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Denying history or defying History? John Fowles's *A maggot* and the postmodernist novel

Fidel,
History absolves no-one,
History takes drugs, has hallucinations,
stumbles among the corpses looking for a fix,
wakes up in the morning with a dead head
& vomits into the future.

(Martin Taylor: "History will absolve me"
Fidel Castro (An unfinished poem)" in Van Wyk *et al*, 1988:680)

And we, the readers of history, the sufferers from history, we scan the pattern
for hopeful conclusions, for the way ahead.

(Barnes, 1989:242)

Abstract

This paper takes issue with accusations that postmodernist fiction neglects or refuses to engage with history. I offer a reading of John Fowles's *A maggot* which demonstrates how postmodernist novels, by way of a self-reflexive interrogation of their own narrative foundation, contest history's master status and expose the latter's similar dependence on narrative modes of totalizing representation. Such a demystification process, I maintain, prompts a recognition of the provisional status of history as a human construct, thus undermining its power of totalization and opening it up to rewriting.

1. Introduction

In recent years it has become fashionable to attack postmodernist art for its detachment from politics and history. Fredric Jameson set the trend by arguing that in postmodernist texts "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (1984a:66); texts, he claims, whose only connection with history is through "nostalgia" and the "random cannibalization of all the styles of the past" (1984a:65). Not only, in the postmodern world according to Jameson, are such texts sundered from the past, but also from the present because they are "incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience" (1984a:68). Since Jameson's pronouncements many critics have followed his lead (see for example Eagleton, 1985). What strikes one about this by now rather tired debate, however, is the sheer paucity of criticism that has set out to contest these rather polemical generalizations by demonstrating that they can only be made in the rarefied realms of theory. A notable exception, however, is Linda Hutcheon (1988 and 1989) who, by drawing a large number of texts from the complex reality of postmodernism as a cultural praxis, exposes the dissonance between

theory and practice inherent in Jameson's tidy but reductive formulation. It should be added, however, that it is by no means clear that Jameson's postmodernism and Hutcheon's postmodernism are the same entity. In contrast to Hutcheon's careful specificity, Jameson's broad conception of postmodernism in art subsumes everything from the French *nouveau romanciers* to the New (Post?) Rock of Talking Heads (1984b:54). In fact, Suleiman is probably right when she maintains that Jameson would have been "a lot more comfortable speaking simply about 'contemporary' or even 'late consumer capitalist' art, rather than trying to unite the two 'posts' of postindustrialist society and Postmodernist aesthetics" (1986:263). Aside from such differences in emphasis, which invariably arise when theorists use inflated critical constructs like *postmodernism*, it does seem clear that the predetermined conceptual boundaries within which Jameson's analysis occurs prevent him from acknowledging what many critics have detected, that is, the large number of (in their view, postmodernist) texts which engage with history. As early as 1972, for example, William Spanos described an existential postmodernism informed by the impulse to reveal the contingency of history and the historicity of humankind. Since then Alan Wilde has identified *midfiction*, by which he means a [postmodernist] narrative form that negotiates the oppositional extremes of realism and reflexivity" (1982:192). Wilde's midfiction, in its turn, corresponds closely to Linda Hutcheon's *historiographic metafiction*, a postmodernist mode that not only installs and then contests the conventions of realism, but also confronts "the discourse of art with the discourse of history" (1988:20). Despite the variety of metatextual labels these theorists employ, they all deal with texts which engage with history and whose very existence contests Jameson's account of the ahistorical nature of postmodernism.

