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Not a saviour of the world: dismissal of messianism in Graham Swift's *Waterland*

1. Premises

The title of Graham Swift's most popular novel, *Waterland* (1983), announces its ideology more explicitly and immediately than most of his other texts do. The oxymoronic compound is as unapologetically paradoxical as it is inconspicuous and down-to-earth. The elements of the binary are not merely juxtaposed in a fundamental contrast but, far more importantly, held together in a state of precarious equilibrium and mutual dependence. The setting of the story – Fenlands, a region in the east of England – is indeed a place characterised by the presence of water, a place which owes its very existence to the constant removal of the element, and which is susceptible to its constant return. The narrative itself similarly balances between the central character's desire to confess his troubled past and his meandering, digressive style, which the most critical of his listeners openly challenges: "[E]xplaining is a way of avoiding the facts while you pretend to get near to them."[1]

The ostentatiously simple title phrase thus enables Swift to introduce a model for the text's many other binaries, all of which on closer inspection prove to be more complicated than one might suppose. The ephemeral

[1] G. Swift, *Waterland* (London: Picador, 1983), p. 145.

construct of civilisation versus the natural chaos and inertia; history as an official, factual account of events versus a plurality of more subjective, if not downright fictional, tales; the potential of human systems of signification to counteract the effects of trauma versus their propensity for producing ever more trauma; the fact that language alienates us from our own selves and our experience versus the way it can console us in this alienation; all of these are shown to be neither entirely complementary nor entirely mutually exclusive, suspended in an endless dynamic of push and pull.[2]

The novel also juxtaposes, crucially from the point of view of the present article, the triumphalism of the Victorian era with the bleak decline of the late 1970s. An autobiographical narrative of a history teacher who faces a personal crisis, his story is an attempt to go back in time, to find at least an explanation for the present calamity and possibly some sort of solution as well. Announced to the audience of his pupils as motivated by his wish "to give you the complete and final version…," (6)[3] it predictably both fulfils and sabotages the design in a number of ways. The epic sweep of the harangue uses the French Revolution and the rise and the deterioration of the British imperialism (two epitomes of what Tom Crick calls "myths of progress and myths of decline" [207]) as the background for the fates of two families, also set in an imperfect juxtaposition with each other. While it discloses dramatic secrets (madness, murder, suicide, incest), the narrative voice at the same time consistently avoids confronting them directly.

Graham Swift himself is frequently counted as a post-Victorian writer and his work has rightly been considered as aiming to mourn the melancholias of modernity from a postmodern standpoint. In the ranks of criticism that deals with this issue, Wendy Wheeler's "Melancholic Modernity and Contemporary Grief"[4] is certainly among the most significant texts. Wheeler reminds her readers that modernity may be broadly understood as an attempt to understand the world without

[2] Some of these are problematised in "The Many Facets of Chaos-vs-Order Dichotomy in Graham Swift's *Waterland*," by Stephan Schaffrath (*Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 [Spring 2003]), pp. 84–93; Hanne Tange's "Regional Redemption: Graham Swift's *Waterland* and the End of History" (*Orbis Litterarum*, 59, 2004), pp. 75–89; Stef Craps's *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift: No Short-Cuts to Salvation* (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2005) and many others.

[3] The ellipsis in which the bold announcement culminates in itself signals the narrator's intention – and persistent tendency – to undermine himself.

[4] W. Wheeler, "Melancholic Modernity and Contemporary Grief," in: *Literature and the contemporary*, ed. R. Luckhurst and P. Marks (Harlow: Longman, 1998), pp. 63–79.

supernatural elements but that posing humanity as the source of knowledge opens up the modern dread of meaninglessness of existence. The nineteenth century – one of two central temporal planes of *Waterland* – is characterised by narratives of modern progress (Industrial Revolution, colonial empire-building, various revolutionary movements across Europe, etc.), but culturally it is predominantly a time of anxiety and melancholy. Wheeler argues that one of the tasks that Swift sets himself in his writing is to find a way to transform the destructive melancholias of modernity into healthy mourning of the postmodern times, and that in his works "the outcome of postmodernity, seen as the attempt to live with loss and uncertainty as a permanent condition, might be the discovery or invention of ways of being in the world which move beyond the harsh individualism of utilitarian modernity, and towards a different way of accounting for and valuing human needs."[5] This line of thought is, of course, based on an assumption that such a clear-cut distinction between melancholia and mourning remains valid; that the former can still be seen as a pathological, dead-end affective involvement that allows no reattachment, while the latter is a form of healthy resolution that opens the way for working through grief conclusively. Such perception is not obvious, even in the light of the evolution of Freud's own ideas on the subject: increasingly, his theorising conceptualised mourning as an endless process, allowing no final detachment of affect from the lost object.[6] Swift appears to be in agreement with Freud on this, consistently questioning any sort of resolutions to individual and social traumas. *Waterland*, with its problematic, fluid epistemology is a flagship example of this attitude.

