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Production of
Time and Truth:
Analysis of Narrative Aspects in
Graham Swift's "Waterland"

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Contents:

1. Introduction.....3

2. Objectivity vs. Subjectivity - Producer vs. Protagonist....4

3. Time Splitting and the Levels of Fiction.....8

 3.1. The Narrative Present.....9

 3.2. The History.....10

 3.3. Toms Youth.....11

4. Conclusion.....13

5. Literature.....13

1. Introduction

While the traditional historiography appoints only on the *accidit ut*, Swift's *Waterland*¹ shows that the relation and correlation between the narration of history and historiography is much more complex.

Nünning designates the novel "eine Form von expliziter historiographischer Eigen- und Allgemeinfiktion"², Landow defines it as a form of "fictional autobiography"³. Both traditional historiography and its subgenre autobiography claim to represent reality by definition. *Waterland* appears as a mixture between these genres and the genre of fictional narration. So it becomes an experiment of reality and fiction, defined as true or false by the narrator.

The implied truth or fiction of the historiographic or narrative elements in the text does not need to correspond with the general assumption that historiography is true and fictional narrative is untrue. In *Waterland*, it is not possible to distinguish between true and false elements, only to distinguish between credible or implausible elements. The question whether elements are credible can be answered by looking at the way in which they are narrated: Swift mixes objectivity and subjectivity in his novel, which results in an interrelation which changes the value of truth in different segments of the novel.

In the following chapter I will try to analyse the connection between the narrator and the novel's protagonist Tom Crick. Afterwards I will try to examine the relationship between truth and the different levels of time appearing in *Waterland*.

¹ Swift, Graham, *Waterland*, 2nd Edition, Picador, 1994.

² Nünning, Ansgar, *Von historischer Fiktion zu historiographischer Metafiktion*, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1994, p. 318.

³ Landow, George P., *History, His Story and Stories in Graham Swift's Waterland*, <http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/hypertext/landow/cv/Essays/Waterland/History269.html> (29.04.98), p. 1; originally published in: *Literary Imagination*, 23 (1990): 197-211.

The illusion of truth and fiction as well as the narrator's subjectivity and objectivity and their relations to the narrator should also be pointed out.

Objectivity vs. Subjectivity - Plot-Producer vs. Protagonist

Even at the beginning of *Waterland*, the reader is confronted with the multifaceted signifier *historia* which is the main theme of the novel. The epigraph shows the connection between history and fictional stories:

"Historia, ae, f: 1. inquiry, investigation, learning. 2. a) a narrative of past events, history. b) any kind of narrative: account, tale, story."⁴

The etymological origin of 'history' at least correlates the term to any variety of fictional narrative, and therefore also to the fairy-tale. The scientific approach of historiography understandably ignores this correlation. Its primary interest is the collection of facts and their analysis and interpretation. Fludernik points out that the traditional historiography dissociates itself from fictional narrative:

"Nevertheless, it seems to me, one can exaggerate fictionality of historiography. [...] The distinctions which one needs to draw between history and fiction are to be situated not on the textual plane (or least not necessarily so) but on the levels of production and reception. They include the historical piecing together of what must have happened from a frequently daunting amount of so-called historical evidence: witnesses' reports, archival registers and documents, previous historical presentations, archeological and biological evidence."⁵

Without taking into consideration the origin of historical sources, they are made to appear as objective, descriptive but neither judging nor valuing. In *Waterland*, Swift specifically tries to transfer the objectivity of historiography onto his protagonist's subjective story-telling and vice versa. By

⁴ *Waterland*, p. '-1'.

⁵ Fludernik, Monika, *History and Metafiction: Experientiality, Causality, and Myth*, in: Engler, Bernd and Kurt Müller [eds.], *Historiographic*

doing so, he eliminates the borders between historiography and fiction.

Objectivity and subjectivity are the decisive factors in suggesting either truth or fiction. Booth describes objectivity as means for the establishment of truth in fictional texts:

"Like all terms, however, objectivity is many things. Underlying it and its many synonyms - impersonality, detachment, disinterestedness, neutrality, etc. - we can distinguish at least three separate qualities: neutrality, impartiality, and *impassibilité*,"⁶

Since the narrator in *Waterland* Tom Crick, is a personal narrator, the *impassibilité* can not be displayed by him. Even the historiographical elements are influenced by the strong subjectivity of the narrator. Nünning explains it as follows:

"Die prononcierte Subjektivität der Geschichtsdarstellung [in *Waterland*] beruht auf der monoperspektivischen Erzählstruktur, denn das gesamte Geschehen wird aus der Sicht eines persönlich von den Ereignissen betroffenen und emotional involvierten Erzählers vermittelt."⁷

The subjectivity discussed by Nünning is only explained by the personal narrator in his function as the protagonist. However, there are traces of authorial narrative in the novel -- they can be found on the inner communication level⁸, but also on the S2/E2-level⁹. Here the narrator is able to arrange the *dispositio*, so he can use time stretching, compression and shifts. Another possibility introduced by the authorial narration is the presentation of knowledge, emotions and even dreams of the characters which appear in the (fictional)

Metafiction in Modern American and Canadian Literature, Schöningh, 1994, p. 82.

