History matters (?)
Various Ways of Looking at History in Graham Swift's *Waterland*

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Abstract

The paper focuses on how history is dealt with in Waterland*, one of Graham Swift's best-known novels. Even though the novel is not a pamphlet on the philosophy of history, it however explores the many ways in which history is indispensable for people in their endeavors to make sense of their past and their identity. However,* Waterland *presents different views of history and story-telling, which are often opposite and undermine one another. The paper will discuss how the novel, at times, suggests that tracing and reconstructing the past is a possible and objective activity, while, at other times, seeming to side with the idea that the past cannot be retrieved and that History is but an arbitrary ordering and construction of facts from the past, which are in themselves disorderly and structureless. In this regard, the novel has often been considered as taking part in the postmodernist debate about the truth in History. The article also deals with the contradictory perspective of History explored in Swift's novel: that of History as a "Grand Narrative" of Progress and the opposite view of History as cyclical and regressive.*

Keywords

History, identity, narrative, amnesia, curiosity, postmodernism, Graham Swift.

Waterland explores many of the topics that are important in Graham Swift's work. One of the main issues the novel raises is the relevance of history in the modern world. Even though it is not a pamphlet on the philosophy of history, it nevertheless draws attention to the role that history has for mankind. It explores and explains reasons and ways in which history is indispensable for people in their efforts to make sense of their past and their identity. *Waterland*, however, is a literary work, therefore in analyzing it we should keep in mind that it has to be "judged" primarily on account of its artistic worth. In the novel the "historical discourse" blends in smoothly with the story of Tom Crick's life and his relationship with Mary, who later becomes his wife, and his mentally retarded brother, Dick. The theoretical issues that have to do with history and narration are welded together by the fact that, when he grows up, Tom becomes interested in history, takes a history degree, and follows the history career as a high school history teacher. He is the protagonist-narrator who becomes the focal point and the central consciousness of the novel, even though oftentimes an unreliable one.

Swift's novel has attracted a considerable body of criticism, most of them generally positive. Del Ivan Janik in an early article on Swift observes that "[he] may prove to be the most outstanding English novelist of the final quarter of the twentieth century" and considers *Waterland* a novel of "expansiveness and complexity." David Leon Higdon regards Swift (and Julian Barnes) as two of the "most promising authors" of the 1980s and *Waterland* as "truly extraordinary"[1], whereas Malcolm Bradbury considers it "Swift's most intricate and thoughtful book."[2] Others (such as Hilary Mantel),

1 Citations from Janik and Higdon in this paragraph are taken from David Malcolm, *Understanding Graham Swift* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 7. The book provides a very useful summary of the publications about Swift's *Waterland* and other novels written until 2003.

2 Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (Penguin, 1994), 433.

have emphasized that Swift's later novels have been compared and measured against *Waterland*[3]. George P. Landow reads the novel as a "fictional autobiography" and notes that it "meditates on human fate, responsibility, and historical narrative."[4]

One of the many reasons in support of history is suggested by Swift's novel when discussing the dichotomy past-present and the alleged supremacy of the latter over the former. People usually focus on the present, on what Swift in the novel calls the "Here and Now", and consider the relationship between the past and the present as hierarchical, with the present occupying a privileged position and the historical relegated to a subordinate role. The pressure of the immediate present and the anticipation for the future make people neglect and push aside the analysis of the past. Tom as a history teacher has to struggle continuously with the skepticism of his students who are reluctant to spend time studying the past and would rather devote more time to the pressing needs of the present. The "dissent" and "unrest" are voiced by Price, the rebel student in Tom's history class. When Tom talks about the French Revolution, Price bluntly and unequivocally proclaims that "What matters is the here and now".[5] Therefore, we should focus on the present rather than concern ourselves with information about wars and kings from the past. There's a problem here, however: How do we "capture" the here and now? How do we make sense of the present? Talking about how people perceive time, one of the founders of psychology, William James, in his *Principles of Psychology* quotes E. R. Clay when analyzing the status of the present:

