"The dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living" (Karl Marx). Can literature be a means to escape the oppressive weight of the past and define a more fruitful relationship to history? Answer with reference to two texts.

Graham Swift's *Waterland* and Julian Barnes' *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* are both examples of historiographic metafiction. This essay refers to both texts in examining how literature can relate to the past. As instances of literature's approach to the past, *Waterland* and *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* both represent history as a form of fiction and at times go so far as to suggest that literature is more adept than historiography in representing the past. However, the two texts also demonstrate how literature can have a fruitful relationship to history in its struggle to narrate it faithfully.

In many regards, literature promotes a less fruitful relationship to history. Historiographic metafiction, like all writing, blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. It is a process of fabulation by which an author takes (in the words of Barnes commenting upon the historian, p242) "a few true facts and spins a new story round them". In melding history with fiction, historiographic metafiction both undermines history's credibility and grounds fiction down to certain moral obligations to its truths, in a process of mutual abrasion. This

"dialectical opposition" in *Waterland* is expressed by Cooper (Pamela Cooper, Imperial Topographies: The Spaces of History in *Waterland*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 42-2 (1996), p. 371). Postmodern writing with its view of many alternative stories, alternative views of the past confounds an absolute view of history. Thus in *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, Julian Barnes propounds the following view of history: "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" (p245). Postmodern literature denigrates history as a fiction because it claims that the past is unknowable and that we only have the best-fit assumptions to work on.

Barnes surmises that "History isn't what happened. History is just what historians tell us" (page 242). In *Waterland*, John Swift uses the character Tom Crick to voice a discussion of how reality precludes history: "Reality is that nothing happens ... I present to you History, the fabrication, the diversion, the reality-obscuring drama." (page 40). Confessing "a weakness for improvised definitions" the History teacher Crick elucidates, "history is that impossible thing: the attempt to give an account, with incomplete knowledge, of actions themselves undertaken with incomplete knowledge" (both from page 108). In

both these instances, literature presents History as the conflagrations of camps of academics battling over various degrees of untruth as on a darkling plain of ideology. The contention which these postmodern viewpoints seem to be implying is that because historiography is as good as a fiction, fiction is as appropriate a method as history for understanding the past. Thus Barnes describes our belief in the obtainability of an absolute truth as tantamount to religious faith, which we cling to only because "if we don't we're lost" and we would "value one liar's version as much as another liar's" (p246).

Swift's narrator Tom Crick justifies story-telling in largely diversionary terms. In relating stories for the sake of stories, as an end in themselves, he presents the narrative as a form of re-telling the past distanced from stringent explanation. "He ... tries to explain. But he already knows ... that it's not explaining he's doing. Because he's already reached the limits of his power to explain ... and although he's trying to explain he's really only telling a - " (pages 108 to 109). Story-telling becomes for Crick a retreat into a fairy-tale world beyond the reach of fearsome rationalisations, forced justifications and the inquisition of a historiographical "Whywhywhy" (p131). As a child, the purpose of story-telling was for Crick, "in order to quell restless thoughts" (p7) and there is a sense in which the History teacher has regressed. Yet he notes that children have a "need of stories" (p7) and states similarly that emptiness (in this case the "empty

space" of the fens) demands to be filled with stories. "What do you do when reality is an empty space? ... you can drink ... Or, like the Cricks ... you can tell stories" (p61). Crick's excuse for his retreat from the ""Inquiry"" of his original ""*Historia*"" (p107) into fairy-tale is that of mid-life disillusionment. Crick describes how he first approached History, "So I shouldered my Subject. ... So I began to demand of history an Explanation. Only to uncover in this dedicated search more mysteries, more fantasticalities ... ;only to conclude forty years later ... - that history is a yarn" (p62). Crick puts history on the same footing as literature.