At one point in the narrative, Crick questions the value of studying history: "What is a history teacher? He's someone who teaches mistakes. While others say, Here's how to do it, he says, And here's what goes wrong. While others tell you, This is the way, this is the path, he says, And here are a few bungles, botches, blunders and fiascos…" (203) He notes that the gradual demise of his great-grandfather's brewing empire illustrates a general mood of decline which has continued until the narrative

[5] Ibid. p. 65.

[6] In "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) Freud claimed that there is a decisive end to the mourning process when the subject's emotional investment is placed in another object. However, in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) he modified his conception, by postulating that the identification with the lost object, previously associated strictly with melancholia, is a feature of normal mourning as well, which should be thought of as endless.

present, both in his life and in his country, "[b]ecause that last quarter of the nineteenth century, […] which is apt to be seen as a culminatory period leading to that mythical long hot Edwardian summer so dear to the collective memory of the English, was, if the truth be known, a period of economic deterioration from which we have never recovered" (137). Tom's ancestors respond to the perspective of reaching the end of what had previously appeared to be unstoppable progress and expansion with two diametrically different attitudes, thus setting up another of the novel's flawed binaries. The narrator's great-grandfather Arthur chooses "forward imperial policies," while his son Ernest "wished that he might return to the former days of the untamed swamps, when all was yet to be done, when something was still to be made from nothing" (137). The two stances, while clearly contrasting with each other, will be demonstrated to be equally deceptive and equally destructive.

This article will consider the novel's handling of the motif of British brand of messianism, which will be approached through the figure of the narrator's half-brother, spawned by Ernest to be the saviour of the world. Tom Crick's own attitude towards promises of a grand future is an epitome of Graham Swift's overall distrust of totalising narratives, which, nevertheless, tend to be presented as inescapable in his prose. I propose that this allows for an analogy with certain aspects of Jacques Lacan's conception of the formation and functioning of the speaking subject. However, in homage to the meandering style of Crick's argumentation, I would like to proceed to the main thesis of my article by way of making two digressions of my own.

2. Dick Crick

Graham Swift has a reputation for his consistent and quite serious use of dirty puns, for reviving dead metaphors, and for exploring the multiplicity of meanings hidden in clichés. The titles of his novels are normally either single words (besides *Waterland*, one might quote *Shuttlecock* (1981) or *Tomorrow* (2006)) or fixed phrases (*Out of This World* (1988), *Last Orders* (1996), *Wish You Were Here* (2011) or *Here We Are* (2020)), whose numerous, often contradictory, implications are pursued both implicitly and explicitly in the texts. Swift's propensity for giving meaningful names to his characters is another manifestation of this feature of his style. The

protagonist of his debut novel (*The Sweet Shop Owner*, 1980) is called William Chapman, but throughout the text he is consistently referred to as "Willy." The diminutive resonates with the character's immaturity, his dependence on the mother-like figure of his frigid wife, but also carries sexual connotations. The wife's name itself – Irene – etymologically points to associations with peace, and her primary preoccupation throughout the story is to maintain a peaceful stasis. The loveless marriage is completed by Dorothy, the daughter, who is Irene's offering to Willy, making up for her own lack of affection for him. Resolving any potential doubts about overinterpretation of these details, Dorothy herself ponders the etymology of her name in the novel, and observes that in Greek, "dorothea" means the gift of gods.[7] Swift therefore very openly encourages his readers to pay close attention to the resonances of his characters' names. Let me add that *The Sweet Shop Owner* culminates with Willy's suicide attempt, and the next time Swift uses the name William for his character is in 1992's *Ever After*. The protagonist of this novel is a man recovering from a failed suicide attempt, and he is also consistently referred to with the diminutive of his first name. This character is called Bill Unwin, so the surname is also openly suggestive.

