

**GRAHAM SWIFT'S *WATERLAND*:
THE PESSIMISTIC END OF HISTORY, OR THE
OPTIMISTIC RECLAMATION OF (HI)STORY/-IES?**

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ABSTRACT

Waterland is one of the best representatives of the postmodern idea of history. It displays a concern for the end of history understood in traditional terms, and presents an alternative based on a mixture of official, personal, and natural (hi)story/-ies and even fairy-tales. The making of history and the construction of the self (exemplified by Tom Crick) are equated with the process of land reclamation in the East Anglian Fens, and, therefore, displayed as labours with only temporary validity. This loss of fixed mainstays that can support master-histories and solid selves—which would create illusions of static pasts—is understood as pessimistic by those who do not partake of the postmodern fundamentals. However, Swift's message in *Waterland* is optimistic, for he understands this temporariness of man's reconstructions of the/his past as liberating. He insists in the necessity of avoiding oppressive closures that make us prisoners of an overly rigid past. Thus, man's reclamation of (hi)story/-ies and of the/his past are displayed as unfulfilled fulfilments which allow us to go on feeding on a liberating curiosity that helps us to make constant "improvisations upon reality". In *Waterland*, only those characters who abandon curiosity, Mary (Tom's wife) and Dick (his brother), are flawed, for they have not learnt "a way of giving reality the slip".

One of the main problems that is presented once and again in Graham Swift's *Waterland* is that in our days—the last quarter of the 20th century—history is coming to an end. In the opening pages, in a chapter called "About the End of History", Price, one of Tom Crick's students, affirms: "The only important thing about his-

tory... is that it's got to the point where it's probably about to end" (1983: 7). This idea of the exhaustion of history is closely related to a problem that John Barth, among many others, had already presented some years before with regard to the end of Literature (mainly represented by the novel), when he wrote in "The Literature of Exhaustion": "Literary forms certainly have histories and historical contingencies, and it may well be that the novel's time as a major art form is up" (1967: 71).¹ However, he finds in retelling classical narratives and myths the solution for this problem, "go[ing] forward by going back, to the very roots and springs of story" (1972: 36).² Swift, in a similar manner, presents the retelling of history as the means to avoid its end. But the history he retells—as in Barth's case—is not the same history, but a/the new alternative (hi)story/-ies (or even fairy tales) of the Fens.

In this study I want to examine Swift's theory of history, and I will argue that the way in which he equates the instability of land reclamation with that of history does not have to be necessarily pessimistic but can be just the opposite. Thus, I suggest that the end of *Waterland* is optimistic in the sense that it provides a way of creating momentary solutions for the exhaustion of history, at the same time as it remains truthful to reality—if this word makes sense any longer—as Tom is aware of the fact that those solutions are only valid for a limited period of time.³

Swift's decision to retell a new history in which fiction (stories, tales) has a prominent function, and the redefinition of the previous concept of history that it implies, is not new at all. Malcolm Bradbury points out that *Waterland* "shares the fascination with fiction as history, history as fiction, that had been important in the novel certainly since the Sixties" (1993: 433). Indeed, in *Waterland* the boundaries between history (understood as the recording of real past events that were automatically translated into facts just after they took place) and story (a fictional or imagined account) are more and more blurred and at the end the term "story" seems to be as adequate and satisfying to understand and refer to the past as "history", or even more. Personal alternative (hi)story/-ies and official history are displayed side by side, and the former will eventually replace the latter—conveying in this way the change from a modernist to a postmodernist attitude towards history, which Ihab Hassan explains by suggesting the oppositional discourse "*Grande Histoire/Petite Histoire*" (official and personal (hi)story, respectively) (1987: 91).

