . . . Not only is *A History* discontinuous. It is achronological" (Finney 36). Mitchell uses a "structural principle which derives from chaos theory" (Hensher). But the authors' humanism, their apparent belief in an objective truth after all, makes their novels appear less rooted in postmodernist relativism than one might be inclined to think. That is why the author of *A History of the World* has been called a "quintessential humanist, of the pre-post-modernist species" (Oates 13), and the author of *Cloud Atlas* a "post-postmodernist" (Wood).

The perspective shed by the two novels on the knowledge and/or reporting of historical events is ultimately a volatile one. What appears to be consistent with postmodernist views on historiography in one place seems to be denied in another. Christina Kotte is quick to conclude that "Barnes' narrative suggests [that] every attempt at drawing a firm line between fact and fiction, and between history and stories, is ultimately

condemned to futility" (98), only to notice later that "the narrative's metafictional half-chapter is fuelled by the very desire to safeguard the notion of 'objective truth' [and that it] . . . reveals Barnes to be far more critical of postmodern conceptions of history and the decentring of the human subject than the reader might have expected after the first eight stories" (98). Another critic inadvertently brings up the same contradiction: "*A History* flaunts a structural feature shared by many postmodernist works of fiction: textual fragmentation or deformation of a sort that is incompatible with [its] totalizing representation of the past" (Holmes 81). What is likely to be unsettling for the reader of *A History of the World* is, in fact, that Barnes does attempt a "totalizing representation of the past," or, rather, of history (enhanced by the glimpse into the future), despite the textual fragmentation.

In any event, fragmentariness is neither an exclusively postmodernist structural pattern, nor necessarily antithetical to structural unity. Many modernist fictions, in prose or in verse, from *The Waste Land* to *The Sound and the Fury*, are patterned on the balance between fragmentariness and coherence, and some (starting with Mallarmé's project of the *livre total*) even seek to represent the world as a whole. This has made certain commentators link the author of *A History of the World* to this earlier tradition: one critic, mentioned above, thinks that Barnes is an "ambivalent, indeed 'modern' postmodernist" (Kotte 100); and a fellow writer (Joyce Carol Oates) has called him "pre-postmodernist" in a review of *A History of the World*. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Barnes rejects this notion: "A critic once called me a 'pre-postmodernist': neither lucid nor helpful in my view" (Guppy 73). This reaction should probably be read in connection with other works by the same author which do not attempt to run counter the perceived narrative tenets of

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postmodernism. The best example here is *Cross Channel* (1996), which is made of 10

stories, all (but the last, set in the near future and focalized on an alter ego of the author,

who admits having written the previous texts) based on actual events from the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries. There are similarities with *A History of the World*: *Cross Channel*

has the same number of sections minus the parenthesis; and it fictionalizes real events and

characters. There are differences as well: though all stories are set in France and involve

British heroes, the sections are in no way connected with one another; and though the

author intervenes, like in *A History of the World*, here he proclaims the fictiveness of the

sections. This suggests that Barnes is willing to embrace postmodernism and to play with it

at the same time, the way a late- (or rather, post-) postmodernist would.

As *Cloud Atlas* was published in the early 2000s, rather than the late 1980s,

Mitchell, who undertakes the same search for unity and coherence, has been more readily

embraced as post-postmodernist. If James Wood, mentioned above, has granted Mitchell

this status because of the latter's eclecticism (i.e., precisely because Mitchell has also

written "pre-postmodernist" books, such as *Black Swan Green*), others have sought to

explain *Cloud Atlas* through postmodernism's current inadequacy:

> Postmodernism emerged against a backdrop of Cold War relations that in many
>
> ways wound down in 1989. Perceptions of the world have been transformed
>
> dramatically in the twenty years since then, such that the discourses of
>
> postmodernism and postcolonialism arguably offer rather limited perspectives on
>
> present circumstances. While postmodernism and postcolonialism challenge forms
>
> of power that impose relatively stable hierarchical structures, they seem
>
> increasingly unsatisfactory to describe the flows of mediated identity, the global

reach of capital, the possibilities of new political paradigms, and the modulating

networks of the world market. (Childs and Green 26)

Another reason (more important perhaps in the present line of reasoning) why these novels

might seem less postmodernist to some critics is the very fact that they emulate the rather

outmoded genre of the "history of the world," especially the one penned by a single author.

A personal history of the world, "something serious but sexy" (*A History of the World* 38),

as one of Barnes's characters calls it, has been a rare occurrence over the past few

decades.[11]

Of course, what should be stressed here is the fact that toying with "pre" or "post"

visions of the world and of the narrative does not mean the two authors discussed here can

completely evade postmodernism – or, for that matter, that they actually attempt it. The

question remains about the two novels' kinship with that postmodernist novelistic genre

that is often considered to have replaced the traditional historical fiction, i.e., the

historiographic metafiction. Linda Hutcheon, who has coined the concept, gives it many

definitions in her 1988 *Poetics of Postmodernism*. One of the commentators of

contemporary British fiction has a good working one: "novels which combine an attention

to verifiable historical events, personages, or milieu with a self-reflexive awareness of their

status as artefacts and the literary narrative conventions they employ" (Rubinson 78).

Hutcheon's concept covers, however, not only such contemporary novels, and not only

literature but all postmodernist cultural practices: it is intended to be a (better) synonym to

postmodernism. It has been, in fact, criticized for being too all-encompassing and

"constructed," and because it "sounds suspiciously like yet another master narrative, and it

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[11] The genre was revived in the early 21st century by authors like Andrew Marr or Geoffrey Blainey who have written one-volume histories of the world (covering 70,000 and 4,000,000 years, respectively).

is by no means the only, or even the best, story, but merely one of several competing 'narratives of postmodernism'" (Mepham 140). If Nünning (quoted above) prefers to include Hutcheon's examples of historiographic metafiction in a more general category of "postmodernist historical novels," others prefer the term "theoretical fiction" (Currie 50), "in the sense that it writes out in fictional form what poststructuralist theorists say about historical narratives" (65).

If one is to accept the concept of historiographic metafiction, at least in its narrow definition suggested by Currie and Rubinson, as a paradigm against which to consider *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas*, three underlying issues of Hutcheon's concept must be addressed first. One has been raised by Lubomír Doležel and has to do with the confusion between narrativization and fictionalization in Hutcheon's line of reasoning. In one of her many definitions of the historiographic metafiction, Hutcheon claims that this type of fiction can "enact the problematic nature of the relation of writing history to narrativization and, thus, to fictionalization, thereby raising the same questions about the cognitive status of historical knowledge with which current philosophers of history are also grappling" (92). Doležel accepts that "both historical and fictional representations of the past are semiotic constructs," but rejects "the tautology that narrativization equals fictionalization" (90). While it is true that Hayden White constantly compares history-writing to the writing of fictions, he only speaks of "fictionalization" in historiography as another word for "interpretation" ("The Historical Text" 89-93). Whether novelists can participate in the contemporary controversy about the epistemology of historiography is

debatable; at any rate, both historians and novelists narrativize and fictionalize, which are two distinct operations.[12]

Secondly, there is the issue of the literal meaning of the phrase "historiographic metafiction," which has been addressed by Ansgar Nünning. In the name "historiographic metafiction," the noun represents the normative element, the adjective the functional one. In other words, the noun shows what such works are, the adjective how they work: historiographic metafictions are fictions about fiction and they use historiographic references to comment on art, literature, the writing process and its relation with reality. What Nünning suggests is that Hutcheon's many definitions can become too all-inclusive and encroach on the territory of other fictions, similar in appearance, but in which the focus is reversed: "In contrast to historiographic metafiction which addresses problems related to the writing of history explicitly in metafictional comments, metahistorical novels focus on the continuity of the past in the present, on the interplay between different time levels, on forms of historical consciousness, and on the recuperation of history" (Nünning 224). In other words, metahistorical novels comment on history and the representation of history, both explicitly and implicitly (through plot, characters, and various topoi, such as the search for truth and/or recollection). They were first labelled, independently, by Ina Schabert in Germany in 1981 (*Der historische Roman* 77), and Barbara Foley in the U.S in 1986 (*Telling the Truth* 186). Metahistorical novels "are generally set in the present but concerned with the appropriation, revision, and transmission of history. Such novels typically explore how characters try to come to terms with the past" (Nünning 224).

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[12] It is true that White himself can be ambiguous about the two terms, especially when he is too invested in the comparison with Frye's mythoi. That is why the confusion appears to persist in the discourse of historians. For instance, a follower of White writes about *Fiction in the Archives*, but uses quotation marks for the "fictional" aspects of documents, which she describes not as "their feigned elements, but rather . . . their forming, shaping, and molding elements: the crafting of a narrative" (Davis 3).

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Nünning's distinction is also helpful because it sheds more light on Doležel's: historiographic metafictions, in a strict definition, cannot indeed participate in a debate about the epistemology of historiography, since historiography is, for them, an instrument. Instead, it is metahistorical novelists who are directly interested in the discussion around the possibility of knowing and/or transmitting historical events. Their works usually have two plots (interrelated or not), one in the present, one in the past, one or the other taking up most of the story. The elements of the past that they are trying to recreate or to recollect are often very specific: one afternoon in a childhood spent in the Fens together with generations of ancestors who had contributed to it, in Graham Swift's *Waterland*; or the mystery behind a portrait painted during the War of the Roses, in Josephine Tey's classic *The Daughter of Time*. Nevertheless, such novels are teeming with explicit and implicit comments on general and abstract notions, such as the nature of history, the deterioration of truth over time, or the relation between reality and representation.

All this, of course, does not mean that the same work cannot be metafictional and metahistorical at the same time. Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* comes first to mind as a piece of fiction that uses its uncommon structure as well as the constant downgrading of the status of its tales from one section to another in order to comment on repetition and knowledge in history, while at the same time it uses historically recognizable events and situations as well as their historical representations in the present and an imagined future in order to comment on the elements of narratives and ultimately on the origin of fictions. The same can be said of *A History of the World* on the whole and of its parts: Rubinson is right that "Shipwreck" is metafictional (99-100); however, "Parenthesis" is not only metafictional, as Kotte writes, but also metahistorical. Barnes's whole oeuvre is interesting in this respect, because he has

written both historiographic metafictions like *Flaubert's Parrot* and *Arthur and George* and metafictional novels like *The Sense of an Ending*. In the first two, historical and biographical elements from nineteenth-century France or England are instrumental in the metafictional commentary about the work of both a nineteenth-century novelist like Flaubert or Doyle and that of the contemporary author. In the other, the contemporary story is a pretext for a general commentary about the unreliability of memory and the possibility of understanding the past.

The third problem posed by a concept like "historiographic metafiction" is that it emphasizes historiography as the only form in which History can be known, discussed, accepted or rejected. The fact that History itself makes an obvious appearance in *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* and that their narrators and characters discuss it, try to come to terms with it and even hope to have an immediate knowledge of it is probably the main reason why these novels have been seen as less (or more) than postmodernist. Metahistorical novels also address History as such, but *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* try to address it while telling it at the same time. The latter operation negates the former because it alters it, in the same way that the mere act of observation changes the phenomenon observed. It is a predicament that these novelists accept, perhaps because fiction is more open to paradoxes than historiography. Nonetheless, even if such novels discuss the representation of History, it is an immediate, first-hand representation, not the representation of a representation. In "Parenthesis," Barnes has a metahistorical passage that seems very much in accord with a postmodernist view of historical representation:

> 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. First it was kings and archbishops with some offstage divine thinking, then it was the march of ideas and the movements of masses, then little local events which mean something bigger, but all the time it's connections, progress meaning, this led to this, this happened because of this. (*A History of the World* 242)

Behind this short history of historiography (from Whig history to postmodernist microhistories) lies the spectre of History as the actual unfolding of events. There is a powerful nostalgia for "what really happened," which is later confirmed by the narrator's idealistic solution: love as the bringer of truth. Rather than just a confirmation of White's idea about the historians' "modes of emplotment," the passage is a critique (filled with regret) of the fact that successive waves of history-writing seem unable to capture historical reality.

Similarly, Mitchell seems to follow in Italo Calvino's footsteps, but the "half-lives," unlike the Italian's, are made whole, rather than left unfinished:

The first time I read Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler . . .* I thought we'd be going back to the interrupted narrative later on in the book, and I very much wanted to. Finishing the novel, I felt a bit cheated that Calvino hadn't followed through with what he'd begun—which was, of course, the whole point of the book. But a voice said this: What would it actually look like if a mirror were placed at the end of the book, and you continued into a second half that took you back to the beginning? That idea was knocking around in my head since I was eighteen or nineteen years old. (Begley)

By adding second halves to his stories, Mitchell in fact negates Calvino's "whole point." His novel is thus the anti-Calvino: the stories appear first discontinuous and then continuous, because, to use White's terms, this is how the world "speaks itself." Not telling the whole story would be cheating against the world. Mitchell's subsequent comment is that the history of the world can be read/told either from beginning to end or from end to beginning with equally valid results. The overarching structure of *Cloud Atlas* resembles a huge palindrome rather than a series of Russian dolls. The beginning explains and justifies the end just as the end explains and justifies the beginning. Adam saves Autua (the name is a palindrome), Mitchell's own "stowaway," just as Autua saves Adam.

In his many interviews, David Mitchell remembers many influential works that helped shape *Cloud Atlas*. However, one particular oversight is curious. William T. Vollmann, another contemporary novelist that has often been called "post-postmodernist" (and has also published a seven-volume, 3,300-page treatise on violence in history), is the author of a 1996 composite novel called *The Atlas*. It has a central eponymous chapter preceded by twenty-six chapters numbered from 1 to 26, and followed by another twenty-six chapters numbered from 26 to 1. The sections are generally set in the early 1990s, with a few in the late 1980s: their purpose is not to cover the history of the world, but rather a slice of it in various places on earth. The author explains in a foreword that "this collection is arranged palindromically: the motif in the first story is taken up again in the last; the second story finds its echo in the second to last, and so on" (Vollmann xvi). Mitchell's narrative structure may be an answer to Calvino's, but his solution strongly resembles Vollmann's.

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Nevertheless, what is particular to novels like *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* and sets them apart from other contemporary works, including historiographic metafictions and metahistorical novels, is the treatment of History in a series of apparently discontinuous, and yet continuous sections. Such a treatment has been used before in works that narrate, narrativize, and interpret History, and that I will henceforward call *histopias*, because they use utopian/dystopian discourse; and because, like utopias, they are "constituted by a movement of affirmation and denial" (Vieira 4), although not of a place or of a society, but of history as a process and as a human construct. A prestigious precursor (named here first because it might have been a prime influence for both authors under discussion) is Jorge Luis Borges's 1935 *A Universal History of Infamy* (also translated into English as *A Universal History of Iniquity*). The first edition (three stories were added in 1954) contains fourteen sections, the eighth of which is partly fictional and partly autobiographical. All the rest are fictionalized tales of real criminals from various places and epochs. Borges's main subterfuge is to pretend that history "speaks itself" in a broken sequence: "History . . ., like a certain motion-picture director, tells its story in discontinuous images" (*Universal History* 39). Another significant histopia is Roberto Calasso's *The Ruin of Kasch* (1983), an essay-novel covering the entire history of the world but focusing on the first decades of nineteenth-century France, the figure of Talleyrand and the Paris of Louis-Sébastien Mercier, Sainte-Beuve, and Walter Benjamin. Throughout his narrative, Calasso explicitly searches for the geometrical locus between the Continuous and the Discontinuous in a Maussian total social (f)act: one that can explain the flow of events while at the same time arrest it.

Perhaps the most important example of histopia before Barnes and Mitchell is, however, Bernard Shaw's 1920 five-play cycle *Back to Methuselah: A Metabiological Pentateuch*. Shaw's "evolutionary fantasia" (Chesterton 23) starts in the Garden of Eden, in an afternoon of the year 4004 BC (the playwright follows James Ussher's[13] chronology); from there it moves "a few centuries later" in Mesopotamia, in the second act of the first play; then to the "present day" of post-WWI England; then to A.D. 2170; then to A.D. 3000; and finally to A.D. 31,920, that is to say "as far as thought can reach." Shaw's Adam and Eve start regretting having invented death; some of their offspring "never want to die, because they are always learning and always creating either things of wisdom, or at least dreaming of them" (31). Six millennia later, two scientists foresee that men will start living 300 years, simply because seventy or eighty "isnt long enough for a complicated civilization like ours" (71). By sheer will, some human beings do indeed prolong their lives, until men become virtually immortal and dream of transforming into mere vortexes of energy. The science fiction elements and the "metabiology" in the play have been intensely discussed by commentators, and it would be very simple to understand *Back to Methuselah* as a euchronia, i.e., "the projection of the utopian wishes into the future" (Vieira 9). However, Fredric Jameson has also convincingly shown that "the longevity drama is not 'really' about longevity at all, but rather about something else, which can a little more rapidly be identified as History itself" (32).