In this paper, I shall discuss one such text, namely John Fowles's *A maggot* (1985), a novel whose dual historical perspective, that is, its application of a twentieth-century perspective on its eighteenth-century subject matter, signals its re-evaluation of the past in the light of the present – a process which Jameson, of course, maintains is impossible in postmodernist texts. I shall demonstrate that there is nothing 'random' or 'cannibalistic' in this novel's parodic dialogue with the form of the eighteenth-century novel: on the contrary, it constitutes a re-reading of the styles of the past and the ideological contexts in which they were produced. Rather than bracketing the past as referent, then, this process of re-evaluation engages with and situates historically all monistic visions of History as a meaningful, teleological development. In their stead, the novel posits a plurality of histories, thereby revealing that it is we, who, in our desire for a totalized order, construct History from histories.¹ It will become clear in the course of my discussion that *A maggot*, like many other postmodernist novels, strives to problematize and alter received notions of history but certainly not to evade or deny them. Although Jameson is correct when he says that such texts inscribe a "crisis in historicity" (1984a:70), he is simply and demonstrably wrong when he reductively maintains that they *efface* historicity. Placed in the context of the postmodernist problematization of history, his objections can only have force if one is prepared to subscribe to those very doctrinaire beliefs about History that postmodernist texts set out to deconstruct.

¹ Since the distinction between history as brute and contingent event and History as human construct is contextually apparent in the discussion which follows, it will not be typographically marked except in cases which require particular emphasis.

2. *A maggot*: denying history ...

On a superficial appraisal of *A maggot*, it might appear that Jameson's complaint that historical metanovels "can no longer set out to represent the historical past" (1984a:71) is justified since, in the novel, the referential plausibility of narrative is eroded by the highly improbable nature of the events narrated. Such a complaint, however, is metafictionally pre-empted in and by the text. The incredulity which is bound to result from any attempt to naturalize the text by means of ratiocinative reading strategies is prefigured and parodied by the incorporation of a reader-figure into the novel, namely Ayscough. This reader-surrogate's rational scepticism when confronted with the eccentric text related by Rebecca Lee, an author-figure, duplicates that of the actual reader: "Would you not, if you had heard such a tale as yours from another, doubt either the teller's reason, or your own? Would you not cry, I cannot and will not believe this absurd and blasphemous tale, it must be got up to bubble and deceive, to blind me from some much plainer truth?" (413).² The analogy between the reader *in* the novel and the reader *of* the novel -- pointed to by the self-reflexive references to literary activity in this *mise en abyme* of the text's reception³ -- becomes even clearer when the reader-figure criticizes the surrogate text's anti-representational stance with the words "well-called maggot" (383). It is hardly a coincidence that the text read by the actual reader is, by its own admission, a *maggot*. This term, as the Prologue emphasizes, signifies a whimsical story (5).

By thematizing the interpretative act in this way, the novel thus anticipates the reader's attempt to assimilate it into a representationalist system of intelligibility and thereby represses its indeterminacies, contradictions and differences. This resistance to interpretative strategies of containment does not, however, culminate in textual onanism. For example, although the seminal maggot episode, to which both Ayscough's criticisms and the novel's title direct the reader, does not engage with the historical past on a referential plane, it *does* interrogate standard notions of history. This, ironically enough, is a form of historical engagement which Jameson himself advocates when he suggests that traditional historiography should forfeit the representation of history in favour of producing the "concept of history" (quoted in Hutcheon, 1988:112).

In the maggot episode, Rebecca Lee's prophecies about the future course of history form a critique of the Enlightenment ideal of historical progress. Her first prophecy is a pastoral comic vision of a world which has changed for the better, an utopian society called "June Eternal" (372-379) which is described as being "(e)xceeding beautiful, like none upon this earth that I have seen or heard speak of ... 'Twas more rich-peopled countryside than city. And over all, there was peace" (372). This vision which, in a crucial conflation, aligns the *aesthetic* category of comedy with historical change, is countered by a tragic vision of a dystopian world which has remained essentially static:

Too like this world, too like, there was no love; all cruelty, killing, pain ... great carriages that bore cannon within, and went faster than the fastest horse; most swift and roaring winged lions ... the

² Page numbers in brackets refer to Fowles, John. 1989. *The maggot*. London : Jonathan Cape.