When literature chooses the narrative form of an authorial all-seeing eye, it puts the narrator in the position of being able to provide the answers which history cannot. The woodworm in the first chapter of *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* approaches this narrative style, and is quick to justify his knowledgeability: "I can vouch for that. I spoke personally to the carrier-hawk who delivered a warm pot to Shem's ark" (p16). This form perpetuates an idea of the past as a knowable certainty; it declares "this happened, for these reasons". This is a reassuring illusion, but not one which allows us to get closer to an understanding of what the past is. Stories beguile us into believing that the past can be rendered comforting by restoring an illusory order. Barnes describes how "Our past and our pain are only eased by soothing fabulation" (p242).

Stories beguile us because the story-teller is the master of his own truths, he defines and creates his own reality. Historiography is a servant to fact, yet when Barnes' character Franklin is called upon to explain and propound the ideas of his Zionist masters in *The Visitors*, by adopting the narrative form Franklin can induce in his audience, even under the situation of extreme threat, a calming reassurance. "He felt his audience begin to relax. The circumstances were unusual, but they were being told a story, and they were offering themselves to the story-teller in the manner of audiences down the ages, wanting to see how things turned out, wanting to have the world explained to them" (p55, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*). This is a narrative at one remove from reality, the story functions as a shelter from the present.

In historiographic metafiction, it is questionable whether the author does not owe a greater allegiance to art than he does to historical fact. In the art criticism of Géricault's "*Scene of Shipwreck*" Barnes describes how the artist is more faithful to the conveyance of emotions than of fact. We note that he does not represent cannibalism for "it is almost comic" (p128). The painting is factually inaccurate. There are more people on the raft than there should be: "Géricault has dragged some of them back from the deep to help out with his composition" (p131). We note that Géricault misrepresents the supposedly emancipated survivors in muscular form. Barnes interprets that "It is because the figures are

sturdy enough to transmit such power that the canvas unlooses in us deeper, submarinous emotions, can sift us through currents of hope and despair, elation, panic and resignation" (p137). Barnes argues that it is precisely because art is free to have "slipped history's anchor" (p137), that it is able to be more honest than any historiographical approach in evoking its emotions and experiences and thus more effective in conferring an understanding of the past. In representing the past Géricault places artistic truth above history. The implication is that the past is better understood as an experience than as a series of facts.

Any re-telling of the past necessarily alters it. Telling a story is a process of exclusion, of omission, the choosing of some facts above others, the amplification of certain aspects. Because of this process, politics is inherent to story-telling, and indeed Barthes contends that the choices of resonances, parallels and images, in metaphor and metonymy, marks out the narrative form as an ideological tool. White describes how "narrative was, for Barthes, following Lacan, the principal instrumentality by which society fashions the narcissistic, infantile consciousness into a "subjectivity" capable of bearing the "responsibilities" of an "object" of the law in all its forms" (Hayden White, The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory, *History and Theory,* 23, (1984) p13). The words which storytelling uses are themselves crude and

imprecise implements for delineating the past. They have shadowy sub-meanings lurking in the cultural consciousness, they have an undertow of implications, thus the mastery of these implements creates avenues for subtle propaganda. Barthes showed in *S/Z* how even the most traditional forms of story-telling can demonstrate "an astute and resourceful reflection upon its own codes and the signifying mechanisms of its culture" (Jonathan Culler, *Roland Barthes*, First edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p87). From Barthes assertion that "signifying entities do not have essences but are defined by networks of relations" (p79) it follows that this propagation of ideological assumptions does not depend upon a conscious authorial system, because it is endemic to the use of words within an echolalia. Furthermore, since "to account for signifying phenomena is to describe the system of norms that makes them possible" (p79) it follows that all writing inflicts its contemporary cultural assumptions upon the past. A less factual, more narrative approach to the past therefore makes it more likely that our present cultural norms obfuscate our understanding of that past.

