THE END OF HISTORY. OR, IS IT? CIRCULARITY VERSUS PROGRESS IN CARYL PHILLIPS' *THE NATURE OF BLOOD*

ÁNGELES DE LA CONCHA
U.N.E.D.

The fact that Linda Hutcheon in her influential work *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) declared "historiographic metafiction" as the defining postmodernist genre, testifies to the status historical fiction enjoys in contemporary writing. Indeed not all critics have agreed on her rather grand pronouncement, but even those who have dissented (Nünning 1997), have done so the better to encompass the rich diversity of the genre, the significant enlargement of its boundaries and above all the challenging epistemological issues it has contributed to raising.

The vigorous upsurge of interest in History is related to the crisis of the discipline itself, in the wake of the revisionist rethinking of the Enlightenment and its self-legitimating emancipatory narratives. History is no longer accepted as the movement of a linear time towards an open and indefinitely perfectible future, in a process whose direction and purpose justifies the events it undertakes to narrate. The exposure of this metanarrative as a legitimation myth for a type of civilisation that it has helped to constitute, that of Western modernity, has destroyed the status of totality it had fashioned, leaving open a structure of "partial totalities, totalities that turn out to be limited by fact", as Foucault (1997: 373) argued in *The Order of Things*. Inevitably, the more history "accepts its relativity, and the more deeply its sinks into the movement it shares with what it is recounting, then the more it tends to the slenderness of the narrative, and all

Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies 22 (2000): 1 - 19.

the positive content it obtained for itself through the human sciences is dissipated" (1997: 371).

That history is a narrative, and that this narrative is all we have of the past or, to put it another way, that we no longer have access to facts but only to interpretations, any interpretation being itself the interpretation of an older one, a story of a previous story, is already an accepted assumption amongst postmodernist historians. That these narratives are subject to what Hayden White significantly described as a "poetic process" in an article, no less significantly, entitled "The Fictions of Factual Representation" (1976), highlights the literary nature of history writing, which involves the literary procedures of selection, troping and emplotment. It is hardly surprising then that since historiography is on the same plane as fiction, the same core questions on the nature of reality and its representation are addressed by both genres, albeit from different perspectives, providing mutually enriching views but indeed blurring their hitherto well defined borders. It is no less surprising that fiction has eagerly seized the chance to contest history's previous privileged authority as regards purported truths, and has both gleefully taken it to task and engaged in providing contending versions. Indeed, the epistemological differences that had staunchly separated them have become narrower in their postmodern counterparts, in that both genres radically oppose foundational discourses that transcend the local, contingent, time-bound stories they undertake to tell, and also, in that both articulate a profound loss of faith in our ability to represent reality. Just as postmodernist historiography alerts the reader to the illusion of the historian as omniscient narrator, and of the "poetic" nature of narrativisation, these novels alert us to history's practices, as well as to their own, in spinning stories. The change of course is crucial. It certainly signals the end of the "great story" of Western civilisation in its two grand versions, the humanist of moral progress and the Marxist of justice and freedom, reducing it to a series of competing, often contradictory, accounts of the same events that undermine the belief that historical processes can ever be objectively known (Niethammer 1992: 8).

The end of history, posthistory, or directly the *death* of history, is not an isolated concept. A mood of impending end theories gradually gathered momentum through the last decades of the twentieth century, probably under the influence of a millennial consciousness. The end of metaphysics, the end of metanarratives, the end of universals, the end of large-scale truths, are all familiar tenets in postmodern criticism. No less than the theories that proclaimed the death of the author, dissolving authorship into socially based discursive practices, the end of the subject, reducing the ego-based

autonomous individual to a product of cultural codes, or even the end of man himself (Foucault 1997: 385). It is therefore no wonder that History should have been drawn into the swirl, with the fiercest assaults levelled not by literary contenders, but by philosophers of History. Yet, when reading them, it becomes clear that they complicate rather than affirm or certify the end of History. Furthermore, the discipline itself, not to mention the novels that fictionalise its discourse, appears more alive and kicking than ever, feeding precisely, in a rather necrophilic mood, upon the alleged death of its subject matter. On the other hand, some of these assaults have been aimed not at History itself but at certain specific historical practices derived from its claim to a scientific status and to an inherent capacity to articulate the inner drives of large world processes. For example, the devastating onslaught on History that Michel Foucault carried out in his influential essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1976), was actually a rejection of what he described as "the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies". In its stead he proposed a different historical practice which he called "genealogy", and embarked on historical enterprises, radically different in kind, in that they relentlessly disrupted history's pretended continuity and teleology, such as *Histoire de la Folie*, translated into English as *Madness and Civilisation. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* or *The History of Sexuality*. However, the difficulty of radically doing away with history as a metaphysically driven narrative is shown in the stinging criticism levelled at his method by Derrida, who, upon the publication of *Madness and Civilisation,* argued that Foucault's attempt "to write the history of madness *itself*" (original emphasis), and not "a history of madness described from within the language of reason, the language of psychiatry *on* madness", fell prey to the same metaphysical trap he was determined to uncover (Derrida 1978: 34). The revolution against reason, claimed Derrida, can be made only from within (1978: 36). On the other hand, if the origin of the history of madness is located at that point in which "reason constituted itself by excluding and objectifying the free subjectivity of madness", then that decision, that differentiating act, "runs the risk of construing the division as an event or a structure subsequent to the unity of an original presence, thereby confirming metaphysics in its fundamental operation" (1978: 40).

