

## Temporal deconstructions: narrating the ruins of time

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In her imaginative experiment in literary reflection, *Artful* (2012), Ali Smith toys with E.M. Forster's observation: 'In a novel there is always a clock.'<sup>1</sup> This 'annoying fact', she observes, means 'the short story can do anything it likes with notions of time; it moves and works spatially regardless of whether it adheres to chronology or conventional plot.' (A, p. 29) *Artful*, with its ghostly and ghosted re-enactment of lectures on literature conducted through the processes of memory and mourning, is itself an example of the elasticity Smith attributes to the short story form: 'it can be as imagistic and as achronological as it likes and will still hold its form. In that it emphasizes the momentousness of the moment. At the same time it deals in, and doesn't compromise on, the purely momentary nature of everything, both timeless and transient.' (A, p. 29) The novel, by contrast, is 'bound to and helplessly interested in society [...] and society is always attached to, in debt to, made by and revealed in the trappings of its time.' It is 'bound to be linear [...] even when it seems to or attempts to deny linearity.' (p. 29) Yet Smith is one of a number of Scottish women novelists who have butted against Forster's 'annoying' assertion that 'It is never possible for a novelist to deny time inside the fabric of his novel.' (A, p. 32) In fiction by Kate Atkinson, A.L. Kennedy, Ali Smith and Louise Welsh relationships between past, present and future are challenged by the reshaping of narrative linearity and through a broader engagement with the forces of history and change.

These writers are not alone in their preoccupation with temporality. There has been a growing fashion in fiction and film for playing with time, creating alternative chronologies and parallel narratives. In cinema *Sliding Doors* (1998) offers an early instance; *About Time* (2013) a more recent one.<sup>2</sup> Films based on books, such as *One Day* (2011), adapted from the novel by David Nicolls (2009) and *The Time Traveller's Wife* (2009), drawn from Audrey Niffenegger's 2003 novel) also manifest this fascination<sup>3</sup>. In fiction, Laura Barnett's well-marketed *The Versions of Us* (2015) challenges the reader to piece together three alternative scenarios, different life narratives for her main characters: 'what if you had said yes? Some moments change everything' shouts its cover.<sup>4</sup> Like *Sliding Doors*, *About Time* and *One Day*, Barnett's novel focus on heterosexual romance and relationships: what would have been 'right', what would have led to the happiest life, with happiness expressed in terms of finding the right partner, sustaining the most solid relationship and formulating the 'best' future for the self in an existing social order. Although experimental in their thematic playing with time and narrative structures, these challenges to linearity are ultimately conventional in their endorsement of an intimate public sphere, in which the 'core context of politics' is assumed to be 'the sphere of private life.'<sup>5</sup> Their temporal experimentation reinforces a fantasy in which the redrawing of chronology serves to affirm the realization of self in the context of romance and family.

In contemporary Scottish women's fiction, challenges to temporality and linear thinking take a rather different turn. In their combination of 'historical' narratives and textual experimentation, Atkinson, Kennedy, Smith and Welsh,

produce fiction with a more challenging ideological force. This essay investigates their dialogues with 'the ruins of time' as political engagements with temporality. It suggests that their writing can be understood as addressing Walter Benjamin's call to conceptualise a 'materialist' history which captures agency in the moment of the now, challenging the 'eternal' image of the past embodied by historicism and instead striving 'to blast open the continuum of history.'<sup>6</sup> Playing with plot, agency and history, all the novels discussed reconfigure the pressures of the past and the possibilities of the present. In their experiments with chronology Atkinson and Smith in particular also address the gendering of history, engaging with Julia Kristeva's notion of 'women's time' and its challenge to linear thinking. But reading their work, and that of A.L. Kennedy through the lens of 'queer temporality' offers further illumination of their questioning of the absolute value of 'reproductive futurism'.<sup>7</sup> In its dystopian vision, Louise Welsh's trilogy presents a more apocalyptic challenge to 'future-thinking'. All these novels use temporal experimentation to present a powerful challenge to conventional narratives around romance and reproduction. Yet they do so with a cautious but curiously optimistic and redemptive emphasis on love which invests their formal experimentation with emotional affect.

Through choice of the historical periods they revisit or imagine, all the novels discussed operate in dark worlds that might be called death-inflected. Kennedy and Atkinson focus on war and the repetition of deathly-action in bombing; Smith's novel is shaped by death in both personal and structural terms; Welsh, influenced by her knowledge of the Black Death, reimagines a contemporary

plague scenario. Yet while each novel is drawn again and again to endings and darkness, each - in its challenge to conventional temporalities - performs a positive, even joyful, interrogation of dominant modes of thinking about history and agency. This essay investigates how, by refusing future-centred narratives, by turning to different pasts, by allowing death to drive their novels, they produce a precarious *jouissance*, described by Ali Smith as ‘that shout, that upward spring, that staircase ladder thing’ and by Atkinson as that feeling ‘as if one’s living on the forward edge of one’s life, as if one never knows whether one is going to fall or fly’ (2015)?<sup>8</sup> Through their interest in the ‘now’ of the past or future and their exploitation of its potentially explosive relationship to the dynamics of history, these novels challenge heteronormative futurity, confronting the very genres in which they are working. Each text is, in one way or another, a romance but the ‘hope’ it engenders through love is not, as in Barnett’s novel, directed towards a future, or used to determine a conclusion; rather each creates ‘a resolution’ presented as provisional, fragmentary and tentative. Redemption – of various kinds – occupies the space of the ‘now’.