Narrative struggles to linearize the past. In *Waterland* Tom Crick's attempt to describe his past gives rise to a web of spliced narratives yoked together in a manner that often frustrates a desire to know the escalation of any one narrative. Explanations intercede and as Barnes describes, "One good story leads to

another" (p242) in the process of explaining the past. The leit-motif of introducing a chapter "let me tell you about ... " (for instance on page 169) used by Swift, demonstrates how a narrative approach to the past can give rise to performance history, what Lewis derogatorily calls "these - circus-acts" (p22). Thus these fragmentary interwoven narratives betray the true nature of history, and Lewis' perception of academic History, which is to defy linear narrative. The study of history as it seeks to inveigle its academy under the umbrella of "an accredited subscience" (*Waterland*, p86) is dissuaded from using the narrative form colonised by literary fiction. Crick describes history as "the river which flows in an eternal circle" (p146) and observes how "It goes in two directions at once. It goes backwards as it goes forwards. It loops. It takes detours" (p135). Cooper observes how "the Fenlands mediate the contradictions of history in *Waterland*" (Imperial Topographies: The Spaces of History in *Waterland*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 42-2 (1996), p. 372). The fens are an appropriate metaphor for the model of the past proposed by *Waterland*. With their palimpsest of changing flows, alternate cuttings, discarded maps for obsolete canals, we see how man's alteration of the fens can describe revisionist approaches to history: be they economic, Marxist or feminist. These numerous alternative versions of history cannot be plotted in a linear mode. When

literature attempts to do so through the sustained narrative, it cannot be said to have a fruitful relationship to either history itself, or to historiography. Literature goes as far as to suggest that Art is better at representing the past than history. Literature offers up love and sex as forces which more adequately account for the vicissitudes of history than traditional historiological explanations. In *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, Barnes offers love as the deep motivator, not because it will provide simple explanations of the past - "(that nonsense about Cleopatra's nose is strictly for sentimentalists)" (p240) - but rather because "it will teach us to stand up to history" (p240). Love posits itself beyond explanation, and thus it is capable of defying and undermining historiological approaches to the past. In *Waterland*, Swift suggests that sex undoes history. "Curiosity ... inspires our sexual explorations ... Have you considered that why so many historical movements, not only revolutionary ones, fail, fail at heart, is because they fail to take account of the complex and unpredictable forms of our curiosity?" (p194). Thus literature claims to offer a closer understanding of the past than history through its grasp of human nature. In what ways can literature help us to define a more fruitful relationship to history? One of the ways it can do this is by making us aware that we cannot, and we do not, act in a historic vacuum. We may observe that it is especially those forms of literature which attempt to reconcile themselves to the past - such

as postmodern literature, post-structualism and historiographic metafiction - which nevertheless find themselves intractably chained to the past via the mechanism of their story-telling. Telling stories is about describing the past - it is a historiographic process however fictional the narrated past is. That these literary movements expose themselves to an awareness of the influence exerted upon them by the past, does not free them from its bonds, rather it makes the genres painfully aware of their captivity. Tom Crick describes this paradox in *Waterland*, "And so often it is precisely these surprise attacks of the Here and Now which, far from launching us into the present tense, which they do, it is true, for a brief and giddy interval, announce that time has taken us prisoner" (p61). The only way of truly escaping the past offered by Swift is that of forgetting it, a means not open to the narrator. Henry Crick may choose voluntary amnesia, "Henry Crick forgets. He says: I remember nothing. But that's just a trick of the brain" (p222); and Dick Crick can have no tenacious or interrogative memory of the past, thus escaping to an ever-present Now, "He sees a bottle, a bottle which he once threw into the river, with which he once - But he doesn't ask HowWhyWho?". We see that the effects of a true escape from a past must be to rend us from the present. Thus Mary Crick's coma-like "amnesia" in which "she stares, vigilantly and knowingly" "out of the tall ward window" whilst Tom "will play his plaintive do-you-remember game. Do you

remember the train ... ? Do you remember beet fields? Poplar trees? A walk by the frozen Ouse ... ?" (all p330), closely mirrors the condition of the unreachable Sarah "whatever the true description - serene, dumb, inscrutable - of her long and stationary vigil in the upper room" (p84).

