To what extent is it true that the treatment of history in the novel is really a coded reflection on the present? Discuss 'history' in two novels that you have studied in the light of this question.

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The elusive nature of history renders it ambivalent and difficult to conceptualise. This essay aims to explore the complex interface between literature and history through a postmodernist perspective by questioning notions of narrativity and ideology in Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time* (1987) and Julian Barnes's *A History of The World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989).

Ongoing reconceptualisation of the relationship between literature and history has led to the fundamental assumption put forward by eminent historian Hayden White that narrative representation of the past constitutes a profoundly literary endeavour: 'The historian arranges the events [...] in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle, and end'.[1] This recognition of the convergence of literature and history as forms of narrative which gather fragments of the world together as a means of shaping the individual elements into a significant whole has problematised our understanding of the past. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon refutes the argument that postmodernist novels offer no serious engagement with historical reality in suggesting that both fiction and history are essentially equally narrative and that meaning does not lie in historical fact, but rather in the way in which historical events have been represented. This effectively opens up a dialogue between the past and the present, in that the past cannot be accessed directly or objectively since it can only be understood through the narrative strategies and ideologies of the writer. Novels written in the present can therefore only conceive of the past in an indirect, subjective and discursive manner which involves interaction between the questions asked and answers given by previous historians, as suggested by R.G. Collingwood in *The Idea of History* (1946), in order to construct new historical understanding and interpretation based on this dialogue. The discourse renders the event meaningful and therefore history can only examine discourse, since there is no inherent meaning within the event itself. However, despite functioning exclusively on a textual level, this form of the postmodernist historical novel Hutcheon (1988) terms 'historiographic metafiction' embodies real ideological, moral and political relevance through its ability to be both 'intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personnages'.[2] By situating itself in its discursive context, historiographic metafiction forces acknowledgement of social practices, the historical conditions of meaning and the positions from which novels are both produced and received. In this sense, each period within the literary tradition is capable of imagining and narrating not only its own history, but other histories as well. Novels such as *The Child in Time* (henceforth *TCT)* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (henceforth *HW*) therefore form part of the social history of events in providing evidence of how history has

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[1] Hayden White, 'Historical Discourse and Literary Writing' in Kuisma Korhonen (ed), Tropes for the Past: Hayden White and the History/Literature Debate (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006) p.25
[2] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988) p.5

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been constructed at any given time, but they also contribute to the narrative of those events, making the boundary between the historiographic metafiction and history especially difficult to maintain.

Characterised then by the belief that many, if not all, apparent realities are social constructs contingent on a specific moment in time, the postmodernist aesthetic seeks to problematise traditional historiographic discourse and the representation of history, often employing critical realist or self-reflexive narrative strategies as a means to do so. Arguably, postmodern realist novels such as *TCT* function particularly effectively in terms of this overlap between the narrative world of the imagination and the actual world of history, and as Laurence Lerner suggests, need not be dismissed as naive positivism: 'if perception is not wholly objective, it does not follow that it must be wholly subjective'.[3] The supposition that history strives to be accurately true intersects with realism's sustained commitment to the possibility of observing and accounting for shared human experience and submerged social realities located within a specific moment of historicity in order to question 'our self-consciousness about (and awareness of the limits of) our structuring impulses and their relation to the social order'.[4] Similarly, highly self-reflexive novels such as *HW* strive to deconstruct the notion of objective truth and global cultural narrative in history in drawing attention to the historically determined constructedness and intertextuality of the text by amalgamating and subsequently shifting between divergent narrative subjectivity, temporality and ideology. It is this overt metafictionality which 'puts into question, at the same time as exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real'[5] to construct a pluralist, and perhaps problematic, view of historiography as consisting of different but equally meaningful constructions of the textualised remains of the past. However, whether tending towards critical realism or intense self-reflexivity, all historiographic metafiction manifests a certain introversion towards and awareness of form which raises key issues surrounding 'the nature of identity and subjectivity; the question of reference and representation; the intertextual nature of the past; and the ideological implications of writing about history'.[6] These underlying matters of contention support Laurence Lerner's (1988) claim that any text constitutes a synthesis of three fundamental criteria - ideology, writing strategies and social reality - none of which can be excluded at the expense of another without greatly oversimplifying the text. In this light, it can be argued that the extent to which the present (social reality) can be encoded within the treatment of history in the postmodernist novel can be determined through exploration of narrativity (writing strategies) and ideology in *TCT* and *HW.*