⁶ Booth, Wayne C., *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, University of Chicago Press 1961, p.67.

⁷ Nünning, p. 323.

⁸ For the terminology see the models of literary communication by Kahrman, Cordula et al., *Erzähltextanalyse. Eine Einführung. Mit Studien- und Übungstexten*. 3. Auflage, Beltz Athenäum, 1993, p. 46 or Pfister, Manfred, *Das Drama. Theorie und Analyse*. 8. Auflage, Fink, 1994, p. 20.

⁹ See *ibid*.

story: "Besides, Will Atkinson was still having ideas. He dreamed that the Atkinsons would one day follow the wondrous barley-seed from its beginning to its end [...]." ¹⁰ The narrator even detaches himself partly from the context of the narration while he talks about the history (the story) of the protagonist.

The changing of the tense from past into present as well as the direct address to the recipients of the narration, which could either be his pupils or the readers of the novel, illustrates that the narrator turns away from the story itself and turns to the recipients: "Your history teacher stands in the doorway, presenting, before his bizarre nativity, the posture of an awe-struck shepherd [...]." ¹¹; "So forget, indeed, your revolutions, your turning-points, your grand metamorphoses of history." ¹² Therefore the narrator occupies the S2- as well as the S1-position in terms of communication models ¹³.

The fact that the narrator and protagonist are rolled into one leads to a partial interference between personal and narrative text. In some instances in the novel the recipient can no longer decide whether it is the teacher Crick who speaks or the narrator of the novel who is involved in a communication with the readers. So it is not possible to distinguish between the pupils who are addressed on the inner communication level and readers who are addressed on an outer level. Especially the mode of imperative speech strengthens this effect. In a purposeful manner the narrator can control the effect of either fact and fiction: he is able to present the emotions of the protagonist as well as the (putative) facts. If the text is seen under the aspect of (literary) communication, the narrator must evoke emotions in the recipient. By being able to reach the recipient, he must become an authority in and of

¹⁰ Waterland, p. 66f.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 265.

¹² Ibid., p. 10.

¹³ See Kahrman, Pfister, (see footnote 8).

the text, who manifests himself as a "Bewußtseinszentrum"¹⁴. Such a manifestation of the narrator is comparable to the task of a speaker using the *ethos* (in terms of plausibility) in order to guide and inform the audience. The necessity to be credible was already considered a basic quality of the speakers in antique rhetoric. While Aristotle clearly emphasised this task in his writings about rhetoric, Cicero was convinced that a speaker known as irreproachable (*vir bonus*) would already fulfil the task.¹⁵

Both varieties can be found in *Waterland*: On the one hand Tom Crick is known to be the narrating protagonist. The person-unit of narrator and protagonist makes sure that his manifestation as a plausible person is also transmitted to the narrator. The character Tom Crick could be analysed by using the *loci a persona* introduced by Quintilian¹⁶. The topics of *natio* or *genus* are first of all reflecting to his surname 'Crick'. Nevertheless, he is also a part of the Atkinson family which "made history"¹⁷. But the most important topics seem to be *conditio* (social position), which is caused by his *educatio et disciplina* (his studies of historiography) and *studia* (his work as a teacher). Moreover, his interest (*quid affected quisque*) in studies of causality make the narrator plausible for the recipient. The other way of manifestation includes the authorial way of narration in some parts of the novel. A narrator who is able to distance himself from the

¹⁴ see Booth, Wayne C., *Die Rhetorik der Erzählkunst*, Bd. 1, Übersetzt von A. Polzin. Quelle & Meyer, 1974, p. 158. Booth uses this term in order to define the internal narrator who does not appear as a person in the text. In accordance to models of literary communication by Kahrmann or Pfister he has to occupy a position between the implied author (S3) and the personalised narrator (S1).

¹⁵ see Göttert, Karlheinz, *Einführung in die Rhetorik. Grundbegriffe - Geschichte - Rezeption*, Fink, 1991, S. 23.

¹⁶ The terminology is taken from Ueding, Gert & Bernd Steinbrink, *Grundriß der Rhetorik- Geschichte. Technik. Methode*, Dritte, überarbeitete und erweiterte Auflage, Metzler, 1994, S. 238-244. Ueding and Steinbrink use the terminology and classification by Quintilian (Quint. V, 8, 4).