Postmodernism affects to acknowledge its allegiance to history and to the history of literature by sideways glances, knowing echoes, and a playful delight in its own artifice. Swift pre-emptively acknowledges and allies himself with the inescapable influences of an earlier text in the opening words of *Waterland*: ""Ours was the marsh country ... " *Great Expectations*" (page i). Intertextuality can serve to corroborate as we see in Barnes' elaboration on the effect of retold stories upon myth: "And then people will believe the myth of Bartley, which was begotten by the myth of Jonah ... Myth will become reality, however sceptical we might be" (pp. 180-181). The retelling of stories strengthens our links with the past. Historiographic metafiction, which knowingly immerses itself in the past and in doing so deepens its context - allows history to act both as a backdrop and a prop in the dramatic narrative; and so can achieve the effect of making the past seem more real to us. Swift announces that "all good fairy-tales" "must have a setting" (p8) and so introduces a chapter which tells us, often in strictly historical terms "1200 square miles in area ... the chief fact", "About the Fens" (p8). New forms of literary movement make, as history does

intermittently according to Swift, "attempts to jettison the impedimenta of history, to do without that ever-frustrating weight" (p136). Strikingly, modernism tried to create its own language of hermetic literary signifiers. Yet in doing so it used classical literature's examples. Thus it is with history, as when in the French revolution, France destroyed an apparently tyrannical monarchical system only to applaud an empire taking its place: "Napoleon Bonaparte, who was waiting by the old puppet theatre; who'd dreamed up for them a new drama based on old themes and who promised them an empire, a destiny - a future" (*Waterland*, p335). Barthes delineates how in the same way, "no writing can be lastingly revolutionary" (from Le Degré zéro, as translated in Culler, *Roland Barthes*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p30) and Culler relates how this is because "each violation of the conventions of language and literature can ultimately be recuperated as a new mode of literature" (Culler p30). Although both literature and history attempt to escape the past, neither can sustainedly do so. An understanding of this parallel can lead to a more fruitful relationship with the past in the study of both doctrines. Thus postmodern historiographic metafiction, which defines an awareness of its allegiance to the past, takes a positive step in relating to history.

Both historiography and literature are engaged in a discussion upon the value of grand narratives in explaining our past. Grand narratives such as Marxism,

economic theory, processes of emancipation in race and gender, and postcolonialism, define history in over-arcing narratives in which the personal is subsumed into the actions of large groups of people with common goals. In literature, the collapse of grand narratives may have been widely remarked, yet Tom Crick, the story-teller clings on to them. Crick describes history as "the record of decline" (p140) and relates the decline of the British Empire and the Atkinson empire, he observes that "the scale of human calamity increases" (p155) and devotes a chapter, *About Contemporary Nightmares* (pp. 296-297) to fears about the nuclear ending of history. Our yearning to become part of some greater scheme of things tends towards a dependency upon the grand narrative. Swift relates "the old, old feeling, that everything might amount to nothing" (p269) and points out that "there are very few of us who can be, for any length of time, merely realistic. So there's no escaping it: even if we miss the grand repertoire of history, we yet imitate it in miniature and endorse, in miniature, its longing for presence, for feature, for purpose, for content" (p41). Grand narratives are useful in literature by the manner in which they situate a plot within a broader perspective; Swift's *Waterland* within the decline of Empire, Barnes' *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* within the decline of religion - and the struggle between religion and science, myth and history. The grand

narratives thereby confer upon the two novels a broader scope for interpretative meaning.