In her World War Two novel *Day* (2007) A.L. Kennedy, a writer constantly experimenting in form and genre, confronts linearity in her exploration of a specific historical moment.<sup>9</sup> Kate Atkinson’s acclaimed *Life After Life* (2013) structures its parallel chronologies of the First and Second World Wars around the idea of chance.<sup>10</sup> *A God In Ruins* (2015), her subsequent experiment with narrative chronology and the notion of ‘what if’, also focuses on World War Two and its legacy, returning to many of the same characters. In *A God in Ruins* Atkinson suggests that the world in which time was ‘dependable’, where ‘the

tenses that Western civilization was constructed on' were secure, belongs firmly to the past. (*AGR*, p. 73) In both novels the iterative return to that past serves to shatter its security and question the ways in which we narrate our relation to time and to history. Ali Smith begins *How to be Both* (2014), partly set in Renaissance Italy and her most explicit confrontation with historicity, by using Hannah Arendt's introduction to Benjamin's *Illuminations* as epigraph: 'Although the living is subject to the ruins of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization'. She immediately alerts readers to her own chronological experimentation. (*HTBB*, p. ix ) Inspired by her interest in medieval history and the Black Death, Louise Welsh set her most recent genre foray in a dystopian, end-stopped future for the 'Plague Times trilogy'. *A Lovely Way to Burn* (2014), *Death is a Welcome Guest* (2015) and *No Dominion* (2017) question 'deceived notions' (*HTBB*, p. 172) of narrative linearity and historical determinism. In their turn to historical moments each of these novels is executing what Walter Benjamin described as a 'tiger's leap' into the past in order to question assumptions of the present and about the future.

Benjamin drew on this striking image of ferocious energy in the 'tiger's leap' to describe how fashion (although 'working in an arena in which the ruling class gives the commands') has a 'flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago.'<sup>11</sup> He argued that because 'History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now', a historical materialist should be equally aggressive, recognising 'a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past', and take 'cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of

history.<sup>12</sup> In their fixation on present-centred pastness, the novels by Kennedy, Smith and Atkinson try to blast past and present worlds into a different recognition; Welsh challenges through a present-shaped engagement with an apocalyptic future.

They flag their intentions in each case. In Kennedy's text this is achieved through her title. Smith, as ever deploying the epigraph to potent effect, quotes Arendt on Benjamin but also a range of other speculations on time and the novel including Giorgio Bassani (*HTBB*, p. ix). Atkinson draws on Plato's thought on time in her epigraph to *Life After Life* but also quotes Heraclitus. Atkinson and Smith's fictions are particularly striking in their deployment of quotation. Welsh meanwhile frames her fiction with reference to both a medieval past and the dystopias that shaped her nineteen-sixties childhood. In the accumulation of such fragments they deploy Benjamin's strategy of using quotations 'like robbers by the roadside who make an aimed attack and relieve an idler of his convictions.'<sup>13</sup> As Arendt suggests, this became for Benjamin 'the only and possible way of dealing with the past without the aid of tradition.'<sup>14</sup> Paratextual strategies of confronting and rupturing time are reinforced by the 'historical' nature of the fiction and the anti-linearity of their narratives. Combined they challenge – in different degrees – future-based thinking. For Kennedy and Welsh the knowing movement between different moments in time and the clash of discourses this produces also serves to destabilise familiarity. The fiction of all four offers a further engagement with Benjamin, encouraging readers into that 'tiger's leap' created by fierce destruction of assumptions around past, present and future.

Yet while these literary tactic serves to disrupt complacency,, a notable feature of all these texts, death-focused, textually and thematically challenging as they are, is their capacity to engage readers with narratives around love, hope and redemption. In so doing they invoke emotional effects as intense as the more popular fictions described earlier. The novels achieve versions of the political challenge to future-centred thinking expressed through the theoretical queering of time, identified by Lee Edelman as the ‘determined opposition to the underlying structures of the politics. An opposition to ‘the governing fantasy of achieving Symbolic closure through the marriage of identity to futurity in order to realize the social subject’ can be read into each of these novels.<sup>15</sup> Yet while they rupture conventional expectations of the novel form, of closure, of pleasure, these novels still sustain a remarkable level of emotional engagement.