From the very beginning of *Waterland*, with the presentation in the epigraph of the Latin word for "history" (*Historia, -ae*) and its different meanings, Swift makes clear the different implications of the present-day word—implications with which he is going to work throughout the novel. In the same way, Peter Widdowson begins his article "Newstories: Fiction, History and the Modern World" displaying the etymology of the word "history". He explains that "[t]he words 'story' and 'history' in English both derive from the Greek *historia*: 'learning by inquiry,' from *histor*— 'a person who knows or sees.'" He adds that in

the earlier English usage... both "story" and "history" can be an account of either imaginary events or of events supposed to be true. But where the modern French word *histoire* retains both the meanings... from the fifteen century onwards the English word bifurcates: so that "history" comes to mean "an account of past real events", but "story" includes "less formal accounts of past events and accounts of imagined events". (1995: 4)

Going back to the earlier use of the word “history”, this critic defines Swift as “the most self-conscious and sophisticated British writer of what I call ‘fictory’” (1995: 11). He coins the term “fictory”, blending in this way both senses: story (fiction) + history, a combination that constitutes the core of *Waterland* and of the idea of history that Swift presents in it.

The fact that both terms —history and story— appear as possible meanings of the Latin “*Historia, -ae*” or the Greek “*Historia*” makes their relation so close for Swift that in the novel they appear as interchangeable, as, for instance, when Lewis —the headmaster— accuses Tom Crick of having “waived [his] responsibilities to the curriculum by turning [his] lessons into these —story-telling sessions”, and Crick answers that “[t]he subject’s still history” (153). In this way, as Widdowson explains, “the novel constantly foregrounds the consonance between historical narratives and ‘telling stories’, between the public and the private worlds... [Therefore, its] main thrust... is how narratives/stories/histories are made, how all our lives (or is it lies?) are woven of them” (1995: 12).

Crick’s new way of teaching history by telling stories is not a meaningless change, but an attitude that he adopts with, among other purposes, a therapeutic intention. As David L. Higdon comments, Crick’s “world has fragmented itself as one stressful event after another has assaulted him over the past few months. His wife Mary has suffered a breakdown... stolen a baby... and been confined to a mental institution... [I]n addition, Tom finds that he is to lose his job” (1991: 187). In other words, he has been assaulted by what he calls “the Here and Now”, by unexpected present impressions that make you reconsider and see in a different light what up to that moment you regarded as your true past or history —a history that you could use to explain and justify your present, but that is not useful (or true?) any longer.⁴

Del Ivan Janik defines the Here and Now as “[t]hat in life which is most real, sometimes more fulfilling but often most painful, [and that] is expressed not in terms of history but in the spots of time, the moments, in which personal experience is concentrated”. He adds that it “may bring transfiguration, more often it will bring pain; but it is the locus of real meaning” (1989: 78) (at least until another Here and Now takes place that makes you look for and find a different meaning or explanation for your life). All this obliges Tom “to come to terms with the guilt and responsibility he has evaded for so many years, and to search for some way of escape” (Higdon 1991: 187). So, the recollection of his past by means of his stories is “a way of making sense of madness” (225); that is why “[t]o comfort himself he tells himself stories. He repeats the stories he’s told his class” (331).

At this moment of crisis pessimism is clear, since Tom’s past history has collapsed, it has come to an end because of the shock he has received from the Here and Now. In order to fight this pessimism he has to find a way of avoiding this terminal approach to history —the same wrong approach that his students are taking and that has led them to create what they call “[o]ur society. The Holocaust Club” (236). So, the first optimistic overtones appear when, instead of remaining sunk under water, he is able to begin a healing process, whose main requirement is to put aside his previous way of approaching history and redefine it.

The official account of history, the piece of “*Grande Histoire*” —exemplified by the French Revolution, the historical period that he has to teach to his class according to the syllabus— is neither useful nor meaningful for his purpose any longer, since it

is a master discourse that has turned into something impersonal. For him the only history that really makes sense is the history—or the stories—of the Fens, since the only way he has to extract conclusions from his own life is by means of deconstructing, reviewing, redefining, and eventually reconstructing this personal history. It is only the research into his own past that can lead him to know himself.

However, the fact that Tom decides to examine his personal history—which from the moment of this decision becomes a counter-history because of its alternative character—does not imply a simplification of the idea of history. It is true that his history affects fewer people than the official one does, but, as pointed out above, the change is not necessarily one from multiple to singular. I suggest that it is from *macrocosm* to *microcosm*—remarking the meaning of the stem *cosm*, or “cosmos”, as “universe”.⁵ In order to get to self-knowledge, Tom has to think of himself, in a certain manner, as Saleem Sinai—the main character in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*—does when he says: “I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I’ve gone which would not have happened if I had not come” (1991: 457). So, the individual turns into a *microcosm*, which makes Saleem conclude that “to understand [him], you’ll have to swallow a world” (1991: 458).