From this brief discussion of precursors, one should not omit the early example of histopia (and possible model for the two novels discussed here) which is the Bible,

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[13] In his 1650 treatise *Annales veteris testamenti, a prima mundi origine deducti*, Anglo-Irish theologian James Ussher (1581-1656) calculated that the Creation had taken place in 4004 B.C. This date was still widely accepted until the mid-nineteenth century. That Shaw uses it as the beginning of his narrative is, of course, one of the many intertextual ironies of the play.

especially the Old Testament, which purports to narrate the history of the world from its very creation all the way to its endpoint. The Bible also uses the same interplay of continuity and discontinuity like Barnes, Mitchell, Borges, Calasso, and Bernard Shaw. In "Odysseus' Scar," the first essay of his *Mimesis*, Eric Auerbach founds his comparison between the biblical narrative and the Homeric epics on precisely the elements listed above:

> The claim of the Old Testament stories to represent universal history . . . gives these stories an entirely different perspective from any the Homeric poems can possess. As a composition, the Old Testament is incomparably less unified than the Homeric poems, it is more obviously pieced together – but the various components all belong to one concept of universal history. . . . The greater the separateness and horizontal disconnection of the stories and groups of stories in relation to one another, compared with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the stronger is their general vertical connection, which holds them all together and which is entirely lacking in Homer. (16-17)

Naturally, there are also similarities between *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* that can suggest Mitchell knew Barnes's novel and may have written his in part as a way of entering a dialogue and of acknowledging his participation in the establishment of a certain type of fiction. These similarities go beyond the narrative structure and the commentary on History. Both novels start with a section about a stowaway who is wanted neither on land nor on sea. Mitchell's second section is the fictionalization of Eric Fenby's memoir about the time spent as Frederick Delius's amanuensis. Nothing similar exists in *A History of the World*. Instead, Barnes created his own avatar of Delius, not unlike Mitchell's Vyvyan Ayrs, in Leonard Verity, the central character of his story "Interference"

from *Cross Channel* (3-20). In a letter sent by Ayrs's protégé, he advises his friend to arrive in Bruges "in that six o'clock in the morning *gnossiennesque* hour" (*Cloud Atlas* 47). The extremely rare adjective is a reference to Erik Satie's 1893 piano compositions titled *Gnossiennes*. In the same collection by Julian Barnes that includes the story about the Delius-like character, there is a short story titled "Gnossienne." Both novels make use of the recurring motif of death-foreboding animals. The clones in *Cloud Atlas* think they will be taken in a "Golden Ark" (190) to a sort of Eden. The characters in Mitchell's central section live after "the Fall" (287) and are saved by another, real, ark. Zach'ry and Meronym's fruitless ascension of Mauna Kea mirrors Miss Ferguson's ascension of Ararat in *A History of the World*.

The most important similarity between the two novels is to be found, as is to be expected, in their relationship with history understood as either unfolding of events or as history-writing. Alun Munslow's dictum that "history is historiography" (128) is often understood in a radical way by postmodernist historians and novelists. If we equate the dictum with the formula "A = B," a radical reading would be that A is nonexistent, being replaced by B; A is illusory, only B is real; A can only exist as B. On the other hand, a less radical reading would understand that both A and B exist, although they are equivalent. Such a reading would be ambiguous, but literature accepts and preserves ambiguity. In histopias like those of Barnes, Mitchell, or Bernard Shaw history-writing is a major topic. Nevertheless, History in general and History as a whole remain the central point of interest and are dominant in three special, utopian/dystopian settings: the future; episodes of conjectural history; and the birth or rebirth of the world.

History, not historiography, can be the main theme in sections set in the future. These are ostensibly about the way History may unfold, not about our human perspective on it. Utopia and dystopia in general are not *about* perspective. They simply are (and are aware of being) perspective. What historians call "conjectural history, a method of addressing periods in human history for which no documentation exists" (Budd, "Vico" 58), offers the same opportunity as the imagined future: that of being its first chronicler. Thus, the events narrated take a position of prominence, even when the reader is perfectly aware of their being a construct, as it happens in Roberto Calasso's eponymous (and entirely fictional) section about an ancient African kingdom in *The Ruin of Kasch*. By being a complete, and not a partial, artefact, such history-writing lets History (albeit fabricated) be perceived as knowable and as authentic. The other temporal setting that may accommodate utopian or dystopian episodes in such works is also the only truly "world-historical" moment of the history of the world, i.e., its origin. This may be the actual birth of the world (e.g., The Garden of Eden) or its rebirth after a planetary catastrophe (e.g., Noah's Ark, Mitchell's Hawaiian community). These are the only episodes when the history of the world is genuinely universal, since it includes all of mankind as its characters. Everything that occurs is a cause and/or an effect worth noticing. I call *histopias* such works that not only comment on the way events are told, but also try to tell the history of the world. They not only comment on History understood as the way events unfold, but also need utopian/dystopian segments as benchmarks against which that History can be measured and understood.

2. Telling Is Retelling

"Remember that what you are told is really threefold:

shaped by the teller, reshaped by the listener,

concealed from both by the dead man of the tale."

(Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*)

Every narrative is in fact a retelling because even in first-hand accounts the world has spoken itself first. It is a threefold process which does not occur in chronological phases, but is rather a complex maze of retelling. First, the discourse that narrates repeats, retells, and in a way recreates History. Second, the events are retold so that all the apparent gaps are filled. Third, History repeats itself.

History Repeating

The most interesting discussion and the most extreme example of retelling is the one in Jorge Luis Borges's "Pierre Menard." The French re-teller of *Don Quixote* tells the story by using Cervantes's exact same words. The identical quotes provided by Borges, who then analyzes the invisible differences, concern the definition of history:

History, *mother* of truth; the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an investigation of reality, but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what took place; it is what we think

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took place. The final clauses – *example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future* – are shamelessly pragmatic. Equally vivid is the contrast in styles. The archaic style of Menard – in the last analysis, a foreigner – suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his precursor, who handles easily the ordinary Spanish of his time. (*Ficciones* 36)

Miguel de Cervantes, the original author, is relegated to the role of "precursor." He obviously cannot lend too much "pragmatic" weight to the ambiguous dictum about history as the mother of truth. Menard, on the other hand, can easily do it simply by being a modern. Instead, his language sounds "affected," while Cervantes's identical words seem natural. Borges's sentence of choice (the definition of history) is not random: the writer, in his view, retells the world and its history in a way that, ideally, is identical to the way the world tells its own history. However, the retelling is necessarily different. This is something that other authors profess to be true. A.S. Byatt, for example, claims: "Writing serious historical fiction today seems to me to have something in common with the difficult modern enterprise of Borges's Pierre Menard, rewriting the Quixote, in the 'same' words, now" (*On Histories* 94). The author who belongs to the "now" is, just like Menard, a "foreigner" to his own narrative. Even if he retells the stories of a "precursor," they gain from being told again, they acquire new and/or more precise meanings. One will forever wonder how anti-imperialist Melville really was in writing his Pacific tales a century and a half ago. However, these doubts are futile when Mitchell finds ways of retelling those stories.

The question that lurks behind any attempt to retell History is whether retelling has a similar value with that of the original. In *A History of the World*, this is the question to

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which Lawrence Beesley hopes the answer is affirmative. He is a *Titanic* survivor who was hired as a consultant for a movie about the sinking and then sneaked "among the extras who despairingly crowded the rail as the ship went down – keen, you would say, to undergo in fiction an alternative version of history" (174). Beesley is feeling guilty for having survived, supposedly in a woman's dress. The director notices him and forces him to leave the set. "And so, for the second time in his life, Lawrence Beesley found himself leaving the *Titanic* just before it was due to go down. Being a violently-educated eighteen-year-old, I was familiar with Marx's elaboration of Hegel: history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. But I had yet to come across an illustration of this process" (175). In *The Ruin of Kasch*, Calasso is also concerned with the way History retells itself in different modes. He quotes Alexis de Toqueville's view of the 1848 revolution: "it seemed to me that everyone was more concerned with staging the French Revolution than with continuing it. . . . Though I could see the end of the performance would be terrible, I was never really able to take the actors seriously; and the whole thing seemed to me a poor tragedy performed by provincial amateurs" (194).

Retold History is just as real as History, albeit its value might be different. Beesley wants to recreate it in the hope that they are axiomatically identical. The Indians in Barnes's eighth chapter, "Upstream!" seem sure that History performed has the same value as History itself:

> They actually think that when Matt and I are dressed up as Jesuits we actually are Jesuits! They think we've gone away and these two blokes in black dresses have turned up! . . . I wonder if [they are not primitive and] it's the opposite and they're a sort of post-acting civilization, maybe the first one on the earth. Like, they don't

need it any more, so they've forgotten about it and don't understand it any longer.

(*A History of the World* 203)

Similarly, in Shaw's pentalogy the men of the future are only able to understand and appreciate art in their childhood, because they do not need to have History retold. In *Cloud Atlas*, History only gets known through various ways of retelling, but the main characters remember it as part of an earlier version of their own life the moment they read or see a movie about it, even if it is a story within a story within a story. Due to this kind of remembrance to which Mitchell's characters participate, History retold – even History retold many times – becomes equated with History itself. The issue of retelling History is ultimately the topic of Barnes's "Shipwreck," about Géricault's famous painting: "The painting has slipped history's anchor. . . . Catastrophe has become art; but this is no reducing process. It is freeing, enlarging, explaining. Catastrophe has become art: that is, after all, what it is for" (*A History of the World* 137). What matters most here, although Barnes does not emphasize it as much, is that he retells both the sinking of the *Medusa* and Géricault's artistic representation of it as equally significant historical episodes.

Any telling is a retelling, just as any "making is a remaking" (Goodman 7), because it uses the materials of a world that has already made itself. Nelson Goodman has shown that our vision of the world is constantly reshaped by: composition and decomposition; weighting; ordering; deletion and supplementation; and deformation (7-16). For reasons of simplicity, he does not add the prefix "re-" before each of these names, however it should be understood. A classic example of retelling by (re)weighting and (re)ordering is Darwin's theory of evolution. Barnes re-weights it one more time in *A History of the World* using the example of the *Titanic* (and, later, in *Cross Channel*, the example of World War One

soldiers) to suggest that "the fittest" who are supposed to survive are simply the most cunning: "The heroes, the solid men of yeoman virtue, the good breeding stock, even the captain (especially 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?" (*A History of the World* 174). Also in *A History of the World* a character trying to take refuge before what she believes to be an imminent nuclear disaster, suggests another re-weighting: "The Survival of the Worriers" (97).

 "You can tell more by showing less" (*A History of the World* 128), insists Barnes, who needs to use deletion in order to fit the history of the world in 200-odd pages. Deletion and deformation are constantly used by humans who re-make History on a daily basis: "Religion decays, the icon remains; a narrative is forgotten, yet its representation still magnetizes. . . . Modern and ignorant, we reimagine the story" (*A History of the World* 133). Such an icon is William Huskisson, remembered today simply by being "the first person to be run down and killed by a train (that's what he *became*, was turned into). And did William Huskisson love? And did his love last? We don't know. All that has survived of him is his moment of final carelessness; death froze him as an instructive cameo about the nature of progress" (229). A man without a story, Huskisson is now similar to a frozen fossil that can tell us little about itself, but participates in the larger narrative about the world and its evolution.

The most important historical narrative (histopia) that Barnes retells in part is, of course, the Bible. Concomitantly, he retells the history of the last thousand years as they were in part shaped by that narrative: "God comes into *A History of the World* a lot because

there has been a lot of God in the history of the world" (Freiburg 41). There is an interesting passage in Barnes's memoir about death, in which he recalls an elderly Latin master at primary school, who "grew satirical about the absurd title of a book called *The Bible Designed to be Read as Literature*. We chuckled along with him, but from a contrary angle: the Bible (boring) was obviously *not* to be read as literature (exciting), QED" (*Nothing* 18). Both the Latin master and the pupils thought – for different reasons – that the Bible was too serious to be read as literature. Not so the adult Barnes. The Bible is exciting to the author of *A History of the World* because it is a retelling that deserves to be retold. The episode of the Flood is retold from the perspective of a woodworm, quite similar to the way the birth of Jesus and the arrival of the Magi to worship at the manger are told from the point of view of a donkey in the cold stable in a short story by Barnes's favourite contemporary French writer, Michel Tournier.

The episode of the Flood, retold in fact in several religious and less religious old narratives, has been retold together with its later destiny in the cultural history of mankind by other authors, most notably, because of its possible connection with Barnes's, in D.M. Thomas's 1981 novel *Ararat.* Thomas's novel has several narrators who retell each other's stories (not unlike the way Mitchell's narrators and focalizers read one another and retell/relive a similar life). The main theme of the book is, in fact, that of retelling. One of the narrators in *Ararat* is a Russian writer called Rozanov, who orally improvises a narrative about another writer, called Surkov, both of whom sound at times like Barnes's woodworm. Rozanov thinks "of Ararat. Two by two they went into the ark" (Thomas 15). Surkov talks to his lover, who has bought a unicorn figurine in Romania and explains that it is "really an Armenian creature, like the raven and the dove. Did you know he was the only

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animal who wouldn't go in the ark? He stayed outside and swam! I can't remember if he survived or drowned. But you can't help admiring him, can you? Telling Noah to get lost!" (23). Just as Surkov is a character in Rozanov's improvisation, he, too, improvises a retold version of Pushkin's *Egyptian Nights*.

This method of retelling (often very loose, in the form of improvisation) is a central topos in European art and literature. Noah's Ark was vaguely represented during the first millennium and a half of Christianity, but then

> the waters are diverted by Michelangelo. In the Sistine Chapel the Ark . . . for the first time loses its compositional pre-eminence. . . . The emphasis is on the lost, the abandoned, the discarded sinners, God's detritus. . . . In Poussin's "The Deluge" the ship is nowhere to be seen; all we are left with is the tormented group of non-swimmers first brought to prominence by Michelangelo and Raphael. Old Noah has sailed out of art history. (*A History of the World* 138)

The history of art is both a retelling of History (catastrophe turned into art) and a constant retelling, re-imagining, improvising of the previous representations. Similarly, all chapters in *A History of the World* and all stories in *Cloud Atlas* are retellings of each other. Each story end is an invitation for a new retelling, just as much as death is an invitation for a new beginning. This might be the central theme of both *Cloud Atlas* and *The Ruin of Kasch* as well as the pet peeve of Shaw in *Back to Methuselah*, in which each end forces us to take it all from the beginning and the only solution is immortality.

> In Thomas's *Ararat*, Surkov thinks of
>
> the philosopher and space pioneer Tsiolkovsky, who had hated death so much
>
> he dreamt of seeding the whole universe with people, all equally immortal.

Where, now, was Tsiolkovsky, if not in his grave? Was it possible that there was somewhere *else*, some paradise in which Tsiolkovsky, and Surkov's mother, and his father, the camp guard at Kolyma, shook hands with each other, greeted each other, ate, drank, and slept together? Inconceivable! And God? To imagine a maker of this blue gulf, those fleecy clouds, was merely to compound the impossible. For it was impossible, logically speaking, for all this, including Surkov himself, to exist. Yet of course nothingness, also, was inconceivable. Moreover, the sky, the clouds, exhibited order and beauty. His consciousness already becoming American, Surkov recalled what an American, or perhaps English, astronomer had said, about the likelihood of chance producing the complex universe: that it was like expecting a tornado, blowing through a scrap yard, to create a Boeing. (136)

Actually, Surkov is thinking of Sir Fred Hoyle (1915-2001) and of the so-called Hoyle's fallacy, or the "junkyard-tornado," similar to the "infinite monkey theorem." Its origins were traced back to Aristotle's *On Generation and Corruption* by Borges, in his essay "The Total Library" (1939), the nonfictional counterpart to "The Library of Babel," of which I will speak in Chapter 3. This long passage from *Ararat* is particularly interesting not only because it retells Shaw's immortality solution in face of the dreadful death and because it anticipates Barnes's vision of a heaven in which victim and torturer brush elbows, but also because it posits the idea that the world cannot really be retold without alteration. In this and other instances of retelling, the meta-comments address not the way we narrate (and especially the way we re-narrate) fiction, but the way we narrate (and especially re-narrate) history (sometimes via fiction).