When the young artist at the centre of Smith’s novel *How to Be Both* paints one of her first subjects she invites her to ‘relax’, orders her “Don’t move’, then asks apologetically, ‘Can you do both?’ (*HTBB*, p. 267) These novels produce similarly contradictory effects. They allow readers to relax into narratives of linear time and the flow of feeling: they demand the empathy and attention more commonly associated with realism. But they also ask us to be tensile in engagement with the movements of time when linearity is disrupted, as achieved in Smith’s text by typographical experimentation and a diptych structure or in Atkinson’s by repetition of a plot line until it loses all familiarity. Each writer in their own way achieves, within the novel form, that elasticity of the imagination that Smith identified with the short story while producing successful novels that speak to

wider audiences than the more rarefied genre. Such a combination of metafictional experimentation and more conventionally realist affect as seen in Smith most obviously but also in Atkinson, Kennedy and Welsh is itself strategic, allowing the reader to be 'both' – i.e. involved and abstracted, in the now and in the beyond now. This combination creates one aspect of the distinctive nature of their explorations of temporality and makes their writing so compelling.

The precarious balance of absorption and rupturing these novels achieve is most evident in their conclusions. *Day* ends with a moment of hope but in a future tense and a precarious situation;

And you will tell him, "Yes. I'll see her again."

And you will feel like laughing.

(*D*, p. 280)

While the idea of Alfie Day being reunited with his beloved is affirmative in the context of his story, the ending presents it as provisional at best, if not imaginary. In *How to Be Both* one of the novel's paired narratives concludes with George 'For now, in the present tense', contemplating a painting and future affirmative action, but thinking 'it's definitely something to do. For the foreseeable.' (*HTBB*, p. 186). The conditional conclusion of George is not the novel's only resistance to the sense of an ending: the 15<sup>th</sup>-century painter who haunts the other narrative cannot remember 'ending', refusing conclusion even in typography:

But how did I then/ End?

I can't recall an end at all, any end I ever, can't, any, demise, no- ' (*HTBB*, p.202)

*Life After Life* closes with yet another version of its narrative beginning on 11<sup>th</sup> February 1910, and a discussion of time: 'We could all be stuck here for days.' (*LAL*, p. 477) while *A God in Ruins* concludes with 'please stop reading now.' (*AGR*, p. 384) Louise Welsh's powerful conclusion to the Plague Times Trilogy ends with a moment between father and adopted son, poised between life and death and ambiguously concluded conversation: 'his son was crying and Magnus could not be sure that he had heard him'. (*ND* p. 372) In each case the novels resist an ending which affirms an achieved present or points into a secure future. Rather they remain poised in moments of the 'now' which are both positive and precarious. In this respect they resist notions of political action which celebrate transition into an imagined future. When Edelman critiques the dominant idea of change effected through the myth of 'one day more', he notes, 'we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child.'<sup>16</sup> Such thinking, Edelman and others have argued, subsumes action in the moment to sacrifice for what might come. Precariously, tentatively, these novels seek to break patterns of future-centred thinking, combining historical specificity with the moment of the now.

Each novel achieves this in different ways and through a range of effects. In *Life After Life* Kate signals the nature and the structure of her experiment from the outset, in an epigraph voiced by one of its characters: 'What if we had a chance to do it again and again until we finally got it right?' (*LAL*, p. 7 ) With its

beginning in 1910 and putative ending in 1967 the novel's fragmented narrative reworks the possibilities of Ursula Beresford Fox in a range of stories that demonstrate the impact of historical forces but also of chance. Ursula's own increasing sense of having lived these events before, a kind of *déjà vu*, also becomes a driver of the different plots. This device provokes questions not just about temporality or the nature of time but also around agency and the capacity to live a 'good' life. The novel thus challenges both the observation of Ursula's friend Klara that 'Hindsight is a wonderful thing. If we all had it there would be no history to write about' (*LAL*, p. 327) and the claim by Sylvie, Ursula's mother, that 'we all end up in the same place' (*LAL*, p. 240). Ursula instead suggests that time 'isn't circular, it's a palimpsest' (*LAL*, p. 456)

Through these constant references to competing concepts of temporality and through its structure, of repeated but different versions of events, the novel asks two questions: can one change history? And can the understanding of history be altered? When a war co-worker during an air raid misquotes John Donne, (Holy Sonnet 13), 'What if this were the world's last night', Ursula corrects him 'What if this present were the world's last night?' and reflects: 'The word 'present' makes all the difference, don't you think? It makes it seem as if one's somehow in the thick of it, which we are, rather than simply contemplating a theoretical concept.' (*LAL*, p. 375) This statement drives much of the novel: in terms of history what does it mean to be 'in the thick of it'?