Literature acclimatises us to the idea of an undermined narrator. In "*The Survivor*", Barnes describes a situation in which two possible narrative interpretations teeter on the Occam's razor of plausibility. We are called to question what is real and what is merely imagined by the narrator: "it was cunning of him not to contradict me entirely" (p108). This in turn calls into question our own prejudices against the narrator of this account - is she merely a "silly cow" (p87)? Swift demonstrates how an understanding of the past, and historiography itself, is often forced to depend upon the "ludicrous testimony" (p104) of people who simply happened to be present. We become accustomed to the undermined testimonies central to historiography; as Crick notes, "the more you try to dissect events, the more you lose hold of them - the more they seem to have occurred largely in people's imagination" (p139). In the first of Barnes' *Three Simple Stories*, we only have Lawrence Beesley's word to go on in establishing how he left the Titanic; and it is wryly noted that "Lawrence Beesley made no mention of female dress in his book *The Loss of the Titanic*" (p174). His credibility is undermined by his attempt to inveigle his way onto the deck in "*A Night to Remember*" (p174). In *Upstream!*, we see how the myth of the Indians' innocence, health and maturity is undermined by their theft and

manslaughter, short life spans and sexual innuendoes. The turning point at which this resultantly begins to undermine the narrator Charlie's credibility is sign-posted by the postscript "Funny thing happened today. Not serious, but makes me wonder about the Indians" (p208). Furthermore, in *Upstream!* we witness how literature accustoms us to the failure of narrative accounts in helping us to understand the past, as Charlie writes "I've thought about what happened next a million times and I still don't know the answer" (p215). Literature's inability to explain at its limitations is also described in "*Parenthesis"* as Barnes affirms Gallant's assertion that "The mystery of what a couple *is*, exactly, is almost the only true mystery left to us, and when we have come to the end of it there will be no more need for literature" (p228). Literature can work towards a more fruitful relationship to history because the author and the historian share similar roles. Both of them search for plausible motivations and likely versions. Barnes proposes the idea in the chapter *Parenthesis* that the capacity of politicians to love denotes a certain "imaginative sympathy" upon which scale, one may ascertain "the candidate's fitness to represent other people" (p244). If love helps us to "stand up to history" (p240) and reassess it, and since empathy helps us to love (since "You can't love someone without imaginative sympathy, without beginning to see the world from another point of view" (p243)), then it follows from Barnes' line of

argument that the practice of reading literature and writing it, by exercising our empathy, helps us to understand history.

Literature helps us to define a more fruitful relationship to our own pasts because in the process of identifying with the characters and the situations set out in literature, our interpretation of the past is altered. The retelling of these stories in a variety of forms and interpretations, echoes the use of the narrative in psychoanalysis. Schafer describes this process in the essay "*Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue*" (Roy Schafer, *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980-81), pp. 29-53). The analysand is asked by the analyst to narrate a story from his life, a memory. "The analyst takes the telling as performance as well as content. The analyst has only tellings and showings to interpret, that is, to retell along psychoanalytic lines" (p39). The analyst influences the narration to conform to his models "The analyst says, in effect, "What I hear you saying is ..."" (p44). Schafer gives an example of a model re-telling in the approach, ""Let me show you over the course of the analysis another reality, commonsensical elements of which are already, though incoherently and eclectically, included in what you now call reality" (p50). In "*The Survivor*", Barnes presents a psychoanalytical retelling of stories. When the man conversing with Kath responds, ""That's an interesting approach. I think we could get somewhere with that"" (p106), the implication is that some re-tellings are more useful than others in improving a

relationship with the past. Barthes demonstrates that literature makes similar impositions on our view of narrative because it uses a series of codes (here I rely upon Culler's translation and exposition: *Roland Barthes*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p84). Of these, the "*referential code*" (p84) is demonstrated to provide "the cultural information upon which texts rely" (p84). In the example of "When Balzac writes that Count Lanty was "as gloomy as a Spaniard and as boring as a banker", he draws upon cultural stereotypes" which are contemporary social assumptions (p84). "In generating mythical meaning, cultures seek to make their own norms seem facts of nature" (p34); and thus via the ideological impositions which its narrative prescribes, literature can convey a different world view with which to interpret a history.