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Retelling often involves re-narrating, i.e., putting events in a different order, changing cause-and-effect patterns, choosing different focalizers, different narrators, and, of course, Goodman's versions of (re)making the world. Re-narrating is what Barnes calls "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" (*A History of the World* 109). A similar idea is forwarded by D.M. Thomas: "One's life becomes increasingly fictional in middle age, I find. There's no longer a great difference between real life and fiction. . . . But that's a feature of our age generally, don't you think? Fiction seems tame compared with reality; and people's reality is so fantastic it seems like fiction" (35-36). The world is middle-aged too, perhaps, and tells a fabulated version of itself. The fact that fiction might seem tamer than reality legitimizes the encroaching of fiction onto history's old fief. Barnes speaks somewhere of "one of [his] favourite historical notions, the invention of tradition" (Guppy 74). In fact, Barnes is fond both of Eric Hobsbawm's concept and of his own more generic notion of fabulation only because they allow him the opportunity to protest against their occurrence: "You keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them . . . that's what most people did. We've got to look at things how they are; we can't rely on fabulation any more. It's the only way we'll survive" (*A History of the World* 111). Here we have a first glimpse into Barnes's belief in the possibility of narrating History objectively.

Other philosophers of history suggest that embellishment and even deceit are necessary; also, that there is more truth to a fictionalized version of events. One such philosopher is Adam Ewing in Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*:

My recent adventures have made me quite the philosopher . . . history admits

no rules; only outcomes. What precipitates outcomes? Vicious acts & virtuous

acts. What precipitates acts? Belief. Belief is both prize & battlefield, within

the mind & in the mind's mirror, the world. If we *believe* humanity is a ladder

of tribes, a colosseum of confrontation, exploitation & bestiality, such a

humanity is surely brought into being. . . . If we *believe* that humanity may

transcend tooth & claw, if we *believe* divers races & creeds can share this

world as peaceably as the orphans share their candlenut tree, if we *believe*

leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the

Earth & its Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass. (527-

528)

Nietzsche blamed Kant and Schopenhauer for their lack of narrative and "dramatic"

elements: "their thoughts do not constitute a passionate history of a soul; there is nothing

here that would make a novel, no crises, catastrophes or death-scenes" (*Daybreak* 197).

One frequently quoted characterization that Nietzsche gives of the philosopher states that

"He knows in that he fictionalizes, and he fictionalizes in that he knows" ("The

Philosopher" 53). However, the original German is "Er erkennt, indem er dichtet, und

dichtet, indem er erkennt" (qt. Alejandro 302n14). "Dichten" means to write literature,

especially poetry. I believe the verb above is closer to "narrativizes" than to "fictionalizes,"

or in any case it means "composes (makes into) a literary production."

However, if one is to understand History as largely and essentially fictional, not

simply because we use our (fictionalizing) thoughts on it, but because it speaks itself in a

way that is not scientifically rigorous, then one can also claim the right or the power to

reorder, retell, re-fictionalize it in a better way. It would also be a purely mental, non-

invasive, strictly discursive way, from one way of speaking/telling to another. This is what

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Adam Ewing, the first and last narrator of the more Nietzschean of the two authors analyzed here, thinks. This mental, non-invasive way of remodelling the world professed by Ewing is very Shavian. In *Back to Methuselah*, the road to biological progress is also eminently mental. Ewing imagines his father-in-law telling him: "'You'll be spat on, shot at, lynched, pacified with medals, spurned by backwoodsmen . . . only as you gasp your dying breath shall you understand, your life amounted to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean!' Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?" (*Cloud Atlas* 529). The last and rather trite sentence of the novel also speaks in favour of the more elaborate Shavian evolution that would gradually bring about a change in human nature.

In "The Babylon Lottery," one of Borges's "fictions," the omnipotent Company does not even conceive of a history that is unitary, unique, and nonfictional: "there is nothing so contaminated with fiction as the history of the Company. . . . A palaeographic document, unearthed in a temple, may well be the work of yesterday's drawing or that of one lasting a century. No book is ever published without some variant in each copy. Scribes take a secret oath to omit, interpolate, vary" (*Ficciones* 50). Here too, "fiction" does not mean complete invention, but merely slight variation. The repetition of only one version of the truth is too dangerous. It is this one version, constantly recited, that tends to turn into myth by sheer repetition. The only historian in Barnes's novel is actually a TV historian, capable of mesmerizing his spectators and have them offer "themselves to the story-teller in the manner of audiences down the ages" (*A History of the World* 55). History is always in danger of becoming the biased version of either the victor or of the vanquished; that is why Barnes insists in a later book that History is rather "the memories of the survivors, most of whom are neither victorious nor defeated" (*The Sense* 56).

Documents are normally the most reliable, if not the only, source of the historian. However, Barnes satirizes the reliability of documents. In a later novel, he has a character say that "History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation" (*The Sense* 17). In *A History of the World*, the TV historian and his audience are on a cruise to Knossos, the ruins of which, documents of a lost civilization, are largely the artefacts of the overly enthusiastic British archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans (Marr 49). The documents from the trial of the woodworm "do not represent the entire proceedings – for instance, the testimony of witnesses, who might be anything from local peasants to distinguished experts on the behavioural patterns of the defendants, has not been recorded" (*A History of the World* 61). Moreover, "the parchment . . . has been attacked, perhaps on more than one occasion, by some species of termite, which has devoured the closing words of the juge d'Église" (79-80). With so many lacunae, the reader is left with both the biased view of sixteenth-century lawyers and with his own biased hindsight.

Barnes confesses that he has only used one researcher in his career: "that was on *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* where I did use someone to research things that I couldn't be bothered with finding out myself, like, how you traveled from England to Turkey in the 1840s – things like that" (Freiburg 32). Instead, he researches by himself, following in the footsteps of his favourite historians, Simon Schama and Richard Cobb (the latter also Schama's model): "The historian, especially of the Cobbian kind, is a sort of novelist, but one who instead of inventing plot and character is obliged *to discover them. . . . *This may well be the harder kind of work, especially when the sought plot proves nugatory, fragmented, trampled into indetectability by previous searchers" (*Something* 10;

my italics). Hayden White's triad of discourses goes full circle in the view of such authors

for whom interpretation and discourse that narrates become one and the same in the effort

of perceiving and retelling the way the world tells itself. Many academic historians today

would not accept such a view and that is why, thinks Barnes, the historical novel "is

certainly one current literary trend at the moment. . . . I think this is partly a question of

filling a vacuum" (Guppy 72).

The Discourse That Narrates

Fabulation, spin, fictionalization are other words for what Hayden White more

neutrally calls "interpretation" in history. Narrativization, as we have seen, is merely the act

of uncluttering the amount of information and of turning it into a story with a beginning

and an end. The foremost interpretative technique is what White, based on Northrop Frye's

categories of myths, calls "emplotment." This has been foreseen by Kermode, who writes

that "World history, the imposition of a plot on time, is a substitute for myth" (*The Sense*

43). Kermode also chronicles the way in which, by the turn of the twentieth century, the

first modernists had become only too aware – and sometimes ambivalent – about the

emplotment technique that had been used by paradigmatic historiography: "The decline of

paradigmatic history, and our growing consciousness of historiography's irreducible

element of fiction, are, like the sophistication of literary plotting, contributions to what

Wilde called 'the decay of lying'" (43). Many decades later, the decay of lying makes

historians, but also novelists like Barnes, long for a non-intrusive narrative voice, one that

White identifies as "the discourse that narrates." Such a discourse would tend to present

"things as they were," although in a way that is closer to Benjamin's view of history-writing. Barnes seems ambivalent himself and "insists that we must believe that there is truth in history, even if we know that we cannot obtain the absolute truth" (Kotte 99), yet that is because he does not believe he is inventing a plot, but merely discovering one.

The idea that the discourse that narrates can exist unadulterated is, of course, an illusion. Even White cannot give another example except that of annals that get interrupted so that they do not even have an end. How can historians or any other type of narrator believe that they can provide such a discourse and not think that they intrude and modify? Simply because they believe that the world speaks itself, i.e., narrates itself first and that their own discourse does little else but attempt to reproduce the original discourse. It is important to keep in mind that the three discourses identified by White do not necessarily exist in exclusion of each other, but instead coexist within the same text. Also, that authors who are perfectly aware of the way history can be narrativized and interpreted can at the same time believe they can tell (or in fact retell) a story that the world itself has to tell. Such an author, for instance, is Gerschom Scholem, for whom "counterhistory attempts to emphasize continuity [while] the theory of catastrophe emphasizes rupture" (Rosen 66). The fact that Scholem calls a history that emphasizes continuity (i.e., narrativizes) "counterhistory" is very telling. The real history – the one he calls "theory of catastrophe" – is discontinuous. Barnes and Mitchell, as well as the other histopians, make use of a discontinuous narrative. While this may seem constructed, for such authors it appears less so. They believe continuity is counterfactual and discontinuity – marked especially by natural catastrophes – is closer to the way the world tells itself.

The disquieted look at nature is not new, but it is the repetitive aspect of it that becomes interesting in the works of the two authors: "Marx warned us that history repeats itself: first as tragedy, then as farce. British novelist David Mitchell suggests a few more iterations: grade-B pulp thriller, creepy dystopian scifi, Hobbesian nightmare" (Turentine BW03). Barnes's novel, which poses as an answer to Marx's frequently (mis)quoted idea that historical events occur twice, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce, also responds to an early ecocritical text: Joseph Meeker's 1978 *The Comedy of Survival*. In Meeker's view, *comedy* is about avoiding confrontation (the foremost example of which is the struggle of culture against nature, which is the subject of *tragedy*) and instead seeking *love* as a way out. Mitchell, in turn, is more interested in following the second wave of ecocritism, concerned with environmental justice, whereas Barnes follows more often the first wave, concerned with preserving nature (or the natural state of humans in his epistolary chapter).

It is not difficult to see that both *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* recount a series of catastrophes, some obvious and on planetary scale, others hidden and of a more personal nature. Others yet are near-disasters, caused by men and foreshadowing a real or imaginary complete destruction. Nature itself is not spared in Barnes's narrative, since it is a natural catastrophe, not a man-made one that starts it all. Thus, *A History of the World* starts off by opposing "the Whig version of history by portraying history as a catastrophe from the start" (Finney 35). Such a narrative reminds one of Walter Benjamin's theory of history, and at least one commentator has suggested seeing "*A History of the World* as a fictional instantiation of Benjamin's concepts and methodology. . . . Where historicists see 'the march of events' as a linear succession of triumphant human advances, Benjamin and

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Barnes see only a trail of violence and destruction" (Buxton 59). Ships and shipwrecks in *A History of the World* can be understood as metaphors for the constant blunders and lack of purpose in the history of mankind: "In Barnes's estimation, the ship of progress has foundered. Marx's locomotive has metamorphosed into a jury-rigged life raft, crowded with desperate or despairing survivors. Like Benjamin's angel's view, Barnes's vision of the past is dominated by an accumulation of shipwrecks that constitute one single historical catastrophe" (Buxton 80). The reference here is of course to Benjamin's description of "the angel of history": "Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet" ("Concept of History" 392).

Catastrophe is more insidious and gradual in Mitchell's novel, although the central section appears to be set in the only remaining human habitation after the near-total destruction of the planet. Yet, catastrophe is omnipresent, man-made, moving along its fellow traveller, tyranny, the latter based on the way man understands nature. Each section opens onto "a different tyranny: colonial, sexual, corporate, institutional, genetic and, from the book's center, the meta-tyranny of a 'progress' that returns us to the cycle's beginning" (Norfolk 22). It is in fact one single tyranny, like Barnes's one single catastrophe. Also like Barnes, Mitchell provides a fictional model for Karl Marx's idea about History repeating itself. One commentator of *Cloud Atlas* stresses the novel's "echoic patterning," which "is clearly involved with Mitchell's sense of history's intricate repetitiveness and the feedback structures which exist within it. His plot works to the logic of Lorenz's Law (that butterfly, that storm), whereby an insignificant occurrence in one place or time can assume

catastrophic proportions elsewhere" (Macfarlane 52). It is not, in fact, "his" plot, but the plot he discovers – as Barnes says Cobb would do – within History itself.

In both novels, the sea and seafaring are principal motifs of the catastrophe theme. Ships are omnipresent and numerous in *A History of the World*: the expedition for Senegal consists not only of the *Medusa*, but "of four vessels: a frigate, a corvette, a flute and a brig" (115); even Noah's Ark is in fact "eight vessels" (128). When there are no actual ships, they are replaced by "the nave of [a] church" (64) or even by a church in the shape of an Ark (249). The first chapter of *Cloud Atlas* is largely set on board *The Prophetess*, but ships that changed local history are also mentioned, namely HMS *Chatham* and *Rodney*. Other later ships that play an important part in the novel are *Kentish Queen*, Papa Song's Golden Ark, and "the Great Ship o' the Prescients" (*Cloud Atlas* 258). In the absence of ships, sailing images and metaphors invade descriptions of dry land: "a low hill crowned by a shipwrecked beech tree" (49); "of all the rural stations for a marooning" (164-165).[14] Nevertheless, actual shipwrecks are very few: only two in *A History of the World* (the *Medusa*, which ran aground; and the *Titanic*, which hit an iceberg) and the brief mention of one in *Cloud Atlas*. Ewing had been shipwrecked, but his diary is incomplete and a more elaborate analepsis is lacking: "I recall the fangs of the banshee tempest & the mariners lost o'erboard" (*Cloud Atlas* 4). Despite the title of one of its sections and the mention of one of the most famous shipwrecks in history, the central image in Barnes's novel is that of the group of beings (men and beasts) that are lost at sea and ultimately saved. The environmental comedy presupposes the concept of redemption, suggested also by

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[14] Shaw's *Heartbreak House,* his last major play written before *Back to Methuselah*, meditates on society as a ship and catastrophe – including the set which is a room as ship and a former sea captain as one of its main characters.

Benjamin.[15] Instead, Mitchell exacerbates the role played by ships, which can bring both total destruction and eventual (limited) salvation.

In a spectacular retelling of the story of the biblical Jonah (and of its recurrence in the 1890s), Barnes explains how what might appear as human interpretation is, in fact, the discovery of the catastrophe plot, which is inherent to the world: "If we examine God not as protagonist and moral bully but as author of this story, we have to mark him down for plot, motivation, suspense and characterisation. Yet in his routine and fairly repellent morality there is one sensational stroke of melodrama – the business with the whale . . . the whale steals it" (*A History of the World* 177). The world (God) tells itself through an emplotted story; and nature, rather than man, is the major culprit. Man-made catastrophes like the Chernobyl accident are present in *A History of the World*, but Barnes is more interested in the way people act in the aftermath. Instead, Mitchell's catastrophes are generated by human character flaws. Like Vyvyan Ayrs, one of his characters, Mitchell "quotes Nietzsche more freely than he admits" (*Cloud Atlas* 531), and *Cloud Atlas* is "essentially, a grand fictional treatise about the will to power – whether corporate or tribal, personal or consumer" (Tait 8). Another character, Henry Goose, explains History as the twin march of progress and catastrophe: "This rapacity, yes, powers our Progress; for ends infernal or divine I know not. Nor do you know, sir. Nor do I overly care. I feel only gratitude that my Maker cast me on the winning side" (*Cloud Atlas* 509). It is characteristically clever of Goose to discover the plot inherent to the world, but to conceal the solution, which Ewing, his victim, will later strive to find.

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[15] One of the ships in Barnes's novel is *Santa Euphemia*, named after a martyr credited with restoring faith in the dual nature of Jesus Christ. The reliquary containing her remains is said to have been thrown into the sea during the Iconoclastic rebellion and saved by two brothers who owned a ship. Euphemia is also the name of one of Calvino's *Invisible Cities*.

In *Cloud Atlas*, the solution for an "objective" discourse that narrates is the same as the solution for the social/natural crusade, which makes Mitchell considerably closer than Barnes to Benjamin's view of History and history-writing. In his search for objectivity, Benjamin writes that "Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it 'the way it really was.' It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" ("Concept of History" 391). This memory, or rather this "flash" of history is both genuinely real and easily concealed by a conventional narrative of the victors. Historical events become "a cycle of starts and stops that vectors through past, present and future, linked by buried clues" (Turentine BW03), as one commentator has noticed about History as narrated in *Cloud Atlas*. The great danger, against which Benjamin warns and with which Ewing has to fight, is that of the "indolence of the heart, that *acedia* which despairs of appropriating the genuine historical image as it briefly flashes up" ("Concept of History" 391). Adam Ewing's journal "bookends a dramatized series of mailshots from the story of civilization's fall" (Childs and Green 33). These "mailshots" are Benjamin's "flashes," which a militant historian cum social crusader (Ewing and his subsequent avatars) is indeed trying to appropriate and retell.