As *Life After Life* covers a period of striking development of women's roles in the public sphere, questions of how agency may be achieved, and the larger concern

with what agency and history might actually mean, are inevitably articulated through an awareness of gender and the 'historicised' acquisition by women of the power to change events. In the section entitled 'A Lovely Day Tomorrow', the sixteen-year old Ursula has to experience, in re-iteration, sexual assault by a visiting American: each time her rejection of it is more vigorous and her subsequent life becomes less one of oppression, passivity and unhappiness as her increasingly forceful challenge to the aggressor helps her avoid an unwanted pregnancy, disastrous marriage and alcoholism..

The novel poses the same questions around agency on a larger scale when Ursula tries to alter the course of political rather than personal history. Impelled by the question of 'what if?' the novel confronts, through Ursula, the question 'what if someone shot Hitler?' Through establishing a personal friendship with Eva Braun in one of her repeated 'lives', Ursula becomes part of Hitler's inner circle. When she has the opportunity to shoot Hitler it is in the feminized context of a German cafe, where everyone is indulging in hot chocolate and luscious cakes. Ursula's actions - producing a gun out of her handbag, having just dabbed at her lips with a lacy handkerchief - offers a powerfully gendered moment, bringing together the domestic and the political spheres. This instance of female action changing the course of history challenges dominant models of female passivity and male agency.

The refocusing of history through a gendered lens in the novel's events is paralleled by its narrative structure and explicit observations on time which reinforce Virginia Woolf's rejection of life as a 'series of gig lamps symmetrically

arranged'.<sup>17</sup> The novel questions dominantly gendered versions of history but also interrogates progressional versions of temporality as articulated through its central character: the past 'is a straight line for Pamela but a jumble for Ursula' (*LAL*, p. 70) leading Ursula to reflect in Woolfian tones: 'Her memories seemed like a cascade of echoes. Could echoes cascade?' (*LAL* p. 156) .

Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* also reconfigures the gendering of public and private histories, most obviously through the novel's subject and structure. By reimagining a 15<sup>th</sup>-century painter as a woman and juxtaposing her life story with a contemporary companion narrative around recently bereaved George, the engagement with particular versions of feminism is evident in its rethinking of 'history'. Both narratives are framed by feminist comments from the contemporary heroine's, dead mother. The challenge to gender categorization produced by the ambiguity around each central character – boy or girl, both? - is mirrored in the diptych device which allows the two narratives to be published and read in different orders. Two stories, two lives, intersect across time. In *How to be Both* and *Life After Life* the overall structuring of the novel – and the spiraling and fragmented nature of typography and text, often resisting even the linearity of a sentence – challenges conventional ways of organizing gender, time and experience.

In both novels then we might discern the melding of the various responsive phases of women to history identified by Julie Kristeva in her essay *Women's Time*.<sup>18</sup> The novels acknowledge the early attempts of the women's movement to gain a place in linear time by their very subject matter. Kristeva's second phase

in which 'linear temporality has been almost totally refused, and as a consequence there has arisen an exacerbated distrust of the entire political dimension' informs the narrative strategies of each. The third phase of mixing the two attitudes - 'insertion into history and the radical refusal of the subjective limitations imposed by this history's time on an experiment carried out in the name of irreducible difference' - emerges from their combination of experimentation, versions of historical specificity and thematic concerns.<sup>19</sup>

Yet in their narrative structures, in their refusal of anything but the most precarious of endings, each novel also present, in its own distinctive way, a further challenge to what Judith Halberstam has described as 'the force of middle-class logic of reproductive temporality. Halberstam suggests that 'in Western culture, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired period of maturation; and we create longevity as the most desirable future... and pathologise modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity.'<sup>20</sup> In their refusal to adhere to that model of temporality, in their playing with 'then and now', with the dissolving of those separations, these writers partake in the 'difficult work of thinking outside narrative history, reworking linear temporality' - in order to see experiences 'not regulated by 'clock time' or a conceptualization of the present as singular and fleeting; experiences not narrowed by the idea that time moves steadily forward, that it is scarce, that we live on only one temporal plane.'<sup>21</sup> They likewise challenge that assumption identified by Edelman 'that time is historical by 'nature' and history demands to be understood in historicizing terms.'<sup>22</sup>

The novelists considered achieve this in various ways. Most obviously Atkinson, Smith and, to a lesser extent Kennedy, do so through the structure of their fictions. In its emphasis on a re-iterated now-ness *Life After Life*, can be read as a manifestation of Benjamin's challenge to understand history as 'time filled by the presence of the now.'<sup>23</sup> Smith acknowledges this concept through her parallel narratives and textual disruptions of linearity. Atkinson's most recent novel, *A God in Ruins*, appears to move back and forwards in time but comes to rest in a moment of present which dissolves and to extent denies everything that has gone before. Kennedy's novel occupies a series of moments in the past, narrated in the tenses of past, present and future. Welsh, in some respects the least experimental of these writers, transposes a narrative from the past – plague – into the form of contemporary thriller and dystopian world, forcing her reader to reconfigure their notions of history.