A key issue in the narrativist historians' thesis is the consideration of emplotment as the syntax which articulates the meaning of otherwise discrete, even random, events. Plot, in turn, is structured in sequential units lineally arranged in a beginning, a middle and an end. As Peter Brooks (1984: 10) perceptively stated in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in*

Narrative, "plot is the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning. We might think of plot as the logic or perhaps the syntax of a certain kind of discourse, one that develops the propositions through a temporal sequence and progression". The articulation of time and emplotment are hence crucial in the story's encoded significance. Depending upon the points chosen to situate the beginning of the narrative and its closure, we shall have a story of either progression or of decline. Both teleology and its ensuing political or moral messages are thus unobtrusively embedded in the narrative process that, in turn, gives shape and meaning to the events narrated.

In both History and story, the issue of a narrative voice or voices has far ranging implications as regards the question of objectivity. The theory of History's neutral detached voice, of its pretension to narrate events as they were, no longer holds. Its illusionist effects have long since been uncovered by the distinction introduced by Benveniste between discourse and history. In historical utterance, he claimed (1977: 208), the speaker is not implied: "no one speaks here; the events *seem* to narrate themselves". Discourse, on the other hand, designates "every utterance assuming a speaker and a hearer, and in the speaker, the intention of influencing the other in some way" (1977: 209). Of course the fact that this intention is not acknowledged in historical narrative does not mean that it does not exist. In fact each historian has his own view of the events he undertakes to narrate. As Barbara Foley (1986: 67) shows in *Telling the Truth. The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction*, in both History and the novel "a truth is being told with facts to back it up". It is hardly surprising then that since the self-assumed neutrality of the narrator's voice has been unmasked and exposed, a plethora of new voices have risen to claim the right to speak up, and have challenged the hitherto unified omniscient view of prevalent historical discourse. Who can speak for whom has subsequently become a thorny question. The archives of History have been opened up to a plurality of story tellers who articulate their contents in new stories, from new perspectives, according to the different vantage points they explicitly assume. The categories of gender, race and ethnicity, largely ignored by the master Western discourse, have hence provided a rich lore of competing stories that lay mute and dormant, waiting, as it were, for release. The monological, lineal, teleological discourse of History has been thus swiftly overtaken by a polyphonic one, which is overtly challenging the former unified prevalent versions, characteristically white and, indeed, male.

In the realm of the novel there has been a parallel process. The new relish in a dialectics of versions and reversions has led to a reopening and

rewriting of canonical works, and has yielded a vast output of new stories that enrich old plots with fresh insights, by providing in-depth explorations of former secondary characters or hitherto unquestioned issues. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1967) was the first well-known successful experiment, with Rhys fleshing out a rich full past for Bertha Mason, Rochester's mad wife in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre.* Emma Tennant's sequels to some of Jane Austen's novels, for example, *Elinor and Marianne* (1996), where she takes up *Sense and Sensibility* after the marriage of the two sisters; or *Pemberly* (1993) and *An Unequal Marriage* (1994), in which she deals with the fortunes of Darcy and Elizabeth and the ongoing effects of "pride and prejudice", offer an ironic and playfully humorous counterpoint to classic (un)realistic closures. Marina Warner in her novel *Indigo* (1992) has recast the female characters of *The Tempest*, Caliban's mother Sycorax, a voiceless shape whose portrait was painted in the harshest terms of abuse by Prospero, and sweet-tempered, credulous and compliant Miranda. Warner fleshes them out anew, giving them full voices of their own, which expose the ideological undercurrents in colonial and feminine representations in Shakespeare's age and play. Both Jean Rhys and Marina Warner had connections with the West Indies. The former was born and raised in Dominica and went to England when she was sixteen. Marina Warner, for her part, though born in England, is related to the small English-Caribbean island of St. Kitts through her father's ancestry, which includes black and white branches. It is hence hardly surprising that their work should explore this hidden vein of untold stories.