The names of *Waterland*'s central characters therefore certainly merit attention. Admittedly, some observations in this regard may seem obvious (the narrator's wife's first name is Mary and she is a devout Catholic, for whom questions of fertility, conception and divine presence in her life are of crucial importance) or perhaps not entirely convincing and relatively insignificant (the protagonist's name is Tom, while his father's is Henry and his half-brother's is Dick; Harry, Dick and Tom are a set of names used in English to signify an ordinary person, an everyman, and these characters are very much of the "salt of the earth" type). Tom's maternal grandfather, Ernest, is straightforwardly described as endowed with "an inclination (true to his name) to take the world in earnest" (138). The name of Tom's elder brother, however, is central to my argument in this paper, and its

[7] These comments are based on Stef Craps' analysis of the implications of the names (*Trauma and Ethics*, p. 38). Other critics of *The Sweet Shop Owner* have devoted considerable attention to the etymologies of the three main characters' names. David Malcolm reads their significance in the context of classical allusions present in the novel (*Understanding Graham Swift* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003], pp. 27–8), while Daniel Lea brings up the Anglo-Saxon roots of the family name, observing that "Chapman" is derived from "pedlars of books of popular verse and song." (*Graham Swift* [Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005], p. 39).

significance is beyond conjecture, since it is also brought up explicitly in the narrative. The protagonist remembers that Dick was "the daily butt of the other kids. 'Dick Crick!' they squawk. 'Dick Crick! Dick Crick!' Like some name in a nursery rhyme. (Now whatever possessed his unthinking parents to call him Richard?)" (209) The sexual connotations of the predominant form of the elder Crick brother's first name figure far more prominently here than in *The Sweet Shop Owner*. Jokes are made "about Dick," in the film adaptation arguably even more emphatically than in the book,[8] and in scenes presenting the teenage protagonists' explorations of their sexuality, the prodigious size of his member is repeatedly emphasised: "Dick has joined us. [...] And not only Dick but, attached to him, concealed, if scarcely contained by his straining swimming-trunks, a tubular swelling of massive and assertive proportions" (161). Dick Crick is therefore a character whose name invites clear phallic connotations, and one who is meant to be the saviour of the world, to remove the sense of insufficiency troubling humanity. In this, he brings up very strong Lacanian associations, since he in many ways performs the same function which is in Jacques Lacan's theorising ascribed to the figure of the phallus, a concept not synonymous with the male member (unlike in Freudian psychoanalysis), but which is not without relation to the biological organ either. The phallus is a signifier not affected by deferral of meaning, the ultimate sign completing the lack on which the very system of signification is founded, often illustrated with the figure of Christ, the object completing the perfection of God himself. Before considering in what ways Dick functions – or fails to function – as the phallic supplement in Ernest Atkinson's narrative, it might be useful to introduce the concept in some more detail.

3. The phallus

The concept of the phallus is one of those crucial points in Lacanian psychoanalysis in which Lacan's "return to Freud" proves to be a profound reworking of his predecessor's theorising. Arguably, Freud does use the term to mark the central difference between the genders as relating closely

[8] The novel's "Mary [...] would like to be better acquainted with Dick" (213) or "her fascination with Dick [...], not least with his much wondered-at parts" (42) versus the film's "She was curious about Dick," pointed out by Adam Sumera as one of the aspects of vulgarisation of the novel's language in the film adaptation ("Going to America to See the Fens Better? Stephen Gyllenhaal's *Waterland*," *Text Matters*, Vol. 5, No. 5 [2015], p. 207).

to, if not identical with, the perception of the male sexual organ – or its absence. Freud also construes subjectivity as essentially gendered, so to some extent Lacan really does follow him, but in fact goes much further in his conception of the phallus.

The phallus is typically explained through a developmental hypothesis of the infant's relation to its mother, who in Western societies is most often the first nurturer, and thus the omnipotent force in the infant's existence as the first entity that the infant learns to perceive as non-identical with itself. The process of establishing subjecthood involves breaking up the presumed unity of the child with the surrounding world, and in particular with the mother, but the conviction of being a crucial part of her holds even after the child enters the symbolic, the system of signification. The realisation that the mother desires – that is lacks – something other than the child, that the child is not everything she needs to make her complete and satisfied, gives rise to a desire in the infant to become (or perhaps actually remain) the object which fills that lack. The formation of the subject's desire after the desire of the (m)Other is undeniably a crucial moment in Lacan's views on subject formation; more interestingly from the perspective of the present argument, this process allows us to illustrate the concept of the phallus: the perceived object of the mother's desire, the thing that is presumed to make the almighty caregiver complete and perfect. When the child is made aware that it cannot become the phallus for the mother (normally through the intervention of a paternal prohibition), castration occurs, and phallus is transformed from a symbol of completeness and self-sufficiency to a symbol of irreducible lack. The phallus is therefore paradoxical and ambiguous in its nature: it encapsulates the dream of perfect harmony, fullness, and control, while reminding us ceaselessly by its very presence that these things are never to be achieved. The constitution of the speaking subject involves an irreversible loss since "when being makes its appearance on the level of language, it must disappear under that language, it loses the reality of its being."[9] Our existence as speaking subjects is marked by the constant striving to regain the lost wholeness, but "the more signifiers produced, the further one moves away from this real [...] The subject chooses the (m)Other in order to regain the lost paradise of the primary experience of