Ewing witnesses such a "historical image" on Raiatea, in the Society Islands, where "The Head Master of the Nazareth Smoking School," in his "Antipodean cockney" (foreshadowing the fictitious Hawaiian cockney in the central section), instructs natives about Jesus and His teachings on smoking: "'by instilling in the slothful so-an'-sos a gentle craving for this harmless leaf, we give him an incentive to earn money, so he can buy his baccy – not liquor, mind, just baccy – from the Mission trading-post. Ingenious, wouldn't you say?'" (*Cloud Atlas* 501). The Polynesians are instilled with the knowledge about and

even the need for capitalism because, as Preacher Horrox later explains, they are higher up the "Civilization's Ladder" than "those 'Irreclaimable Races,' the Australian Aboriginals, Patagonians, various African peoples, &c., just one rung up from the great apes & so obdurate to Progress that, like mastadons & mammoths, I am afraid, a speedy 'knocking off the ladder' – after their cousins, the Guanches, Canary Islanders & Tasmanians – is the kindest prospect" (507). Such marginalized people, like "the unclean" in Barnes's version of the history of the world, recur in the following sections, in the shape of the disinherited, the elderly, the cloned, or those opposed to the corporate machine.

The marginalized in *A History of the World* can be a small tribe lost in the Orinoco jungle or Jews of the late 1930s and early 1980s, but animals are the most conspicuous representative of the group. The struggle between culture (dominant and invading) and nature (marginalized and in retreat) is staged as a trial in the third chapter of *A History of the World*, "The Wars of Religion." The marginalized are also granted the narrative voice in the opening section, and it is "difficult to imagine a more marginalized and victimized character than the narrator of the first chapter, 'The Stowaway': a microscopic woodworm belonging to a species branded as 'unclean' and condemned to extinction by Noah" (Onega, "Nightmare" 357). Thus, some "of the usually silenced losers in history's ruthless struggles are heard in Barnes's novel, but their revisionist narratives do not ameliorate its destructiveness" (Holmes 88). Such revisionism is consonant with Benjamin's theory of history but also with the practices of "The Group," British historians like Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thomson, and Raphael Samuel, who promoted "history from below" (Himmelfarb 287) and with contemporary subaltern studies. The more a historical narrative

tends to go below, the closer it gets to nature and the environment. One author of

metahistorical novels suggests: "Let's call it Natural History" (Swift 137).

Like Lawrence Norfolk's *Pope's Rhinoceros* and Graham Swift's *Waterland*

(centered on the figure of the wandering eel), *A History of the World* "too has its humans

lost in the rainforest, its animals (irradiated reindeer) innocent victims of human

incompetence or folly. It too ends up with a romantic vision of human love to set against a

reductive view of human importance" (Byatt, *On Histories* 71). A.S. Byatt, who clearly

identifies here the environmental comedy in Barnes's novel, is actually talking of retro-

Victorian novels, in which nature, evolution, and Darwinism often play a crucial part.[16]

Barnes constantly reinterprets a Darwinian catchphrase as "the survival of the grabbiest" (*A*

History of the World 7) or "the survival of the worriers" (97) and has a character ask, "Why

are we always punishing animals?" (87) He also finds a way to make the comedy of

survival explicit in an interview in which he hints at the last line of a famous Victorian

poem:

> There is a chapter in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, as you will
>
> know, about medieval animal trials. Most people who look at animal trials
>
> tend to think that if in medieval times they gave judicial trials to a pig for
>
> eating the face of [a] man who was lying in a ditch in a drunken stupor, that
>
> this was a sign of how incredibly primitive and stupid the Middle Ages were.
>
> It seems to me that it's a sign of how wonderfully larger and more extended
>
> the sense of what life was in those days, and that when the pig was executed
>
> by an official hangman, it was actually elevating the status of the pig rather

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[16] The concept was coined by Sally Shuttleworth, in "Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel" (253-268).
I will refer to this essay in the conclusion to my thesis.

than anything else. It was putting it into the order of God's creation, it was giving it a conscience, you could say, whereas now the horizon has lowered. God is not in his sky and we treat pigs worse now than they did in the Middle Ages. (Freiburg 41-42)

In *Cloud Atlas*, tragedy befalls manifold, but the solution is not the mere "comedy" of preservation by love and inter-species collaboration (as seen on Barnes's Ark and on the survivor's boat), but the search for justice, represented primarily by Ewing and his crusader mentality, after being rescued by Autua. Sonmi is another crusader, who does not simply wish for the preservation of the human species, but helps instead a branch of it (the Valleysmen) who has a better relationship with nature. Another, more timid, crusader is Sixsmith, the whistleblowing scientist killed by corporate thugs. In keeping with the extended metaphor of sailing, Sixsmith has a boat called *Starfish* (*Cloud Atlas* 448). The concept of "keystone species," pivotal in contemporary environmental studies, is based on a species of starfish. Most starfish species can regenerate lost arms and even a new "disc" (the middle part), but are very exposed to water pollution. Mitchell's narrative is consistent with the view of contemporary historians that all history is "in a sense, historical ecology" (Fernandez-Armesto, *Civilizations* 16). Even Mitchell's title might be an indication that his history of the world is in fact natural history.[17]

Modern history has identified certain structures that "live on for so long that they become stable elements for an indefinite number of generations: they encumber history, they impede and thus control its flow. . . . The most readily accessible example still seems that of geographical constraint. For centuries man has remained the prisoner of climate,

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[17] Clouds are reservoirs of the planet's energy (see David Randall, *Atmosphere, Clouds, and Climate*), hence a "cloud atlas" can be understood as another name for the history of the Earth.

vegetation, animal population, farming potential" (Braudel, "History" 254). These structures evolve in a *longue durée*. Writing about natural history means at the same time following the longest *durée* and being a revisionist. The latter can mean writing about the killing of innocent animals: the reindeer in *A History of the World* (84), the pheasant in *Cloud Atlas* (460), the fawn in *Back to Methuselah* (3). However, even when the last representatives of a species are killed off, Barnes's woodworm does not protest much. For this narrator, things are what they are and one simply needs to know them and find peace through knowledge. Instead, in *Cloud Atlas* the need for justice colours the conflict in sharper tones. The table in the Horroxes' parsonage stands "with each leg immersed in a dish of water. Mrs Horrox explained, 'Ants, one bane of Bethlehem. Their drowned bodies must be emptied periodically, lest they build a causeway of themselves'" (497). Wagstaff, a farmer from Bethlehem, exclaims: "'The ants! Ants get everywhere. In your food, your clothes, your nose, even, until we convert these accursed ants, these islands'll never be truly ours'" (503). Barnes's woodworm and Mitchell's ants are in similar situations but have different attitudes: the woodworm fights a guerrilla war, always in hiding, while the ants are caught in open combat against the human invader.

Histopias (2)

In the woodworm's narrative, a totalitarian regime is being enforced on Noah's Ark. There is a curfew, doors are locked, and animals can be punished and sent to isolation cells. Noah and his family operate a secret police service "and certain of the travellers agreed to act as stool pigeons. I'm sorry to report that ratting to the authorities was at times

widespread. It wasn't a nature reserve, that Ark of ours; at times it was more like a prison ship" (*A History of the World* 4). A few animal idioms ("stool pigeons," "ratting") turn the species selected for survival into informants, while the last phrase alludes to a local custom. Great Britain has a long and notorious tradition of prison ships, originally decommissioned warships, which either transported exiled convicts (mainly to Australia), or kept prisoners of war,[18] including Irish Republican Army members during Barnes's lifetime. The same kind of oppressive regime is being enforced in the Papa Song eatery in *Cloud Atlas* (also, the fabricants eat themselves, just as the animals are eaten on the Ark). However, what is special and unexpected here is that dystopian elements are introduced in the retelling of what is supposed to be a utopian episode of the past. Animals were saved from a planetary catastrophe in the aftermath of which they and the only human family on earth began multiplying. In the retelling, the instrument of salvation is a prison and the "clean" animals are saved because they are edible.

In *Cloud Atlas*, Ewing's journal includes dystopian elements in what is supposed to be a utopian past: paradisiacal Polynesia is also the land of genocidal wars and of brainwashing imperialists. This is not, in fact, as paradoxical as it may seem. Dystopia is not the opposite of utopia, but is rather located at equal distance away from the two extreme views about the possibility of creating a better world: utopia and anti-utopia (Moylan 127). Tom Moylan and others make this distinction by stressing only the telos of a narrative. As such, even a dystopian text can be either utopian or anti-utopian, although Moylan prefers to call the second type "pseudo-dystopia" (157), because a "real" dystopia is open rather than closed and characterized by militant rather than resigned pessimism. Both *A History of*

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[18] Most notably in the American Revolutionary War, when more than 10,000 prisoners died on British ships in the New York harbour (while only 8,000 Americans died in all the battles of the war).

the World and *Cloud Atlas* could, at times, appear to be anti-utopian (or pseudo-dystopian) because of frequent images of "hope being mocked" (*A History of the World* 132) and because the characters find themselves trammelled by improbable situations and feel alienated in a world that is not ready to accept them.[19] Yet, hope, often associated with militancy, constantly makes a comeback; and, as Raymond Williams has shown, "the experience of isolation, of alienation, and of self-exile" (45) is an issue with which utopian/dystopian novels have to come to terms. Isolation and self-exile are fundamental in all the sections of *Cloud Atlas* (and are discussed at large in the second and third); and alienation is the corollary of the cross-planetary travels in the two novels. Also, one man's utopia might be another's dystopia; and many utopias often have dystopian elements.

Militancy may also creep into imagined societies that are not far in time and in structure from the present world. This is a feature of what Lyman Tower Sargent has called "critical dystopias" ("The Three Faces" 7). Such is the story of Timothy Cavendish in *Cloud Atlas*, trapped in the Aurora house and in a Kafkaesque scenario (the rights to which he sells to a Hollywood studio). He manages to escape his prison, although no one is able or ready to listen to his story, which is why he turns it into fiction (he, too, learns to appreciate the plot of the previous section, that of the "airport novel," which can be seen as a meta-commentary on the role of the critical dystopia). A critical dystopia is also "Half-Lives," an avowedly fictional version of the year 1975 in the United States. In metafictional commentary, Luisa Rey explains that terror in Hitchcock's *Psycho* is contained, but "a film that shows the world *is* a Bates Motel, well, that's . . . dystopia" (*Cloud Atlas* 95). In *A History of the World*, the critical dystopia is staged in "The Survivor," whose narrator finds

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[19] Both, though especially *Cloud Atlas*, include elements of what has been called "ecotopia" (Stableford 259), i.e., utopian/dystopian discourse in which the fate of Nature plays a crucial part.

out "what's wrong with the world . . . We've given up having lookouts. We don't think about saving other people, we just sail on by relying on our machines. Everyone's below deck" (95-96) and, if you happen to be drifting on the ocean, the big ships who could have saved you before will just sail right past.

The conventional distinction between utopia and dystopia can still be useful. The two modes can be seen as opposites if one looks at how the plot starts, not at where it may (seem to) go. From this perspective, both *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* can be said to open on worlds that are presented in stark opposition to utopia. Mitchell's novel begins (and ends) in an Edenic place dominated by imperialism, bondage, and genocide, while Barnes's starts by retelling an episode of Genesis in surprisingly dystopian tones. Noah and his family operate a gastronomic form of racial selection (*A History of the World* 6-8), some animals being "simply Not Wanted on Voyage" (7). "Clean," i.e., edible, animals "got into the Ark by sevens; the unclean by twos" (10). All "cross-breeds" (15-16) are also sacrificed: the basilisk, the griffon, the sphinx, the hippogriff. In the second section of the novel, the "cleanliness" of human beings is decided upon according to the value system of Islamic terrorists. Franklin Hughes had acquired an Irish passport because the world "was no longer a welcoming place" (37) for a BBC journalist. In the fifth section, health is the new criterion, and "it was agreed among the fifteen healthy persons that their sick comrades must, for the common good of those who might yet survive, be cast into the sea. . . . The healthy were separated from the unhealthy like the clean from the unclean" (121). In and of itself, a state of conflict does not create a sense of the (critical) dystopia. Instead, what is necessary is that the average man suffer: "Those in the middle got killed; governments and terrorists survived" (47). In the future corpocratic society imagined by

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Mitchell in "An Orison of Sonmi-451" the average man is called a consumer, who has "to spend a fixed quota of dollars each month. . . . Hoarding is an anti-corpocratic crime" (*Cloud Atlas* 237).

What might appear as utopia is in fact marred by weariness. A major theme in *Back to Methuselah* is "the boredom of Utopia, the tedium of acedia of the long-lifer" (Jameson 34). Boredom spoils the achievements of longevity both thirty millennia into the future and six millennia before the present, when Adam and Eve decide to invent the limited lifespan. It is interesting to note that Jameson uses the same term as Benjamin (acedia) because Shaw's long-lived are no longer interested in history. Just like the "historicist" authors that Benjamin criticizes, they see no "flashes" in the past. One of the early commentators of Shaw's play made a similar observation about the entire History: "Progress began in boredom; and, heaven knows, it sometimes seems likely to end in it" (Chesterton 24).[20] In *A History of the World* the author-narrator ends up in a heaven where all wishes are fulfilled for an unlimited number of times, which inevitably leads to boredom. History begins and ends, for both Shaw and Barnes, as pseudo-utopia. Knowledge about the past, especially of the deepest past, the one hidden inside the human soul, can inform the knowledge about the future, which is perhaps the most important thesis on history in both Shaw's play and Mitchell's novel. Pseudo-utopia in the past, critical dystopia in the present, utopian dystopia in the future seem to form the most common sequence in a histopia, although all three may recur in various moments and locales.

Mitchell has them recur in various places in the Pacific, in part because of his sources. One of the most important ones is Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, in

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[20] One of the few histories of the world written in recent times by a single author uses the following epigraph from Derek Walcott: "history . . . is boredom interrupted by war" (Marr xiii).

which Mitchell found the story of the Moriori of the Chatham Islands. He thought "that was irresistible. I wanted to work out a way of getting that story in" (Begley). Diamond may be said to "emplot" his narrative, but his plot is anything but linear or bound. This is because he has found a way that history tells itself: "like an onion" (Diamond 9), behaving differently on each continent, because of "differences in real estate" (401). However, what really appealed to Mitchell (and to Diamond's many readers) is that his book purports to explain the entire history of the world, from the continental drift onwards. As another contemporary historian has expounded,

> The big change, I think, that has overtaken my own discipline in my lifetime is
> that we historians have more or less abandoned the search for long-term
> origins. . . . When we want to explain the decline and fall of the Roman
> Empire, we no longer do as Edward Gibbon in his classic on the subject and
> go back to the age of the Antonine emperors (who were doing very well in
> their day), but say that migrations in the late fourth and early fifth centuries
> provoked a sudden and unmanageable crisis. (Fernandez-Armesto, *1492* 315)

Like Diamond, histopian novelists and dramatists look into the origins of mankind (the Garden of Eden, the Flood, the remote islands of Polynesia) to understand and be able to narrate its future. Moreover, they try to identify the flashing memory of which speaks Benjamin and which might go unnoticed in the historian's well-tempered narrative. For example, D'Arnoq in *Cloud Atlas* recounts the invasion of the Chathams by the Maoris as being orchestrated by HMS *Rodney* and makes of Harewood, its captain, a minor character in the human catastrophe that followed (14). In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Mitchell's source, Diamond narrates a similar tragedy, but the British presence is concealed: there is only

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word of "a ship carrying 500 Maoris" (53) at the beginning of the chapter on Polynesia, and no mention of the fact that the Maoris themselves did not possess ships.

Like Diamond, Mitchell – or rather his mouthpieces such as Dhondt and Sachs – tries to identify that one thing that can explain the entire history of the world, except he finds it inside man himself. Dhondt avows to Frobisher that wars and other disasters are eternal companions of humanity because of one single character feature: "The will to power, the backbone of human nature. The threat of violence, the fear of violence, or actual violence, is the instrument of this dreadful will. You can see the will to power in bedrooms, kitchens, factories, unions and the borders of states, listen to this and remember it" (*Cloud Atlas* 462). Dhondt and Frobisher think that the will to power will trigger the end of the human species, while Grimaldi, one of the villains of the third section of *Cloud Atlas*, thinks it distinguishes the great from the average: "the will to power. This is the enigma at the core of the various destinies of men" (131-132). Sonmi refines the argument in one of her *Declarations* and sets mere will as different from the will of the powerful: "It is a cycle as old as tribalism. In the beginning there is ignorance. Ignorance engenders fear. Fear engenders hatred, and hatred engenders violence. Violence breeds further violence until the only law is whatever is *willed* by the most powerful" (360-361). Will plays a similarly crucial part in History in *Back to Methuselah*: "imagination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire; you will what you imagine; and at last you create what you will" (9). Having established the one element of paramount importance in the way History tells itself, Shaw and Mitchell can go on and see how the future tells itself.