³ There are numerous, and often conflicting, taxonomies of the technique of the *mise en abyme*. In this paper, the term simply denotes a structural device that transforms a component of the narrative into a mirror reflecting and reduplicating, from within the text, the process of reading. See Brian McHale (1989:124-128).

which did drop great grenades upon their enemy and made untold destruction upon them -- why, whole cities laid to ruin ... And else, great towers of smoke and flame that burnt all below, made hurricane and earthquake where they rose (381-382).

In addition to aligning tragedy with historical stasis, the second prophecy bridges the gap between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries by providing the reader with a depiction of modern technological warfare. The description is striking in that it represents the carnage wrought by the war-machines of the twentieth century without using the requisite terminology, an elliptical strategy which prompts the contemporary reader to provide the missing information by utilizing his/her knowledge of the massive developments that have taken place in science, and particularly the science of warfare, since the eighteenth century. The point of this strategy is to make the reader realize that the difference between the past and the present is merely of a technological nature: the two societies are fundamentally the same. This realization is articulated by Rebecca Lee when she refers to the static society of her tragic vision as being "(t)oo like this world ... all cruelty, killing, pain", and concludes with the comment: "... all we lack are their devilish arts and ingenuity to be the same, as cruel also" (382). Her opinion is corroborated by the following observation in the Epilogue, addressed to the reader as a contemporary: "In much else we have developed immeasurably from the eighteenth century; with their central plain question -- what morality justifies the flagrant injustice and inequality of human society? -- we have not progressed one inch" (459). Quite apart from yoking the aesthetic poles of comedy and tragedy to the historical antitheses of change and stasis, respectively, these juxtaposed visions give the lie to what Lyotard refers to as the "grand narrative of emancipation" (1984:xxiii-xxiv; 31). In other words, they reject the view that scientific and technological advance promotes ethico-political progress and culminates in universal happiness, a view which gained currency during the Enlightenment and has served to legitimate science ever since (Lyotard, 1984:xxiii-xxv; 27-37)).

The novel's incredulity to notions of historical progress is manifest in the following passage, which describes the character Bartholomew's response to the architects of Stonehenge:

... for God all time is as one, eternally now, whereas we must see it as past, present, future, as in a history ... Do you not admire that, perhaps before Rome, before Christ himself, these savages who set these stones knew something even our Newtons and Leibnizes cannot reach? ... We moderns are corrupted by our past, our learning, our historians ... for as I say, we are like the personages of a tale ... Yet they who set and dressed those stones lived before the tale began ... in a present that had no past, such as we may hardly imagine to ourselves (149-151).

Here the belief in historical progress which underpins the binary opposition of 'savages' and 'moderns', is subverted by the statement that the 'savages' were in possession of knowledge before which Newton "was but a helpless child" (149). Moreover, the determinism inherent in such a notion of historical continuity is exposed by the contrast between the moderns' experience of temporality and the 'rude' savages' experience of temporal integration. Whereas the former are epiphenomena of an inexorably linear process, subordinate to and determined by the supposedly objective goals of human progress, the latter experience a perpetual present. As such, they are not subject to the tyranny of teleology -- a perpetual present cannot support *teloi* since the setting of goals requires a commitment to a certain linear continuity over time and therefore presupposes a present which is part of some larger set of projects which includes the past and future.

By evoking a 'stage' which 'preceded' the imposition of a deterministic temporal structure on the continuum of history, Fowles hints at the freedom which accompanies an absence of

temporal goals. In the novel, the state of unconfined Dionysian flux experienced by the 'rude savages' thus serves as an image of a freer state of being. The rude savages, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms (1977), have not yet been 'oedipalized', that is, the symbolic (language, structure and society) has not yet entered them, and they are consequently in close proximity to the pre-symbolic (freedom, spontaneity and flux). In Fowles's words, they "lived before the tale began," that is, they have not been inserted or inscribed into the grand narrative of history. For Fowles, as this passage makes clear, such an intercalation must inevitably be accompanied by a loss of freedom.