[9] P. Verhaeghe, "Causation and Destitution of a Pre-ontological Non-entity: On the Lacanian Subject," in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed. D. Nobus (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 176.

satisfaction, and the net result will be an ever more clear delineation of this loss."[10] As will be demonstrated in the following section of this article, the longing for lost paradise is quite familiar to Crick both in his capacity as a historian and in his personal experience, as is the oscillation between the embrace and rejection of disappointing substitutes offered by the symbolic.

Hopefully at this point the phallic dimension is becoming clear both in Tom Crick's own narrative enterprise and in the historical processes that he is describing to his students. Crick himself acknowledges the universal impulse to try and restore lost equilibrium as one of the motivations of his trade: "history [...] creates this insidious longing to go backwards. Nostalgia. How we yearn [...] to return to that time before history claimed us, before things went wrong. [...] How we pine for Paradise. For mother's milk. To draw back the curtain of events that has fallen between us and the Golden Age" (118). The phallus may therefore be perceived as informing Crick's discourse in more ways than one. On the one hand, it represents the fantasy of some vantage point outside the constraints of language, of a form of expression that exceeds the limitations of signifiers, which captures the whole of our being and thus enables him to offer "the complete and final version." It is also one of the extremes of the binary organising Crick's familial history: it stands at the pole of the rational mastery of a factual account, of language as a tool of power and progress – and within Crick's narrative, it may be associated with the Atkinson lineage in his story. This is why Ernest's rebellion against his father, expressed through his project of the incestuous union whose fruit is to reverse the flow of time, restore paradise, make humanity whole again, cannot but fail. What lies underneath Ernest's rejection of the imperial enterprise has at its root a disturbingly analogous impulse: to find a signifier that would put everything right, that would complete all lack, remove all obstacles on the path to endless progress; to bring to the world its saviour. The phallus therefore stands at the other pole of the narrative as well, representing with equal ease Ernest's irrational longing to restore Paradise.

4. The Prodigal Son

The phallic implications of Tom Crick's maternal ancestors are evidenced by their dependence on the supplement of Progress or Empire

[10] Ibid.

in shaping their ideology. The Atkinsons' propensity for action – making history – leads to continuous change, but is not driven merely by practical, pragmatic, mercantile motivations: "Is there no end to the advance of commerce? But should we speak only of the advance of commerce, and not of the advance of Ideas – those Ideas which the Atkinson cannot help conceiving?" (79) Technical innovation and business expansion require the support of the framework of the patriotic, imperial discourse: "How many times does the Union Jack flutter above the arched and motto-inscribed entrance to the New Brewery to mark some occasion of patriotic pride? How often does the *Gildsey Examiner* (founded with Atkinson money and an organ for Disraeliite Toryism) refer in its columns, in the same breath and the same tone, to the March of Industry and the Might of Albion?" (80) The enterprise can never be limited to "figures of Profit and Sale, to sacks of malt, barrels of ale, chaldrons of coal" (80); it must be supplemented by something that goes beyond mere facts. In this sense, incidentally, this is a point where the clear-cut juxtaposition of the Cricks and the Atkinsons fails: the latter prove to be as reliant on "telling stories" as the former.

The Cricks' labour, on the other hand, is endless, and their preference for narrativising reality – making stories – suggests homeostasis rather than development. This explains why Crick speaks of a misunderstanding when he discusses the collusion of the humble enterprise of land reclamation with imperialist triumphalism: "And why has land reclamation in the eastern Fens become confused with the Empire of Great Britain? Because to fix the zenith is to fix the point at which decline begins" (80). The Cricks have no problem with decline, perfectly aware that it inevitably accompanies any rise. Tom's own distrust of promises of endless expansion thus places him on the side of the paternal branch of his family. The very nature of history as a tool for ordering the chaos of reality makes it dependent on the recognition of its inherent limitations according to one of Crick's definitions, which is completed by an explicitly anti-phallic manifesto, a declaration of disbelief in any kind of ultimate signifier: "[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 no short-cuts to Salvation, no recipe for a New World, only the dogged and patient art of making do [...] by attempting to explain

we may come, not at an Explanation, but to a knowledge of the limits of our power to explain" (94). Inevitably, Crick himself as a narrator follows these precepts partially at best, and although this is not the crucial concern of the present text, I will return to his own phallic supplement in the final section of my analysis.