While Saleem may sound as a bit of a grandiose egotist for all this, his point can be quite revealing in order to understand Tom’s situation. Brenda Marshall explains that “[t]o ‘swallow a world’ is the impossible challenge offered by historiographic metafiction” (1992: 175). This impossibility of explaining a/the whole world is truly pessimistic, but would it not be as pessimistic or even more to be able to fully explain it? To exhaust the meanings of the universe? For, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, “[i]f we accept that all is provisional... we will not stop thinking, as some fear; in fact, that acceptance will guarantee that we never stop thinking—and rethinking” (1988: 53). For this matter, we could compare our limited capacity of explaining our world (including our past) with the way in which serial publications—take Charles Dickens’s works as an example—were read in the 19th century. The way of keeping the readers interested in these publications was the creation of an unfulfilled desire by maintaining an illusion, a promise of fulfillment without finally providing it. It is a desire for a definite closure mixed with another for an open continuation, an effect similar to the one Scheherazade achieves with the way in which she tells her stories in *The Arabian Nights* and also in John Barth’s “Dunyazadiad” in *Chimera*. And this is the way in which Tom understands man’s research in history, for he says to his students:

your “Why?” gives the answer [to the question “What is the point of history?”]. Your demand for explanation provides an explanation. Isn’t this seeking of reasons itself inevitably an historical process...? And so long as we have this itch for explanations, must we not always carry round with us this cumbersome but precious bag of clues called History? (106)

For him, the “historical process” is carried out by relieving this “itch for explanations”, a process whose development—the action of reclaiming the past—is both “cumbersome” but “precious”, painful but necessary.

Going back to Saleem's words, Tom analyses "everything that went before [him]" in order to understand "the sum total" that he has become. This research in one's past, far from being something new, has been repeated again and again in universal literature, but now—in postmodern literature, and in *Waterland*, as an example of this trend—there is a relevant change. In order to explain this, George P. Landow argues that although Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* appear as influential sources of inspiration for this kind of research in *Waterland*, there is the difference that, whereas Pip in *Great Expectations*, and characters similar to him, "tell the stories of their lives after *everything interesting* has already happened to them and they have at last reached some safe haven", "Tom Crick... writes within a time of crisis". And "[s]uch writing from within an ongoing crisis may well be the postmodernist contribution to autobiography" (Landow 1990: 204-5). In this situation of immediate implication, Tom feels the necessity of understanding and acknowledging the indispensable importance of imagination (fiction) in reconstructing the/ his past experience.

The only way out of this crisis is overcoming it by detachment. Tom has to transcend this dramatic situation in the present by bracketing it (together with all the past events that may be related to it), so that he can examine it from outside. In the introduction to *Aren't You Rather Young To Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, B.S. Johnson conveys the same necessity as follows: "I write especially to exorcise, to remove from myself, from my mind, the burden, having to bear some pain, the hurt of some experience: in order that it may be over there, in a book, and not in here in my mind" (1973: 18-19). Whereas this detachment is physically impossible, it is metaphorically possible. Like Fausto Maijstral in Thomas Pynchon's *V*, Tom adopts the role of the poet, of the ontology maker, as far as he begins to tell (hi)stories in which the boundaries between fiction and reality are not very clear. Fausto, "[I]iving as he does much of the time in the world of metaphor... is always acutely conscious that metaphor has no value apart from its function; that it is a device, an artifice" (1961: 325-6). In the same way, Tom creates his own personal ontology, where family stories, fairy tales, natural history, etc., have at least the same validity—if not more—as the official records of the building of great empires. Like Fausto, he acknowledges the fictionality—artificiality—and the temporal limitations of his metaphor, but it is the only means he has of imposing some order in the chaos in which he is immersed.