3. ... or defying History?

A maggot, however, does not suggest a return to pre-history as a solution to the tyranny of the *telos*. If it did, it would justify Jameson's contention that postmodernist fiction is nostalgic, that it indulges its readers' desire to be recalled to times less problematic than their own (1984a:66). Rather than denying history in this way, Fowles lays bare the narrative foundation of his novel so as to confront and contest History's master status by revealing History's equivalent dependence on plot structures which systematize, homogenize and unify disparate materials, that is, its dependence on narrative modes of totalizing representation (see Kermode, 1966, 1967:35-64; White, 1984). The novel's fictionality is foregrounded by the frequent and self-conscious use of words like *maggot*, *tale* and *story* (44, 126, 132, 226, 251, 267, 325, 361, 383, 413). This is especially conspicuous in the passage, quoted above, in which Bartholomew contends that "we moderns are corrupted by our ... *historians*" and "like the personages of a *tale*" are forced to "see [time] as past, present, future, as in a *history*" (my italics, 149-151). The word *history*, significantly, joins the ranks of narrative metaphors here and lays bare those notions of causality and temporal homogeneity, linearity, and continuity which govern our conceptions of both novelistic art and history. In this passage, Fowles relies on the novel's dual temporal perspective to harness both the obsolete sense of *history* as a work of fiction and its current sense of a factual account of things that have happened (see Scholes, 1969:1-3; and Davis, 1983:67-70). The resultant ambiguity of the word destabilizes the fixity of its contemporary meaning, thereby blurring the constricting binary opposition of 'story' and 'history' and suggesting not only that history too is a fiction, but also that it deploys the same set of narrative conventions as novelistic art. This, in turn, demystifies historicist ideologies by showing them to be impositions of plots on the raw flux of history -- master narratives and strategies of containment that limit and therefore impoverish the complex reality of the continuum of history.

Apart from challenging history's master status by discovering its narrative base, the self-conscious use of the word *history* in this passage also recalls the stock eighteenth-century literary convention of incorporating the word in the titles of novels. It thereby directs the reader's attention to *A maggot's* disclosure of the collusion between historicist ideologies and narrative modes of representation in novelistic art. The eighteenth-century novel's strongly teleological form -- its highly artificial beginning, middle and end and its relentlessly linear, chronological movement through time -- represents admirably the eighteenth-century view of the cosmos as the Christian God's perfect, end-directed Creation and those secularized versions of Judeo-Christian eschatology engendered by the Enlightenment belief in a rational pattern of historical development. This is pointed to by the authorial narrator's description of eighteenth-century society as "a world so entirely pre-ordained it might be written, like this book" (385). The analogy, implicit here, between

the relationship of the eighteenth-century author to her/his novel and that of God to His creation, is elsewhere made explicit by Lacy's words: "I said we most certainly knew that there was an Author behind all, and likewise His sacred text" (149-150). This analogy, verging on identity, between the teleological form of the eighteenth-century novel and received notions of history implies that such novels do not reflect history, they reflect History, that is, history as it has been encoded by some master narrative. In so doing, it shows that realist narrative derives its authority not from any stable 'reality' which it represents, but from those ideologically-loaded cultural conventions that inform both it and the construct called *History* (see Siegle, 1986:225). It now becomes clear that the thrust of *A maggot's* critique of the teleological form of the eighteenth-century novel is to expose the extent to which such novels, by complying and colluding with historicist ideologies, function as a means through which society equips its subjects with forms of recognition consonant with its own totalizing development.

