

The Novels of Graham Swift

by Ian Brinton



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Scope of Topic

The aim of this Bookmark is to provide a close critical reading of Graham Swift's two most substantial novels to date and to give an account of his moving preoccupation with human beings in relation to their pasts.

BOOKS TO READ

The novels discussed are *Waterland* (Heinemann 1983) and *Last Orders* (Picador 1996)

NOTES

Hold to the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past.
Ulysses, by James Joyce.

We have, each of us, a life-story, an inner narrative - whose continuity, whose sense is our lives. To be ourselves, we must have ourselves - possess, if need be repossess our life-stories. A man needs a narrative, a continuous narrative to maintain his identity, his self. *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, by Oliver Sacks.

The story is not just there to be - although it is - interesting and entertaining, it's there because someone needs to tell it because of something that has happened. Someone's experience has fallen apart, and in order to attempt - not necessarily with any success - to put it back together, they have an urge to tell a story.' *Out of This World*, by Graham Swift.

There are two meanings of the word 'history': (a) 'the event of the past' and (b) 'telling a story about the events of the past'. Poststructuralist thought makes it clear that history is always 'narrated', and that therefore the first sense is untenable. The past can never be available to us in pure form, but always in the form of 'representations'; after poststructuralism, history becomes textualized. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, by Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson.

The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there. *The Go-Between*, by L.P.Hartley.

Concern with seeing individuals in relation to their past has become a preoccupation not only of modern British novelists such as Graham Swift and Julian Barnes but also of the French movement of historians involved with *Annales*. For instance Ladurie made his name through his seminal book of historical re-creation, *Montaillou*, (published by Gallimard in 1975), in which he brought to life the conflict between Catholics and Cathars in a French village between 1294 and 1324 by using a Register compiled by Jacques Fournier, the Bishop of Palmiers. Ladurie quotes extensively from this inquisition-record and by doing so allows the modern reader an insight into the exact social and personal workings of a small Pyrenean community of seven hundred years ago. Story-telling, an art old as man himself, allows human beings to understand who they are in relation to who they were, or, as William Golding put it in his novel *Free Fall* (Faber 1959): 'Perhaps reading my story through again I shall see the connection between the little boy, clear as spring water and the man like a

stagnant pool. Somehow the one became the other.' That 'somehow' carries within it the history of a life, and it can only be deconstructed by the forging of connections with the past. Memory is the process by which we initiate such links with our past, it is what unites us with all our previous selves, conferring a sense of continuity through the temporal stream. Without the capacity to remember, we would be forced to exist in a perpetual present, isolated in a single moment of being, with a moat or lacuna of forgetting all around us. We would be in what the schoolboy, Price, from *Waterland* calls the 'Here and Now'.

Waterland (Heinemann 1983)

Graham Swift's third novel was short-listed for the Booker Prize and won both the Winifred Holtby Prize for a regional novel and the Guardian Fiction Award. It is a complex story narrated by Tom Crick, a teacher of History in South London, whose wife has been arrested for stealing a baby from outside a supermarket store. The reason she gave to the court was 'God told me to do it'. As Tom's career is threatened not only by the press coverage of this seemingly insane act but also by the 'rationalisation' of the curriculum in the comprehensive school in which he teaches ('We're cutting back History,' says the Headmaster, Lewis) he changes the topic of his Sixth-Form teaching from The French Revolution to a History of the Fens, the geographical area in which he was brought up. In effect he tells his own story, his own History, which involves murder, incest and the appalling abortion which his girlfriend, Mary, later to become Mrs. Crick, underwent in the fairy-tale nightmare world of the marshes. Threading this personal narrative Swift presents us with the history of land reclamation, the rise and fall of the brewing family Atkinson and the life-cycle of the eel. In the background of his childhood tale there can be heard the 'roar of ascending bombers' in the chaotic world of July 1943.

When *Waterland* was published in 1983 cruise missiles were first deployed on English soil. A letter published in *The Times* on 30 January 1980 from Professor Michael Howard of Oxford University said: 'The presence of cruise missiles on British soil makes it highly possible that this country would be the target for a series of preemptive strikes by Soviet missiles'. It was a time of fear which is registered by Price, one of Tom Crick's pupils, a teacher-baiter, who says:

The only important thing about history, I think, sir, is that it's got to the point where it's probably about to end

Tom Crick's response is the stuff of the novel:

So we closed our textbooks. Put aside the French Revolution. So we said goodbye to that old and hackneyed fairy-tale with its Rights of Man, liberty caps, cockades, tricolours, not to mention its hissing guillotines, and its quaint notion that it had bestowed on the world a New Beginning.