Tom's attitude has been more and more necessary in the second half of our century, for, as Pynchon says, "[i]t is the 'role' of the poet, this 20th Century. To lie" (1961: 326), to create a metaphor, an illusion, that most of the times is not true, but that helps us live in this world. With this intention, Tom writes/tells "*A History of the Fens*" (6)—*Waterland*—a mirror in which he projects his past and present fears, doubts, illusions, and from which he makes temporary reclamations. If these reclamations do not fully explain his present situation, at least they do it partially, and always convey the promise of further explanation—as long as he asks "Why?"

In order to carry out this process of metaphorical recreation, Tom presents his life just in the opposite way of a *Bildungsroman*. The reason for this is that first he needs to deconstruct his past, so that he can reconstruct it again as a new past. In this way, Catherine Bernard says, referring to Swift's and Martin Amis's works, that "these texts may be defined as inverted *Bildungsromane* in which the narrators proceed

toward the dissolution rather than the assertion of their self” (1993: 126). Indeed, Tom realizes that he has to understand his life as a text, not a singular one, but, as Landow states, “a textualized, intertextualized self”. This critic goes on to suggest that “[p]resenting Tom Crick as intertwined with so many other tales and selves, Swift presents the self... as an entity both composed of many texts and dispersed into them.. And that is why to record part of himself, Tom must also record so many other histories, for they all intertwine, echo, and reverberate” (1990: 207).

In order to present this (inter)textual self and to carry out the introspective analysis that its examination requires, Swift very appropriately chooses the Fenland as the geographical frame for his narrative, for it is a land cut by innumerable threads of water that intertwine with each other, turning what otherwise would be a solid surface into a marshy area. Swift makes this correlation between self and Fens clear when he presents Thomas Atkinson’s interest in “the study of the brain and the nervous system” (79) after he has hit his wife Sarah. With this new occupation, he discovers “the even more intricate topography [in contrast with that of the Fens] of the medulla and the cerebellum, which have... their own networks of channels and ducts and their own dependance on the constant distribution of fluids” (80).

This East Anglian place and the process of siltation and land reclamation related to it is so appropriate for Tom’s development of his metaphor and for the new approach to history that he proposes because, more than a “land”, it is a “waterland”, i.e. an unstable terrain where what has been built today may be undone tomorrow. Nevertheless, the Fenland people —exemplified by the Crick family— do not have any other alternative but to practice the art of land reclamation (“human siltation”) if they want to have a “stable” ground to live on, even if they know that this “stability” is fated to be only temporary. In fact, as Tom tells his students, “every Fenman suffers now and then the illusion that the land he walks over is *not there*, is floating”, and the explanation of this is that

[w]hen you work with water, you have to know and respect it. When you labour to subdue it, you have to understand that one day it may rise up and turn all your labours to nothing. For what is water, which seeks to make all things level, which has no taste or colour of its own, but a liquid form of Nothing?
(13)

Carrying out a simple substitution of terms in the last two quotations, one can read the tenor, the literal meaning, of Tom’s metaphor, and, at the same time, it can be understood as a clear exposition of the postmodern way of approaching history. Thus, reading “historian” instead of “Fenman”, and “history” instead of “water”, Tom is indirectly showing his students the attitude one has to adopt not to fall in the trap of taking history as an unchangable and inflexible account that conveys *the* unquestionable truth. As Brenda Marshall explains, “[t]his is the postmodern lesson: there is nothing —no thought, no idea, no place, concept, matter— that does not have a history, and those histories are mutable, shifting”. The conclusion that derives from this is that “history can refuse ‘the certainty of absolutes’” (1992: 169).

In *Clea*, the fourth and last volume of *The Alexandria Quartet*, Lawrence Durrell explains that in order to escape from this trap of “the certainty of absolutes” one has

to make “improvisations upon reality”, “improvisations of the heart itself” (1960: 97), accepting the fact that history has to be understood as a palimpsest in which many truths can be written, not necessarily in a corrective manner, but also in a cumulative one.⁶ In the same way, Tom explains to his students: “Ah, the idols and icons, the emblems and totems of history. How when we knock down one, another rises in its place” (179). Through this, he is teaching them that when one tries to write history (or to extract conclusions from events translated into facts) one must be ready to accept a rewriting of what was once assumed as true —and which indeed worked as one’s reality for some time. The reason for this is that history, as water, is something “which has no taste or colour of its own”, only the one that one wants to or is able to provide it with, for —quoting Durrell again, this time in *Balthazar*— “[t]here are only as many realities as you care to imagine”, since “[o]ur view of reality [is] conditioned by our position in space and time” (1958: 144, 5).⁷