In his discussion of Shaw's play, Fredric Jameson comes to associate it with the science fiction genre and notes that "the unique new possibilities of this representational

discourse – which has come to occupy something of the functions of the historical novel in the beginning of the bourgeois age – are social, political, and historical far more than they are technological or narrowly scientific" (37). Barnes and Mitchell consciously and effortlessly combine the historical and science fiction as if they were one and the same. Retelling the past and retelling the future are part of the same representational discourse. The discussion of the mixture of genres in both novels goes hand in hand with the exercise of identifying allusions, parodies, and pastiches. In *Cloud Atlas*, for example, commentators have discovered "a remarkable variety of genres – conventional historical fiction, dystopian sci-fi, literary farce" (Wood), a combination of historical and science fiction (Thorne 18), a mixture of Calvino and H.G. Wells (Tait 8), of Philip Larkin, Huxley, and Orwell (Hensher 34), of Marx, Hobbes, Nietzsche, Burgess, Melville, Kingsley Amis, and Paul Bowles (Turentine BW03), or of Defoe, Isherwood, Martin Amis, and William S. Burroughs (Bissell 7). In Barnes's novel, commentators have identified the combination, or even a "playful parodying of literary genres" (Onega, "The Nightmare" 360), while "the very design of *Cloud Atlas* tells a further story, a quest conducted among genres, languages and witnesses for the means to represent worlds, familiar or remote, historical or imaginary" (Norfolk 22).

 A History of the World is also seen as a mixture of several historical subgenres: "[i]t is a compendium of and critical commentary on theological, legal, scholarly, literary, speculative, and traditional historical genres of writing. Barnes mixes all these genres to give a sense of history as 'a multi-media collage'" (Rubinson 94). The quote here is from a longer sentence about the multifaceted aspect of history: "And we cling to history as a series of salon pictures, conversation pieces whose participants we can easily reimagine

back to life, when all the time it's more like a multi-media collage, with paint applied by decorator's roller rather than camel-hair brush" (*A History of the World* 242). The prohibitive message "Not Wanted On Voyage" in Barnes's first chapter has been seen as a "self-conscious citation of the fictional narrative on which [the first chapter] 'The Stowaway' is modeled: Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage*" (Buxton 62). *A History of the World* in its entirety has even been seen as a "pastiche of the composite novel" (Ingersoll 216). Even *Cloud Atlas* has appeared as a "gloss" (Bissell 7) on various subjects. The second section, "The Visitors," is "loosely based on the terrorist hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* in 1981" (Kotte 75), and the eighth section can be read "as a parody of Robert Bolt's [1986 historical film] *The Mission*" (76).

Sometimes, the parody is simply played out in references. In "Half-Lives," Luisa Rey describes Swannekke A, the nuclear plant that threatens to destroy northern California, "quivering like Utopia in a noon mirage" (*Cloud Atlas* 124). The reference here is unlikely to point to Thomas More's island. Instead, it could point either to the Gilbert and Sullivan musical (set in an island in the South Pacific and satirizing turn-of-the-century globalization) or the Laurel and Hardy movie (on a South Pacific island rich in uranium deposits), both of which are called *Utopia*. However, the mixture of genres in *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* can also be understood as going beyond parody and pastiche. It can be seen as an exercise in retelling. Sometimes it is a re-narration, i.e., the same story and plot but with a different narrative voice: the episode of the Ark, for which Barnes keeps the "cosy catastrophe" scenario (thus named by Brian Aldiss) but has a woodworm reinterpret all the story elements. Sometimes it is the Menardian kind of retelling, cultivated by Mitchell in "Letters from Zudelghem," the only section in *Cloud Atlas* that does not deal

with actual or potential disaster (other than personal), but it is rather a metafictional

performance. The fictional Frobisher is a stand-in for the real Eric Fenby, Vyvyan Ayrs is a

version of Delius, and all the events and situations narrated retell Fenby's story. Thus,

when Frobisher notes in his diary that "Sir Edward Elgar came to tea this afternoon" (*Cloud

Atlas* 82) he retells, just like Pierre Menard, an event already told in a previous story, but he

gives it a different meaning. This time it is not Fenby's Elgar, but Frobisher's "Elgar," a

cameo in a postmodernist tale. Frobisher's (and Mitchell's) Menardian creed is expressed

in the conflicting ideas about the youngster's co-authorship to Ayrs's *Der Todtenvogel*:

"more than a few of its best ideas are mine. Suppose an amanuensis must reconcile himself

to renouncing his share in authorship, but buttoning one's lip is never easy" (*Cloud Atlas*

65-66).

Not only time, but also place can be retold, which can be seen in the authors' efforts

to include various portions of the planet in their narratives. Barnes has confessed his

admiration for Somerset Maugham's "lucid pessimism and ranging geography" (*Nothing*

83). The geographical area covered by the sections of *A History of the World* is

considerably more impressive than the one in *Cloud Atlas*. In Mitchell's novel, four

sections cover a wide triangle in the Pacific Ocean, going from the Chatham Islands in the

southwest corner to Korea in the northwest and San Francisco in the northeast, with

Hawai'i in the middle. The other two sections cover a much smaller triangle whose corners

are set in London, Bruges, and Glasgow (both protagonists start off in London and end up

in the other two locations). In *A History of the World*, on the other hand, although the

Mediterranean basin (including the eastern shore of the Black Sea) is featured prominently

in five sections and several European locales are at least mentioned in another five, other

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sites are in Africa, Australia, North, Central, and South America. Asia makes a brief appearance in "Project Ararat" (the future astronaut used to drop bombs up the Yalu River), a section in which even the Moon is the setting for a part of the story. As catastrophes occur all over, pessimism travels from one continent to the next.

The most important conflict in the midst of which men can find themselves is a natural one, between land and water. Graham Swift builds his metahistorical discourse in *Waterland* on this ancestral conflict that affects the people of the Fens: "Perhaps at heart they always knew, in spite of their land-preserving efforts, that they belonged to the old, prehistoric flood. . . . For what is water, which seeks to make all things level, which has no taste or color of its own, but a liquid form of Nothing?" (13) Swift's narrator (whose words here foreshadow Ewing's last words in *Cloud Atlas*) is a history teacher for whom History is made chiefly of this primal tug-of-war between elements. For Barnes's author-narrator, the events of natural history need to be retold in fiction: "We have to understand it, of course, this catastrophe; to understand it, we have to imagine it, so we need the imaginative arts. But we also need to justify it and forgive it, this catastrophe, however minimally. Why did it happen, this mad act of Nature, this crazed human moment? Well, at least it produced art. Perhaps, in the end, that's what catastrophe is *for*" (*A History of the World* 125).

Disaster can be justified. After all, a major natural catastrophe is the beginning of British history: "there was an ice age, or, to be precise, a series of glacial advances and withdrawals, during which time the sea interposed itself between the conjunctive Ouse and Rhine, and the land mass later known as Great Britain began to detach itself from the continent" (Swift 143). The disaster took place around the year 6500 B.C., when the so-called Doggerland was flooded and Britain became an island, with a "catastrophic impact

on the . . . population" (Weninger et al. 17). Flaubert mentions the event in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, in which one of the characters speculates on the possible consequences of an earthquake underneath the English Channel and suggests that the two shores might be reunited again "after all these millennia. Bouvard, terrified by the prospect, runs away – as much, you might conclude, at the notion of the British coming any nearer as at the catastrophe itself" (*Something* xvi). Barnes is trying here – as he so often does – to establish a link with the (literary) past. Another such link that can prove fruitful is that with Tolstoy as seen by Isaiah Berlin in his 1954 *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, namely as an author of historical novels who derides his characters' assumption that history is coherent, but who is himself struggling to find coherence in history. In one of his essays, Barnes writes that fiction "is both centripetal and centrifugal. It wants to tell all stories, in all their contrariness, contradiction, and irresolvability; at the same time it wants to tell the one true story, the one that smelts and refines and resolves all the other stories" (*Nothing* 234-235). In Berlin's terms, authors like Barnes and Mitchell wish to reconcile the view of the fox with that of the hedgehog, because their fictions retell History and History tells itself as both continuous and discontinuous.

3. Nonsense of an Ending

> "[R]eincarnation is a fact.
>
> Donate your ashes to a fruit farmer."
>
> David Mitchell (Begley)

Myth and Fiction

Hayden White bases his theory of the "modes of emplotment" on Northrop Frye's *mythoi*, although the latter concern strictly works of fiction.[21] Whereas Frye thinks that only historians guilty of a "poetic fallacy" make use of mythoi, White insists that historians in general "emplot" and he takes for granted Frye's suggestion that "when a historian's scheme gets to a certain point of comprehensiveness it becomes mythical in shape" ("The Historical Text" 82). Frye, as read by White, sees literary works as having a fictional and a thematic aspect, the latter being ultimately a form of "discursive writing" which turns the piece of literature into an illustrative fable of parable. For White, the fact that history itself is "discursive writing" makes the meeting of historical narrative and pre-generic plot structures (*mythoi*) a natural union (83).

The idea that comprehensiveness or, rather, a perfectly comprehensive "scheme" may be suspect appears in both *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas*. Sonmi, in Mitchell's fifth section, gives such a comprehensive version of her life and of the rebellion

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[21] Including what Frye calls "specific encyclopaedic forms," treated separately towards the end of *Anatomy of Criticism* (315-326), and which would probably be the term he would apply to works like *A History of the World*, *Cloud Atlas* or *The Ruin of Kasch*.

in which she has taken part. She is being interrogated and has no intention of lying. She is

trying to remember everything and not hide anything. She is trying to avoid giving her own

interpretation of the facts. The entire narrative is comprehensive and has a clear point,

although Sonmi later explains that it was composed of "scripted events. . . . Didn't you spot

the hairline cracks?" (*Cloud Atlas* 363-364). Sonmi had been hailed as the chosen one and a

whole scenario had been designed to make her look like the iconic figure of a wide

conspiracy. For a long while, she had to believe her own scripted narrative because of the

role she had been chosen to play in it. Instead, the narrator in Barnes's first section

explains: "I am not constrained that way. I was never chosen. . . . My account you can

trust" (*A History of the World* 4). If the story of "The Stowaway" has serious lacunae

because the narrator had to conceal itself at all times, the woodworm feels free to interpret.

Its tale lacks comprehensiveness and the narrator is often forced to guess.

"The Stowaway" is at times a tragedy, at times a farce, sometimes both. In a

commentary on Marx's misinterpreted idea about the varied recurrence of history, Barnes

has the partial narrator of his fifth section (her stream-of-consciousness gets interrupted by

an omniscient narrator) attempt to remember a nursery rhyme:

We get scared by history; we allow ourselves to be bullied by dates.

In fourteen hundred and ninety-two

Columbus sailed the ocean blue

And then what? Everyone became wiser? People stopped building new

ghettoes in which to practice the old persecutions? Stopped making the old

mistakes, or new mistakes, or new versions of old mistakes? (And does history

repeat itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce? No, that's too

grand, too considered a process. History just burps, and we taste again that

raw-onion sandwich it swallowed centuries ago.) (*A History of the World* 241)

The last sentence, often quoted, is a refusal to accept the idea that history can recur in

different modes and it foreshadows the narrator's realization that events can actually be

variously encoded. In an elucidating paragraph, White explains that

no historical event is *intrinsically tragic*; it can only be conceived as such

from a particular point of view. . . . For in history what is tragic from one

perspective is comic from another, just as in society what appears to be tragic

from the standpoint of one class may be, as Marx purported to show of the 18th

Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, only a farce from that of another class.

Considered as potential elements of a story, historical events are value-neutral.

Whether they find their place finally in a story that is tragic, comic, romantic,

or ironic – to use Frye's categories – depends upon the historian's decision to

*con*figure them according to the imperatives of one plot structure or mythos

rather than another. ("The Historical Text" 84)

Both the "stowaway" and the "survivor" in *A History of the World* seem uneasy

about emplotting their narrative or even refuse to do it. Just like Sonmi in *Cloud Atlas*, the

narrator of "The Survivor" is ready to accept that very little in the story she is telling is

actually true. Because of a trauma, she realizes that she may be, in fact, "fabulating." In an

interview about *A History of the World*, Barnes explains that "'Fabulation' [i]s a medical

term for what you do when a lot of your brain has been destroyed . . . it's rather gratifying

for a novelist – the human mind can't exist without the illusion of a full story. So it

fabulates and it convinces itself that the fabulation is as true and concrete as what it 'really'

knows. Then it coherently links the real and the totally imagined in a plausible narrative"
(Guignery, "History" 54-55). In reality, the medical term is "confabulation" – Swift uses it
in *Waterland* to speak of the way two characters try to fill the gaps in each other's stories
(325). White makes a similar suggestion when he compares historiography with
psychotherapy:

> The problem is to get the patient to 'reemplot' his whole life history in such a
>
> way as to change the *meaning* of those events for him and their *significance*
>
> for the economy of the whole set of events that make up his life. . . .
>
> Historians seek to refamiliarize us with events which have been forgotten
>
> through either accident, neglect, or repression. Moreover, the greatest
>
> historians have always dealt with those events in the histories of their cultures
>
> which are 'traumatic' in nature and the meaning of which is either
>
> problematical or overdetermined in the significance that they still have for
>
> current life. ("The Historical Text" 87)

Barnes has a similar comparison in his metahistorical "Parenthesis," in which
History becomes an illness: "We lie here in our hospital bed of the present (what nice clean
sheets we get nowadays) with a bubble of daily news drip-fed into our arm. We think we
know who we are, though we don't quite know why we're here, or how long we shall be
forced to stay. And while we fret and writhe in bandaged uncertainty – are we a voluntary
patient? – we fabulate" (*A History of the World* 242). Steven Connor, in *The English Novel
in History*, has identified a subgenre of the contemporary British historical novel about
"Endings and Living on" and Susana Onega thinks *A History of the World* belongs to this
category because it "attempts to negotiate [a] collective trauma" ("Nightmare" 359). This

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seems to be the ultimate meaning of Barnes's term, which he makes clearer when he turns the explanation from medical metaphor to commentary on the fictionalization of history: "We make up a story to cover the facts we don't know or can't accept; we keep a few true facts and spin a new story around them. Our panic and our pain are only eased by soothing fabulation; we call it history" (*A History of the World* 242). This is consistent with White's own exoneration of myths: "the encodation of events in terms of such plot structures is one of the ways that a culture has of making sense of both personal and public pasts" ("The Historical Text" 85).

In his classical text about personal and collective histories, Carl Becker finds that disinterestedness, instead of turning us into better historians, is what makes us accept fictions, like that of the signing of the Declaration of Independence on the fourth of July 1776, which the average person "remembers," or has a clear representation of, whereas the signing took place on the second of August (24-25). "We are thus of that ancient and honourable company of wise men of the tribe, of bards and story-tellers and minstrels, of soothsayers and priests, to whom in successive ages has been entrusted the keeping of the useful myths . . . a myth is a once valid but now discarded version of the human story, as our now valid versions will in due course be relegated to the category of discarded myths" (Becker 25). Such a bard is Zach'ry in Mitchell's sixth section. At the beginning of his "yarn" about Meronym/Sonmi and Georgie the devil he asks his audience: "so gimme some mutton an' I'll tell you 'bout our first meetin'. A fat joocesome slice, nay, none o'your burnt wafery off'ring's" (*Cloud Atlas* 249). Zach'ry narrates at a time in the remote future (which strongly resembles a remote past) when "tale" and "tell" have been replaced by the ambiguous "yarn" (noun and verb), more suggestive of fictionality. His story takes into

account a series of "useful myths" of the Valleysmen, which is strengthened by his Biblical references.

In the second section of *Cloud Atlas*, the narrator leaves an interesting clue about the benefit of useful myths: "I played that 'Angel of Mons' piece I wrote on holiday with you in the Scilly Isles two summers ago" (70). The mention of the Scilly Isles cannot be coincidental: they are the setting of one of the most devastating naval disasters in history, which claimed the lives of over 1400 British sailors in 1707. Yet, more intriguing here is the clue about the Angel of Mons, a popular legend about a group of angels who supposedly protected members of the British army in the Battle of Mons at the beginning of the First World War. It originated in Arthur Machen's 1914 short story "The Bowmen," written as a "false document," not unlike many of the stories in Calvino's *If on A Winter's Night a Traveller*. In Machen's story, bowmen from Agincourt as well as Saint George himself help the British soldiers against the German enemy. The fact that the legend was largely embraced by its readers, despite Machen's admission of the "fabulation," can probably be explained that it helped the audience make sense of the unusual way that the world told itself. For Mitchell's narrator, it is also a "soothing fabulation," because he had lost a brother in the same war.