The core of this critique manifests itself in the parodic dialogue which *A maggot's* form conducts with that of the eighteenth-century novel. Whereas Fowles thematizes the period novel's representation of teleological views of history, he enlists the very structure of his own novel to represent an ateleological view of history. This oppositional and dialogic strategy is achieved by the sustained subversion of linear narrative in *A maggot*. For example, the reader is presented with depositions -- the contradictory accounts of the disappearance of Bartholomew as related to Ayscough, the lawyer and reader-figure -- which coexist without final reconciliation. These rival versions of the same set of 'facts', together with the third-person narrative sections of the book and the interpolated pages of historical chronicle, result in a plurality of intersecting texts which dislocate chronology in the novel by causing it to repeat, contradict, modify and double back on itself. In *A maggot*, therefore, it is truer to talk of narrative reiteration than narrative development.

The sustained destruction of 'organic' unity in the novel constitutes a challenge to the impulse to totalize inherent in the notion of continuity in history and its representation. It is an attempt to break through the appearance of totality, the illusion of a world that is whole, fostered by teleological accounts of history and promoted by the very form of 'organic' works. Thus, while setting itself up as an eighteenth-century novel, *A maggot* diverges radically in form and therefore ideology from such novels. In fact, it 'reads' the rise of the novel in this period as the ideologically motivated installation of the set of literary techniques or protocols known as realism as criteria for deciding what is acceptable as authentic historical experience. Accordingly, it shows that the formation of the novel was governed by an ideological urge, namely the representational logic through which a society secures its own reflection in consciousness. In strong contrast to 'organic' texts, which use realism as a cover for privileging and propagating only one of the many ways in which the continuum of history might be cut up, the elevation of discontinuity to a structural principle in *A maggot* constitutes a refusal to repress contingency by reducing it to a unified meaning, a rejection of all false reconciliation with totalizing schemes of explanation, and an attempt to provide the reader with an image of ateleology, that is, to formally reflect the unconscious process, rather than ideological deformations, of history (see Spanos, 1972:148; 155).

A maggot presents itself, and re-presents history, then, as a mass of potentialities which develop in accordance with no intelligible plan in order to liberate the reader from the tyranny of the *telos*, from those coercive ideologies of progress which envisage a (providential) endpoint to the story of history. In this respect, the ending of the novel is

crucial, since, in an attempt to show that history is open-ended and therefore open to change, the novel's conclusion "pulverizes closure" (Spanos, 1979:115), thus providing an excellent example of what Linda Hutcheon (1988:176) terms "anti-closure closure". The novel concludes with the birth of a child, thereby ostensibly conforming to the characteristic comic ending of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, described by Henry James as a "distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs and cheerful remarks" (quoted in Kermode, 1966, 1977:22). In terms of the comic vision's alignment of comedy with change in history, this ending is thematically justified. Furthermore, it only apparently satisfies the reader's desire for a narrative *telos* by installing novelistic closure in the conventional manner of such endings, since it, instead, opens the novel up to history. In a particularly striking metaleptic transgression of ontological boundaries (see McHale, 1987:119-121), the child born, namely Ann Lee, is an historical personage. What would have simply remained a rather intriguing aesthetic ploy, that is, the use of an artistic convention like comedy to advance change, is thus translated into the terms of an historical imperative: Ann Lee was the founder of the Shakers, a religious movement which in the Epilogue is described as affirming change because it was characterized by dissent, by "an aspiration, a determination to escape mere science, mere reason, established belief and religion, into the one thing that excuses an escape from such powerful social gods, the founding of a more humane society" (458).