Taking all that has been said into account, one can understand what Tom thinks about the progression of history. For him, history does not follow a linear development at all, but, nevertheless, it still presents a kind of evolution. The idea of progress is always related to the action of going forwards, but for Tom it can be much more complex. Thus, he states that history “goes in two directions at once. It goes backwards as it goes forwards. It loops. It takes detours. Do not fall into the illusion that history is a well-disciplined and unflagging column marching unswervingly into the future” (135). Later on, almost at the end of the book, he concludes that “[t]here is this thing called progress. But it doesn’t progress, it doesn’t go anywhere... My humble model for progress is the reclamation of land. Which is repeatedly, never-endingly retrieving what is lost” (336). Therefore, the historical process is much more complex than a simple teleological movement: it is a process —like “the reclamation of land”— of gaining some ground as you look forwards and losing some other as you look backwards. And this process admits the possibility of inversion when the re-examination and reconstruction of the past requires, in its turn, a reconstruction of the present.

Tom characterizes his model for progress as “humble” and then he warns his students that they “shouldn’t go mistaking the reclamation of land for the building of empires” (336). What he is doing —as the dredgers do— is “[a] dogged, vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business” (336). Brenda Marshall comments that “[t]he stories of war survive; the stories of people’s lives do not. [And]... one of the goals of postmodern’s historiographic metafiction [is] to provide a memory counter to one dedicated to war” (1992: 163).⁸ This is exactly what Tom is doing; he is not constructing a *Grande Histoire*, a huge official history about “the building of empires”, but offering the alternative “stories of people’s lives”.

Linda Hutcheon states that “[t]hose in power control history”, but she adds that “[t]he marginal and ex-centric, however, can contest that power, even as they remain within its purvey” (1988: 197). The way of carrying out this contest is by creating alternative counter-histories that will question the power and validity of the official one. With this, the writing of history is displayed as a merely selective process, which leads Brian McHale to pose the question, “What is official history the history of? Of the winners... of the male sex[?]” Then, like Hutcheon, he points out that the postmodernists try to “redress the balance of the historical records of writing histories of the excluded, those relegated permanently to history’s dark areas” (1987: 90).

Tom Crick is perfectly aware of those “excluded”, for he tells his students: “did I not bid you remember that for each protagonist who once stepped on to the stage of so-called historical events, there were thousands, millions, who never entered the theatre—who never knew that the show was running—who got on with the donkey-work of coping with reality?” (40). He feels that these people should not be excluded, and he justifies his telling the stories of the people of the Fens saying that “even if we miss the grand repertoire of history, we yet imitate it in miniature” (41).

These “miniature” histories are—in McHale’s words—a “form of apochryphal history [that] responds to the..impulse to restore ‘lost’ groups... to the historical record that animates historical research itself in our time” (1987: 91). Thus, Crick’s attitude and his preference for the history of his ancestors instead of the official one—represented by the French Revolution—is a perfect example of this trend. McHale also comments that this “[a]pochryphal history contradicts the official version in one of two ways: either it *supplements* the historical record, claiming to restore what has been lost or suppressed; or it *displaces* official history altogether” (1987: 90). In *Waterland* both possibilities take place, as, on the one hand, Crick is filling “dark areas” of history with the account of what was happening in the Fenland in World War II, and, on the other hand, he is constantly replacing that official history with his personal one—the one that he presents as meaningful to him.