Secondly, in most cases these writers offer explicit critique of 'history as linear narrative' in which, as Edelman describes, 'meaning succeeds in revealing itself - *as itself* - through time.' In *How to Be Both* George reflects that: 'History is horrible. It is mounds of bodies pressing down into the ground below cities and towns in the unending wars.' George is appalled by history. 'It's only redeeming feature is that it tends to be well and truly over.' (*HTBB*, p. 104) This version of history, however, is subverted by the whole narrative impetus of the novel, with its intertwining stories and typographical and textual attacks on linearity.

George's initial observation that 'That was then. This is now [...] That's what time is' falls apart in the context of the novel's events. (*HTBB* p. 103) *How to be Both* is founded on the premise that this is NOT what time is; George, like the reader, has

to move on from linear ways of thinking. Is there, the novel asks, a different way in which we can configure being in time?

*Life After Life* likewise challenges assumptions about history and time in terms of a political imagination. Ursula critiques the deployment of teleological narratives in politics when she realizes that 'most people muddled through events and only in retrospect realized their significance; the Fuhrer was different, he was consciously making history for the future. Only a narcissist could do that.' *HTBB* p. 324) Hitler himself can be read as embodying an extreme version of 'the coercive belief in the paramount value of futurity'<sup>24</sup>.

In *Day*, a novel whose temporal 'nowness' is embodied by its title, A.L. Kennedy also explores the fantasies of futurity offered by World War Two through her account of Alfie member of a bomber-crew brotherhood, mingling memories of his early life with an abusive father, the intensity of his war experiences and his disillusioning return to civil life. *Day*, as Petra Rau notes, is one of the few British novels to engage with 'the moral complexity of the the Strategic Air Offensive over Germany.'<sup>25</sup> In its masculine focus, it might seem removed from Kristeva's engagement with woman's time. But the novel also initiates a conversation around temporality and agency which has relevance beyond the context of war or masculinity and is continued in the other novels explored here. As evident in its engagement with the temporal, flagged by the constant punning around its hero's name –e.g. 'Let's call it A. Day'. (*D*, p. 35), Kennedy's novel is consistently concerned with the processes of time, with the dynamic between

the individual life and its broader historical context, and with the simultaneously comforting and estranging nature of repetition.

While the novel, as with most of Kennedy's fiction, plays with and challenges linearity, the more complex engagements with time emerge from the responses of Day to his experiences of the war and afterwards. Even his reflections on his own impenetrable accent are couched in the language of past, present and future tenses: *'Yo bin and yo bay. Yo doe and yo day. You are, or you have been, and you aren't or you haven't been. You do or you don't or you didn't.'* (*D*, p. 8) As a character hurled into history, Day is interested in the possibilities of change while also recognising its apparent impossibility. Early in the novel he articulates a tension between the fact that 'a man had to imagine he'd get a chance at freedom, a bit of space. The interval between alternatives, that gave you space' (*D*, p. 2) and the 'trouble' being 'that you had so much to do: breathing, sleeping, waking, eating: you couldn't avoid them, were built to need them and so they just went on and on. Where were the other possibilities, the changes you might want to make [...]?' (*D*, p. 2) The war experience represents an extreme example (and in some respects a resolution of) these challenges. While exposure to death and to grand narratives attenuates time - 'Infinity is fond of wars, they give it a way to come in' (*D*, p. 10) - war conversely produces (and can only operate through) a welcome present-centredness. When Day becomes part of the bomber air crew he observes: 'being in the air crew obliterates past. [...] They were the crew and nothing other than the crew and that would be for ever. [...] The crew was extremely particular whenever it dealt with time - it woke and as live and moving in that moment only. It would not be concerned with its past and had no

business thinking of its future.’ (*D*, pp. 68-9) Kennedy thus deploys World War Two, the bomber-crew and its death-centred focus to re-imagine relationships with linear time.

Kennedy’s novel shares with Atkinson’s exploration of war, and in particular the dynamics of the bombing raid, an interest in challenging the rationale of future-centred thinking while also finding a positive dimension to this death-inflected sphere. In *Day* Alfie’s attempts after the war to expose the SS background of fellow film-set worker Vasyl and prevent him from coming to Britain are met with an official admonition: ‘We must think of the future, not the past.’ (*D*, p. 263) This political expediency of moving on from past destruction as a necessary step towards reconstruction serves as a mirror of the shaping ideology behind bombing raids – destruction now for a better tomorrow – which Alfie has to struggle with in his own consciousness. The novel overall rejects this kind of future thinking – when the ‘Good German’ tells Alfie he ‘should have kids. It would suit you. it is ‘Knowing that was probably untrue. Knowing that most hopes were misleading. And knowing that Day, Alfred F., would not be all right.’ (*D*, p. 164) Likewise Alfie’s fellow crew-member, Molloy, when nearing the end of his tour of missions, is destroyed by ‘the hope thing’ which makes him unable to function in the moment. (*D*, p. 234) Alfie himself is shown singing ‘Jerusalem’, the epitome of hope, at the end of the novel simply as a means of letting British workers on the film escape into Europe: he is ‘yelling the England that will never be.’ (*D*, p. 268) while helping his fellows escape the pull of history.