> The relation of experience to time has not been profoundly studied. Its objects are given as being of the present, but the part of time referred to by the datum is a very different thing from the conterminous of the past and future which philosophy denotes by the name Present. The present to which the datum refers is really a part of the past -- a recent past -- delusively given as being a time that intervenes between the past and the future.[6]

Thus the concept of the Here and Now is itself problematic; it is, as Tom says in *Waterland*, an "indefinable zone", "it is", after all, "the Here and Now that turns out to be the fairy-tale, not History, whose substance is at least for ever determined and unchangeable."[7] Clay has coined the term "specious present" to refer to our perception of time, a term that was subsequently used by James and other philosophers who studied time perception. The present, thus, is elusive and illusive and the future does not exist. This could be reason enough for people to devote much time to the study of the past, which, according to this argument, is the only temporal entity worth studying.

It is, however, difficult to pinpoint Swift's view of the present and the real in the novel. When discussing the novel in an interview, Swift himself asserted that "it's important for fiction to be magical, just as it's important for fiction to embrace the real world, to look really hard at the real world."[8] Even though Crick states that the "Here and Now", or the real, "turns out to be a fairy-tale"[9]

3 In Malcolm, *Understanding Graham Swift*, 7.

4 George P. Landow, "History, His Story, and Stories in Graham Swift's Waterland," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 23, no. 2 (fall 1990): 197.

5 Swift, *Waterland*, 60.

6 Quoted in William James, *Principles of Psychology*, *Volume I* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 609.

7 Swift, *Waterland*, 60.

8 Graham Swift, interview by Patrick McGrath and Patricia McGrath, *Bomb* 15 (1986): 47.

9 Swift, *Waterland*, 60.

and History is "forever determined", the opposite view – that History is a myth, legend, or fairy-tale, is also endorsed and that Here and Now intervenes from time to time to shake the protagonist out of the dream. "[T]here are very few of us who can be… merely realistic"[10], he declares and "the reality of things-be thankful-only visits us for a brief while"[11]. The real, which is connected with the present, the Here and Now, is often linked with the traumatic moment in the novel. And it seems that history – whether in the form of the Grand Narratives or the lesser stories created by people serves as a means to cope with trauma – or to evade it.

Eric Berlatsky argues in an insightful article that "the real is not… merely the material presence of death itself" but "rather the extraordinary and dislocating event that makes Crick aware that he is not merely a part of a story or dream but is inexpressibly in 'the present'… the 'Here and Now.'"[12] He is referring here to the event that begins the book, the finding of the body of Freddie Parr, Tom's and Mary's childhood friend, who, as it turns out later, was killed by Tom's brother, Dick. That is a traumatic event for Tom, who is himself indirectly involved in the crime and he states that for the first he became aware that events had consequences in life and that he was, too, part of history. Swift includes many versions of history in the novel and one of them is naturally linked with the idea of history as story or story-telling. The narrator claims that it is through story-telling that people try to make sense of the Here and Now, which is sometimes traumatic. They have the tendency to narrativize experience in order to make it tamer, explicable and this narrativization of reality is indispensable to our existence.

Berlatsky writes that "reality is… the realization of one's own existence outside of a scripted, easily explained symbolic, a momentary sense of uniqueness and presence that is not easily explained or transformed into narrative," and that it is precisely this feeling of being in the Here and Now "which gives the sense of one's own participation in the world, not merely as an observer."[13] History – as story-telling – helps Tom create a narrative of his experience. It is only through the narrativization of these events, the "scripting" of these events, that he can cope with them. Seen from this perspective, *Waterland* sees history as a way of avoiding reality, of modifying it so as to be able to continue with our lives. It is impossible to merely live with and in reality – the Here and Now – and people need to construct stories of their lives and the events around them. Nevertheless, as is common with Swift, as soon as it is presented, this view is challenged. Discussing the contradictory nature of Crick, Swift has distanced himself from his narrator by saying: "he [Tom Crick] says many things, he says contradictory things… he is in a state of personal crisis and his once-cherished and fairly coherent views of history are being challenged, and so he's voicing in the novel different views of history, of progress, the fate of mankind."[14] The traumatic events in the book – the murder of Freddie Parr, the horrific abortion of Mary, the kidnapping of a baby by Mary – resist being integrated into the narrative.