Caryl Phillips, who is black and was also born in St. Kitts and was brought up in England, is another writer that epitomises this kind of literary experimentation in historical revision and reversions. His first novels dealt with Jamaican issues: the stagnant life and enclosed horizons of a small colony, the hazy dreams of its inhabitants, the lure of the metropolis and the inability to adjust in either place. In *Cambridge* (1991) he went on to explore the conflicts of the daughter of an English plantation owner, who goes over to the West Indies on an inspection tour of the neglected family property. The narrative is the untold tale of largely suppressed plantation conflicts, silently looming in the background of canonical eighteenth and nineteenth-century British literature. One has only to remember *Mansfield Park*, for example, where the Bertrams' wealth and position are due to their plantation in the West Indies, or Jane Eyre, who near the end of the novel inherits a small fortune from an uncle also in the West Indies.

Crossing the River (1993) is an extremely interesting story covering the family destinies of a former black slave bound for Liberia, the land chosen for black slaves in America to go to when they were freed after the American

Civil War. The novel signals Caryl Phillips' first experiments with fictionalising the breakdown of traditional historical narrative. He does so by defying its most salient feature, linearity, in its widest possible spectrum of plot, social background and time. Instead of a lineal plot, we have a stark juxtaposition of fragments of the stories of a black slave's children, located in distant spaces and times. Starting in Liberia, after the American Civil War the narrative moves on to Denver, U.S., in the early 19th century, and from there on to a small provincial town in England during the second world war, to end in the same place some years later. The breaches in chronology, space and social environment do away with explicit causality. Instead, they give the effect of a broken mirror, its fragments sadly reflecting the African diaspora and ensuing destruction of memory, land and kin ties. They are tales of oblivion, death and dispersal, connected only by a tenuous family link that provides the palimpsest against which the novel acquires its haunting extra-temporal quality. The palimpsest, in turn, articulates the overall meaning of the narrative, by highlighting behind the temporal and spatial dissemination of the stories a pattern of recurrent exclusion and dispersion.

In *The Nature of Blood* (1997) Phillips further expanded the interaction between chronology and plot. The juxtaposition of aspects of the past and the present is here more ambitious and daring, as the narrative interweaves very different sources: historical, literary and fictional, with disparate places and times. It is the palimpsest which provides, in the end, the thread that holds the random fragments in shape. The plot intertwines various threads from distant historical times, social backgrounds and countries. The novel opens in a camp in Cyprus under British rule after the war, where thousands of Jewish refugees are waiting to be allowed entry in Palestine. It moves on to an extermination camp in Germany upon the entry of the British troops and their provision of humanitarian relief to survivors. We are then taken back in time to the 15th century, to Portobuffole, a small city near Venice in the Easter of 1480, when Jews and Christians are celebrating their respective historical religious commemorations. From there on to Venice at some time in the 16th century, when the Republic is on the verge of war with the Turks over Cyprus. There is an incessant shuttle between past and present, in which all the threads gradually interweave in a pattern which we will not be able to discern until the end of the narrative. Even at this point, it is intimated that the narrative could be indefinitely stretched to accommodate a new range of stories strung together by a haunting circularity. Its closure is thus arbitrary, fully dependent on the will of the narrator to stop there and then, and only then do we realise that the temporal and spatial gaps are just as much constitutive elements of the pattern as the recorded events. Furthermore, it is

their empty spaces that ascribe, albeit in an oblique way, full meaning to the story. Their recurrence constitute, as it were, visible figures within a geometry in which the voids are simultaneously background and/or figures, with respect the figures and/or background. In this way, Phillips builds up a narrative strategy that collapses the limits between form and content in a masterly way, as gradually the background becomes a figure and the figures recede into background.

As the novel is not sequential, there is no need for chapters. Events are arranged in no fixed clear-cut structure, but rather in a loose flow of episodes and voices criss-crossing across centuries, with only a few blank spaces between the shifts in time and place —Cyprus, Germany, Italy, England and Israel, in no apparent order. Textually, the beginning and the end are connected through a secondary character, Stephan Stern, a Jewish doctor who once chose to leave Germany, the country of his birth, in pursuit of the dream of a promised land. The novel is circular in structure, or perhaps elliptical, as it spirals forward to the present, while incessantly gyrating towards and around events in the past as it tours through distant countries and cultures. There are Christians, there are Jews and there are blacks. Blacks that are either Christian as Othello, or Jewish like Malka, the African girl flown into Israel from a village in Ethiopia that briefly figures in the last episode. And there are those who do not fit in a particular definition, who are just caught in the in-betweens. These are arbitrarily defined by others, or they eventually define themselves according to the image projected onto them by others, either by the others' rejection of them, or by their own will to please and adjust and become integrated in the others' world. In some cases there are visible differences in skin colour, dress and/ or way of life, the latter either chosen or imposed. But the fundamental difference goes beyond all appearances. *The Nature of Blood* is in this sense a profoundly metaphorical title. On the one hand, blood is related to the semantic field of emotion and kinship, and is as such associated with the deepest, the tenderest, the most violent and murderous human feelings. On the other, its physical substance does not show any outward difference, thus it is only the ideology informing the social and cultural practices that carries the excess in meaning.