Taken together with the novel's comic ending, this passage from the Epilogue endorses Rebecca Lee's comic vision by foregrounding the necessity of delivering history from the control of totalizing *teloi* in order to bring about a better world. *A maggot's* rejection of ideologies of historical advance does not, therefore, lead to a passive pessimism and acquiescence in the *status quo*. It would consequently be wrong to construe the novel's erosion of the boundary between story and history as either a destruction or trivialization of history. Instead, it is calculated to indicate that History, like story, is a fiction -- a human construct -- with humankind as its author. The old eighteenth-century analogy between the author and his/her creation and God and His Creation is therefore supplanted by a new analogy: in the same way that an author creates a novel, humankind, as the author of history, creates history. Postmodernist fictions like *A maggot* consequently *do* acknowledge the human(ist) urge to make order. They insist, however, that these orders are human constructs and therefore provisional, rather than the natural, fixed, universal and eternal entities that they are usually taken to be (see Hutcheon, 1988:16). The value of such a demystification process is that a recognition of the provisional status of history as an ordering system undermines its power of totalization and opens it up to reworking -- or, in terms of the new analogy, rewriting. However, if the new construct which results from such an endeavour is to constitute a truly radical change, rather than merely another variation of hegemonic historical practice, it would have to view critically not only the assumptions of previous systems, but also its own. To develop the by now discernibly postmodern equation between the construction of story and history which *A maggot* postulates, any alternate dispensation would, like this novel, have to self-subversively undermine its claims to Truth by displaying a metafictional awareness of its fictional status. This built-in compulsion to reflexivity would, like the self-consciousness of postmodernist narrative, ensure the new construct's continued provisionality and enable it to resist fetishization and its concomitant, totalization. In Linda Hutcheon's words, "If we accept that all is provisional and historically conditioned, we will not stop thinking, as some fear; in fact, that acceptance will guarantee that we never stop thinking -- and rethinking" (1988:53). It is precisely such an elevation of dissent -- as a stay against stasis -- to an historical principle which is advocated in *A maggot's* Epilogue:

Dissent is a universal human phenomenon, yet that of Northern Europe and America is, I suspect, our most precious legacy to the world. We associate it especially with religion, since all new religion begins in dissent, that is, in a refusal to believe what those in power would have us believe -- what they would command and oblige us, in all ways from totalitarian tyranny and brutal force to media manipulation and cultural hegemony, to believe. But in essence it is an external biological and evolutionary mechanism, not something that was needed once ... It is needed always, and in our age more than ever (459).

While the novel's comic ending endorses Rebecca Lee's comic vision by positing history as a scope of pluralistic possibilities, its Epilogue, however, ultimately represents twentieth-century history as the realization of Rebecca Lee's tragic vision:

We grow too clever now to change; too selfish and too multiple, too dominated by the Devil's great I, in Shaker terminology; too self-tyrannized, too pledged to our own convenience, too tired, too indifferent to others, too frightened.

I mourn not the outward form, but the lost spirit, courage and imagination of Mother Ann Lee's word, her Logos; its almost divine maggot (460).

By ending with the word *maggot*, this passage in the Epilogue recalls the pivotal maggot episode, in which the comic and tragic visions occur. The tragic vision, which depicts the military, political and technological suffering of twentieth-century humanity, forms a temporal link with the Epilogue by similarly returning the reader to the present. Being aware of the novel's alignment of comedy and change in opposition to tragedy and stasis, the reader is able to see that this passage at the end of the Epilogue interprets the killing fields of twentieth-century history as the outcome of the inertia and resistance to change engendered by those despotic theories of historical destiny which, in justifying present means by arbitrary future ends, rationalize mass slaughter. In so doing the Epilogue implies that the tragic vision is more in keeping with the "endless calamity" (24) of contemporary history than is the comic vision.

The dialectic between comedy and tragedy thus absorbs the Epilogue into the novel proper. Rather than merely presenting the reader with the author's afterthoughts on his novel, the Epilogue further problematizes the novel's already open ending. The illusion, fostered by the convention of the epilogue, of a putative transition from a fictional world to a factual world external to the narrative, in which the author addresses his/her comments on his/her fiction to the reader, is here subverted by the collapse of the boundary between fiction and reality. This sabotage is, of course, prepared throughout the novel by the repeated transgressions of the boundary between story and history, transgressions which culminate in the fusion of these two realms by the novel's ostensible ending.