Much of the theoretical work about queer temporality emerged out of the Aids crisis, shaped by living in ways in which 'future' becomes something else. The centring of both *Day* and *A God in Ruins* on the Second World War suggests that it performs a similar function. Two out of the three novels have a particular emphasis on the bomber pilots, whose survival statistics were horrendous. In the first novel, one of Ursula's incarnations is as an air raid warden, another catalyzer for awareness of death. Even the phrase echoing from the close of each narrative in *Life After Life*, 'darkness fell' connotes the falling of bombs. Bombing then, and in particular bombing raids over Germany, become oxymoronic emblems of repetition and finality. In the similarity and difference of each raid, in the heavy droning of the planes that accompanies each narrative account of 'life after life' which each time is a nearer death after death, culminating in the presentness of death and the completion of 'a life lived perfectly', the repetitiveness of a Derridean death drive is enacted. The bombing raid is both a repeated action and one of illuminating intensity in its specific nature. In *Day* Alfie moves from the repetitiveness of bombing in which 'you see the targets beside targets; nothing but targets [...] you don't talk about death. You only ever say you have knowledge of the workings of bombs' to the cognisance when flying over Hamburg that 'This is death. This is the edge of the real face of death, its size – we burned the sky open today and now death has come in.' (*D*, p. 235) Burning the sky open carries a deeper implication, echoing the blowing open of the continuum of history encouraged by Benjamin.

Yet it is from the naming of death that Alfie finds a measure of happiness and redemption in love – a love with Joyce that can only ever be in the moment and,

in the context of her failed marriage, only enjoyed, as the complicated tenses of the novel's conclusion suggests, in the day. Edelman argues that 'If the fate of the queer is to figure the fate that cuts the thread of futurity, if the *jouissance*, the corrosive enjoyment intrinsic to queer (non) identity annihilates the fetishistic *jouissance* that works to *consolidate* identity by allowing reality to coagulate around its ritual reproduction, then the only oppositional status to which our queerness could ever lead would depend on our taking seriously the place of the death drive we're called on to figure.'<sup>26</sup> The novels discussed here take seriously the place of the death drive, that which cannot be represented, but engage too with the possibilities of 'corrosive enjoyment' that its acknowledgement might bring. Queer time, suggests Halberstam, 'even as it emerges from the Aids crisis, is not only about compression and annihilation; it is also about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the concentrations of family, inheritance and child rearing.'<sup>27</sup> In their experiments with different ways of scripting temporality both *Day and Life After Life* focus on death as a means of rebutting linearity and determinism and of reclaiming presentness.

Louise Welsh's 'Plague Times' trilogy can also be understood as a product of new thinking around temporality emerging from the AIDS crisis. Welsh is a writer consistently interested in generic experiments. In this trilogy she plays with her fondness for the thriller genre in fiction set in a dystopian future in which a fast spreading lurgy, 'the Sweats', disrupts the patterns of conventional life and shakes up the possibilities of action and escape. A historian of the medieval period, Welsh collapses plague life and modern civilization in enriching and destabilising ways. The apocalyptic thinking of these novels, as she notes in the

acknowledgements of *A Lovely Way to Burn*, 'goes back to my early childhood, a mild obsession with 'the bomb', the television dramas, *Threads* by Barry Hines and *Survivors* by Terry Nation. The idea that the collapse of civilization is imminent has been around since ancient times.' (ND, p. 357) For all their apparent generic conventionality, the concept of plague underpinning the texts raises questions around chance and determinism: the 'Sweats' appears to arrive at random so those who escape cannot claim agency but are nevertheless endowed with it. The social breakdown brought about by the plague likewise poses political questions relevant to present-centred situation.

While Atkinson, Smith and Kennedy reshape relationships with the past, and in so doing challenge future-thinking narratives, Welsh's work takes a rather different direction. It might be understood in terms of a response to 'future-consciousness', associated with millennial thinking, with 9/11, with the temporalities of modernity in which the future is envisaged as empty yet constantly imagined and feared.<sup>28</sup> The dark preoccupations of her trilogy are less with past death worlds and more with a contemporary concern around what Kathleen Stewart defines as 'Trauma Time': 'We are in trauma time now. Where the here and now drifts between the future-making of awakened expectations and the dragging dread of lurking threats and half-remembered horrors.'<sup>29</sup> While working in a popular thriller genre, Welsh's 'Plague Times' trilogy embodies a climate in which 'violence and abjection are seen as a contagion, like a virus; self-control and social containment are the only known vaccine.'<sup>30</sup>