I began, having recognised in my young but by no means carefree class the contagious symptoms of fear: 'Once upon a time...'

Waterland is a novel about History and man's insatiable curiosity, his need to ask the question 'why?' It is about our need to see ourselves in terms of our geographical and historical contexts and whilst also being about story-telling itself, and the comforting nature of narratives, it faces the uncomfortable realities which we uncover when that question 'why?' is asked. Humanity's urgent need to explore his surrounding, changing world is there in the young Mary's ceaseless 'itch', her desire to explore not only Tom's young body but also that of his retarded elder brother, Dick, and it leads to the opening of Pandora's box, to 'the strife, the entanglements, the consuming of energy, the tireless searching that curiosity engenders'. When Mary becomes pregnant by Tom she tries to keep the knowledge from Dick by pretending that the real culprit is Freddie Parr, another local lad, but then has to recognise

her responsibility when she witnesses Dick murdering him. The knowledge of life's complexity, its interrelatedness, terrifies the young Tom for whom childhood is over and whose world will never be uncomplicated again. Tom and Mary visit the witch-like figure of old Martha Clay out on the marshes to beg for an illicit abortion and Swift presents us with a scene of harrowing vividness:

I rush to the door. Hesitate. Move instead to a little window that must look over the curtained-off bed. Children, there are things which happen outside dreams which should only happen in them. A pipe - no, a piece of sedge, a length of hollow reed - is stuck into Mary's hole. The other end is in Martha's mouth. Crouching low, her head between Mary's gory knees, her eyes closed in concentration, Martha is sucking with all her might. Those cheeks - those blood-bag cheeks working like bellows.

I go into the cottage. I pull back the filthy curtain. Martha appears to have just spat something into the pail. I yell, 'Mary!' But Mary doesn't hear me. Her name bounces back to me. She doesn't know me. She's a little convent girl, staunchly saying her prayers:

'HolyMaryMotherofGodHolyMaryMotherofGodHolyMaryMotherof - '

The candle is snuffed under Mary's hand. I nearly trip over the pail. In the pail is what the future's made of. I rush out again to be sick.

This nightmare will never end because our present is completely interlinked with our past: 'the past will go on happening'. Forty years after this nightmare scene Tom is forced to tear Mary's second, stolen, 'child' away from her grasp, aware as he does so that he 'is tearing the life out of her'.

We cannot escape from our history and we need it in order to come to some patterning of our individual lives. But we also have to accept that history is the attempt to give an account, with incomplete knowledge, of actions themselves undertaken with incomplete knowledge. If we can learn anything then it is 'only the dogged and patient art of making do'.

Tom Crick, the historian, suggests that history is not a representation of objective truth but an amalgm of many subjective perceptions, or different versions'. The pattern of alternatives is set at the beginning of the novel as the reader is presented with subtly different versions. For instance, in the first chapter Tom Crick claims that:

1. 'we lived in a fairy-tale place. In a lock-keeper's cottage, by a river, in the middle of the Fens.'
2. 'We lived in a lock-keeper's cottage by the River Leem, which flows out of Norfolk into the Great Ouse.'
3. 'My father kept the lock on the River Leem, two miles from where it empties into the Ouse.'

In these variations we can see a subtle shift in the language from the realm of fairy-tale to something more dispassionate and apparently factual. However, none of the accounts are either wholly true or wholly false; each account selects one perceptual strand from a myriad of possibilities. Or, as Julian Barnes writes in *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, 'History isn't what happened. History is just what historians tell us.'

Last Orders (Picador 1996)

Graham Swift's most recent novel, which won the Booker prize for 1996, deals with what the death of an individual means for those friends and relations left behind. A group of four

Eastenders from Bermondsey have a day out travelling down to Margate in order to fulfil a dying wish of their old friend and close neighbour, Jack Dodds. Jack in effect accompanies them since their object in making the journey is to tip his ashes off Margate pier. Whereas the living travel in a Mercedes, arranged by Vince, Jack's adopted son, the dead man travels in what looks like a large instant-coffee jar which is itself kept safely in a plain brown cardboard box, about a foot high and six inches square. He is literally a jack-in-the-box in that we are increasingly surprised by our growing awareness of how little these four close-knit people know of each other. The novel is narrated through the voices of Vic, the smart and responsible undertaker who owns the funeral parlour opposite to where Jack had his butcher's business, Lenny the fruit-and-veg man, little Ray the 'lucky' man on the horses who as it turns out was having an affair with Jack's wife, Amy, some years ago and Vince who has made his money in the car-trade. The solemnity with which these four carry out Jack's 'last orders' is matched with a black, absurdist, humour which even includes a 'scrap' on the way because one of them wants to scatter some of the ashes before Margate pier is reached. The fight is caused by Vince wanting to commemorate a childhood memory of a family picnic to a small hill near Canterbury. Lenny objects to this but he too has his own agenda, or history, in that it was Vince who got his daughter pregnant some years ago and Lenny is resentful of the way in which the seducer has got on in the world by breaking away from the family butcher business. Reaching their destination the last words of narrative are given to little 'Raysy':

