

STORIES AS SILT IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S *WATERLAND*

ELISABETA SIMONA CATANĂ

Politehnica University of Bucharest, FILS-DCLM

Abstract: *The essay analyses Graham Swift's Waterland and shows that history and identity are subject to a process of reconstruction within stories which evince their author's power to build on the past based on his vision and cultural experience. We associate the process of recreating the world of the past through stories with the process of recreating a new world through siltation. The same as silt develops land and a new world on the already existing pieces of land reclaimed from water, stories reconstruct history and the past. Both silt and stories reconstruct the past.*

Keywords: *history, identity, the past, silt, story, water.*

1. Introduction

A postmodernist novel which calls the concept of historical truth into doubt by associating historical reality with a haunting story, Graham Swift's (1992) *Waterland* approaches the theme of the cyclical times, cyclical historical events and stories, demonstrating the idea that everything returns to its own beginning symbolized by water, which stands for the origin of life. Enlarging upon the sacred symbol of water, Graham Swift's novel suggests the fact that, when it recedes and becomes subject to siltation, water allows land to extend in order to make human life possible and allows stories to spread and to dominate our lives. Ever since waters parted so that the world could be created, stories have gone around, causing various interpretations of historical reality. *Waterland* is the land developed through siltation and the land of never-ending stories which reconstruct the past according to the narrator's vision.

Graham Swift's *Waterland* is a collection of fifty-two stories told by Tom Crick, a history teacher threatened to have History excluded from the school curriculum, threatened to lose his job and to be retired. Most stories are addressed to his pupils at school in an attempt to define the concepts of *revolution, history, reality, the past, the present*. His main idea is that any revolution brings about a refreshing beginning, everything being cyclical and recyclable, gone and brought to life again. Teaching History to his pupils at school, Tom Crick makes comparisons between the terrible time lived by his ancestors, who had to survive floods and resort to "land reclamation" (Swift 1992:9) through siltation and drainage, and the terrible time of the French Revolution. His history lessons turn into stories which are told in instalments, switching from the past to the present. As he admits, he combines facts and fiction, history and fairy-tales, which are presented piecemeal like fragments of lessons to be put together and understood by educated readers and students: "he takes refuge in the fanciful fabric of Kingsley's yarn, in which, in misty Fenland settings (which match his misty, love-sick state of mind) history merges with fiction, fact gets blurred with fable..." (Swift 1992:208). He illustrates the postmodernist idea that the *grand*

narrative is an illusion, that the various instances of historical reality presented in stories and the various interpretations of historical events must be put together in order to understand the present which is another image of the past.

A Fenlander whose historical past is marked by a never-ending struggle with rising waters at certain times, a struggle for “land reclamation” (Swift 1992:9) for living and working, Tom Crick enlarges upon the process of siltation which causes land to extend and stories to go around. The same as silt develops land and recreates a new world, stories recreate history and the past. Stories illustrate the narrator’s view on the immemorial past that we bear in our minds and that we become aware of through *déjà-vu* experiences. Stories can be associated with silt as they rebuild the past, the same as silt creates a new world:

Silt: which shapes and undermines continents; which demolishes as it builds; which is simultaneous accretion and erosion; neither progress nor decay. (...)

What silt began, man continued. Land reclamation. (...)

So forget, indeed, your revolutions, your turning-points, your grand metamorphoses of history. Consider, instead, the slow and arduous process, the interminable and ambiguous process – the process of human siltation – of land reclamation (Swift 1992:8-10).

Siltation, which results in “land reclamation” (Swift 1992:8-10), stands for a process of recreating a new world on the world of the past under water. Siltation is cyclical, natural and spontaneous causing stories to unfold and to illustrate the “Here and Now” (Swift 1992:60) which is nothing but a face of the past. Beyond the solid ground created through siltation and drainage, there is water or the source of poetry and meditation: “for water and meditation, they say, go together” (Swift 1992:13). Water stands for a sacred living entity that appreciates moral values and hard work, having to be treated with due deference so as not to take revenge and do away with everything. Our actions cause the world to crumble, to be rebuilt and the stories to go round: “When 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” (Swift 1992:13). Not only does siltation cause the formation of a new world, but it also influences human behaviour, marking it by “phlegm. A muddy, silty humour” (Swift 1992:15). That is why in the next part of this essay, we will enlarge upon the concept of identity, which is subject to what the process of siltation implies: a reconstruction of a new world on the already existing pieces of land reclaimed from water or from the immemorial past. We compare the process of siltation, which results in developing land and a new world, with the process of constructing one’s identity and one’s past within stories.