Narrators shift in this kaleidoscopic novel. There are first, second and third narrative voices. Intradiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators. Direct report and also free indirect style. Wanderings of memory, flux of consciousness, a split voice of a fractured self. Instead of the neutral or absent (in either case monological) voice of the historical narrative, we get a polyphony, where each voice is posited in relation to every other while remaining perfectly distinct: a plurality of centres of consciousness, irreducible to a common

denominator or a unifying view. Even in the instance of an omniscient narrator telling a historical event which occurred in Portobuffole in 1480, that of the trial of three Jews accused of child murder as their religious rites, the narrative voice splits into double meanings. Irony reveals in this case the unlimited capacity of language to choose, among its many layers of meaning, those that construe reality to suit power. Oral sources of history are by this means, unobtrusively exposed through the testimonies adduced to prove the facts that are accepted as evidence. For example, the witness borne by a woman who had spoken to the allegedly murdered child beggar, when he had asked her for the name of the town. Or the report of another woman that had seen him, though not actually spoken to him. Or yet again, the testimony borne by a blacksmith, who is described as "a busy albeit unpredictable temperamental man", who, yes, recalled he had been asked the address of one of the Jews by a child and had directed him to his place. This last witness we are told in passing, was the crucial one, as "in those times nobody could accept the word of a woman, unless it had been substantiated by a man" (49). Of course this quiet side remark links together in the same order two sets of well grounded historic phenomena: the deprivation of basic civic rights, in the case of women on the sole ground of gender, and the artful interpretation of law, in the service of the authority currently in power, in matters affecting ethnic and racial minorities, both of which show in retrospect the workings of prejudice and its fateful import in the course of history.

The Nature of Blood captures well the deadly power of false rumours, their calculated effect in blood heating and the vicious violence of blood prejudice once set loose. Expressions such as "it was widely known" (52), "one had to understand" (59), "the Jews were widely known to" (52), "there was no doubt that" (59), "nearly everyone remembered" (59), attest to the unspecific, yet powerful force of anonymous authority. Conversely, the novel also captures the cold-blooded form in which justice can remain both unscrupulously at fault and yet scrupulously faultless in its procedures. Irony is eloquent in this respect. "Jews were obliged to take an oath that they would freely volunteer the truth", we read. A judge, on the other hand, could order "the individual to be tormented if he suspected either perjury or reticence". The neutral-seeming third person narrative ironically signals the foreseeable outcome: "having by means of torture, loosened the Jews' tongues to a full confession of their wickedness, the appalling details of their crime continued to cause great indignation among the people of Portobuffole... Andrea Dolfin [the doge's representative] concluded his urgent report with a written summary of the crime, according to the Jews' own confession" (100).

In the light of the exposed unreliability of historical records, the broken and fragmentary first person narrative of Eva Stern, a young woman aged 21, on the verge of release from an extermination camp in Germany by British troops, though openly subjective, rings more true. Yet, her story, for all its prototypical quality, is not likely to appear in History books. She is not an agent of History, but only a bearer of it. And History, of course, deals with agency and change. Agents are the ones to be recorded, their acts acknowledged no matter the outcome. Bearers, on the other hand, are lumped together and recorded as ciphers. Eva's narrative tells the ordeal of an inexperienced young girl caught in a turmoil of forces she cannot understand and for which she bears little responsibility. Significantly, she is the child of a mixed marriage, a Jewish father and a German mother, and has no particular religious or ethnic allegiances. Her father had estranged himself from his own kin, being only too eager to "heal the wound of his 'low' upbringing" (16). And her mother was, in turn, estranged from her own parents upon her marriage to the young doctor, bright enough to be her father's junior partner, but not deemed socially fit to marry her.