"Useful myths," "soothing fabulation," "making sense of the past" are in fact ameliorative terms for untruths passed along from one individual or one generation to another. Franklin Hughes, the protagonist of "The Visitors," is really able to make sense of the past and "the passengers commented on . . . how he really made history come alive for them" (*A History of the World* 35). He is in fact, at that moment, completely disinterested, to use Becker's term. Frank Kermode insists that "literary fictions belong to [Hans]

Vaihinger's category of 'the consciously false.' They are not subject, like hypotheses, to proof or disconfirmation[;] only, if they come to lose their operational effectiveness, to neglect" (*Sense* 40). On the contrary, myths are believed to be true, or at least useful, by a large number of people, including their disseminators. One could say, for example, that Machen's "Angel of Mons" was intended as a fiction, but it soon grew into a myth. A reaction against such "fabulation" is Calasso's *The Ruin of Kasch* in which "storytelling [is] substituted for myth" (Byatt, *On Histories* 127).

Kermode makes of his distinction between fictions and myths an indictment of Northrop Frye's theory: "If we forget that fictions are fictive we regress to myth (as when the Neo-Platonists forget the fictiveness of Plato's fictions and Professor Frye forgets the fictiveness of *all* fictions)" (*Sense* 41). When he analyzes paradigmatic histories (which White would call "emplotted"), Kermode becomes more emphatic: "We can think of them as fictions, as useful. If we treat them as something other than they are [i.e., if they become myths] we are yielding to irrationalism; we are committing an error against which the intellectual history of our century should certainly have warned us. Its ideological expression is fascism; its practical consequence the Final Solution. And we are always in some danger of committing this error" (103). White does not deny the fictionality of myths, although he reduces them to a structural element, as modes of emplotment. Like Kermode, he seems to be using, without mentioning, Vaihinger: "it is their nondisconfirmability that testifies to the essentially *literary* nature of historical classics. There is something in a historical masterpiece that cannot be negated, and this nonnegatable element is its form, the form which is its fiction" ("The Historical Text" 89).

Barnes, who is a close reader of Kermode (and borrowed the title of one of his novels, *The Sense of an Ending* from that of the critic's best-known book) turns the leader of the Muslim terrorists who have taken Hughes and the other passengers hostage into a paradigmatic historian so as to illustrate the dangers of letting fictions turn into myths: "the leader of the visitors returned. . . . 'I understand that you have been lectured on the palace of Knossos,' he began. . . . 'That is good. It is important for you to understand other civilizations. How they are great, and how – he paused meaningly – 'they fall. I hope very much that you will enjoy your trip to Knossos'" (*A History of the World* 43). Not only does the "visitor" start his own Final Solution aboard a single ship. He uses a paradigmatical decline-and-fall version of History, based on the fabulation that is Knossos today. In "The Survivor," the narrator thinks she will survive thanks to what turns out to be pure fabulation, but is redeemed by going the other way: "Fabulation. You keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them . . . that's what most people did. We've got to look at things how they are; we can't rely on fabulation any more. It's the only way we'll survive" (*A History of the World* 111).

Isaac Sachs, one of Mitchell's characters who theorize on time and history (the others are D'Arnoq and Dhondt), realizes the same danger (too late, though, because he does not survive a bomb planted on the plane taking him away). In a few sentences reminiscent of Barnes's Lawrence Beesley, who tries to recreate his own past as a *Titanic* survivor, Sachs meditates on the difference between actual and virtual past in relation to the very same naval catastrophe:

> The disaster as it *actually* occurred descends into obscurity as its eyewitnesses
>
> die off, documents perish + the wreck of the ship dissolves in its Atlantic

grave. Yet a *virtual* sinking of the *Titanic*, created from reworked memories,

papers, hearsay, fiction – in short, belief – grows ever "truer." The actual past

is brittle, ever-dimming + ever more problematic to access + reconstruct: in

contrast, the virtual past is malleable, ever-brightening + ever more difficult to

circumvent/expose as fraudulent. The present presses the virtual past into its

own service, to lend credence to its mythologies + legitimacy. (*Cloud Atlas*

408-409)

Similarly, Barnes theorizes on the difference between fiction and life: "Fictional characters

are easier to 'see,' given a competent novelist – and a competent reader. They are placed at

a certain distance, moved this way and that, posed to catch the light, turned to reveal their

depth. . . . But life is different. The better you know someone, the less well you often see

them" (*Nothing* 154). As a result, both Mitchell and Barnes choose to retell reworked

memories, hearsay, and fiction as they build their "consciously false" histories of the world.

Apart from the many retellings that have already been noted so far, those of famous

fictional accounts, e.g., the writings of Herman Melville and Daniel Defoe, deserve special

notice precisely because they are fictions used in the retelling of History. This is

acknowledged by Mitchell when Ewing listens to D'Arnoq's version about the past decades

in the history of the Chatham Islands: "My query unlocked a Pandora's Box of history. . . .

His history, for my money, holds company with the pen of a Defoe or Melville & I shall

record it in these pages" (*Cloud Atlas* 10). Barnes moved the setting of *The Mission* from

Paraguay to "somewhere near the Mocapra" (*A History of the World* 196), that is, closer to

the location of Crusoe's island. The first line of *Cloud Atlas* is reminiscent of a famous

episode in *Robinson Crusoe*,[22] but most references are to Melville. *Typee* and *Benito Cereno* are mentioned directly, *The Confidence Man* indirectly. Some plot elements of "The Pacific Journal" are reminiscent of *Moby Dick*: there are similarities between the *Prophetess* and the *Essex*, as well as between Ewing and Ishmael (both of whom are orphans) and between their Polynesian friends, Queequeg and Autua. Once, Ewing notes: "I snatched my diary & clattered downstairs to a *riotocracy* of merriment & ridicule from the white savages there gathered" (*Cloud Atlas* 7). A rare word, "riotocracy" was coined by Melville in his description of the *The Encantadas* (1854), more exactly in "Sketch Seven: Charles's Isle and the Dog-King." Charles's Island was then the name of the principal landmass of the Galapagos Archipelago, crucial in the forging of Darwin's theory of evolution. The first island visited by Darwin on his voyage on the *Beagle* is San Cristobal, whose English name is Chatham.[23] *The Encantadas* end with the inscription on a gravestone found by Melville on Chatham Isle.

Interpretation

The sections of *A History of the World* include several different modes of emplotting history: "the theory that the past is always repeated (most clearly in 'Three Simple Stories'); the belief that history is cyclical (particularly in 'A Dream'); the biblical view of history (in 'The Stowaway') . . . the many arguments that history is fundamentally

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[22] "Beyond the Indian hamlet, upon a forlorn strand, I happened on a trail of recent footprints" (*Cloud Atlas* 3) recalls Robinson's shock: "one Day about Noon going towards my Boat, I was exceedingly surpriz'd with the Print of a Man's naked Foot on the Shore, which was very plain to be seen in the Sand" (Defoe 130).
[23] History is scarce, although not absent, in *The Encantadas*. What is more interesting is the fact that Melville divides his description of the islands into ten "sketches."

embroiled in the processes of evolution and the survival of the fittest (perhaps most clearly in 'The Wars of Religion,' but also in a story such as 'The Visitors')" (Childs 82-83). However, all of these are discussed, often satirized, and ultimately rejected, individually and then in group (*A History of the World* 242) – with one exception: the idea that time is circular and history cyclical, first announced in "The Survivor," then refined in "A Dream." History is unpredictably cyclical because time is a chaotic vortex that can move fast then stand still, now describing a spiral then turning backwards. A similar view emerges from some of Mitchell's mouthpieces: "Time, no arrow, no boomerang, but a concertina" (*Cloud Atlas* 370), says Timothy Cavendish when he is no longer able to remember his own age or the number of days spent in the Aurora House.

In one of Borges's short stories ("The Secret Miracle"), fictional philosopher Jaromir Hladík denies (the idea is quite Nietzschean) "that all events in the universe make up a temporal series. He argues that the number of experiences possible to man is not infinite, and that a single 'repetition' suffices to demonstrate that time is a fallacy. . . . Unfortunately, the arguments that demonstrate this fallacy are not any less fallacious" (*Ficciones* 116). Many histopian writers dream of "a place that contains the secret of the past and of the future, which contains time coiled around itself like a lasso hanging from the pommel of a saddle" (Calvino 219). However, such a hope (Barnes actually uses the conceit of a dream in the last section of his novel to show it) is fallacious, as Borges has warned, since the only place man could be in control of time-as-a-lasso would be in the very absence of time. Calvino himself suggests the fallaciousness of time when his first narrator expects a "password" in the form of "a comment on the headline of the newspaper

sticking out of my pocket, on the results of the horse races. 'Ah, Zeno of Elea came in first'" (15-16).

In a 1933 review, Borges wrote that his friend Ezequiel Martinez Estrada's book *X-Ray of the Pampas* was a "'pathetic interpretation of the pathetic history of history and even of geography.' One might venture to suggest that *A Universal History of Inequity* is a further work in that genre-binding genre" (Hurley, "Afterword" 84). Histopian efforts are condemned to pathos, unless one dares to accept and narrate at the same time the possibility and the impossibility of time and history. Borges considers it a question of style. He describes himself as an adherent to the baroque, which he defines as the style "that deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) its own possibilities, and that borders on self-caricature. . . . I would venture to say that the baroque is the final stage in all art, when art flaunts and squanders its resources. The baroque is intellectual, and Bernard Shaw has said that all intellectual labour is inherently humorous" (*Universal History* 4). Such a commitment to exhaustion can be seen in the way all narrators in *Cloud Atlas* expect to be read and considered, which "alters what they do and tell, in exactly the way that chaos theory maintains" (Hensher 34). Even Zach'ry understands chaos theory and tells Meronym: "I'm jus' a stoopit goat-herder, but I reck'n jus' by bein' here you're bustin' this nat'ral order" (*Cloud Atlas* 280). Indeed, he is like the object of an anthropologist's study who suddenly comprehends modern anthropology.

Mitchell's self-caricature is manifest in one of Timothy Cavendish's thoughts: "As an experienced editor I disapprove of backflashes, foreshadowings and tricksy devices, they belong in the 1980s with MAs in Postmodernism and Chaos Theory" (*Cloud Atlas* 152). Mitchell's own MA thesis at the University of Kent is entitled "Levels of Reality in

Postmodern Fiction." In one of the sections of Mitchell's professed model, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, the narrator is trying to get inside a castle and paradoxically goes "through a series of places that ought to be more and more interior, whereas instead I find myself more and more outside; from one courtyard I move to another courtyard, as if in this palace all the doors served only for leaving and never for entering" (219). In the courtyards, places seen for the first time somehow resemble dreams already forgotten. Calvino's metaphor describes precisely the different "levels of reality" in his story within a story within a story. Mitchell adds the element of time to Calvino's formula: as his stories unfold forward into the future they are ontologically downgraded since each story is in fact "an artefact in the next" (Norfolk 22) and real points of ingress appear only as the narrative starts regressing temporally in the second half of the book. Mitchell has stated that "literary composition [i]s world-making" (Begley) but, as it would suit the baroque style, in *Cloud Atlas* he also manifests incredulity towards the possibility of world-making.

The plot in *Cloud Atlas* comes full circle. When Ewing falls into a chasm, he finds "tree sculptures" (19-21) of an extinct civilization. His groping in the dark foreshadows Zach'ry's own adventures and discovery of the lost civilization of the Old'uns, represented by the astronomical observatories. When Sonmi re-emerges as Meronym and saves the Valleysmen she is dark, thereby taking Autua's place as saviour of the white men, but from the position of the more technologically advanced. In the chapel at Ocean Bay, Ewing notices that the small flock "resembled more the Early Christians of Rome than any later Church encrusted with arcana & gemstones" (*Cloud Atlas* 8-9). Shaw's story in *Back to Methuselah* also comes full circle, first to a kind of mythological ancient Greece, then to the most spiritually evolved human beings who are on the verge of becoming as powerful

as Lilith, the first human. The act of going – repeatedly – full circle is more explicit in the ramblings of Barnes's "survivor." After she repeats the rhyme about Columbus sailing the ocean blue in 1492, she asks: "And then what? They always make it sound so simple. Names, dates, achievements. I hate dates. Dates are bullies, dates are know-alls" (*A History of the World* 97). Dates count for the linearity of history and in their absence one might be able to discern a different orientation, like the one she figures at the end of her conversation with her caretakers: "So, in your *version* – I stressed the word – 'where did they find me?' 'About a hundred miles east of Darwin. Going round in circles.' 'Going round in circles,' I repeated. 'That's what the world does'" (109).

When he gets to the "Old'uns Waimea Track" (*Cloud Atlas* 284) and finds the two astronomical observatories, Zach'ry believes them to be ancient temples that allowed the holy men of yore to communicate with their gods. This is consistent with the way the Elderly Gentleman narrates human history in the fourth section of *Back to Methuselah*: "They set up a new religion. . . . Instead of worshipping the greatness and wisdom of the Deity, men gaped foolishly at the million billion miles of space and worshipped the astronomer as infallible and omniscient. They built temples for his telescopes" (153). Shaw draws a good deal of inspiration from Nietzsche, of whom he says in the "Postscript" to the play that he was able to show "not what mankind is but what it might become" (258). In fact, Nietzsche uses both the past and the future to illuminate the present. His famous genealogical method (or history of morality) bridges the past, the present and the future by analyzing the codes ("hieroglyphs") of human lives: "Genealogy not only unmasks the past but also reveals the hidden nature of present-day culture" (Alejandro 36). The death of God

has left human lives drift away and, since time is infinite the same combination of factors that make up a human life can recur eternally.

Benjamin has shown that Auguste Blanqui theorized the idea of eternal recurrence before Nietzsche, "with hardly less pathos and with truly hallucinatory power [in what] turns out to be a magical image of history itself" ("Blanqui" 93). However, it is more likely that Mitchell and Shaw knew it from Nietzsche, and especially from the following passage:

> What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? (*Gay Science* [341] 194)

In *Back to Methuselah*, Conrad tells his niece Savvy: "You are Eve, in a sense. The Eternal Life persists; only it wears out its bodies and minds and gets new ones, like new clothes. You are only a new hat and frock for Eve" (74). Other parts (the politicians, the emperor of Turania, etc.) seem to be reincarnations of previous characters in the play. "Not the least fascinating aspect of its dramaturgy – occasionally the cycle is actually performed – is the suggestion of recurrence implicit in the use of the same actors for later and later roles" (Jameson 26). Shaw suggests that will can bring about longevity, but the same must be true

about reincarnation. As a matter a fact, a commentator of Nietzsche has pointed out that even for the German philosopher, "The Eternal Return is a necessity that must be willed" (Klossowski 108). Mitchell's characters appear to be reincarnations of characters from previous sections, which is emphasized by a comet-shaped birthmark and by sudden recollections of lives past. Moreover, Sonmi finds out about Siddhartha, who taught "about overcoming pain, however, and how to earn a higher reincarnation in future lifetimes" (*Cloud Atlas* 348). Cavendish plans to return, like Solzhenitsyn, "one bright dusk" (404). However, he is quite old, so he might be planning to return in another life or, rather, as a character in a Hollywood movie.[24] *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is Vyvyan Ayrs's "Bible" (as it was Delius's), and Frobisher works with him on a symphonic work, "truly, a behemoth of the deeps" (*Cloud Atlas* 84), called "Eternal Recurrence."

Each time one of Mitchell's characters realizes that there is some connection with one or more people from the past sections, he is able to travel, via memory, to that moment in the past, which means that going into the future through reincarnation is also a way of making the reverse trip. Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence "opens up a vast horizon of possibilities. It means that the will to power can go backward. . . . The riddle of life is solved. Life is more than the will to power; it is the eternal recurrence of the same life, which, in its circularity, exists in the infinitude of time. . . . Time can go backwards, and life will accompany it" (Alejandro 185). Man can look within himself to understand the past and the future. Alejandro has summarized as follows Nietzsche's historiography: "First, the most remote as well as the most recent past of the organic world continues in the human body. . . . Second, this past can be recaptured. Third, he wants his life to be the

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[24] Transmuted onto film, he will live on like the characters in Bioy Casares's *The Invention of Morel*.

foundation to decipher 'the hieroglyphs of life in general'" (48). In the last play of *Back to Methuselah*, the He-Ancient comes to a similar conclusion: "And I . . . ceased to walk over the mountains with my friends, and walked alone for I found that I had creative power over myself but none over my friends. And then I ceased to walk on the mountains; for I saw that the mountains were dead" (243). The She-Ancient adds, "it was to myself I turned as to the final reality" (244).