By foregrounding narrative as both content and form, historiographic metafiction self-consciously reminds us that whilst events did take place in the past, 'we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning'[7] in order to render them meaningful. As a result, both *TCT* and *HW* seek to problematise and subvert traditional concepts of subjectivity alongside the inscription of subjectivity into history in order to challenge narrative singularity in the name of multiplicity and disparity: 'postmodernism establishes, differentiates, and then disperses stable narrative voices (and bodies) that use memory to try and make sense of the past'.[8] Although this reconceptualisation of the past in non-developmental, non-continuous terms points towards the unknowability and instability of historical understanding, it simultaneously opens up the opportunity for new configurations

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[3] Laurence Lerner, 'History and Fiction' in *The Frontiers of Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) pp.60-68
[4] Hutcheon, p.180
[5] Ibid.,p.92
[6] Ibid., p.117
[7] Ibid., p.97
[8] Ibid., p.118

of subjectivity and therefore new historical knowledge. Structured around the traumatic event of losing a child, *TCT* articulates the significance of relativity from the outset: 'The steady forward press of the pavement crowds must have conveyed to [the commuters struck in stationary traffic] a sense of relative motion, of drifting slowly backwards'.[9] The narrative constantly foregrounds the partiality, specificity and limitedness of any account or description, emphasising in this way the limitations of historical narrative as simply an interpretation of events and processes, rather than the events and processes themselves, as a means of creating distance and coping with the past: 'He suspected – and it turned out later that he was correct – that she took his efforts to be a typically masculine evasion, an attempt to mask feelings behind displays of competence and organisation and physical efforts' (p.21). Although essentially focalised entirely through Stephen's perspective, which is often characterised by free indirect discourse - 'Five feet might not be far to fall, but people broke their necks falling half that distance off chairs' (p.118) - certain episodes contained within the conventional, third-person omniscient narration deviate from this otherwise consistent focalisation, furthering the narrative complexity. For instance, the extent to which the third-person depiction of Stephen's mother as a young woman working the department store can be attributed to Stephen is questionable: 'She was an odd mixture of shyness and independence...pretty in a bright, bird-like way' (p.183). Whilst the embedding of this observation in the conversation between Stephen and his mother suggests that it has been narratively summarised by Stephen and then included in retrospection, the idea that Stephen's mother would comment on herself in this way is unlikely. Similarly, moments of authorial intervention where the narrator appears to step forward and address the reader directly, succeed in questioning who is speaking: 'But time – not necessarily as it is, for who knows that, but as thought has constituted it – monomaniacally forbids second chances' (p.9). Comparatively, in *HW* the intertextuality of history is immediately established through the foregrounding of historical knowledge as accessible only in terms of other available narratives. Each chapter generates heterogeneous and often contradictory knowledge about the past in order to deconstruct any notion of unified or consistent historical understanding: 'The history of the world? Just voices echoing in the dark; images that burn for a few centuries and then fade; stories, old stories that sometimes seem to overlap; strange links; impertinent connections'.[10] The exploratory juxtaposition of various narrative modes, including different registers, first, second and third-person narrative voices, male and female viewpoints, creates a plurality of narrative perspectives and multiplicity of discursive genres which succeed in drawing attention to how each constructs its own history: 'They were chosen, they endured, they survived: it's normal for them to gloss over the awkward episodes, to have convenient lapses of memory' (p.4). By foregrounding traditionally marginalised or previously unauthorised narratives, such as those belonging to the woodworm, the novel then questions the process behind the translation of individual perspectives into public ones, and how knowledge of the past is shaped: 'You aren't too good with the truth, either, your species. You keep forgetting things, or you pretend to' (p.29). Lack of narrative cohesion resulting from competing accounts of the past - whereby new locations and time periods are established in each chapter - problematises the notion of 'continuous history [...] the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity', enabling the novel to resist totalising interpretation .[11]

      Within both *TCT* and *HW* temporality constitutes a fundamental and inseparable aspect of narrative expression in allowing for a world which is simultaneously chronological

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[9] Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time* (London: Vintage, 1992) p.1. All further references are made to this edition
[10] Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (London: Picador, 1990) p.242. All further references are made to this edition
[11] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Oxon: Routledge, 2002) p.13