The last thread to complete the novel's complex interwoven narrative is that of an African, the appointed General of the Venetian navy, soon to defend the island of Cyprus from the Turks. It is once again a first person narrative and also a leap back into the past, to Venice in the 16th century, and again one more tale of exclusion on ethnic grounds. In the case of the three Portobuffole Jews accused of child murdering, the protagonists were (self)enclosed in a ghetto and allowed no possibility of social mixing. At the time, intimacy between Jewish men and Christian women was punished and neither community had any wish to intrude upon the other's ground. In Eva's narrative the exclusion was initially rooted exclusively on socio-economic grounds. In her grandparents' case, on the first generation money of their daughter's suitor compared with their own solidly established wealth through a lineage of bankers. There is no other identifying sign or visible difference. Later on, in her own case as in that of many others, the difference is even more insubstantial as it has to do with the invisibility of blood, which, as such, is far beyond physical perception. It needs, therefore, to be made apparent. First, it has to be clothed in a recognisable fashion and forced to wear a visible outward sign, then it has to be openly and indelibly inscribed on the body itself. It is always an "other" who has the prerogative to inscribe and signify, and hence to set the new meaning, regulated by a new syntax, no matter how arbitrary. "Destiny is a movement of a uniformed man's hand"

(163), we are told, and it is up to this hand to decide, to the point of life or death. The depersonalisation implied by the close-up of the hand and the uniform which grow into a centre of decision, stands metonymically for a process of objectification in which human beings are reduced to bodies. In the camp it is the body only that counts. Body activities, body decay, damaged bodies. They are despoiled, scrutinised, used, manufactured, discarded and shot or gassed and burned. Bodies made docile objects, eventually reduced to food for rats. "Dead or alive. The distinction is irrelevant" (172). The narrative acquires at this point a staccato feverish rhythm; sentences cut short, grammar reduced to the barest essential as the randomness of the mind follows the calculated, purposeful depersonalising scheme.

And yet, the tenor of the story subtly, but significantly, aims at a different target. Once again, it does so by means of the narrative form, without comment or explicit causal connections. It is not the brutality of the extermination camps that the narrative foregrounds, despite the scenes depicted, but the equally deadly effects produced by freedom, when this freedom is set in a vacuum and its promises turn out to be a mirage. To Eva's eyes, untuned to the ways of the world, as the camp had encompassed all her experience other than childhood memories, the kind, cool impersonality of the D. P camp is as damaging as the calculated brutality and random cruelty of the extermination one. The difference lies only in the lack of physical violence: "[N]o killing. No last words. No cruelty. Just death" (187). Objectifying slips into subjectifying, that Foucaultian concept by which the individual is given the illusion of becoming a subject in his or her own right, whilst actually being subjected and "normalised" in a no longer visible but just as effective way. Eva feels looked at, weighed, labelled and placed, according to an image of her she cannot control and which escapes her. She is at a double remove from the world and from her inner self, as she faces an unrecognisable body under the depersonalising acrostics for the displaced. Memory and dreams start to blend in nightmares mixing with reality and soon overtake it, as freedom looks empty and the future is void of its promises. It is significant that release and officially granted freedom break the resistance the camp had not succeeded in breaking. Ironically there is no need to kill anymore. Eva herself willingly takes her life, sweetly reassuring the other half of her divided self with the soothing words she had always been offered, and which persistently prove to be lies: "You'll be fine", "everything will be fine", "don't worry, everything will be fine".

Of course the intention is fully political. It targets the aftermath of post-colonisation and enfranchisement processes, when people are granted a citizenship void of the actual means to enjoy it. It is Eva's infatuation with

the British trooper who individualises her in the German camp and gives her the illusion of once again being a human being, a woman with the prospect of the bare commonness of a woman's life —love and children— and her later disillusion, that causes her fall into madness and death. It is telling that this happens in Britain, where she follows him in the wake of his feeble offer of marriage and help. Indeed the narrative makes clear that he cannot keep his promise, not out of ill will but through lack of purpose and sheer ineffectuality. Pointedly, a strong purpose, albeit quite different in kind, is ironically shown in the case of the British troops responsible for ensuring the passage of the Jewish survivors from the German camps into Palestine, who are detained yet again in a barbed wire camp in Cyprus: "A dishevelled collections of tin huts and tents were illuminated by bright floodlights. However this shower of electricity, far from conferring any glamour, served only to confirm the pitiful nature of the whole shabby enterprise. The British had taken it upon themselves to imprison the defenceless" (6), we read. The fact that this episode is located at the beginning of the novel, with the liberators turned into guards of a new restrictive order, proleptically points to the fatal cycle of oppression and revolt that, according to Michel Foucault, opposes the consolatory fable of progress of traditional history.

In his influential essay on the discourse of History as scientific discipline, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", Foucault launched a fierce attack on the tendency to describe the history of morality in terms of a lineal development. Developments, for him are wishful illusion. They "may appear as a culmination", he wrote (1977: 83), but they are merely the current episodes in a series of subjugations", in which the rulers exploited at will their power to regulate and to punish through the emptiness of law and its system of rules, which could be bent to any purpose. Contrary to modern History's attempts at unifying synthesis and meaningful teleology, he encouraged a method of research that would record events in their singularity, outside an imposed chain of significations. Furthermore, he (1977: 76) urged his readers "to seek in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without History —in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts" This is precisely what postmodern historical novels are currently doing. Indeed what Caryl Phillips does in *The Nature of Blood* in which discrete, disparate events are explored through the deepest human predicaments to reveal the profoundly antihuman thrust of Western History, self-fashioned as a record of moral progress.