In terms of the iconoclastic strategies by which the novel shatters conventional narrative logic, it would seem that the Epilogue displaces the comic ending and positions itself as the novel's actual and tragic ending. However, since the formal demarcation between novel proper and Epilogue is retained in the text, despite being undermined, it would be more accurate to say that these strategies place the two competing endings *sous rature* without displacing the one in order to privilege the other. In a much more convincing fashion than is the case with the multiple endings of *The French lieutenant's woman* (1969), these rival endings are left in an uneasy state of suspension. Moreover, the preservation of the structural division between epilogue and novel proper means that their provisionality is not impaired by the "tyranny of the last chapter" (Fowles, 1969:349) which compromises the multiple endings of *The French lieutenant's woman* and which ultimately renders this earlier novel teleological and conclusive.

By placing the tragic ending in the guise of an epilogue *after* the comic ending in *A maggot*, Fowles achieves the impossible, namely to both betray the teleological nature of his narrative *and* maintain the provisionality of its endpoint. This becomes clear when it is considered that, given the ineluctably teleological, indeed fatalistic, drive of tragedy, the positioning of the Epilogue at the end of *A maggot* must be construed as a wry and self-subversive acknowledgement of the novel's paradoxical, but inevitable, dependence on those very conventions of teleological narrative which it undermines (see Hutcheon, 1988:120-121). *A maggot* thus archly and self-consciously flaunts the contradictory nature of an enterprise, such as its own, which installs that which it seeks to subvert. However, it should be remembered that this novel does not so much endeavour to eradicate teleological narrative as to sabotage the totalizing power of *teloi*. Indeed, the mere fact that the Epilogue posits as an *eskhaton* "the founding of a more humane society" (458) constitutes a recognition of the necessity of *teloi* in any project which envisages social change. The point of the novel's critique of teleological notions of history, as becomes apparent from its provisional endings, is simply that *teloi*, in the absence of any ontological grounding, have to be highly provisional. Rather than elevating them to the normative status of fixed and timeless entities, then, we should accept their contingency and, indeed, open them up to a ceaseless process of rewriting.

Apart from offering this perspective on history as, in Calinescu's (1983:284) words, "an ongoing process of 'creative evolution' without any 'objectively' pre-established *telos* or *eskhaton*", *A maggot*'s rival endings also advance a theory of historical agency. By denying the claustrophilic reader the sanctuary of a closed ending, they invest him/her with the authority, renounced by Fowles, to choose between comedy and tragedy. At this juncture the aesthetic and historical moments merge: while exacting an engagement with history, this choice is also an aesthetic one since it is made in the full knowledge that history is an artefact, a human-made construct.

4. Conclusion

It would appear, then, that *A maggot*, as an example of postmodernist narrative fiction, is hardly ahistorical. Instead of manifesting a refusal to engage with the present or to think historically, which Jameson cites as being characteristic of this mode (1984a:65-68), it displays a desire to understand present culture as the product of past narrative representations. Rather than self-consciously savouring its own narrativity, it presents narrative representation as an irrevocably political and historical act. This is achieved by *foregrounding* the contingent identity of history and by exposing the manner in which supposedly neutral aesthetic forms repress this contingency in the interests of propagating coercive secular eschatologies of progress. As I have argued, this rejection of notions of historical advance does not lead to an impotent acquiescence in the *status quo*. Instead, it posits a rejection of all historical narratives which repress a view of history as a mass of potentialities as a precondition for social transformation. Such an intervention can hardly be construed as an attempt to efface or bracket the past (let alone the present) as referent. It *should* be seen as an interrogation, not an evasion, of our notions of historicity.