However, a great deal of this personal history, like the official one, needs the help of fiction to make sense, to exist, and this is what will lead him to develop his idea that man needs “[t]o live an amphibious life” (207), a life in which “history merges with fiction, fact gets blurred with fable” (208). Fortunately or unfortunately, this is the only reality to which man has access. Thus, the young Tom is a detective in search for facts in history books—epistemological and modernist in this sense—and “[h]e hasn’t begun to ask yet where the stories end and reality begins. But he will, he will” (208). At this early stage he begins with “the itch of curiosity” (51) “About Holes and Things” (42) (“[W]holes” ~ cosmos, and “Things” ~ facts) and he can distinguish and separate—or so it seems to him—history from story. However, after some time he will learn that their boundaries are not so clear. This will oblige him to create his new ontology and lead “an amphibious life” between history and fiction (becoming postmodern in this way). He does not have any alternative if he wants to fill in the gaps or dark areas of knowledge that will appear once and again throughout his life. For him, man is no more than “the story-telling animal” (62). He goes on to explain that telling stories is necessary for us. Man “wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories, he has to keep on making them up. As long as there’s a story, it’s all right” (63). On short, man needs to create narratives to impose an order on his life, and this is exactly what Tom is doing. In this way, as Janik points out, “*Waterland* is a manifestation of man’s need to tell stories to keep reality under control” (1989: 83).

Tom’s comment that “[a]s long as there’s a story, it’s all right” makes clear that not having a story to tell would be the great problem for man, and eventually the end of history. The reason for this is that men would not be able to provide an explanation for their lives, which would leave them feeling chaotic. Even if we know that telling stories is “a struggle to preserve an artifice... a struggle to make things not seem

meaningless", it is a necessary "fight against fear". Telling stories "helps to drive out fear... explaining, evading the facts, making up meanings, taking a larger view, putting things into perspective, dodging the here and now, education, history, fairy-tales —it helps to eliminate fear" (241). And this is why Tom is telling the (hi)story of the Fens: "It's a way of getting at the truth", "a way of coming up with just another story, a way of giving reality the slip" (263).

For me, the fact that Tom has a story to tell, one that helps reconcile him with his past, is not pessimistic at all. At the end of the novel, even if he has not been able to answer every question, as, for instance, who was Dick's father (Ernest Atkinson or Henry Crick), or who was the father of Mary's baby (Tom, Dick, or even Freddie Parr), he has produced a fiction (a story) in which the questions have answers that are valid for him: Ernest Atkinson was Dick's father and he himself was Mary's baby's father. These answers, it may be argued, are not necessarily true, but who can give the right answer? In Dick's case, not even Helen Atkinson could be sure. They provide an illusion of closure within the openness of final uncertainty, but is this not what we do with everything that happened in the past? Since events are not available for us, we have to be content with our fictions, with our "improvisations upon reality" —to quote Durrell again.

If man could not improvise upon what he finds in the present, he would be trapped in the past, as Dick and Mary are. On the one hand, all his life Dick has been thinking of Henry Crick as his father. When he learns who his real father was, he is not able to adapt his past to that "Here and Now", he cannot improvise, and that is why he commits suicide: because he is not able to impose an order within the chaos that his life and his past have turned into. On the other hand, Mary is also trapped in the past because, as Tom says, "she's become a hard-featured woman with a past. Then I see it's because something's gone from her face. Curiosity's gone" (57). Both Mary and Dick have lost their ability for improvisation —that is, if the latter ever did have it; clearly, he is not able to develop it in a manner which allows him to absorb the new information about his conception.

If every character in the novel were as flawed Mary and Dick, the conclusion would be completely depressing. But Tom Crick is there to show us that there is "a way of giving reality the slip" (163), namely by telling stories. The solution is never to give up asking "Why?" since "curiosity produces story-telling" and this is "a necessary act, something that one does... to keep our heads above water" (Landow 1990: 210). According to Tom's idea of history, the end of the novel would have been very pessimistic if every question had been solved with an irrevocable answer, inviting the end of curiosity —and, therefore, of history— and providing a closure that would make Tom a prisoner of the past (as Dick and Mary are).