I mentioned earlier the import of emplotment and how it provided the syntax of a discourse by arranging the episodes in units structured in a sequential order, in which beginnings, middle and ends articulate the

meaning. The temporal and spatial randomness of the stories that are gathered together in this multiple plot novel is of course only apparent. The lack of sequence and the fragmentary nature of the structure are in themselves fully meaningful. Although there is no particular order and the stories are not told one at a time, but intermingle all the time, the links and the meaning are there in their very absence, highlighting the lie of a metahistory of lineal development and showing instead the pattern of repetition. Irony is one of the threads that link the disparate stories, conferring on them an overall negative historical meaning. Eva's catch-phrase in Germany "everything will be fine", is replicated in Malka's story in Israel, in which it is the Jews' turn to seize power and we are unobtrusively shown its incipient effects: "Everywhere, we were told the same thing. First we will teach you the language, then when you leave the absorption centre you will be able to study at the university. Don't worry, your parents will find work" (208). Eventually she ends up in a dancing club entertaining elderly men, about to be sacked, and being black, she is never asked to dance.

I also mentioned the elliptical structure of the novel within which the different stories spiralled forward in a related circular movement. In keeping with it, they all share a pattern of initial enticing progress that augurs personal success or liberation, inevitably to turn back into further confinement in society and the self. The protagonists move both geographically and socially from the margins into the centre, only to be drawn away and ruthlessly expelled far beyond the limits of the social order. Eva's father moves up the ladder socially and professionally but success almost coincides with defeat, bringing about in his fall that of his German wife and their two daughters. Geographically, he moves from the outskirts of the city into a four-storeyed house in the professional quarter that stands at its centre as a symbol of his acquired status, only to end up, all four, in small hidden rooms of back streets, and later on, in the deadly confinement of the extermination camps.

"I had moved from the edge of the world into the centre. From the dark margins to a place where even the weakest rays of the evening sun were caught and thrown back in a blaze of glory. I, a man born of royal blood, a mighty warrior, yet a man who, at one time, could view himself only as a poor slave, had been summoned to serve this state; to lead the Venetian army; to stand at the very centre of the empire" (107). This is Othello musing over his fortune while contemplating his newly wed wife, peacefully asleep. Indeed we do not need to be told the outcome of this story. It is known well enough. As T. S. Eliot (1963: 194) hauntingly expressed in "Burnt Norton", appropriating Mary Stuart's enigmatic motto, "in my end is

my beginning". Caryl Phillips situates the end of Othello's narrative almost at the point where Shakespeare began his, with premonitory advice urging the African renegade: "Black Uncle Tom... fighting the white man's war for him" (181), "while you still have time, jump from her bed and fly away home... no good can come from your foreign adventure" (183). In *The Nature of Blood*, Othello's story is a tale of foreboding. A story of strenuous self-advancement and of adjustment to others, for which he will pay a high price.

The inclusion of a literary piece of work, such as *Othello,* in the midst of other narratives dealing with historical events, though Phillips makes a point of citing its historical sources, is in keeping with two of the main tenets of new historicism, initially highly indebted to Michel Foucault. First, in that it "eliminates the old divisions between literature and its 'background', between text and context" (Veeser 1989: xi). And, second, in the non sequential and temporally distant arrangement of the narratives, showing the way in which "literary and non-literary texts can interpenetrate over a great historical divide" (Veeser 1994: 16).

Othello is one of the tragedies that has undergone the most thorough critical revision by new historicists, not to mention feminist and multi-cultural critics. In bringing together their critical practices and insights, namely the juxtaposition and relating of events belonging to different realms of experience, and offering different perspectives on their ideological ground, Phillips highlights a recurring historical pattern ignored or suppressed by History's grand narrative of progress. In this respect, the postmodern historical novel shows itself to be particularly well fitted for the analysis of those ideological pressures that have shaped events, both private and public. By rejecting the portrait of the past as the self-contained and complete world depicted by modern history and by focusing instead on the distortions and reworkings that subjective interpretation and reconstruction entail, it has the ability to yield ever new, often competing, meanings. Furthermore, it throws new light on the way narrative itself shapes meaning as it brings to the fore, on the one hand, the ways in which representation is pervaded by ideology, in the Althusserian terms of the imaginary relationship the individual entertains with his real life conditions. On the other, it shows how the personal is political, as feminist theory had insistently claimed. This means, that those practices which for ages have been largely dismissed as legally and socially irrelevant because of their ascription to the realm of the private and the domestic, are in fact at the basis of the social organisation and have immense consequences at the public level. No wonder Foucault encouraged historians to look into "sentiments, love, conscience, instincts".