The French Revolution, one of the most important, decisive – and traumatic – events in modern Europe, features prominently in *Waterland*. It is that part of the syllabus Crick returns to

10 Swift, *Waterland*, 41.

11 Swift, *Waterland*, 33.

12 Eric Berlatsky, "'The Swamps of Myth … And Empirical Fishing Lines': Historiography, Narrativity, and the 'Here and Now' in Graham Swift's 'Waterland,'" *Journal of Narrative Theory* 36, no. 2 (2006): 276.

13 Berlatsky, "Historiography, Narrativity, and the 'Here and Now'", 277.

14 Graham Swift, interview, 45.

over and over again in his history classes, even though he is all the time digressing and ending up telling stories (histories) from his own life, the Fens, and his family. It is, indeed, understandable that this historical event should become an important motif in this novel and the focus, the obsession for Tom as a teacher of "the past". The French Revolution has often been regarded as one of the most influential events in world history. It represents a radical break with the past (at least in the West) and, many see it as the beginning of modern era in European history[15]. Critics of history attack the discipline of history from the position of the defenders of modernity, the position which states that we should look forward and not get bogged down and hindered by the past, a view that is endorsed in *Waterland* by Lewis, the headmaster, when he tells Tom that the purpose of education is "to send just one of these kids out into the world with a sense of his or her usefulness, with an ability to apply, with practical knowledge and not a rag-bag of pointless information".[16] Historian John Tosh traces the modern man's rejection of the past precisely to the French Revolution:

> The equation of modernity with a rejection of the past was first put into effect during the French Revolution of 1789–93. The revolutionaries executed the king, abolished the aristocracy, attacked religion and declared 22 September 1792 the beginning of Year 1. All this was done in the name of reason, untrammelled by precedent or tradition.[17]

It proved, however, impossible to escape from "pastness", and, as the Revolution became more radicalized, many of its supporters modified their stance, understanding that "humans were not so free from the hand of the past as the revolutionaries had supposed, that progressive change must be built on the cumulative achievements of earlier generations."[18,19] In *Waterland* the narrator, referring to the French revolutionaries, states that they, too, were strongly influenced by the past and that they were merely imitating the Classical models:

> And those revolutionary messiahs – Robespierre, Marat, the rest – of whom it can be said, at least, that they were prepared to go to extremes in order to create a new world – did they really have in mind a Society of the Future? Not a bit of it. Their model was an idealized ancient Rome… .Their prototype the murder of Caesar. Our heroes of the new age – good classicists all – yearned, too, to go back… [20]

In this passage Swift – or Tom Crick – undermines the superiority of the present over the past. It may seem an echo of the cyclical theory of History, which regards History not as a straightforward and chronological line that moves towards the future but rather following a cyclical course. The inevitability of dealing with the past, or rather, the inevitable fact that the past is always with you – that is another reason that Swift gives in favor of dealing with history. One cannot unburden oneself from the "baggage" of the past, the accumulated, never-ceasing pile of history, even though,

15 Ferenc Fehér, ed., *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) provides a very good account of the importance of the French Revolution.

16 Swift, *Waterland*, 22.

17 John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (London: Longman, 2002), 28.

18 Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 29.

19 It is interesting to note an analogy between this idea and Harold Bloom's view in *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1997). Bloom's view is that every great writer establishes an ambiguous relationship with previous writers. The modern writers try to leave their mark in history by creating something new, while at the same time feeling that they cannot escape the influence of the past.