Welsh literalises this world in which 'In the anxious stasis of the future, everyday practices [...] can guard against the moment of being 'taken back'.<sup>31</sup> In *A Lovely Way to Burn*, which follows Stevie Flint's attempts, in a plague-ridden London, to find out the truth about her boyfriend's murder, thriller and apocalyptic nightmare are combined in ways which emphasise the precarious balance of everyday and the monstrous: 'the London the tourists saw and the other London of rough sleepers and kettled demos, the cheap chicken fryers whose sleeping bags lay bundled in the back of the shop.' (*ALWTB*, p. 59) Responses to the horror take the form of the mundane, as symbolized by supermarkets where hard to tell difference between looters and hoarders. (*ALWTB*, p. 166-7) The intersections of horror and the mundane are highlighted by Stevie's own banal job as presenter on a shopping channel. *Death Is a Welcome Guest* continues this dystopian sequence, with Magnus McFall, an Orcadian comedian trying to move out of London and return home in a novel which reworks Edwin Muir's own formulation of apocalyptic thinking in 'The Horses'. The final novel in the series, *No Dominion*, unites Stevie and Magnus in an adventure south, originating from their endeavour to save the new community they have created in Orkney. Again the novel references brands and cityscapes to acknowledge the power but also disintegration of everyday consumerism which had appeared to postpone the apocalypse:

The shopping centre had been designed to allow crowds to sweep through its halls. Magnus looked up at the mezzanine and saw they were exposed from every angle.[...] Stevie's voice was soft. 'Do you remember this? These shops?'

He saw what she meant. The Body Shop, Next, Boots, Clintons, Lush, H. Samuel...' (ND, p. 284)

The characters forced into this world are caught within an imagined culture which, as Stewart suggests, 'marks a mode of attention at once deeply distracted and scanning for revelations and driven by the fury of its own traces.'<sup>32</sup>

Yet while these novels are shaped by death, resist future-thinking, challenge history, they do so in ways that can also be read as redemptive. Atkinson has described *A God In Ruins* as a novel about the Fall and it is certainly threaded with images of falling: but it is also full of images of flying. The moment of stop in the present – Teddy's death in the air – becomes the model of a life lived perfectly. Falling and flying, as seen in *Day* too, are not necessarily oppositional. And in Kennedy, Atkinson, and Smith the movements between falling and flying are deployed in different ways, to convey notions of linear times oppressiveness but also opportunities for liberation from it. As stated in *A God In Ruins*: 'In the days before the war we are told, people lived in the knowledge of the dependable nature of time: that is now shattered. Before the war every day was much the same, wasn't it? Home, the office, home again. Routine dulls the senses so. And then suddenly it feels as if one's living on the forward edge of one's life, as if one never knows whether one is going to fall or fly.' (AGR p. 190) Smith's novel too, although shaped by both the death of George's mother and of the haunting artist, occupying a world in which George notes 'everything is so post death', is nevertheless full of images of pointing up, into the sky, away from the earth. (HTBB, p. 97) As the artist asserts, 'things and beings shown to be moving

upwards into the air have always about them the most and best vitality' (*HTBB*, p. 352) Both central characters in the novel resist the press of history: 'I don't want all my memories falling on me like an avalanche.' muses the artist's ghost. (*HTBB*, p. 330) George's narrative meanwhile moves towards the revelation that: 'What if history instead *was* that shout, that upward spring, that staircase ladder thing, and everybody was just used to call something quite different the word history. What if received notions of history were deceptive?' (*HTBB*, p.172) In Welsh's fiction too there is a redemptive theme brought about through love imagined differently. In the hint that a future community be more reliant upon young women warriors who will not be forced into marriage and child-bearing, and its exploration of love in contexts removed from romance or birth allegiance, Welsh's fiction also confronts dominant and conservative models of future thinking.

Annemarie Jagose warned, in a 2007 discussion about the 'reification of queer temporality, the credentialing of asynchrony, multi-temporality and non-linearity as if they were automatically in the service of queer political projects and aspirations.'<sup>33</sup> It would be dangerous to assume that the novels discussed here are all in the service of that project. Nevertheless, their textual strategies and thematic obsessions work to 'queer' – in the sense of disrupting and refusing history as a linear narrative in which meaning is revealed by and through time.