2. Identity as Subject to Siltation. The Recreated Past and History

One’s identity, which is nothing but one’s story in a postmodernist context, is to be understood in the process of reading and of putting the storylines together. It is subject to a cyclical regeneration and reconstruction within stories; it is subject to what the process of siltation implies, to the inhabited space and to the lived experiences which return and haunt the present. Tom Crick’s identity is revealed by the stories he tells. The same as his Fenland ancestors survived the rising waters, floods and harsh times through determination, hard work, creativity, patience and a phlegmatic character, Tom Crick overcomes his career difficulties by his determination to have his story, his *histoire*, understood by his pupils and by his readers. He speaks convincingly, never being ironic. That is why he is a “reliable narrator” who, according to Seymour Chatman (1990:153), “is free to explain and comment on the characters’

misapprehensions, though in many cases she ('covertly') elects to let them reveal themselves". Warned by Lewis, his headmaster, that he will no longer be able to teach History, as it will be removed from the curriculum, and warned by Price, his student who interrupts his lesson about the French Revolution, that "history is coming to an end" (Swift 1992:125), Tom Crick asks Lewis not to forbid his own story or history: "Don't banish my history..." (Swift 1992:21). He strongly believes in the idea of recurrent times, in the idea of the circle of life and historical events, of the power of the story to overcome the end of the world associated with the end of the Atkinson Empire or with the floods. He has inherited the gift of telling stories from his parents and grandparents and does his best to rewrite history in his own stories, to explain the past events in a dialogue with his pupils and readers:

How did the Cricks outwit reality? By telling stories. Down to the last generation, they were not only phlegmatic but superstitious and credulous creatures. Suckers for stories. While the Atkinsons made history, the Cricks spun yarns. (Swift 1992:17)

Tom Crick's identity is shaped by his story and history. His words, ideas and history define his identity. The fact that the way one narrates and enlarges upon one's story defines one's personality and identity is evinced by Mark Currie (1998) in *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, where he shows that "the only way to explain who we are is to tell our own story, to select key events which characterise us and organize them according to the formal principles of narrative – to externalise ourselves as if talking of someone else, and for the purposes of self-representation" (Currie 1998:17). Thus, Tom Crick's gifted hand turns history into a beautiful story which reminds us of the recurrent themes of other literary works of the past: the crumbling of great empires or *vanitas vanitatum*, the incest, the unrequited love followed by suicide, the power of water to destroy and regenerate the world, the power of stories to keep history and meditation alive. Tom Crick turns historical truth into a tale replete with rhetorical questions. He urges his pupils to permanently ask *why* and invites them to think of his stories and theories, to ponder on them, to interpret them in order to understand them. In his view, our knowledge and understanding of history bring about our nostalgia for the origins. He associates history with heavy luggage that we have to carry in order to do our duty and wonders whether it is an instrument of progress or of regress: "And how do we know that this mountain of baggage called History, which we are obliged to lug with us – which slows our pace to a crawl and makes us stagger off course – is really hindering us from advancing or retreating?" (Swift 1992:136). From his standpoint, "history accumulates" (Swift 1992:136) and that is why we can state that it is subject to what the process of siltation implies. It is the historian's creation in his own story based on his vision and cultural experience. It "accumulates" (Swift 1992:136) the historian's views on the past and his queries: "And because history accumulates, because it gets always heavier and the frustration greater, so the attempts to throw it off (in order to go – which way was it?) become more violent and drastic" (Swift 1992:136-137).