I say, 'Goodbye Jack'. The sky and the sea and the wind are all mixed up together but I reckon it wouldn't make no difference if they weren't because of the blur in my eyes. Vic and Vincey's faces look like white blobs but Lenny's looks like a beacon, and across the water you can see the lights of Margate. You can stand on the end of Margate pier and look across to Dreamland. Then I throw the last handful and the seagulls come back on a second chance and I hold up the jar, shaking it, like I should chuck it out to sea too, a message in a bottle, Jack Arthur Dodds, save our souls, and the ash that I carried in my hands, which was the Jack who once walked around, is carried away by the wind, is whirled away by the wind till the ash becomes wind and the wind becomes Jack what we're made of.

The novel is about death, absence and the little we know of each other's real lives, each other's real history. Absence is registered by the acknowledgement of space: what was once filled is now empty. This is noted from the beginning when Ray is in The Coach and Horses having a pint, waiting for the others to arrive. The landlord makes the normal noises of shared regret at Jack's demise:

'Won't be the same, will it? he says, shaking his head and looking a little way along the bar, like at unoccupied space. 'Won't be the same'

People seem recognisable through their routines and the repetitions of those actions with which their whole lives are bound up. Routine is circular and like the Coach and Horses itself is movement which does not necessarily signify progression. The clock in the pub boasts the name of its maker, Slattery 1884, and Ray's drunken joke haunts the novel:

'But it ain't ever gone nowhere, has it?'

'The clock?'

'The Coach, the Coach.'

And Jack said, 'Where d'you think it should be going, Raysy? Where d'you think we've all got to get to that the bleeding coach should be taking us?'

Combining humour with compassion Swift asks us to contemplate how we register the absence, for ever, of those whom we thought we knew so well. It is impossible to register absence in presence but the novel toys with the thoughts of what such feelings might be like. Here, as in the world made familiar to us in the poetry of Philip Larkin (*Dockery and Son*, *Mr. Bleaney* and *Aubad*) we are presented with a fumbling realisation about the inevitability of

death and the effect it will have upon those left behind. Sitting in a comfy pub in Rochester, taking in a few pints to break up the journey, Lenny comments on how much Jack, who is lodged in a box next to them on a seat, would have enjoyed this lads' day out:

Then Vic says, like it's a truth we're not up to grasping, that has to be broke gently, 'If he was here, we wouldn't be, would we? It's because he's not that we are.'

The clean edges and meticulous style of so much of Graham Swift's writing are not only aspects of a master story-teller but also reflect a writer whose concern is literary. *Waterland* is itself a glance at metafiction, a narrative about the art of narrative and *Last Orders* owes a clear debt to the narrative technique employed by William Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying*. But any reader who may doubt that Swift's major concern is the study of the individual's concern for defining his relationship between himself and the world around him, the uniqueness of our personal history, need only turn to the earlier collection of short studies published in 1982 by London Magazine Editions, *Learning to Swim*. In the title story, *Mrs. Singleton* (the pun contained in the surname can be no accident), contemplates her separateness from her husband as she 'stood on the sand like a marooned woman watching for ships'. In '*The Watch*' we are asked to contemplate 'the position of a man who has the prospect before him of extraordinary length of years' who 'looks back at his own past as other men look at history books'. The increasing awareness of the self's isolation is seen:

The limits of his being, his 'place in time', as the phrase goes, the fact of his perishability begin to fade and he begins not to interest himself in those means by which other men seek to prolong their existence. And of these, what is more universal than the begetting of children, the passing on of one's own blood

But perhaps the last word should go to Gabor, the disinherited Hungarian boy brought to England in 1957, in the story which bears his name, who concludes his visit to London with his adoptive family by replying to the question about how was the big city by saying:

...with the grave, wise expression he always had when concentrating on his English: 'I like London. Iss full history. Iss full history.'

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

- Graham Swift *Out of this World* (Penguin 1988)
Ever After (Picador 1992)
- Julian Barnes *Metroland* (Cape 1980)
Flaubert's Parrot (Cape 1984)
A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters (Cape 1989)
- Milan Kundera *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (Faber 1982)
The Unbearable Lightness of Being (Faber 1984)
- Ian McEwan *The Child in Time* (Cape 1987)
- Oliver Sacks *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (Duckworth 1985)

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