20 Swift, *Waterland*, 138.

Tom says, there have always been "attempts to jettison the impediments of history, to do without that ever-frustrating weight. And because history accumulates, because it gets always heavier… so the attempts to throw it off… become more violent and drastic."[21] Janik has suggested a sort of deconstructive reading to the past-present opposition (or History and the "Here and Now"), by arguing that they are not really opposites but rather "polarities, two aspects of experience."[22] He gives the example of Tom Crick's maternal and paternal ancestors – the Atkinsons and the Cricks. The former were important entrepreneurs, "idea-men", philanthropists and true proponents of the idea of Progress, whereas the latter were simple, unremarkable people, from whom Tom Crick has inherited that "story-telling" streak: "Making history, like the Atkinsons, and telling stories about it, like the Cricks, are two different ways to outwit the emptiness we glimpse (and fear) at the heart of reality; to 'assure ourselves that… things are happening'".[23]

Nevertheless, one of the most important reasons Tom gives in support of history is related to a basic urge all human beings have – that of requiring explanations and trying to understand the world they live in. This basic urge is linked to man's "historical sense", which Nietzsche called man's sixth sense. This "sense" is what makes us human and is one of the most important tools human beings have for trying to make sense of their existence. "Man", historian Geoffrey Barraclough affirms, "is an historical animal, with a deep sense of his own past; and if he cannot integrate the past by a history explicit and true, he will integrate it by a history implicit and false."[24] Thus history is the means through which he integrates the past, and by integrating the past, he assures his own integrity as a human being. Man needs explanations, he needs to know the truth about his past; he is curious and, driven by curiosity, starts to dig into things, and this digging is necessarily done by going back from the present into the past. After all, every effect has a precedent cause. Thus the historical sense is deeply connected with people's search for explanations and that is how Tom defends the study of history to his skeptical and uninterested students. The very question they raise (Why history?) provides the answer:

> And when you asked, as all history classes ask, as all history classes should ask, What is the point of history? Why history? Why the past? I used to say… : but your 'Why?' gives the answer. Your demand for explanation provides an explanation.[25]

It is this all-to-human "itching" for explanations that makes human beings rummage the past. In trying to come to terms with their existence, they inevitably go back to the past. In fact, as William James points out, the past is always in the present, it is always with us.

Man, "the historical animal", can only make sense of his identity and can have a footing on reality by creating a narrative of himself, of his life and the world that surrounds them. Chaos and entropy are a continual threat to human existence and human beings have the tendency to give coherence to their own life lest their life and their whole existence should slip into

21 Swift, *Waterland*, 136–137.

22 Del Ivan Janik, "'History and the 'Here and Now': The Novels of Graham Swift," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 35: 1 (1989), 85.

23 Janik, "'History and the 'Here and Now'," 85–86.

24 Quoted in Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 49.

25 Swift, *Waterland,* 106.

the abyss of the absurd. Without a coherent welding of the main – and minor events – of life there would only be an incoherent accumulation of successive events. Therefore man creates a narrative – a grand narrative, if you will – of their life. This narrative is necessarily an historical account, even though one which is constantly modified and adapted and is never fixed and unalterable. History – that of individuals as well as that of nations – takes the form of a "magic lantern spectacle" and often that of a "nostalgic projection or reality-surrogate," and even as compensation.[26] Man, Crick affirms, is a "story-telling animal" and he cannot stand empty spaces:

> Yet the Here and Now, which brings both joy and terror, comes but rarely. […] That's the way it is: life includes a lot of empty space. We are one-tenth living tissue, nine-tenths water; life is one-tenth Here and Now, nine-tenths a history lesson. […] What do you do when reality is an empty space?[27]

The answer Tom Crick gives is that the "story-telling animal", can only fill the empty spaces by telling stories. Because emptiness, nothingness, and futility engulf man's existence and threaten to annihilate it, human beings try to fill the empty spaces of their existence by talking of the past and by constructing the narrative of their lives: "[Man] has to go on telling stories, he has to keep on making them up" and "he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker buoys and trail-signs of stories."[28]