Just as Tom Crick's identity is built, defined and revealed by his discourse, history is reconstructed and given an identity according to our interpretation. In a postmodernist fashion, Tom Crick claims that history is a creation of our imagination, moving in a circle which we cannot escape: "How it repeats itself, how it goes back on itself, no matter how we try to straighten it out. How it twists and turns. How it goes in circles and brings us back to the same place" (Swift 1992:142). We are caught in a circle of history and stories whose remembrance and narration lead us to our salvation and understanding of our human condition and existence. Tom Crick's stories promote the idea of cyclical history and times, the idea that everything returns to

its origins. Thus, the fifteenth story, “About the Ouse”, shows that the river flows in order to return to itself: “Ouse flows to the sea, it flows, in reality, like all rivers, only back to itself, to its own source; and that impression that a river moves only one way is an illusion. (...) Because it will return. Because we are always stepping into the same river” (Swift 1992:145-146). Moreover, in the 38th story, “About the East Wind”, the narrator reinforces the belief that the past returns and enlarges upon the use of *gone* as more appropriate than the use of *dead*. If things are *gone*, they are supposed to come back, if they are *dead*, they are not supposed to revisit us:

For ‘Gone’, in such circumstances, is a far more elusive word. To little Tom, whose whole life might have been different if his father had told him what his infant heart was already braced to accept – that his own Mum was dead, no more, finished, extinct – this word ‘Gone’ carried the suggestion of some conscious, if perverse decision on his mother’s part, as if she had not ceased absolutely to exist but was somewhere very far away, inaccessible, invisible, yet still there. (...) ‘Well, if she’s gone, when is she coming back?’ (Swift 1992:283)

The son of Henry Crick, a lockkeeper on the River Leem, married to Ernest Richard Atkinson’s daughter, Helen Atkinson, a beautiful and helpful nurse, Tom Crick loses his mother at an early age and remembers her stories in the “fairy-tale place”, “far away from the wide world” (Swift 1992:1). He investigates the history of his family, which he presents with detailed facts and explanations throughout the fifty-two stories. In his ninth story, “About the Rise of the Atkinsons”, he shows that the law of compensation governs our world, as “there can be no success with impunity, no great achievement without accompanying loss” (Swift 1992:72). This idea is proved by the story of Thomas Atkinson, a successful businessman married to a beautiful woman, Sarah Turnbull of Gildsey. According to this story, Thomas Atkinson falls sick with gout and becomes madly jealous of his wife, Sarah. He severely hits his wife, who falls on a wooden table and becomes unconscious due to the head injury, never recovering her wits, having to spend the rest of her life in a wheelchair. This story turns into a haunting legend as, in her insanity, Sarah predicts the burning of the Atkinsons’ brewery and the end of their business: “she would utter the only words specifically attributed to her in all the years following her husband’s dreadful fit of rage. Namely: ‘Smoke’, ‘Fire!’, ‘Burning!’, in infinite permutations” (Swift 1992:84). Her husband’s sin brings about the collapse of the Atkinsons’ business. Sarah becomes a haunting presence for her neighbours, suggesting that justice prevails, that fire and water set the stage for a new beginning. This idea emphasizes Tom Crick’s belief that everything comes back to its own beginning symbolized by water – the hidden Logos, the washed away past sin, the origin of life and stories.

If Tom Crick’s identity is revealed by his vision and ideas throughout his own narrative, his physical aspect and traits are to be created in our mind based on his stories. His physical traits are just alluded to and associated with the physical environment marked by water, phlegm, dreams and visions. Tom Crick, the character who is not given a physical description, promotes the postmodernist idea that truth is the result of our interpretations based on the evidence that we collect and examine while reading. His identity encapsulates the essence of the phlegmatic Fenlander who survives the floods or the end of the world through stories and faith. Due to its temporary, mortal nature, the physical identity is given no major importance in Graham Swift’s novel. It is subject to what the process of siltation implies, being built and rebuilt in our minds, in our interpretations based on our cultural experiences. What lies behind Tom Crick’s physical identity is a series of deep-rooted ideas which are recurrent, revisiting all generations like circles.

The same as we have to construct Tom Crick’s identity in our mind based on his stories and ideas, the past and history are reconstructed and reinterpreted in his own accounts.