In their engagement with history the novels are not casting it aside so much as challenging these 'deceived notions'. When George complains that the First World War is irrelevant to her, her mother explodes with:

What, the Great War? In which your great-grandfather , who happened to be my grandfather, was gassed in the trenches not once but twice. Which meant he and your great grandmother were very poor, because he was too ill to work and died young? And meant I inherited his weak lungs? [...] And then the break up of the Balkans, and the start of the territorial trouble in the Middle East [...] and the civil unrest in Ireland, and the shifts of power in Russia, and the power shifts in the Ottoman Empire, and the bankruptcy, economic catastrophe and social unrest in Germany, all of which played a huge part in the rise of fascism, and the bringing about of another war [...] Not relevant? To us? (*HTBB*, p. 107)

This fiction is not against history. Rather, as Smith's novel suggests, 'Maybe anything that forced or pushed such a spring back down or blocked the upward shout of it was opposed to the making of what history really was.' (*HTBB* p. 173)

This literary desire to blow history open, informed by the urge to reshape categories of gender and sexuality, rethink agency and claim the newness of the present, comes at a moment in which Scotland itself is confronting and contesting its own various relationships to the past and future. Reflecting in 2012 on the Scottish independence debate, Mike Small wrote: 'Until the referendum we are in a liminal land, neither here nor there', continuing 'In Liminal Land one group of politicians is accused of spreading false hope while another spreads doubt and fear. Both campaigns have problems with this attempt to project forward to some imagined future, because while they can play safe to respective dreams and anxieties, it's in today's here and now that Britain is falling apart.'<sup>34</sup> By fracturing time, by breaking history – linguistically,

structurally, chronologically, emotionally – the novelists discussed in this essay are, in their different ways, trying to escape from a history in which a mound of bodies from the past press down upon us and from notions of a future which demands sacrifice of the present. By narrating the ruins of time, they attempt to re-imagine a space in which ‘one’s living on the forward edge of one’s life.’

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), cited in Ali Smith, *Artful* [2012]

(London: Penguin, 2013), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> *Sliding Doors*, film, directed by Peter Howitt. UK: Miramax, 1998; *About Time*, film, directed by Richard Curtis. UK: Translux; Working Title, 2013.

<sup>3</sup>; David Nicholls, *One Day* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009); *One Day*, film, directed by Lone Scherfig, 2011; Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler’s Wife* (New York: MacAdam Cage, 2003); *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, film, directed by Robert Schwentke. USA: New Line Cinema, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Barnett, *The Versions of Us* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson: London 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn [1968] (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 253-64, p. 262.

<sup>7</sup> For discussion of this see Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), Chapter One.

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- <sup>8</sup> Ali Smith, *How to be Both* (London:[2014] (Penguin: 2015), p. 172; Kate Atkinson, *A God In Ruins* (London: Doubleday,2015), p. 190.
- <sup>9</sup> A. L. Kennedy, *Day* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007).
- <sup>10</sup> Kate Atkinson, *Life After Life* (London: Doubleday, 2013).
- <sup>11</sup> Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 261.
- <sup>12</sup> Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 263
- <sup>13</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'Introduction', *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn [1968] (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), p. 38, quoting *Schriften* 1, 571.
- <sup>14</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'Introduction', *Illuminations*, p. 49.
- <sup>15</sup> Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, pp. 12-13.
- <sup>16</sup> Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, p. 11
- <sup>17</sup> 'Modern Fiction', in Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, 1925 (rpt. London: Hogarth Press, 1951), pp. 184-95.
- <sup>18</sup> Julia Kristeva 'Women's Time', trans. Alice Jardine, and Harry Blake, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 7 (1981), pp. 13-35; 19, 20, 34.
- <sup>19</sup> Kristeva, 'Women's Time', p. 19; p. 20.
- <sup>20</sup> Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives (Sexual Cultures)*, 1st edn (New York,: New York University Press, 2004) p. 4.
- <sup>21</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, in C. Dinshaw, L. Edelman, R. A. Ferguson, C. Freccero, E. Freeman, J. Halberstam, 'Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13 (2007), <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2006-030>>177-95; p. 186.
- <sup>22</sup> Edelman in 'Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion', p.181.

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- <sup>23</sup> Benjamin 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 252.
- <sup>24</sup> Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* p. 6.
- <sup>25</sup> Petra Rau, 'Knowledge of the Working of Bombs: The Strategic Air offensive in Rhetoric and Fiction', in P. Rau (ed.) *Long Shadows: The Second World War in British Fiction and Film* Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois: 2016), pp. 197-220.
- <sup>26</sup> Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, pp. 310-11.
- <sup>27</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, p. 2.
- <sup>28</sup> See Daniel Rosenberg and Susan Harding, 'Introduction', *Histories of the Future* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005).
- <sup>29</sup> Kathleen Stewart, 'Trauma Time: A Still Life' in Rosenberg and Harding, *Histories of the Future*, pp. 323-339, p. 325,
- <sup>30</sup> Stewart, 'Trauma Time', p. 325. She is referencing Mike Davis *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998).
- <sup>31</sup> Stewart, 'Trauma Time', p. 333.
- <sup>32</sup> Stewart, 'Trauma Time', p. 338.
- <sup>33</sup> Annemarie Jagose in Dinshaw *et al.*, 'Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion'. p. 191.
- <sup>34</sup> Mike Small, [untitled] in Scott Hames (ed.), *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence* (Edinburgh: Word Press Books, 2012), 179-85, p. 179.