This – shall we call it traditional? – view of History, as is often the case in *Waterland*, seems to be both endorsed and opposed. In the novel history is continually compared with myth, fairy-tale, and Tom agrees that there is no clear-cut division between "fact" and the "invented". History in Swift's novel is often confused and mixed with the mysterious and the mythical and its reliability as a source of knowledge and truth is not absolute. The possibility of reclaiming the past is continually undermined. Discussing memory's effectiveness in Swift's other novel *Shuttlecock* and Kauzo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*, Bożena Kucała notes that "what happened does not always correspond to what is remembered" and, moreover, "what is remembered may not be faithfully reflected in what is narrated. […] [T]he disjunction between past reality and accounts thereof is ascribable […] to the natural deficiencies of memory".[29] The epigraph of *Waterland*, which is a dictionary entry of the word "history", very well describes the many meanings that the word "history" acquires in the novel: "Historia, -ae, f. 1. Inquiry, investigation, learning. 2. a) a narrative of past events, history. b) any kind of narrative: account, tale, story."[30] Swift's view on history and its significance has given rise to many interesting readings. Janik writes that in *Waterland*, "[h]istory is […] the attempt to retrieve or find or impose logic and order on what is neither logical nor orderly."[31] Bradbury writes that the "past" in Swift's novel is indeed a "waterland" and it "yields up not a stable past but a wealth of buried and suppressed pasts" and that all records are deceptively ambiguous.[32] Landow asserts that history as "an

26 Martin L. Davies, *Imprisoned by History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 8–9.

27 Swift, *Waterland*, 138.

28 Swift, *Waterland*, 62–63.

29 Bożena Kucała, "Ignorance Is Strength: Kazuo Ishiguro's and Graham Swift's Argument against Knowledge", *American & British Studies Annual* 8 (2015): 74.

30 Swift, *Waterland*, epigraph.

31 Janik, "'History and the 'Here and Now'", 85.

32 Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, 433.

explanatory [narrative] […] function[s]… as means of ordering our lives and thereby protecting us from chaos and disorder."[33] Analyzing the novel as an autobiographical account, Landow states that

> on the one hand, *Waterland* seems a rigorously historicist presentation of selfhood; on the other, its self-conscious examination of the history that historicizes this self makes it appear that these narratives […] are patently constructed, purely subjective patterns[34]

and Malcolm writes that it "abounds in storytellers telling tales whose relationship to reality is never simple and direct – tales which shape, form, or permit escapes from the real, rather than give access to it…" and "[s]tories are a means of controlling, coping with, and evading the real; by no means do they give unmediated access to it, nor are they really meant to.[35]

All of these comments point to the way history and the past are presented in *Waterland*, by focusing on the narrativist aspect of history. They align the novel with the postmodernist view of history, which argues that one cannot have a direct and absolute retrieval of history; that the only way one can approach history is through texts rather than the "real events" of the past; and that, ultimately, history is merely a construction. The text does, of course, invite such an interpretation and there are many aspects of the story which corroborate this idea. The narrator himself admits that "all history is yarn,"[36] a tale that is an admixture of reconstruction and construction of the past and that "[h]istory is that impossible thing: the attempt to give an account, with incomplete knowledge, of actions themselves undertaken with incomplete knowledge. So that it teaches us […] only the dogged and patient art of making do."[37] This can be regarded as the postmodernist view, one of whose most vocal proponents is Hayden White. This position, often called constructivist or narrativist, problematizes the relationship between History as an academic discipline and the past events and insists on the fact that all histories are merely constructions, narratives which are unavoidably ideological. Lyotard's critique of the Grand Narratives and the legitimacy of these Narratives is also part of this debate. Linda Hutcheon in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism* has argued that historiography today is involved in the same issues that are at the heart of much "postmodernist theory and fiction" and in "its efforts on rendering problematic the nature of narrative in particular". She enlists *Waterland* in that group of novels which deal with these issues.[38]