An obvious criticism of the conclusions which I have reached in this paper is that they stem from a reading of an isolated postmodernist text. *A maggot* is, I would argue however, fairly representative of those postmodernist novels that have orchestrated a return, albeit a critical one, to history and politics through the deployment of reflexive narrative strategies

(see Hutcheon, 1988:4-5; 57). D.M.Thomas's *Ararat* (1984), for example, manifests a similar incredulity towards totalizing ideals of progress through rationality in its view of history as perpetuating the structures of political domination rather than progressing towards a just ethico-political order, that is, an end which is also a new beginning or 'Ararat'. The same can be said of those postcolonial texts which share with postmodernism an urge to challenge narrative representation and the construction of historical monoliths. Many Latin American novels, for example, offer a view of history aimed at subverting the misleading linear sequence of narrative history. In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One hundred years of solitude* (1978), history is re-presented as being inescapably cyclical. As with *Ararat*, the interchangeable characters and political events in this novel suggest that everything in the 'end' repeats itself and nothing really progresses. At times this antipathy to teleological notions of history is directly articulated, as in Carlos Fuentes's *Terra nostra*:

... a people without a history is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern of timeless moments
... true history will be to live and to glorify those temporal instants, and not, as until now, to sacrifice
them to an illusory, unattainable and devouring future, for every time the future becomes the present
instant we repudiate it in the name of a future we desire but never have (1978:43).

Other postcolonial texts, like J.M. Coetzee's *Life and times of Michael K* (1983) and *Foe* (1986), present colonial history in metafictional terms as a controlling master narrative constructed by the colonizer as author, a text from which the colonized as character seeks to escape. Like *A maggot*, these novels cannot be arraigned for either failing or refusing to engage with history. Although they may appear to be diegetically narcissistic, their reflexivity, as Siegle argues of postmodernist fiction in general, "denaturalizes far more than merely literary codes and pertains to more than the aesthetic 'heterocosm' to which some theorists might wish to restrict it" (1986:11). Without exception, the metafictional self-consciousness of these novels, paradoxically, prompts us to question the process by which we represent our views of history to ourselves -- thereby revealing that all dominant modes of representation have a politics and, indeed, a history. Such questioning and challenging, as Linda Hutcheon argues, "are positive values for the knowledge derived from such inquiry may be the only possible condition of change" (1988:8).

Given the proliferation of postmodernist and postcolonial texts which contextualize and problematize history, one is forced to agree with Linda Hutcheon's conclusion that interpretations of postmodernism which dismiss such texts on the grounds that they are empty of political content are only possible "on a very abstract level of theoretical analysis, one which ignores actual works of art" (Hutchinson, 1988:18). Such interpretations, however, do not simply proffer yet more evidence of the "dangers of separating neat theory from messy practice" (Hutcheon, 1988:19). They are also transcendent in the sense that they repress and endeavour to smother the complexity and creative potential of postmodernism as a cultural practice. It is consequently not surprising that the principal expressions of this will to power stem from theorists such as Jameson and Eagleton. After all, their oppositional stance in relation to postmodernism is based on the kind of totalizing meta-narrative that postmodernism both challenges and threatens. Indeed, Jameson's very call for "genuine historicity," that is, for "our social, historical, and existential present and the past as 'referent'" to be seen as "ultimate objects" (1984a:67), testifies to the centrality of the notion of a stable historical development in the Marxist master narrative. And, as I have argued, this notion is antithetical to the project of postmodernist fiction, like *A maggot*, for which genuine historicity can only be that which admits its contingent nature and proclaims its provisionality, rather than arrogating to itself the status of ultimate object. Such texts regard with the utmost suspicion all calls to "shut down" the play of

differences" (Chapman, 1988:328) in favour of stable historical entities. They see such imperatives as expressions of agoraphobia grounded in a desire to bask in the peace of imprisonment conferred by monistic (and monastic) visions of history. Rather than indulging this desire to suspend disbelief in grand narratives, postmodernist fictions seek to inculcate an incredulity toward these narratives in an attempt to disable the totalizing force with which they repress difference and contradiction in order to entrench the rigid logic by which they, and behind them, entire systems of political structures and social institutions, maintain their hegemony.

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