Throughout his stories, he demonstrates the idea that history and the past revolve in a circle, revisiting all ages and all generations. The fact that he associates man with a “story-telling animal” (Swift 1992:60) suggests the idea that human beings, who are endowed with the gift of cultural memory, the gift of thinking and of telling stories, meet their death if deprived of their ability to think, to tell stories and to ask questions in order to understand their human condition and past. The “story-telling animal” (Swift 1992:60) fights death by thinking and telling stories, advancing his knowledge and broadening his cultural perspective. This idea reminds us of what Ihab Hassan (1987) claims in *The Postmodern Turn. Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*: “Behind all history, continuous or discrete, abstract or autistic, lurks the struggle of identity with death” (Hassan 1987:26).

The present history of Waterland, as recounted and interpreted by Tom Crick in his narrative, is a recurrent phenomenon. It is the past revisited and recreated by his stories and by his readers. According to Linda Hutcheon (2002), “knowing the past becomes a question of representing, that is, of constructing and interpreting, not of objective recording” (Hutcheon 2002:70). In line with this idea, Tom Crick’s history lessons just offer his own perspective on the past as the history teacher admits that he tells stories. Linda Hutcheon (2002) argues that we cannot have the absolute historical truth revealed but we can only catch glimpses of the past within the narrative of what she calls “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon 2002:69). We can only recreate the past in our minds based on what we read:

The question is never whether the events of the past actually took place. The past did exist – independently of our capacity to know it. Historiographic metafiction accepts this philosophically realist view of the past and then proceeds to confront it with an anti-realist one that suggests that, however true that independence may be, nevertheless the past exists for us – now – only as traces on and in the present. The absent past can only be inferred from circumstantial evidence (Hutcheon 2002:69)

The idea that everything comes back to its origin is suggested by the stories about Tom Crick’s grandfather and brother. According to these stories, both commit suicide following their sins. Their death restores the equilibrium of life, signalling a fresh beginning of everything. They return to earth leaving behind never-ending stories. The same idea is illustrated by Mary’s story. She aborted a child when very young, having asked Tom to throw it into a river. This event echoes the moment when she used to throw Dick’s eels into water. The eel symbolizes the tormented subconscious that Mary wants to get rid of. It is returned to water, which stands for the origin of life and which brings about forgetfulness and a fresh beginning of everything. Water is our essence, “we are nine-tenth water” (Swift 1992:61). We build on it like silt and get drowned in it unless we respect it or if we sin like the Atkinsons whose violent acts, incest and greed cause their destruction and death. We build on the forgotten past times the same as silt creates a new world on the already existing pieces of land reclaimed from water. Associating history with “a red herring” (Swift 1992:165), Tom Crick becomes the spokesman of Postmodernism. If it is a “red herring” (Swift 1992:165), history is subject to interpretations just as stories are. We investigate it in order to carry out our duty and in order to satisfy our curiosity. Stories ensure the continuity of history and the past. The stories of the past are the source of the stories of the present as the past echoes the present. For instance, Mary, the character of the present and Tom Crick’s wife, ends up resembling Sarah Atkinson, the character of the past, when confined to bed in the asylum. Both female characters end up suffering from total oblivion, waiting for their death in an isolated asylum. Therefore, everything turns out to be cyclical.

3. Conclusion

Turning history and time into fiction, Tom Crick, the narrator of *Waterland* and a history teacher, evinces the power of the story to reconstruct the past. Showing that *Waterland* is the land developed through siltation, the land revisited by a recurrent history and haunting stories, Tom Crick demonstrates that the present world is a powerful image of the past world. He rewrites history and the past in his stories, admitting that his history lessons are nothing but stories. Tom Crick alludes to the idea that the past and one's identity are subject to a cyclical reconstruction within stories, the same as *Waterland* is cyclically redeveloped through siltation. We can compare the process of siltation, which results in reconstructing a new world on the already existing pieces of land reclaimed from water or from the immemorial past, with the process of reconstructing the past and one's identity within stories. Tom Crick's identity is his own story, which is subject to what the process of siltation implies. The outcome of Tom Crick's stories is similar to the outcome of the process of siltation, as it amounts to reconstructing the world of the past. Stories are like silt, as their purpose is to recreate the past. Both silt and stories reconstruct the past in Graham Swift's novel.

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Note on the author

Elisabeta Simona CATANĂ is Lecturer of English at the Department of Modern Languages in the Polytechnic University of Bucharest. She holds a PhD in Philology from The West University of Timișoara. She has participated in many international conferences and her published papers focus on literary topics, English language teaching and e-learning.