The "constructivist" or "narrativist" view on history claims that historical facts do not really have a meaning in themselves but we as human beings impose meaning and coherence to them and we can only do that through turning them into a narrative. As a result, history cannot be seen as objective or even as "true", since it is ultimately shaped in order to conform to our human desire for order, shape and coherence.[39] When pushed to an extreme, this view leads to the idea

33 Landow, "History, His Story, and Stories," 202.

34 Landow, "History, His Story, and Stories," 208.

35 Malcolm, *Understanding Graham Swift*, 95.

36 Malcolm, *Understanding Graham Swift*, 61–62.

37 Swift, *Waterland,* 108.

38 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 55.

39 For a very good account of the narrativist idea of History see Eric Berlatsky's article (cited above), "Historiography, Narrativity, and the 'Here and Now'".

that we can never access the past fact and that every narrative of the past is untrue and fictional. Hence the tendency to view history as fiction. There are many passages in the novel which, indeed, can be seen as endorsing this argument. Crick, the history teacher, tells his class that story-telling is

> all a struggle to make things not seem meaningless. It's all a fight against fear… what do you think all my stories are for.… I don't care what you call it – explaining, evading the facts, making up meanings, taking a larger view, putting things in perspective, dodging the here and now, education, history, fairy-tales–it helps to eliminate fear.[40]

When Price asks him: "so we can find whatever meaning we like in History", he is in fact voicing the concerns of the critics against the constructivist view of history and its corollary idea that, since meaning is constructed and everything is relative, then massacres, genocide, slavery and the like may have not existed. Crick's answer to Price is: "I do believe that. I believe it more and more. History: a lucky dip of meanings. Events elude meaning, but we look for meaning. Another definition of Man: the animal who craves meaning".[41]

In *Waterland,* the "historical sense" people have is also related to curiosity. "The end of the world", says Crick, will arrive "when curiosity is exhausted (so long live curiosity)."[42] Historical research, which is related to curiosity and the need for explanation – the "whywhywhy", the "wailing siren" that so bothers Tom Crick throughout *Waterland* – constitutes our involvement in and engagement with the world. It is thus a fundamental drive in life and one which defines our humanness. Crick affirms that "[c]uriosity begets love. It weds us to the world."[43] It is curiosity that drives Tom to find out the truth about his brother's parentage, a search that would ultimately reveal the incestuous nature of the union between their mother and their grandfather, Ernest Atkinson – Dick's biological father – and would lead to Dick's suicide. The frame of the novel itself takes the form of an account of an historical research, in that it reconstructs the life story of the protagonists. It begins to build gradually into a whole with the many missing pieces of the past fitting into the big puzzle. Tom draws an analogy between the reconstruction of a crime with the historical method: "It's an analogy of the historical method; an analogy of how you discover how you've become what you are. If you're lucky you might find out."[44] One of the meanings of the word "history" in the epigraph – "inquiry" or "knowledge acquired by investigation" – very well grasps this aspect of historical research.

The investigation into the past aims at discovering or unearthing the reality and understanding why the present is the way it is. Only that this "inquiry", or "detective work", leads to unpleasant, even traumatic, facts. Martin L. Davies states that "[t]he painstakingly faithful […] reconstruction of the past is a deeply melancholic activity"[45], one which, as Flaubert says about the reconstruction of Carthage in his novel *Salammbô*, brings "much sadness".[46]

40 Swift, *Waterland,* 241.

41 Swift, *Waterland,* 140.

42 Swift, *Waterland*, 194.

43 Swift, *Waterland*, 206.

44 Swift, *Waterland*, 312.

45 Martin L. Davies, *Historics: Why History Dominates Contemporary Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 175.