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and flexibly repetitive. Steven Connor underlines the importance of temporal structure in defining narrative as 'an articulation of temporality with transitivity' which involves the passage of time and ordering of events with relation to sequence, duration and temporal connection. [12] Focalising perspective through retrospect whilst being contained within a projection of the future, *TCT* gestures towards the need for a sense of critical distance and detachment in order to review and reassess particular moments in the past: 'while they could never redeem the loss of their daughter, they would love her through their new child, and never close their minds to the possibility of her return' (p.239). In particular, the episode outside the pub where Stephen appears to inhabit an impossible moment in the past demonstrates how history can be seen as a dynamic flux and site of creativity in which past experiences are constantly being re-formed and opened up to re-telling: 'this location had its origins outside his own existence [...] sudden movement could dispel this delicate reconstruction of another time' (p.59). This distortedness and inconsistency of time at the level of the plot simultaneously points towards the relativity of temporality and narrative consciousness - 'Time was redeemed, time assumed purpose all over again because it was the medium for the fulfilment of desire' (p.68) – alongside the existence of alternative parallel universes: 'Their hesitation was brief, delicious before the forking paths' (p.66). Constant allusion to 'tales of Schroedinger's cat, backward flowing time, the right-handedness of God and other quantum magic' (p.43) succeeds in shattering any illusion of a knowable, stable reality and instead evokes the concept of anti-narrative in suggesting that the only certainty is uncertainty. Consequently, until proven either way, the possible worlds of Kate missing and Kate present, although unable to interact with one another, are able to exist at the same time: 'Since he had exhausted all possibilities on the material plane [..] it only made sense to deal on the level of the symbolic and the numinous, to conjoin with those unknowable forces which dealt with probability' (p.137). Similarly, *HW* articulates an acute expression of dislocated, cyclical temporality through the sustained repetition of shared concerns and motifs which contest the absolute and essentialist notion of there being one continuous history generated out of cause-and-effect: 'I dreamt that I woke up. It's the oldest dream of all, and I've just had it. I dreamt that I woke up' (p.283). This lack of chronological progression refutes the idea that history is neatly linear, with the present building upon an ever-accumulating past: 'There's one thing I'll say for history. It's very good at finding things. We try to cover them up, but history doesn't let go. It's got time on its side' (p.242). Even the repeated references to rafts, boats, woodworm, beetles, natural and unnatural disasters throughout the various chapters evidence no clear significance or pattern behind them, prompting the narrator in the parenthesis chapter to ask, 'does history repeat itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce?' – 'No, that's too grand, too considered a process' (p.241). The therefore novel appears to move in terms of seemingly coincidental cycles and arbitrary coincidences, offering no clear knowledge about historical progress of development, with many of the characters literally and metaphorically lost at sea, drifting helplessly without direction: Noah's ark; the hostages on the cruise ship; Kath Ferris; the castaways on the raft of the Medusa. However, the invoking of conventional binary oppositions upon which many value systems are often based – clean and unclean; sacred and irreverent; chosen and damned – points towards the context-dependant nature of values and ideology, alongside endorsing the idea that knowledge of the world of historical reality is the result of an interaction between that world and our methods of perceiving it.

Hayden White maintains that 'if ideology is the treatment of the form of a thing as content or essence [...] historiography is ideological precisely insofar as it takes the characteristic form of its discourse, the narrative, as a content, that is narritivity, and treats

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[12] Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History: 1950-1995* (Oxon: Routledge, 2001) p.3

"narrativity" as an essence shared by both discourses and sets of events alike'.[13] In this sense, ideology and literature are inseparable. Furthermore, since every representation of the past involves a historicising of the present, in rendering these representations visible, the values and ideologies of the present can be made readily available for reinterpretation and revaluation. In terms of ideology, it is *TCT* which most pointedly concerns itself with issues of narrative responsibility and the ethical implications involved in representing individual subjectivity alongside the society that forms them: 'it was the responsibility of governments to stage-manage this drama of realised potential, widening possibilities' (p.25). Emphasising the importance of content over form, McEwan argues, 'there can surely be no more mileage to be had from demonstrating yet again through self-enclosed "fictions" that reality is words and words are lies. There is no need to be strangled by that particular loop – the artifice of fiction can be taken for granted'.[14] This acknowledgment of the underlying textuality of historical knowledge points towards an acute awareness of the powerful effect that narrative can have, particularly when that narrative functions as ideology and is no longer merely seen as one of many possible interpretations. As a result, *TCT* evidences a critical engagement with the socio-political ideologies and policies of an imaginary, authoritarian, Thatcherite government as a means of drawing attention to the idealised constructs and social stereotypes upon which societies are often built: 'The people who used the supermarket divided into two groups, as distinct as tribes or nations. The first lived locally in modernised Victorian terraced houses which they owned. The second lived locally in tower blocks and council estates' (p.10). Similarly, nostalgic allusions to the comforts of childhood and days gone by gesture towards the tendency to reconstruct the past in an idealised, and therefore distorted, way: 'It was a secure and ordered world, hierarchical and caring' (p.77). *HW* endorses this idealised view of history in invoking the theory of 'fabulation' as a means of explaining the way in which we make sense of the present by inventing narratives of the past: '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 round them. Our panic and our pain are only eased by soothing fabulation; we call it history' (p.242). Matthew Pateman suggests that 'fabulation is an overcoming of chaos, a necessary and soothing practice that provides coherence and stability amid an otherwise daunting array or disparate and unassimilable facts',[15] implying that the ultimate purpose of narrative is to console and provide salvation from the harshness of reality in a similar way to biblical narrative, upon which the pattern of the entire novel is based. However, this drawing of comparisons to fable and myth is problematic as it suggests that history is not the devastating and malevolent force implied elsewhere in the novel, but rather a reassuring, fictional product of the imagination.