The stories told by Tom, however, undeniably support his stance. Consider only the dramatic development in the narrative present which has led to Crick's making his speech in the first place. Troubled by the effects of the traumatic abortion which has rendered her infertile and filled her with guilt, Mary leans into increasingly delusional forms of religious belief, which provides her with precisely the kind of consolation and order that her husband's narrative strives for – but always undermines. It is her faith in divine intervention as a way of achieving plenitude, restoring the perfect state from before the fall, that leads her to kidnap a baby "who, as everyone knows, was sent by God. Who will save us all" (284). In their turn, these events are only an echo – and an aftereffect – of Tom's grandfather and his placing the idea of beauty (embodied by his daughter Helen) in the position of the phallus. This leads Ernest to ask Helen to bear him a child who is to become the saviour of the world. Ironically, Ernest's enterprise, as was already remarked, supposedly aimed against the inconsistencies in the nineteenth-century triumphalism, in fact proves to be as teleological as the Victorian imperialism which it apparently negates, to the extent that it appears to be its direct emanation, or perhaps a parody, a subversive caricature.

Ernest is a rebel from the start, and the way Crick tells the story, it appears that he is somehow synonymous with his family's decline. Born at a time when the brewing empire is losing its impetus, he "was the first of the brewing Atkinsons to assume his legacy without the assurance of its inevitable expansion, without the incentive of Progress" (137). His father, perceiving himself as "not a master of the present but a servant of the future" (137) responds to the weakening of his position by turning to the phallic supplement of imperial policies, which envision not only a restoration of the lost glory, but actually unprecedented growth. His son, always reluctant to take his position in the line of inevitable Atkinson success, opts for a more down-to-earth policy, and denounces his father "as one of those who had fed the people with dreams of inflated and no longer

tenable grandeur, who had intoxicated them with visions of Empire, [...] thus diverting their minds from matters nearer home. Whilst he, the son of the father, advocated restraint, realism, the restoration of simplicity and sufficiency" (140). Announced merely three years before the outbreak of World War I, his warning that the country is bound to face "catastrophic consequences unless the present mood of jingoism was curbed and the military poker-playing of the nations halted" (140) is not taken well by his compatriots. After his political ambitions are frustrated, Ernest goes back to his profession, which serves as another vessel for his natural propensity for subversion: "A brewer: a fermenter" (147). He is determined to place a mirror before the faces of the community that has rejected him: "But though he accepts defeat he does not accept inaction. He waits for the moment to give the people what they want" (147). His gift takes the form of the Coronation Ale, brewed to celebrate the ascension to the throne of George V, which is offered to the town as a gesture of reconciliation. In fact, the beer proves so devastatingly intoxicating that its effects turn the celebrations into a chaos of indignity and destruction. Ernest could thus be said to embody almost literally "'real' in the strict Lacanian sense: a 'hitch,' an impediment which gives rise to ever-new symbolizations by means of which one endeavours to integrate and domesticate it [...] but which simultaneously condemns these endeavours to ultimate failure."[11] Pushed to the margins of the dominant discourse, he keeps returning, ceaselessly exposing its flaws. After the tumultuous night during which his brewery is destroyed in a fire, Ernest retreats with his daughter to pursue his most ambitious project, which will extend his influence into the next generation.

5. The saviour of the world

> Once upon a time there was a father who fell in love with his daughter (no let's be clear, we're not just talking about ordinary paternal affection). And the father – who'd lost his wife many years before – and the daughter lived alone in a former lodge on the edge of the grounds of a hospital. Hemmed in by tall trees and standing all by itself, this lodge was like a house in a fairy-tale – a gingerbread house, a woodcutter's cottage; but in fact the

[11] S. Žižek, "The Spectre of Ideology," in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. S. Žižek (London, New York: Verso, 1994), p. 22.