46 Davies, *Historics*, 175.

"Might it not be better", Tom asks in *Waterland* "if we could acquire the gift of amnesia?"[47] Nietzsche claims that "man envies the beast, that forgets at once, and sees every moment really die, sink into night and mist, extinguished for ever. The beast lives *unhistorically*".[48] However, the answer to the above question that Tom poses is given by Tom himself when he rejects amnesia, the wish for forgetfulness and complete erasure of the painful past:

> [W]ould not this gift of amnesia only release us from the trap of the question why into the prison of idiocy? […] [H]istory has its uses, its serious purpose. […] Yes, yes, the past gets in the way; it trips us up, bogs us down; it complicates… But to ignore this is folly, because, above all, what history teaches us is to avoid illusion and make-believe, to lay aside dreams, moonshine, cure-alls, wonder-workings, pie-in-the-sky – to be realistic."[49]

History, thus, becomes the "dispeller of illusions" and grappling with history becomes a way of being involved in the world and avoiding illusion and make-believe. Passages such as this contradict the idea that *Waterland* is a typically postmodernist novel whose main aim is to expose the falsity and constructedness of all histories (and story-telling), as argued earlier. If in other parts of the novel, Tom refers to story-telling as fantasy and a way of escaping reality, in fragments such as these he seems to endorse the opposite view. We might also read Mary's madness from this perspective; she cannot establish a healthy and reasonable relationship with her past, which leads to her dissociation from reality and, eventually, to madness. Unable to come to terms with her traumatic past – related to the painful loss of her child and her inability to bear children – she creates an imaginary pregnancy and "finalizes" that "pregnancy" by kidnapping a baby. Thus her inability to cope with her traumatic past leads to her schizophrenic condition and she is eventually hospitalized in an asylum. We might argue that even though painful, Tom's clinging to reality prevents him from slipping into a world of madness and serves as a sort of therapeutic process for him.

(Inconclusive) Conclusion

Waterland features a number of issues that are central to Swift's literary concerns. The novel explores the relationship between the past and the present and how the past shapes or – as is usually the case in Swift – misshapes the present. In the novel we encounter various perspectives of history (and story-telling), which, at times, undermine one another. Swift himself has declared that he has a paradoxical outlook on life and – when discussing *Waterland* – he asserts that telling stories is… an imposing of extra structure on reality, and it's something very much needed by these people who happen to live in a landscape which almost says to them, look, reality is flat and empty.[50] Thus we might read the novel as supporting the constructivist view of history, according to which all histories are merely narratives, constructed by people in their search for meaning, order, and identity in a meaningless, disorderly and fragmentary world. That reading would confirm the

47 Swift, *Waterland*, 108.

48 Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. by Adrian Collins, in *Thoughts Out of Season*, vol. 5 of *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 7.

49 Swift, *Waterland*, 108.

50 Graham Swift, interview, 45.

view (held by Hutcheon) that the novel is a postmodernist one. The postmodernist view regards historical accounts of all sorts – whether the Grand Narratives or the "little", personal ones – as ultimately fictions. This argument however, as shown in the article, is countered and balanced by the opposite stance, which sees history as the dispeller of illusions and an activity that teaches people to shun illusion. History – albeit not perfectly – tries to reconstruct (rather than construct) the past and to give people answers which would help them understand reality, cope with it, and create their identity. History teaches us to be realistic. However, reality, the real, or, to use Swift's term, the Here and Now itself, remains problematic.

Waterland is permeated throughout by a note of melancholy. Is Swift suggesting that uncovering the past with its traumas and ruptures inevitably leads to a pessimistic view of life? Is it true – as Tom's headmaster says – that "history breeds pessimism", that it "inspires […] gloom" and that all we get from it is a "defeatist, jaundiced outlook of life?"[51] Or does Swift agree with historian Geoffrey Elton's idea that history cures man of his adolescent illusion that he is the center of the world and teaches him his insignificance in the face of the great events of History?[52] In the course of the novel, these positions are sometimes endorsed and at other times refuted, even though the narrator argues that the "gift of amnesia" would only lead people in the "prison of idiocy". That would make us believe that *Waterland* seems to urge readers to live – to use Sartre's words – an "authentic" life, one which entails an unceasing and laborious engagement with and acceptance of the past.