Timothy Cavendish looks too late at the chief elements of his life: "Assuming they were a fixed feature in my life's voyage, I neglected to record their latitude, their longitude, their approach. Young ruddy fool. What wouldn't I give now for a never-changing map of the ever-constant ineffable? To possess, as it were, an atlas of clouds" (*Cloud Atlas* 389). Cavendish is the first one, in the chronological order of the plot, to make use of Mitchell's Nietzschean metaphor (Frobisher composes a sextet called *Cloud Atlas* and Luisa Rey listens to it, but neither goes so far as to formulate a theory of the place of man in the ever-returning time). The other one is Zach'ry who, although (or because) he is living in a post-civilized world, is a firm believer in eternal recurrence: "Souls cross the skies o' time, Abbess'd say, like clouds crossin' skies o' the world" (318). He later elaborates: "Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies, an' tho' a cloud's shape nor hue nor size don't stay the same it's still a cloud an' so is a soul. Who can say where the cloud's blowed from or who the soul'll be 'morrow? Only Sonmi's the east an' the west an' the compass an' the atlas, yay, only the atlas o'clouds" (324).

In the "Half-Lives" section, Isaac Sachs formulates an interpretation of history that has to be read in connection with Zach'ry's metaphor about souls, just as Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence must be understood together with the genealogical method. Sachs

describes history as a multitude of actual and virtual moments which are anterior and ulterior to the present one. From the perspective of now, the actual past makes way to the virtual past and the virtual future to the actual future, until the latter becomes the actual past and makes way to the virtual past: "an infinite matrioshka doll of painted moments, each 'shell' (the present) encased inside a nest of 'shells' (previous presents) I call the actual past but which we *perceive* as the virtual past. The doll of 'now' likewise encases a nest of presents yet to be, which I call the actual future but which we *perceive* as the virtual future" (*Cloud Atlas* 409). Cavendish understands at least in part how the life of a single man can contain the necessary code for deciphering the multiplicity of pasts and futures. Mitchell took an idea from *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, where one of the narrators discovers "that even in this tiny, insignificant episode there is implicit everything I have experienced, all the past, the multiple pasts I have tried in vain to leave behind me, the lives that in the end are soldered into an overall life, my life" (Calvino 104). However, in *Cloud Atlas*, Sachs's model of time as a matrioshka doll of possible pasts and futures "both mimics the novel's structure and provides another slant on the 'half-lives' of its narrators, whose truncated stories are only completed after the interventions of successive characters. This suggests that narratives (and lives) do not so much end as ceaselessly recycle themselves in new contexts, transposed into different but related forms" (Childs and Green 44). Unlike in Calvino's novel, Mitchell's narratives do not end (nor are they really interrupted); they live on because they are retold.

The way the story is told in *Cloud Atlas* – the reader has to go all the way into the future before returning all the way into the past – mirrors one last interpretative argument that histopian authors usually seem to wish to make: that the past contains not only a key to

the understanding of the future; it contains the future itself. Once, Zach'ry wants to kill a turtle: "But I seen its eyes, so ancient was his eyes they seen the future, yay, an' I let it go" (*Cloud Atlas* 268). In *Back to Methuselah*, tens of thousands of years of evolution and willpower are necessary so that other humans can reach the same status that the demiurgic Lilith already had in the year zero. The entire history of the world, including its future, can be reduced to a few elements that have been there from the remotest past: death, sacrifice, iniquity, will to power, catastrophe and attempts to cope with it. In Barnes's section of "The Survivor," the partial narrator (Kath) refuses to make what others tell her are "right connections. . . . This happened, they say, and as a consequence that happened. There was a battle here, a war here, a king was deposed, famous men – always famous men, I'm sick of famous men – made events happen. . . . I look at the history of the world. . . . All I see is the old connections, the ones we don't take notice of any more" (*A History of the World* 97).

Kath starts giving this idea a very concrete shape in the way she does things. She switches from a motorboat to a kayak because "it would have been cheating to find a new land with the help of a diesel engine. The old ways of doing things had to be rediscovered: the future lay in the past" (*A History of the World* 96). She advises herself: "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" (104). A similar nostalgia for simpler times makes Frobisher note: "I traced Magellan's voyage across my globe and longed for a century when a fresh beginning was no further than the next clipper out of Deptford" (*Cloud Atlas* 158). In his 1965 *L'Histoire n'a pas de sens*, René Sédillot describes Ovid's "age of gold" with an image that Barnes would appreciate: "The pine trees had not yet been cut down in order to be converted into ships" (13). In fact, Sédillot also writes that history

can flow upstream (12), an image that is central to *A History of the World*. This idea recurs in another novel by Julian Barnes: "when these new memories suddenly came upon me – it was as if, for that moment, time had been placed in reverse. As if, for that moment, the river ran upstream" (*The Sense* 122). "Upstream" is also a section of *A History of the World*, but the middle section, "The Mountain," the one in which Miss Fergusson sees the river flowing upstream, is all about recuperating the past. The reader (but not the main character of the section) understands that the past is illusory and cannot be captured entirely. However, by going after the past, Miss Fergusson succeeds in turning back the flow of history and in completing one of its many circles.

Histopias (3)

In *The Ruin of Kasch*, Roberto Calasso has a quotation from Richard Cobb in which the historian recounts how his physician uncle liked to find out other people's secrets. The historian, in Cobb's view, should be more like this man and look for the unknowable and the unmemorable, rather than making of his narrative a collection of anecdotes of the Great. Calasso then concludes: "The true historian is the prime enemy of every hunter for the Memorable. His desired prey is primarily what has eluded memory and what has had every reason to elude it" (182). Just like a man's life, history is made of facts one chooses to remember and others that one chooses to forget. Barnes makes a comment similar to Cobb's and Calasso's when he writes that "if, as we approach death and look back on our lives, 'we understand our narrative' and stamp a final meaning upon it, I suspect we are doing little more than confabulating: processing strange, incomprehensible, contradictory

input into some kind, any kind, of believable story – but believable mainly to ourselves" (*Nothing* 185-186). A dying person is "an unreliable narrator, because what is useful to us generally conflicts with what is true, and what is useful at that time is a sense of having lived to some purpose, and according to some comprehensible plot" (186).

The conventional view about history *as* memory applies to nations and people. Without this memory, man would be lost: "his to-day would be aimless and his to-morrow without significance" (Becker 20). However, a writer like Julian Barnes understands a memory rather as "a memory of a memory of a memory, mirrors set in parallel . . . like a country remembering its history: the past was never just the past, it was what made the present able to live with itself" (*England* 6). The distrust of memory is taken further by Mitchell: the memory of fabricants is sabotaged during their sleep with "lethe, a soporifix added to Soap" (*Cloud Atlas* 207). Cavendish thinks "memory serves" is a "duplicitous" phrase (165), then remembers Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* (372), that is, essays about the fallibility of memory, and Vladimir Nabokov's memoir *Speak, Memory* to which he immediately adds: "No, not a word" (369). Memory is already unreliable in Ewing's 1850s diary. Wagstaff, the young farmer from Raiatea tells Ewing that memory can become faulty in only one generation: "The native children don't even know the names of the old idols no more. It's all rats' nests & rubble now. That's what all beliefs turn to one day" (506). New idols are created, instead, out of the collective memory: Zach'ry prays to Sonmi, the clone from the previous section, now a goddess. His prayer preserves the structure of older ones, like "The Lord's Prayer" and "Hail Mary": "I cudn't mem'ry the Abbess's holy words 'cept *Dear Sonmi, Who Art Amongst Us, Return this Beloved Soul to a Valley Womb, We Beseech Thee*" (251).

The implicit commentary here is that men attach exaggerated importance to random traces from the past and that these traces might in fact have been fictional. In *Back to Methuselah*, Shaw imagines "the canonization of Saint Henrik Ibsen" (121), but also a Falstaff monument, dedicated to the "fat sage" who showed that "cowardice was a great patriotic virtue" (178) at the end of the Great War. Sonmi describes "a malachite statue of Prophet Malthus" (*Cloud Atlas* 344); real and fictional, religious and secular are sometimes combined in a new memory. In Shaw's play, people "remember" that the "Archangel Michael was a mighty sculptor and painter" (217) and Martellus quotes from "a lost scripture called The Confessions of St Augustin, the English Opium Eater" (250). Pygmalion also is confused about a kind of demiurgic sage, half god, half Enlightenment philosopher: "There are some fragments of pictures and documents which represent him as walking in a garden and advising people to cultivate their gardens. His name has come down to use in several forms. One of them is Jove. Another is Voltaire" (221). The male figure created by Pygmalion introduces himself as Ozymandias, king of kings (and quotes Shelley), the female figure as Cleopatra-Semiramis, queen of queens (230).

Sonmi and Yoona, forever secluded in the Papa Song eatery, discover what they call The Book of Outside, reminiscent of the holy books in John Boorman's *Zardoz* and Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, which they study in the "chamber of secrets," and which is in fact an anthology of fairy tales (*Cloud Atlas* 197). When she actually goes outside, Sonmi finds the book again and is able to read its title "*Fairy Tales of Hans Christian Andersen*" (230), which shows that it is in fact a simplified book of the future, when all fairy tales become works by Andersen. Such syncretism is prevalent in the future described by Shaw, who speaks of "the father of history, Thucyderodotus Macollybuckle.

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Have you read his account of what was blasphemously called the Perfect City of God, and the attempt made to reproduce it in the northern part of these islands by Jonhobsnoxious, called the Leviathan?" (184) When Sonmi starts reading books from the university library, among her requests there are Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, but also Ireneo Funes's *Remembrances* (*Cloud Atlas* 227-228). In fact, Ireneo Funes is the eponymous character of Borges's "Funes the Memorious," a short story about the uselessness of mere memory: "Without effort, [Funes] had learned English, French, Portuguese, Latin. I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but details, almost contiguous details" (*Ficciones* 90).

Modernist authors and their fictional characters (such as Conrad's Marlow) believed that knowing oneself, including the memory of one's past, is the most one could hope for, whereas in the postmodern world "that is precisely what you do not want, for the vacuum at the heart of modern culture has also invaded the heart of the [post]modern self" (Waugh, *Metafiction* 150). Unlike the modernist race for self-apprehension, postmodernist novels "challenge the humanist assumption of a unified self and an integrated consciousness by both installing coherent subjectivity and subverting it" (Hutcheon xii). Barnes appears to be a typically postmodernist author when he says that we "live as if we are creatures of free will when philosophers and evolutionary biologists tell us this is largely a fiction. We live as if the memory were a well-built and efficiently staffed left-luggage office. We live as if the soul – or spirit, or individuality, or personality – were an identifiable and locatable entity rather than a story the brain tells itself" (*Nothing* 118). Several characters created by Barnes and Mitchell (who uses the trope of reincarnation to express his evolutionary

concerns) as well as John Self (Martin Amis's protagonist in *Money*) could be linked to theories of contemporary biological anthropologists who suggest that the evolutionary narrative should be "circuitous, indirect, multifaceted" (Tiger 16) and who fear that man is no longer in touch with the way he has naturally evolved for hundreds of thousands of years. One of Barnes's deepest concerns is that "evolution is not just a process which has brought the race to its current admirable condition, but one which logically implies evolution away from us" (*Nothing* 209).

Evolution becomes the ultimate danger for present humanity, and the solution suggested by Barnes in *A History of the World* is the cultivation of love: "The two major themes of the book are history and love . . . in some way love is the remedy for history" (Moseley 119-120). "Julian Barnes," the narrator in Barnes's "Parenthesis," explains that love is necessary because the history of the world "is ridiculous without it. . . . Love won't change the history of the world . . . but it will do something much more important: teach us to stand up to history, to ignore its chin-out strut. I don't accept your terms, love says; sorry, you don't impress, and by the way what a silly uniform you're wearing" (*A History of the World* 240). In "The Survivor," Kath decides there is something truer and stronger than causal connections, without yet understanding that it is love. This is also the question addressed by the narrator of *Waterland*: "Love. Lu-love. Lu-lu-love. Does it ward off evil? Will its magic word suspend indefinitely the link between cause and effect? Will it help those citizens of Hamburg and Berlin, clutching in anticipation their loved ones and whispering loving words in their feeble cellars and backyard bunkers?" (Swift 300). For Barnes, love breaks the causal chain, since causality is just a mode of emplotment, a

paradigmatic view of history, whereas love "is anti-mechanical, anti-materialist" (*A History of the World* 244).

Love can directly adhere to its object in a non-mechanical way, just like one can adhere to truth without a causal explanation. Ultimately, "sex is about truth. How you cuddle in the dark governs how you see the history of the world" (*A History of the World* 241). The way we see love is the way we see truth:

> We all know objective truth is not obtainable, that when some event occurs we
> shall have a multiplicity of subjective truths which we assess and then fabulate
> into history, into some God-eyed version of what "really" happened. This
> God-eyed version is a fake – a charming, impossible fake, like those medieval
> paintings which show all the stages of Christ's Passion happening
> simultaneously in different parts of the picture. But while we know this, we
> must still believe that objective truth is obtainable . . . because if we don't
> we're lost, we fall into beguiling relativity, we value one liar's version as
> much as another liar's, we throw up our hands at the puzzle of it all, we admit
> that the victor has the right not just to the spoils but also to the truth. (Whose
> truths do we prefer, by the way, the victor's or the victim's? Are pride and
> compassion greater distorters than shame and fear?) And so it is with love. We
> must believe in it, or we're lost. 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. (*A
> History of the World* 245-246)

This is the passage that has made commentators like Joyce Carol Oates call Barnes a "quintessential humanist, of the pre-postmodernist species." For Barnes, love "works to undermine the postmodernist relativism to which the arguments about history tend; if people tell the truth when they are in love, then there is truth to tell" (Moseley 123-124).

Because it attaches to its object as to truth itself, love is also "a starting point for civic virtue. You can't love someone without imaginative sympathy, without beginning to see the world from another point of view" (*A History of the World* 243). Mitchell hints at this in many episodes in which greed and the will to power are countered by the discovery of love: "The possibility of sympathetic reciprocity, which acknowledges co-dependency, is glimpsed throughout the second-half of *Cloud Atlas* as an alternative social principle that could deflect a predatory world from consuming itself" (Childs and Green 34). In *Back to Methuselah*, love is "something that holds us together": Adam feels it and the serpent names it (15). Love occurs or perhaps is more visible in moments of crisis or catastrophe, but there might even be a deeper connection between such moments and love. In Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* time is binary: it can manifest itself either as *chronos* or as *kairos*. The former is time as measured by the clock, the latter is personal or social, generally indicating a moment of crisis. History can be seen as chronos, in which every moment is in a temporal and causal relation to its priors, or a succession of *kairoi*. A *kairos* is not only a moment but also an end that puts the past in a new perspective:

> Christ did change it, rewrote it, and in a new way fulfilled it. In the same way, the
> End changes all, and produces, in what in relation to it is the past, these seasons,
> *kairoi*, historical moments of intemporal significance. The divine plot is the pattern
> of *kairoi* in relation to the End. Not only the Greeks but the Hebrews lacked this

antithesis . . . and so no contrast between time which is simply "one damn thing after another" and time as concentrated in *kairoi*. (Kermode 47-48)

At the beginning of the postmodern era, novelists were pointing out "that we are narrative beings because we live in biological time. Whether we like it or not, our lives have beginnings, middles and ends. We narrate ourselves to each other in bars and beds. Walter Benjamin, in his essay on 'The Storyteller' points out that a man's life becomes a story at the time of death" (Byatt, *On Histories* 132). Barnes, who believes with Kermode that without a well-determined plot our lives are "one damn thing after another" (*Nothing* 185), also thinks that the dying man is an unreliable narrator. The narrator of the last section of *A History of the World* goes to heaven and finds out that his life really was one damn thing after another and that it was "really OK" (294). Barnes's "'ending' is a parody of endings" (Ingersoll 228). Ingersoll's quotation marks clearly indicate that *A History of the World* does not really have an ending. That the ending is, in fact, nonsensical, is suggested by the way Barnes's author-narrator steps out of his own narrative, first in "Parenthesis," then in "A Dream," instead of bringing it to an end. "The ordinary Victorian novel ends, as every parodist knows, with a series of settlements, of new engagements and formal relationships, whereas the ordinary twentieth-century novel ends with a man going away on his own, having extricated himself from a dominating situation, and found himself in so doing" (Williams 47). In novels like *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* the ending is denied by the discontinuity and by the plurality of heroes that find new meanings and even new lives in later sections that can become older ones as the ending becomes a beginning.

This cyclical pattern of endings and beginnings that negates the typical beginning-middle-end pattern of a narrative is also founded on it. Both Barnes and Mitchell may have based their view of time and history on a chapter in Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* about narrativization:

Let us take a very simple example, the ticking of a clock. We ask what it *says*: and we agree that it says *tick-tock*. By this fiction we humanize it, make it talk our language. Of course, it is we who provide the fictional difference between the two sounds; *tick* is our word for a physical beginning, *tock* our word for an end. . . . The interval between the two sounds is now charged with significant duration. The clock's *tick-tock* I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it form; and the interval between *tock* and *tick* represents purely successive, disorganized time of the sort that we need to humanize. . . . *Tick* is a humble genesis, *tock* a feeble apocalypse. (44-45)

In his novel bearing the same title as Kermode's essay, Barnes's narrator speaks of "ordinary, everyday time, which clocks and watches assure us passes regularly: tick-tock, click-clock. Is there anything more plausible than a second hand? And yet it takes only the smallest pleasure or pain to teach us time's malleability" (*The Sense* 3). This malleability of time can make beginnings and ends vanish into other ends and beginnings. In *Cloud Atlas*, history "exists as an impossibly ductile cable of influence, which human beings experience only as 'elastic moments, whose ends disappear into the past and the future'" (Macfarlane 52).