> father had once been a rich and influential man – amongst other things he owned a brewery – though, one way or another, he'd fallen on bad times; and once he'd lived in the grand building which was now a hospital. Far away, across the sea, there'd been a great war and the hospital was full of soldiers, some of them wounded in their bodies but all of them wounded in the mind. (195)

Adopting the stylings of a fairy-tale is a strategy used by Tom Crick on a number of occasions when he is facing the most drastic sections of his story (most tellingly, he adopts it when speaking of his and Mary's visit at Martha Clay's place to have the pregnancy terminated). The fairy-tale convention literally allows Crick to narrate events that he admits himself to be unable to discuss just a few pages earlier, which he only signals as "something appalling, something indescribable, something quite unlike a fairy-tale" (190). The narrator speculates that perhaps Ernest fell in love with his own daughter at least in part because Helen continued his work: she once disorganised a military parade with her very looks, exercising her "sudden power, without the need for either word or action, to make a mockery of these war-mongering proceedings – when [Ernest's] words and actions had failed" (189). Helen's very appearance is sufficient to achieve more than her father's hectic political activity, and in a journal to which Crick refers without ever quoting it, his grandfather declares himself "a Worshipper of Beauty," who is trying to "cling (I only paraphrase his words) to some left-over fragment of paradise" (189). Soon, however, Ernest's actions go well beyond a mere provocation or parody of the ideology that he rejected. Indeed, Crick does not fail to diagnose an affinity with those against whom his grandfather ostensibly is rebelling: "Can it be that he too has succumbed to that old Atkinson malaise and caught Ideas? And not just any old idea, but Beauty – most Platonic of the lot. The Idea of Ideas" (189-90).[12] Whether Ernest's affection for Helen is reciprocated remains subject to speculation, but Crick leaves no doubt that she does not share his desire to beget a son. She finally agrees on condition that Ernest allows her to marry one of the wounded soldiers she has been nursing and that she will be free to leave her father.

This is how Dick comes into the world – not so much to save it as to cause more chaos and destruction. On some level he is very much an agent of his

[12] A pun on the nature of the relationship is inevitable: "And there's nothing Platonic about it" (190).

grand/father's disturbing influence, although by no means a complement to fill any of his lacks. Indeed, Ernest never lives to see the disappointment that Dick will become, because some six months after his birth he takes his own life.[13] He does leave in the hands of his daughter a casket containing twelve bottles of his (in)famous Coronation Ale, a letter explaining Dick's origin, and the journal that has already been mentioned. The narrator reads these gestures as his farewell to Helen, "not as a father but as a lover," (201) and after fulfilling this final obligation that Ernest sees himself as having to the future, "he felt a great vacuum inside him and he started to fill it with beer" (202). Whether the drink was the cause of his decision or just facilitated it remains uncertain.

In a sense, one may wonder how much of a disappointment Dick really is. Admittedly, he is explicitly described by his half-brother as "[n]ot a saviour of the world. A potato-head. Not a hope for the future. A numbskull with the dull, vacant stare of a fish," who "can't be taught. Can't read, can't write. Speaks half in baby-prattle, if he speaks at all. Never asks questions. Doesn't want to know. Forgets tomorrow what he's told today" (209). Dick is thus shown as living outside time – outside the artificial history, the domain of the symbolic, of lack and dissatisfaction. In many ways he functions outside the realm of signification, suspended in a constant present, in a circular, natural homeostasis, unaffected by the calamities of what his half-brother calls "artificial history," which in a sense does make him worthy of the title of the phallus, a signifier unaffected by the inadequacies of the symbolic.

Dick is only dragged out of this natural inertia by two feminine influences: his mother, who, after succumbing to flu[14] "disappeared without explaining and never came back again," (210) and Mary, who undertakes his "sentimental education, that is, his training in the matters of the heart" (214). The two seemingly radically different situations have a crucial element in common: both involve an experience of lack or desire, a realisation that something is missing and the wish to restore or possess it. The transgressive wish to return to a paradisiacal state of unity with the mother is rendered literal by Tom's account of his brother's

[13] His gesture will be replicated by Bill Unwin's biological father in *Ever After* as well as Jack Luxton's father (and very nearly Jack himself) in *Wish You Were Here*. Both characters commit suicide by shooting themselves, and Michael Luxton, exactly like Ernest, sits under a tree to do it.