Another related feature of the postmodern historical novel is the rewriting of events from the point of view of those generally ignored by traditional history. Women, for instance, have been and still are conspicuously absent from historical records. By choosing a female voice and the ordinary experience of an ordinary girl for the account of an event central to the novel, and one as historically significant as the Holocaust, Phillips brings to the fore the largely disregarded history of women. *The Nature of Blood* exposes their exclusion from the centres of decision and power that articulate social pressures into practices, whilst showing them to be the first victims of the ensuing social organisation. In Eva's narrative, her mother is the first one to see the impending turn of events. She insists once and again on the need to leave Germany whilst it is still possible and migrate to America where they could all make a new start. But her pleading and insistence are of no account to her husband, estranged from her out of his social self-consciousness, until it is too late. The fate of Eva's eldest sister, Margot, is related to the sexual abuse she suffers at the hands of the man in whose house she is in hiding. The suicide of the German woman who gives shelter to Eva and her parents is related to her relationship with her Jewish lover. Eva's own death is ultimately related to her abandonment by the British soldier that befriended her in the camp. None of these women have any power of decision regarding their own lives, conditioned as they are by powerful, cultural and emotional or psychological ties. Eva herself indirectly makes her mother responsible for her father's stubborn refusal to listen to his wife's pleas, guessing that if she had been more compliant towards him, less herself in a word, she would have been able to win him into leaving for America.

Desdemona is another such victim. From the very beginning of Othello's narrative she is unconsciously associated in his mind with the prevailing reductively binary classification of woman as either virgin or whore, the borderline between the two always being unclear. In his first long monologue while contemplating his wife in her sleep, he wonders at the fate that had "deposited her into such a predicament". In his musing she is cast as object of the public male gaze, in which he shares in full connivance with the accompanying sexual speculations: "No longer to be gazed upon as desirable, yet unattainable". Imagined by others as "easy prey for their lascivious thoughts". "Truly, what am I to make of her?", he wonders. "In her chastity, loyalty and honour, she is the most un-Venetian of women, yet is there some sport to this lady's actions? I am familiar with the renowned deceit of the Venetian courtesan, yet I have taken a Venetian for a wife. Has some plot been hatched about me?" (106).

Shakespearean critics are quite unanimous in tracing Othello's jealousy back to a profound sexual anxiety that makes him prone to believe Iago's slanderous accusations of Desdemona. As Gayle Greene (1995: 48) puts it, "though he has powerful instigation in Iago, Iago has power only because his insinuations ring deeply true to him". As she goes on to show, his anxiety is grounded in men's internalisation of women's ambivalent identity, an ambivalence which makes the ties between them precarious, whilst always leaving the prerrogative to cut them in male hands. Desdemona's father does so when discovering that she has eloped with the Moor. He thereupon disowns her as his child and warns Othello that having deceived her father, he may well be the next one to be deceived. The plausible generalisation of an act is soon to be coupled to the generalisation of lustful sexuality that Iago attributes to women. It is indeed the shared male assumptions on the nature of women that makes Othello believe Iago sooner than Desdemona. And yet it is also quite clear from the play, that this identity which has been bestowed on women by men has no grounds whatsoever as far as the three feminine characters are concerned (Hidalgo 1996, Neely 1980). As Greene (1995: 54) highlights, "men's misconception of women are in Desdemona's words 'horrible fancies', projections of their own worst fears and failings" (iv, ii, 26).

In the novel, Caryl Phillips emphasises from the beginning of the narrative the nature of Othello's anxiety, and leaves it clear that Iago will succeed because the seeds of the tragedy are already there in the African's heart. In *The Nature of Blood* Othello has a wife and a son of his own, both of whom he has left behind in his native country and is about to betray. As he wandered through the city of Venice, he gazed at it in awe and was lured by its golden vision, a vision he saw as profoundly "desirable but attainable". For months he has been sailing its intricate labyrinth of channels sliding into its inmost water lanes. Desdemona's enclosed garden is at the centre of the empire, being the daughter of one of the powerful senators in whose hands is his destiny. The seclusion of the place, the watery surroundings and the tales of self-aggrandisement make the realms of power and sexual desire interlock metaphorically. Phillips makes clear that the sexual anxiety generated in Othello, though indeed projected onto Desdemona, has more to do with his own self and past than with their mutual relation. In this he differs from Greenblatt (1994: 70), for whom Desdemona's frank sexual desire is unconsciously perceived as adulterous by her husband, on account of the prevailing Christian conception of marriage and the suspect nature of pleasure and sexual love. In Phillips' version, Othello's adultery moves beyond the

sexual realm into the political, as it involves turning his back on his own kin and people to fully embrace his white masters' values and ambitions.