The novel often intimates that history is cyclical, repetitive and that it never progresses. This can be seen in the way the Grand Narrative of Progress of the Atkinson family comes to an end. In the novel the Atkinsons embody the idea of History as Progress, but this idea is thwarted when Ernest Atkinson (Tom's grandfather) becomes involved in an incestuous relationship with his daughter, Helen (Tom's mother), and fathers a son with her; that son, Dick Crick, is mentally retarded and, like Ernest, takes his own life. History, then, is not a tale that teaches human beings about Progress but rather that the "same old things will repeat themselves."[53] Therefore, as Tom says, a history teacher is "someone who teaches mistakes", the "bungles, botches, blunders and fiascos."[54] Even though people need story-telling in order to soothe their fears, the way the novel ends – both the story from the past (Mary's abortion and Dick's suicide) and the story in the present (Tom losing his job and Mary confined in an institution) – does not seem to give much hope. As Higdon has pointed out, "[n]arrating the past […] generally has a freeing, healing effect on the narrators . . .but in Waterland, Swift has so positioned the closure of the two stories that a sense of melancholy, even defeat, pervades the novel."[55]

51 Swift, *Waterland,* 154.

52 Elton writes: "Even a superficial acquaintance with the existence, through millennia of time, of numberless human beings helps to correct the normal adolescent inclination to relate the world to oneself instead of relating oneself to the world." Quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 6.

53 Swift, *Waterland,* 240.

54 Swift, *Waterland,* 235.

55 David Leon Higdon, "Double closures in postmodern British fiction: the example of Graham Swift," *Critical Survey* 3, no. 1 (1991): 92.

As already stated, the various and opposing views on history and the real might make us believe that they cancel out one another and that what we are left with is a nihilistic view of life. Or, if the word "nihilistic" does not accurately describe the feeling the novel leaves the reader with, then the word "equilibrium" or "balance" might be more adequate. The idea of history as a Grand Narrative of Progress is balanced in the novel by the cyclical and regressive path life takes. The story of the land reclamation and the dredging of the Fens very well embodies this kind of equilibrium in nature. Even though generations of Cricks and Atkinsons devoted much time and money to the draining of the Fens, the waters always return, thereby undermining all human effort. As the narrator says "even nature teaches us that nothing is given without something being taken away… [W]ater […] however much you coax it this way and that, will return, at the slightest opportunity, to its former equilibrium"[56], and the same balance is found in human nature: "no Napoleon," he declares, "can go carving up the map of Europe without getting his comeuppance."[57] History, too, or, rather the constructed ordering and the forceful imposition upon facts, is always subverted by those facts which refuse to fit into a neat and coherent narrative, no matter how much the story-telling animal craves it. As Landow puts it, "history, like draining the fens, can never achieve more than temporary victories against the natural, for the simple reason that people carry out both these projects within time, and […] sooner or later, time wins."[58] Hence the feeling of pointlessness and melancholy that the book might instill in the reader. As always in *Waterland*, however, ambiguity abounds and there are many feelings the reader is left with. Even though time may be the winner eventually, the human efforts to create cohesion and meaning out of the chaos of life – however Sisyphean and almost absurd they might seem – are precisely what make us human. The following fragment from the novel is, I think, a good way to end the article, as it offers an affirmation – even though not a very enthusiastic one – of the value of human endeavor and resilience in the face of absurdity and chaos:

> There's this thing called progress. But it doesn't progress, it doesn't go anywhere. Because as progress progresses the world can slip away. It's progress if you can stop the world slipping away. My humble model for progress is the reclamation of land. Which is repeatedly, never-endingly retrieving what is lost. A dogged, vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business.[59]

56 Swift, *Waterland,* 72.

57 Swift, *Waterland,* 72.

58 Landow, "History, His Story, and Stories," 209.

59 Swift, *Waterland,* 336.

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