[14] Which she catches after nursing Tom out of it, in another very Victorian trope.

unsuccessful struggle to cope with the death of Helen Crick with the aid of the mysterious box she has left him at her father's request. Dick is unable to conceptualise absence and thus predictably misconstrues substitution as well. He assumes that his mother cannot possibly "have gone where she can't be retrieved. Perhaps she's hiding somewhere else. If they took her away in one box, perhaps she'll return in another [...] perhaps she's inside those bottles" (210-11). The spectacular failure of the attempt carries overtly sexual connotations: after drinking one bottle, Dick

> sinks to his knees, puts a hand to his belly; feels his arms, his legs, his head to see if they are still there. His eyelids have never whirred so fast. A look of disbelief – of guilt, terror – crosses his face. A look not unlike the look he will give on a certain day by the Hockwell Lode, when something inside his woollen bathing trunks starts to stir unsuspectedly. He sits, but can't stay still, as if he'd never guessed quite what dangerous stuff he was made of, and he has to get away from it. But the only way to get away from it is to leap out of his own skin. (249)

Even without the analogy to Dick's unsettling realisation of his own sexual urges, the incident would be recognisable as an eruption of *jouissance*, a cruel caricature of a return to a pre-subjective bliss. Swift's wording itself is here very Lacanian: the only way to get away from the overwhelming intensity of the pre-symbolic state is indeed to "leap out of one's own skin" – that is to become castrated, to lose the integrity of being that we supposedly possess before we enter the domain of substitution. Dick's naïve understanding of substitution – as literally restoring the lost object – demonstrates the futility of any attempt to totalise the symbolic into a perfectly coherent order, ignoring its internal contradictions and incongruities which return inevitably in the form of the real. In fact, the contents of the case – both the letter and Ernest's infamous brew – can only achieve one effect. The experiment not only does not restore Dick's mother, or make him whole, but in fact opens him to the sense of inadequacy that is associated with the symbolic. Dick's phallus also fails, as it has to – or, to be more precise, his imaginary phallus is replaced with the symbolic one. The culmination of the scene is presented in suggestively psychoanalytic terms: Dick throws the empty bottle away "with a confused and anguished cry – as if, for all his terror, he is throwing away some potential parcel of

bliss, some part of his own unconsummated flesh" (250). This is a literal embodiment of castration: Dick receives a message from his father, telling him categorically why he can never become one with his mother, and to truly accept this, he must sever an essential part of himself. What is more, the dreamed-of element that is supposed to make him complete, give him a perfect identity which would justify his position in the symbolic, is shown to be distinctly alienating: "It's not him at all; it's the stuff inside the bottle" (250).

His relationship with Mary also has the effect of disturbing his peaceful amnesia, giving him something to remember, something to long for, "if indeed it has ever sunk completely into the Lethe of Dick's brain – it returns again now, it rises, buoyantly and pungently, to the surface: that memory which disturbs and confuses, goads and exacerbates the beautiful feeling" (218). This experience proves equally disappointing and equally subjectifying: Dick longs for Love the same way Ernest yearned after Beauty, and just like him finds sex instead. "But Dick doesn't want a biology lesson. What he wants is Lu-lu-love. He wants the Wonderful Thing. […] And Mary says, but they're all part […] of the Wonderful Thing. And Dick says what's wonderful about putting something in a hole?" (225) Mary is as persistent in her encouragement as Dick is distrustful of the experiment, but finally "the result of all this is that it proves Too big" (225). The phallus – whether in its capacity as the perfect abstraction, or the biological organ – once again proves to be not the final, perfect complement that will remove all insufficiency, but a reminder of ever more insufficiency and dissatisfaction.

Mary's affair with both Crick brothers and her pregnancy lead to further progress in Dick's education. The stuff Dick is made of indeed proves dangerous when, thinking himself cuckolded by a friend of all three, Freddie Parr, he murders the boy with a bottle of Coronation Ale. Thus, rather than offering an ultimate explanation, Dick in fact causes ever more confusion and suffering, enforcing the production of discourses which cannot but fail to capture his essence. When his crime is discovered, Dick follows Ernest by committing suicide, a decision he also takes under the influence of the magic beer. The main difference is that Dick does take his life by literally reconnecting with nature, something that leads to the phallic moment in Tom's own discourse.