Gayle Greene perceptively remarks that Othello "indicates considerably more interest in what made Desdemona love him than what made him love her, and a reliance on [...] certain "props of assurance": a dependence on the esteem of others for his sense of himself" (1995: 50). In the same vein, in *The Nature of Blood* Desdemona is the means by which he accomplishes the successful fashioning of an identity that becomes not only acceptable to the Western "others", but is loved by the daughter of one of the most important protagonists. She is the token of his centredness and hence, the possibility of her betrayal, albeit sexual, transcends sexuality. It threatens the core of the identity he has so laboriously fashioned.

In his seminal article "The Improvisation of Power", Stephen Greenblatt identifies narrativity and performance as the essential constituents of Othello's character. It is indeed quite evident from the play that Desdemona's initial attraction to him is grounded in his narrative abilities, in the tales he tells her of wondrous deeds and of the fearful dangers he had run into and overcome. Greenblatt (1994: 59) argues that "Desdemona's falling in love with the self fashioned by his narrative seals Othello's ceasing to be himself". Phillips, for his part, reveals quite clearly in his own narrative the self-delusive nature of the black man's fantasies. His self-absorption, his keen observation of others in order to learn from them and grow in their esteem. He even uses Desdemona as a source of valuable self-interested information, using the occasion of their meetings "to learn from her about Venetian society" (1997: 134). It is his narcissism and his courting of Western values that do not allow him to be a good judge of character as he relies too heavily on the perception of himself solely in relation to a culture within which he is a foreigner. Caryl Phillips' novel focuses on the close association of ethnic and gender prejudices resulting in such a tragic output of historical violence. Othello has internalised both. His image of himself is constructed by his search for his reflexion in the eyes of others. He is profoundly self-conscious of his appearance and of the impression he makes and for all his pride and boasts of personal worth, he is only too eager to trust, to please and adjust. Indeed when the plot is hatched, he will make an easy prey.

By juxtaposing stories within a wide spectrum of factual truth with texts whose status is unmistakably literary, the novel clearly endorses the new historicist claim to the collapsing of text and context. The reopening and rewriting of historical texts, regardless of whether they belong to the literary or the "historical" realm, perform the same ideological function. They display

the cultural, political and ideological pressures that have shaped representations of identity and social groups, and expose the outcome of their clashing interests. At the same time, they show the hidden links and the common nature of discreet events, encouraging the reader to reflect on the untold history that binds them together.

Narrative closure has an ideological clinching effect, as well as being the ultimate means to articulate the meaning of the story. In consonance with the remarks made above on the non-sequential yet elliptical structure of the novel and on the apparent arbitrariness of its beginning and ending, I wish to point now to the undecidable quality of its closure. The circularity of the narrative, after a wide span of centuries, brings us again to the beginning. Shortly after, in fact, because we are allowed the very brief, though necessary, glimpse of the outcome of the hopes deposited in the Promised Land. This time we are told the story of a black Jewish Ethopian young woman and her predicament in Israel amongst white Jews. History blends once again into another random story, yet again showing no development and no progress, only a sinister pattern of recurrence. A narrative doomed to an indefinite replay of the past with slight variations. We are left with the lonely image of Stephen Stern, who has briefly met this black Jewish woman and seen through her story, sadly rewinding scenes of his own lost life and the wasted lives of his nieces, Eva and Margot, back in Germany. His arms vainly outstretched to reach them signal the unbridgeable gaps between sequences of subjugations, within which Malka's near future prefigures yet another episode. The mood is indeed melancholic.

It is here that the pattern of affairs between the events is brought to the fore to reveal that single drama that Foucault's (1977: 85) genealogy shows History as staging: "the endlessly repeated play of dominations". Genealogy was for Foucault "a way of analysing multiple open-ended, heterogeneous trajectories of discourses, practices and events, and of establishing their patterned relationships without recourse to regimes of truths that claim pseudo-naturalistic laws or global necessities" (Mitchell Dean 1994: 35). But Foucault's alternative, and Caryl Phillips' in his wake, though indeed drastically "curative" of false illusions, as it was intended to be, replaces the discarded "consolatory" metanarrative of moral progress with an indefinite recurrence of oppression. "In this perspective, the future no longer exists", Baudrillard (1994: 11) wrote accurately in "The reversal of history", and "if there is no longer a future, there is no longer an end either. So *this is not even the end of history*" (original emphasis), but simply another point on its endless circularity.

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