On the basis that the imaginative capacity of narrative allows for the entering into the mind of another, McEwan maintains that 'what underlies morality is the imagination itself [...] it is at the level of empathy that moral questions begin in fiction'.[16] By foregrounding the experience of loss in *TCT* – loss of family relationships; loss of childhood; loss of the British Empire – the moral centre of the novel appears to cohere around finding a way to cope with the past in order to move forwards: 'It was then, three years late, that they began to cry together at last for the lost, irreplaceable child' (p.239). Whilst Charles Darke's desperate attempt to regress back into childhood ultimately ends in failure, the birth of another child at the end of the novel suggests genuine confirmation of the idea that time disperses nothing without in some way restoring it, and that 'in acknowledgement of the world they were about

[13] Hayden White, 'The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory' in *History and Theory*, Vol. 23, No.1, Feb 1984, pp. 1-33
[14] Ian McEwan, 'The State of Fiction - A Symposium,' *The New Review*, 5:1, Summer 1978): 50-51
[15] Matthew Pateman, *Julian Barnes* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers Ltd, 2002) p.43
[16] Ian McEwan, 'Interview with Liliane Louvel, Gilles Ménégaldo, Anne-Laure Fortin' in *Etudes Britannique Contemporaines 8*, November 1994 (Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de Montpellier, 1995)

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to rejoin, and into which they hoped to take their love' (p.245) the present will help to make sense of the past. Comparatively, in *HW*, the tension between absolute historical narrative and the fragmentary ones which manifest themselves within the form of the novel serve as an ideological reminder that whilst desired, the certainty that fabulation can provide is impossible to achieve: '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' (p.111). Whilst any stable notion of what history involves is difficult to ascertain, what is made certain is Barnes's fundamental concern about the way in which the brutality of historical events are mediated and therefore distorted through narrative: 'and there we have it – the moment of supreme agony on the raft, taken up, transformed, justified by art, turned into a sprung and weighted image, then varnished, framed, glazed, hung in a famous art gallery to illuminate our human condition' (p.139). According to the narrator in the 'parenthesis' chapter, implied to be Barnes himself - 'When I say 'I' you will want to know within a paragraph or two whether I mean Julian Barnes or someone invented' (p.227) - there are, or have been, three main ways in which this anxiety has been assuaged: religion, art, and love. However, whilst all three are transcendentally set up in order to see how they stand up to history, love is presented as the only hope as a means of coping with the burden of the past: 'The history of the world becomes brutally self-important without love [...] Love makes us see the truth, makes it our duty to tell the truth' (p.240). In this light, both McEwan and Barnes can be seen to be genuinely expressing their belief that novels are morally and ethically necessary in their ability to produce usefully contrasting ideologies which conceive of different ways of viewing historical reality. Whilst McEwan conceives narrative as an inherently moral form in its enabling of access to other points of view, Barnes suggests the egotism of the world can be contradicted through 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' (p.246). It is this fundamental connection between love and truth, this humanist reconfirmation of the transcendental power of human relationships as a means of coping with history, which therefore forms the moral centre of both these novel.

        In questioning concepts of narrativity and ideology in *TCT* and *HW*, both McEwan and Barns evidence the capacity of the postmodern novel to explore the complex interface between literature and history. By examining the extent to which the treatment of history in the novel is really a coded reflection on the present, these writers succeed in creating awareness of the profound interrelationship between narrative and history and the fundamental importance their continual interaction with one another has in producing new interpretations of historical reality.

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