Throughout the narrative, Crick repeatedly claims that to remain (or perhaps step) beyond the domain of the symbolic is to preserve a lost paradise beyond historical consciousness and the social institutions of adulthood. Crick's vision of nature as embodying the dream of a return to a pre-symbolic paradise goes against his distrust of analogous narratives in the political realm. This inconsistency is perhaps possible because he considers the dangers of history-making (or, more broadly, existing in the symbolic) as uniquely human: in the chapter that famously defines the human being as "the storytelling animal," he tells his students "only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history" (53). What has been said about Dick's existence outside of time as well as the animal metaphors used by the narrator to describe his condition make it clear that this remark may apply to him. Crick's interpretation of his brother's desperate self-destructive deed shows that this is not an innocent overlap – ideological reading of nature proves to be useful in justifying the situation for which he is to a large extent also responsible. Tom not only stresses the unreliability of his memory ("Memory can't even be sure whether what I saw, I saw first in anticipation before I actually saw it, as if I had witnessed it somewhere already – a memory before it occurred" (308)), but actually creates a more elaborate decoy by admitting an analogous gesture and apologising for it. During an attempt to stop Dick from drowning himself, Tom and Harry find that explaining the complexities of the situation to outsiders is too demanding, and Tom reduces it to a succinct lie, for which he still feels guilty: "He's gone barmy. / (Forgive me, Dick. To malign your final gesture, your last recourse, with the taint of madness, to rob it of reality. I, if anyone, should know the reason for your plight)" (304). Then, however, he performs the same operation, this time on his audience: after re-emphasising Dick's connection to the subversively amorphous nature of the Fenlands ("The smell of something hauled from primitive depths. The smell that haunts Dick's bedroom" (307)), Tom describes his disappearance in terms that imply a return to nature, following an instinct: "And then he plunges. In a long, reaching, powerful arc [...] sufficiently reaching and powerful for us to observe his body, in its flight through the air, form a single, taut and seemingly limbless continuum, so that an expert on diving might have judged that here indeed was a natural, here indeed was a fish of a man"

(309). As if this was insufficient, he adds: "He's on his way. Obeying instinct. Returning. The Ouse flows to the sea..." (310) Such fatalist interpretation of the situation relieves Tom of responsibility, and Nature as an idealised abstraction is forcibly used to close gaps in the narrative. Crick as a narrator performs exactly the kind of discursive violence that he claims to repudiate as a historian,[15] so his anti-phallic, anti-messianistic diatribe ends up falling for the same temptation against which he warns his listeners.

6. No resolution

Like most of Swift's characters, and especially narrators, Tom Crick finds himself caught between the devastating effects of overwhelming events and the dangers of falling for the illusion of narratives that promise to contain them. In a novel which is as much about the restorative power of storytelling as about its inherent limitations, fulfilling the assurances of the Victorian messianism is no more possible than the permanent drying of the Fenlands. Near the conclusion of his narrative, Crick makes a telling analogy between the constant struggle to prevent water from overtaking the land and the notion of progress itself, which, according to him

> doesn't progress. It doesn't go anywhere. Because as progress progresses the world can slip away. My humble model for progress is the reclamation of land. Which is repeatedly, never-endingly retrieving what is lost. A dogged and vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business. (291)

The hydraulic metaphor justifies Freudian associations, and the analogy may certainly be extended to the Lacanian conception of the speaking subject. The endless drainage in which the inhabitants of the Fenlands are involved is reminiscent of Lacan's notion of surplus *jouissance*, which "indicates that after castration has drained *jouissance* from the body, there is always a certain amount left over."[16] This is why the frustrated history

[15] See Lea for a discussion of the discrepancy between Crick's repeatedly declared belief in the Marxist notion of circularity of history and the fact that his interpretation of his own troubled past depends on a nostalgic view of history as a linear progression of cause and effect. (pp. 74-75)

[16] D. Evans, "From Kantian Ethics to Mystical Experience: An Exploration of Jouissance" in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed. D. Nobus (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 12.

teacher's persistent inconsistency has one lesson to teach its audience: it should not be presumed that language can ever dispel the trauma of leaving the supposed pre-symbolic paradise, but neither should we ever expect to be free of the temptations of the imaginary phallus in its countless incarnations. The example of his half-brother amply demonstrates that simply rejecting all-encompassing ideologies is bound to lead to effects as disastrous as yielding to them without reservations. *Waterland* firmly rejects the teleological message of messianism and provides a perfect example of Swift's own "dogged and patient art of making do," of the importance of asking questions rather than insisting on possessing definite answers.

Not a saviour of the world: dismissal of messianism in Graham Swift's *Waterland*

The article considers the highly critical handling of the British brand of messianism in Graham Swift's novel *Waterland* (1983) in the light of Jacques Lacan's concept of the phallus. The issue is approached through the figure of the narrator's half-brother, spawned to be the saviour of the world and the narrator's attitude towards promises of a grand future, an epitome of Graham Swift's overall distrust of totalising narratives. The desire for a complete and final explanation is shown to be as inescapable as it is impossible to fulfil.

Key words: Graham Swift, *Waterland*, Jacques Lacan, the phallus, messianism
Słowa kluczowe: Graham Swift, *Kraina wód*, Jacques Lacan, fallus, mesjanizm