On the contrary, *Waterland* ends with Dick's suicide, but there is no corpse, no physical proof that he has really died, which turns him into some sort of Christ-like figure. The point is not in whether he has died or not, but in the fact that his presence has not been deliberately obliterated from the text —nor from Tom's life. Thus, the very last words in the novel are: "On the bank of the thickening dusk, in the will-o'-the-wisp dusk, abandoned but vigilant, a motor-cycle" (358). This is Dick's motor-cycle, which has been identified with him throughout the novel, and therefore may perfectly stand for him in a metonymic way. Indeed, after Dick's disap-

pearance it is described as animate, for although it can be “abandoned”, it could never have been “vigilant” —an adjective that qualifies an animate being— had it not remained as a last trace of its owner. “[V]igilant” presences like Dick’s lead one to formulate the question “Why?” and provide the beginning for a new story that will reclaim a piece of the waterland of the past. As Tom proposes: “The dead are dead, aren’t they? The past is done with, isn’t it? But sometimes there are ways of unlocking that sealed-up domain, of exposing to the corrosive air its secret contents. And Dick had a key” (284). Although in this case Tom refers to a real key, the one that opens Ernest Atkinson’s chest, Dick also works as a metaphorical key for Tom’s reclamation of the past. For instance, the uncertainty about who Dick’s father is becomes one of the main reasons for Tom’s inquiries into the Atkinson and the Crick families’ pasts, inquiries that lead him to many others. This openness to new questions about the past is what, for me, grants the hopeful character to this book and to man’s attempt to achieve knowledge of the past. For, as Tom says, “[a]s long as there’s a story, it’s all right” (63). And he has a story to tell called *Waterland* or *A History of the Fens*, a story that is an artifice, but that has helped another Crick to reclaim a piece of land from the waters in which he is immersed and of which he is a constituent part.⁹

Notes

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- ¹ In fact, Nicholas Urfe, the main character in John Fowles’s *The Magus*, affirms that “[t]he novel is no longer an art form”, something that, according to him, became an usual topic when he was reading English at Oxford in the early 50s. Conchis, another character in the book, also thinks that “[t]he novel is dead. As dead as alchemy” (1977: 96). With this I want to suggest that the problematizing of history that *Waterland* displays can have a parallel reading by substituting literature for history.
- ² See also “Perseid” and “Bellerophoniad”, the other two *novellas* that make up *Chimera*, and his sequence of stories *Lost in the Funhouse* as examples of retellings of classical myths.
- ³ I emphasize the plurality of the word “solutions” because if it were singular it would mean that after a solution there would be no more possibilities, and, indeed, this would be the end of history, with the pessimism that it would convey.
- ⁴ At this stage, the term “history” becomes what Hassan calls “*Petite Histoire*” and, in its turn, it may be synonymous with “autobiography”. This does not mean that “*Petite Histoire*” or alternative (hi)story is always reduced to this degree of individualization, for the book that Tom is writing (presumably *Waterland*) is entitled *A History of the Fens* and, therefore, it is the “*Petite Histoire*” of the Fenland, containing that of many of its people within.
- ⁵ However, this cosmos or universe is supposed to consist of an ordered system, and this is the reason that obliges Tom to look for that temporary, and up to that moment hidden, pattern that endows that microcosm with a possible kind of order which can be translated into ease of mind.

- ⁶ This same concept is also expressed by many British and American writers after Durrell, as, for example, A.S. Byatt in *Possession: A Romance*, John Fowles in *The Magus* and *A Maggot*, Charles Johnson in *Middle Passage*, Thomas Pynchon in *V*, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, etc. And if we consider previous literature as a historical inheritance, we can also mention Angela Carter in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, J.M. Coetzee in *Foe*, John Gardner in *Grendel*, Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, etc. But even as early as at the end of the nineteenth century Henry Adams was already suggesting this attitude in his *Education*.
- ⁷ This is also pointed out by James Joyce in *Ulysses* with regard to the idea of parallax, which he makes quite explicit with the multiple overlapping perspectives that appear in chapter 10, "Wandering Rocks".
- ⁸ See John Berger's *G.* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* as counter-histories of war.
- ⁹ A detailed consideration of the last name Crick could help us realize the unavoidable instability of Tom's achievement. "Crick" is quite similar to "creek", a word that denotes a narrow body of water, and in Midwestern United States they are even homophones. In this way, we can see that the main character in *Waterland*, who can be understood as a representative of man coping with his past, has as inherently unstable and fluent a psychology as water itself. But the lesson of this novel is that this is a necessary requirement for man's freedom so that he does not get trapped in his past.

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