Literature can go some way to mitigating tragedy in the past, by salvaging from catastrophe a work of art. In *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, the example is Géricault's painting originating from the Medusa disaster. Barnes notes that we "need to justify it and forgive it, this tragedy, however minimally" and the refrain "Well, at least it produced art" (both p125) is a way of doing this. In *Waterland*, although the extent to which the confessional form of Tom Crick's classroom (and pub) story-telling alleviates his emotional turmoil is questionable, it is the history teacher's personal catastrophe which provides the catalyst to his creation of narrative. This mirrors the way catastrophe gives rise

to the academy of historical study, "History begins only at the point where things go wrong; history is born only with trouble, with perplexity, with regret" (p106). Crick presents the horrors of Martha Clay's "blood-bag cheeks" (p308) and the tragedy of Dick's death and justifies doing so because children's "need of stories is matched only by the need adults have of children to tell stories to, of receptacles for their stock of fairy-tales, of listening ears on which to unload those most unbelievable yet haunting of fairy-tales, their own lives" (p7). The role which Tom Crick played in both events is a story which yearns to be told, to be confessed. Crick's narration seems to assume the beliefs of the Catholic confessional and echoes its hope for a degree of absolution received simply through the act of having one's story heard.

To conclude, because historiographic metafiction blurs distinctions between fiction and history, it risks losing sight of the fact that whilst "objective truth is not obtainable" (Barnes, p245), it does exist. Barnes advises us that "we must still believe that objective truth is obtainable" (p245) and Swift's narrator, the History teacher Crick, is even more didactic in urging us to keep asking "that incessant question Whywhywhy" (p107) and that although "there is never any end to that question ... to ignore this is folly, because, above all, what history teaches us is ... to be realistic" (p108). In its struggle to narrate the past, literature alters it, yet the literary movements which take part in this struggle

gain an awareness of their captivity. In struggling to narrate the past, literature explores problems of narratorial credibility, the significance of grand narratives and the political and psychoanalytical implications of retelling stories. It is from this struggle with history that literature acquires a more fruitful relationship to the past.

Bibliography:

Barnes, Julian, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, Second Edition, (Great Britain, Picador, 1990).

Bien, Joseph, *History, Revolution and Human Nature: Marx's Philosophical Anthropology*, First Edition, (Netherlands: B.R. Grüner Publishing Co., 1984).

Brewer, John and Stella Tillyard, "History and Telling Stories: Graham Swift's *"Waterland"*", *History Today*, 35, (1985), pp. 49-51.

Chatman, Seymour, "Critical Response: Reply to Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Critical Inquiry*, 7, (1980-81), pp. 802-809.

Cooper, Pamela, "Imperial Topographies: The Spaces of History in *Waterland*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 42, (1996), pp. 371-396.

Culler, Jonathan, *Roland Barthes*, First edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

Georgallides, Katerina, "Graham Swift: A Postmodern Romantic?", M.A. (Lancaster) (1997).

Goodman, Nelson, "Critical Response: The Telling and the Told", *Critical Inquiry*, 7, (1980-81), pp. 799-801.

Lavers, Annette, *Roland Barthes: Structuralism and After*, First Edition, (USA, Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1982).

Parker, Michael and Roger Starkey, *Postcolonial Literatures: Achebe, Ngugi, Desai, Walcott*, First Edition, (Great Britain, Macmillan Press Ltd., 1995).

Sage, Heidi Anne, "The Role of History in the Novels of Graham Swift and its Relation to the Protagonists' Quests for Personal Meaning, M.A. (Lancaster) (1995).

Schafer, Roy, "Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue", *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980-81), pp. 29-53.

Swift, Graham, *Waterland*, Third Edition, (Great Britain: Picador, 1992).

Swift, Graham, *Ever After*, First Edition, (Great Britain: Picador, 1992).

Waldman, Marilyn Robinson, "Critical Response: The Otherwise Unnoteworthy Year 711", *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980-81), pp. 784-792.

White, Hayden, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality", *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980-81), pp. 5-27.

White, Hayden, "Critical Response: The Narrativization of Real Events", *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980-81), pp. 793-798.

White, Hayden, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory", *History and Theory*, 23 (1984), pp. 1-33.