The clock and its hands are a measure and also a sufficient condition for the existence of history. Stuck in Aurora House, Cavendish feels the weight of his situation like a "clock with no hands" (*Cloud Atlas* 372). In post-civilization Hawaii, there is a clock, "yay, the only working clock in the Valleys. . . . When I was a schooler I was 'fraid of that tick-tockin' spider watchin'n'judgin' us. . . . I mem'ry Abbess sayin', *Civ'lize need time, an' if we let this clock die, time'll die too, an' how can we bring back the Civ'lized Days as it was b'fore the Fall?* (257). In the central section of *A History of the World*, Colonel Fergusson hears the noise made by a beetle and subconsciously compares it with that of a clock: "*Tick, tick, tick, tick. Tock. Tick, tick, tick, tick. Tock.* It sounded like a clock gently misfiring, time entering a delirium" (143). The sound of the beetle imitates in fact that of Beethoven's sound of fate (the beetle in the story is also a harbinger of death), which suggests a connection with one of Kermode's definitions of *kairos* as not time, but the "fate of time":

> that which was conceived of as simply successive becomes charged with past and future: what was *chronos* becomes *kairos*. This is the time of the novelist, a transformation of mere successiveness which has been likened, by writers as different as Forster and Musil, to the experience of love, the erotic consciousness which makes divinely satisfactory sense out of the commonplace person. (*Sense* 46)

The beetle in Barnes's story makes the noise when it believes to be in the presence of a sexual mate, but humans can evade the mere *chronos*: "Love boils down to pheromones, [the materialist argument] says. . . . We are just a grander version of that beetles bashing its head in a box at the sound of a tapped pencil" (*A History of the World* 245).

The circular plot of *Cloud Atlas* and *The Ruin of Kasch* is specifically meant to avoid an end (as is the circularity of the story in *A History of the World* and *Back to Methuselah*). However, that does not mean that history describes a perfect circle, going back to the beginning: "No, a full circle was never achieved: when history tried that trick, it missed its orbit" (Barnes, *Cross Channel* 209). The End is not impossible, which is suggested in fact by Mitchell's Frobisher: "Anticipating the end of the world is humanity's oldest pastime. . . . The End is what we want, so I'm afraid the End is what we're damn well going to get" (*Cloud Atlas* 471). The author of *Time's Arrow* is just as sure when he discusses Brezhnev's sentence "God will not forgive us if we fail," addressed to Jimmy Carter at a disarmament summit: "Carter liked the phrase and used it himself, with one politic emendation. 'History,' he said, 'will not forgive us if we fail.' Actually Brezhnev was nearer the mark. In the event of 'failure,' God might just make it, whereas history would not" (Amis, *Einstein's Monsters* 12-13). That extreme situation aside, history always survives in "the tears of things" (*Cloud Atlas* 354), as Mitchell suggests with a quote from Virgil. Out of these traces there will always be a new beginning negating the end, as Frobisher advances to Sixsmith: "Rome'll decline and fall again, Cortazar'll[25] sail again and, later, Ewing will too . . . you'll read this letter again, the Sun'll grow cold again. Nietzsche's gramophone record. When it ends, the Old One plays it again, for an eternity of eternities. Time cannot permeate this sabbatical. We do not stay dead long" (490).

In *Back to Methuselah*, Adam discovers that the serpent can restart living "again and again" (5) by shredding its skin (a sort of palingenesis). The serpent calls losing the old

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[25] Mitchell's obscure reference is probably to Jose de Mazarredo y Salazar de Muñatones Cortázar (1745-1812), famous Spanish admiral and important contributor to a "maritime atlas," although the Argentinean novelist (whom Frobisher could not have known) also sailed to France in 1951.

skin "death" and getting a new one "being born" and "birth" (7). The human characters cannot imitate the serpent literally, but they learn to renew themselves as new beings after their timely end, in a way that is similar to the way in which the end of a narrative (or what can be perceived as an end of history) is at the same time a new beginning. As Barnes tries to show in *The Sense of an Ending*, the end *is* actually a new beginning, not in the sense that something new commences (thereby that same moment would keep its "sense of/as an ending"), but in the sense that the original beginning of the narrative is now new, transformed, other. The river is constantly new because it flows downstream, but this newness gives a new value to its origin, so, at least in this sense, the river also flows upstream. History, in the view of many histopian authors, is not unlike Borges's "library of Babel," that is,

> *limitless and periodic*. If an eternal voyager were to traverse it in any direction, he would find, after many centuries, that the same volumes are repeated in the same disorder. . . . Strictly speaking, *one single volume* should suffice . . . consisting of an infinite number of infinitely thin pages. . . . each apparent leaf of the book would divide into other analogous leaves. The inconceivable central leaf would have no reverse. (*Ficciones* 65-66)

A History of the World, organized around its central section ("The Mountain") and *Cloud Atlas*, all of whose sections are divided into analogous ones, but whose central section has "no reverse," follow this pattern of limitlessness and periodicity that mirrors the authors' view of history itself. Just like the authors of *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas*, historians like Simon Schama (e.g., in his *The American Future*) have tried to show that sidestepping and circularity do not completely exclude progression. Even though (or

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because) the end(s) and the beginning(s) may be as illusory as Julian Barnes and David Mitchell suggest, a single volume (fictional or nonfictional) feigning infinity and eternal recurrence can contain all of history.

Conclusion

A History of the World and *Cloud Atlas* are a special case within the paradigm of postmodernist historical novels. What sets them apart is the attempt to narrate the history of the world from a beginning to an (inconclusive) end. Julian Barnes has a microscopic narrator start with an episode from the Genesis, while a human narrator bearing the author's name ends with a dream of the personal and universal hereafter. David Mitchell's novel (in terms of both story and plot) begins and ends with the encounter between (and mutual discovery of) "modernity" and "primitivism," i.e., the encounter between a symbolical beginning and a symbolical end. History is narrated in the two novels as a series of catastrophes and is narrativized as both continuous and discontinuous. I have suggested that the concept of storyworld can be very useful in the analysis of *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas*, since it refers to a world co-created by the text and by the reader of the text, and the reader needs to take into account a series of textual clues in order to understand the way in which continuity and discontinuity work hand in hand. Instead, both these clues and extratextual ones (literary and philosophical) are necessary for the understanding of the two authors' interpretation of history.

Robert Frobisher gives a very telling account of his "Sextet for overlapping soloists," which mirrors the structure of Mitchell's novel and the way he narrativizes history: "piano, clarinet, 'cello, oboe and violin, each in its own language of key, scale and colour. In the 1st set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the 2nd, each interruption is recontinued, in order. Revolutionary or gimmicky? Shan't know until it's finished, and by then it'll be too late" (*Cloud Atlas* 463). For the interpretation of history suggested in the

novel, on the other hand, the author's models can also be helpful. Italo Calvino, for example, refers his readers to what Hans Magnus Enzensberger calls "topological fictions," an example of which is

> the German rhyme in which a black dog goes into a kitchen and steals a bone, and the cook kills him with a ladle, after which many black dogs in tears carry him away and bury him under a stone on which they write, "A black dog went into a kitchen and stole a bone…, etc., etc." Enzensberger draws a topology of this which is a series of concentric circles. Each retelling is *inside* the original and its predecessors. (Byatt, *On Histories* 140)

In an interview, Mitchell indicates another source: "I read about an Egyptian Goddess who gave birth to a pregnant daughter, whose embryo in turn was already pregnant and so on to infinity. That's just beautiful. It seems to be a beautiful model for time as well. Every possible moment is contained in *this moment,* regressing on to infinity" (Sinclair; my italics). However infinite the regression, there will always be one initial goddess and one initial ladle. Wherever one may place "this moment" that contains every other moment (Mitchell succeeds in placing it at the beginning, the middle, and the end of his novel), there will always be an inaugural moment in such a model for time.

Despite Barnes's and Mitchell's effort of taking apart the very idea of a narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end, it is precisely an original cause, an inaugural catastrophe that stands out in the world that the reader is invited to co-create in their novels. All the characters in *A History of the World* look back at the foundational disaster of the Flood, while the plot in *Cloud Atlas* keeps going back to the genocide of the Moriori, out of which comes a lesson that guides the redemptive efforts of the heroes in the stories that follow. Sally Shuttleworth, one of the commentators of the British postmodernist historical

novel, bases her analysis on the early example of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and says that many of these novels focus on the theme of "natural history" as it was conceived of in mid-nineteenth-century England. She calls such novels "retro-Victorian" and finds that they are spurred by nostalgia not only for the intellectual crisis sparked by the beginnings of modern geology and anthropology, but also for the seemingly insurmountable boundaries of the foregoing period:

> Perhaps this is the ultimate key to the current nostalgia for the Darwinian era. For the Victorians there was a decisive crisis of faith, a sense that the world was shaking under them, an ecstatic agony of indecision. . . . Many of the retro-Victorian texts are informed by a sense of loss, but it is a *second order* loss. It is not loss of a specific belief system, but rather the loss of that sense of immediacy and urgency which comes with true existential crisis. (Shuttleworth 260)

Geologists of the early nineteenth century were divided into two camps: uniformitarianists, who believed that all the geological strata that were being studied had formed in a non-catastrophic way; and diluvialists like Georges Cuvier, who "held that the record of the rocks could be interpreted correctly only by supposing that there had been a series of great catastrophes, not merely one; and that the Noachian Flood of Genesis was a record of one of them" (Daniel 33-34). Whether it had had one or several beginnings, the history of the world (as represented by the men and women of the early nineteenth century) was safely bound between the moment of divine creation and the present. The crisis intervened once it had become clear that the world must be older than the six millennia prescribed by Ussher's calculations: "The quite sudden and enormous lengthening of the scale of history has been far more worrying than the Copernican revolution. . . . The six-days world was still perfectly acceptable to intelligent contemporaries of Jane Austen.

When it collapsed, the sciences were liberated; what was for the arts a difficulty presented the sciences with a new dimension in which they could luxuriate" (Kermode, *Sense* 166-167).

It was not "because they believed in the divine inspiration of Genesis but because of the inadequacy of any other prehistory that learned men even well into the nineteenth century turned to the Genesis account of the Creation, the Fall, and the Flood to explain the origin of man and society, and clutched at the firm dates of Ussher and [John] Lightfoot to give them a secure chronology of the past" (Daniel 29). Once the past had lost its fundamental boundary, more scientific-minded people like Colonel Fergusson in Barnes's central section, "The Mountain," could decide to emplot History differently and believe "in the world's ability to progress, in man's ascent, in the defeat of superstition" (*A History of the World* 143). His daughter Amanda refuses to accept this plot and goes in search of the "proof" that History has well-delineated boundaries such as the Flood. Frank Kermode writes that "Fictional paradigms really belong to a world in which the relation of beginning and end is not too tenuous – a six-days world, the tight world-scheme of Augustine, the limited time-scale of Ussher" (*Sense* 166). The fact that histopian authors like Barnes and Mitchell might prefer exactly a more tenuous relation between beginning and end does not disallow a proposition like Sally Shuttleworth's that they might also entertain certain nostalgia for boundaries.

Such boundaries can encapsulate History and make it a more comfortable object of study, which is a major concern for these authors. If Barnes starts with the Flood, Shaw begins in the Garden and Eden and keeps the Ussher chronology,[26] while Mitchell's first

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[26] In his Preface, Shaw deliberately places the mostly futuristic *Back to Methuselah* at the heart of the neo-Darwinian debates and writes a personal interpretation of the Victorian crisis.

section is placed in the midst of the Victorian crisis. Central to both *A History of the World* and *Cloud Atlas* are retro-Victorian sections: "The Mountain" and "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing," which, in terms of the plot, is the innermost piece of Mitchell's Russian doll. The most obvious nostalgia here is that for a time before the invention of Prehistory and the subsequent social Darwinism: since human beings were suddenly understood to have evolved over hundreds of thousands of years, the "primitives" of Africa, Oceania or the Americas could no longer be seen as different, but rather as unevolved.[27] Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* begins in the heart of the Polynesian darkness, among people whom some of the Victorian-era characters of the novel see as stages in human evolution. In the middle of the nineteenth century, people started asking themselves if, "Just as there had been biological evolution, . . . there [was] also a natural cultural evolution leading through various stages up to civilization" (Daniel 56). Students of prehistory used to see modern pre-literate societies as identical "in the social structure and mental and spiritual beliefs" with Palaeolithic Europeans (133). This is the dilemma that Charlie, the actor in Barnes's novel, has to face during his encounter with the South American natives – and he finds out that they are not primitive, but rather "bloody mature" (*A History of the World* 205).

Charlie asks himself if the tribe will "disappear forever wiped out by some killer bug and all that will be left of them is a film in which they're playing their own ancestors" (*A History of the World* 201). Such apocalyptic scenarios abound in Barnes's and Mitchell's novels and I have shown that they are necessary for the histopian project. This particular scenario is also interesting because it might include a veiled reference to

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[27] The early nineteenth century is also the era of "the decline of the Noble Savage" (Stocking, Jr. 35-41), triggered by the doctrine of polygenism (i.e., the idea that only the White man descends from Adam and that God has also created other human races). If Horrox's "ladder of civilization" in *Cloud Atlas* is reminiscent of such a doctrine, Henry Goose is evidently a social Darwinist who believes the strong are destined to dominate and even exterminate the weak.

Robinson Crusoe, since the tribe encountered in the Orinoco River basin by Charlie might be Friday's own tribe. Other such references in *A History of the World* include shipwrecks, the search for a desert island in "The Survivor," the story of Jonah (with whom Defoe's character compares himself). In *Cloud Atlas*, the reference to Defoe is made explicit by Adam Ewing. The story of Robinson Crusoe has been revisited several times in the last half of a century, perhaps most notably by J.M. Coetzee in *Foe* (1986) and Michel Tournier in *Friday* (1967).[28]

However, these revisionist narratives do not emphasize the personal apocalypse that is central to Defoe's novel. James Joyce, on the other hand, noticed it in a 1912 conference on Daniel Defoe given in Italian.[29] Joyce begins by showing that Defoe also wrote *The Storm* and *A Journal of the Plague*, both accounts of natural catastrophes. After explaining that Robinson Crusoe is "The true symbol of the British conquest . . . the true prototype of the British colonist, as Friday (the trusty savage who arrives on an unlucky day) is the symbol of the subject races" (24), Joyce compares Robinson's account with the last book of the Bible: "Saint John the Evangelist saw on the island of Patmos the apocalyptic ruin of the universe and the building of the walls of the eternal city sparkling with beryl and emerald, with onyx and jasper, with sapphire and ruby. Crusoe saw only one marvel in all the fertile creation around him, the print of a naked foot in the virgin sand. And who knows if the latter is not more significant than the former?" (Joyce 25).

A similar footprint in the sand is the first image in Mitchell's novel, only it belongs to a white man. In Mitchell's response to Defoe, the Moriori have been exterminated and,

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[28] J.M.G. Le Clézio's *The Interrogation* (1963) deserves a special mention here, not only for its epigraph from *Robinson Crusoe* or for its protagonist named after Robinson's parrot, but also because, like Barnes's character in "The Survivor," Le Clézio's Adam Pollo might be confabulating.

[29] The conference was translated by Joseph Prescott and published in *Buffalo Studies* I:1 (December 1964), 1-27.

unlike Robinson's island, the Chathams are no longer a white spot on the map. Autua, Adam Ewing's own Friday, is well-versed in European sailing techniques and has already been on more sea journeys than Adam. He is also less naïve than his white master and is not deceived by the trickster Henry Goose. Similarly, Charlie in *A History of the World* feels he has been sent among the jungle tribesmen "so they can teach [him] a lesson about life" (200). Robinson and Friday, like many of the characters marked by loneliness and alienation in *Cloud Atlas* and *A History of the World*, are survivors of personal and/or global disasters. Their narrative echoes an interpretation of History and their fate mirrors the fate of mankind. What sets apart Barnes's and Mitchell's novels from the long tradition that includes *Robinson Crusoe* is that their interpretation of history is made explicit; that it is exemplified through the narrative structure of the novels themselves; and that *Cloud Atlas* and *A History of the World* do not simply answer the question "what is history?" but also narrate a fictionalized version of that history.

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