¹⁷ *Waterland*, p. 17

plot and the characters reaches a god-like status: he claims to be absolutely reliable and is accepted as such.

3. Time Splitting and the levels of fiction

According to Janik the different temporal sections of *Waterland* can be subdivided into three time levels:

"The novel's structure is rambling and recursive, intermixing episodes from three structure elements. The first of these elements is a history of the Fenlands and of the prominent entrepreneurial Atkinson family and of the obscure, plodding Crick family, from the seventeenth century to the marriage of the narrators parents after World War I. The second consists of events of the 1940s: Mary Metcalfs adolescent sexual experiences with Tom Crick and his 'potato-head' half brother Dick [...], Dick's murder of Freddy Parr, Mary's abortion, Tom's revelation of Dick's incestuous conception and Dick's consequent suicide by drowning, Tom's return from the war and his marriage to Mary. The final element involves events of 1980, the narrative present: Mary's religious visions, her kidnapping of a baby [...], her committal to a mental institution, and Tom's loss of his position as a history teacher."¹⁸

If we disregard at the moment, that the plot of *Waterland* starts already with Gunnhildas hermit in 695, the experiences of Crick on the level of narrative present have to be dated to the year 1979¹⁹, I would like to adopt Janik's subdivision. The 52 chapters of *Waterland* are not arranged chronologically, with no more than two chapters belonging to the same time level. This *dispositio* of time could be interpreted as an attempt to suppress the separation of those levels. Every time level deals with historiography as well as with story-telling. On the following pages I will try to analyse the ways in which facts and fiction are transmitted on each of the different time levels.

3.1. The narrative present - The Story of Tom Crick

¹⁸ Janik, Del Ivan, *History and the "Here and Now"*: The Novels of Graham Swift, in: *Twentieth Century Literature* 35 (1989), 1, S. 84.

¹⁹ A chronology of *Waterland* can be found at Landow, George P., *Waterland: A Chronology*, '<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/hypertext/landow/post/uk/gswift/wl/wlchron.html>', (download on 27th July 1998)

The level of narrative present is characterised by situations in which Crick teaches his history class. The bracketed comments appearing in nearly every chapter, however, which reflect the thoughts of the protagonist or commentation the situation in a way of inner monologue must not be neglected: "[...]he [Jacob Crick] would catch eels (*because he was still a water-man at heart*), not only with wicker traps [...]." ²⁰, "Dick puts the bottle (*a slim bottle, dark brown with a narrow neck*) to his lips and drinks." ²¹, "Worry's donated him an ulcer, which he douses with whisky from a filing cabinet (*I know about that too*)." ²² Both the existence of these comments and their statements about knowledge and details of respective action intensify the credibility of the narrator. He becomes able to intervene, too annotate and to evaluate the situations and characters. This phenomenon parallels the epic drama of Brecht, Wilder and others. It can also be found in a section of the 31st chapter, which resembles a stage direction:

"Darkness. A school playground. Darkness in the classrooms, in the assembly hall, in the science block, the gym, the library. Only a single light still burns in the office wing. A teacher walks, with unsteady gait, across the playground. [...]" ²³

The stage direction is followed by a short narrative comment, after which the dialogue between Price and Crick starts. This dialogue creates an effect of dramatic immediacy, although the bracketed comments seem to express alienation, and to show the presence of the narrator: "(But why this solicitude? This solidarity? These extra-respectful 'sirs'? From you of all --)" ²⁴

Therefore, the activities of the protagonist are presented as realistic by the narrator. However, the stories he tells his

²⁰ Waterland, S. 14

²¹ Ibid., S. 245

²² Ibid., S, 23

²³ Ibid., S. 236

²⁴ Ibid., p. 237

pupils are explicitly described as fictional: "Stories, Price. Fairy Tales."²⁵

3.2. The history

The time level of history is dominated by the history of the Fenlands and the history of the Atkinson family. On the other hand international or European history which represents the actual content of Cricks subject and which is expected of "historiographischer Eigen- und Allgemeinfiktion"²⁶ is hardly provided. The introduction to the history of the Fenlands starts at the end of the second chapter:

"And since a fairy-tale must have a setting, a setting which, like the settings of all good fairy-tales, must be both palpable and unreal, let me tell you [about the fens]."²⁷

This introduction is shaped by an inflation of the fairy-tale term:

"Fairy tale words; **fairy tale** advice. But we lives in a **fairy-tale** world."²⁸, "A **fairy-tale** land, after all."²⁹, "So we said goodbye to that old and hackneyed **fairy-tale** with its Rights of Man, liberty caps, [...]."³⁰, "[...] of receptables for their stock of **fairy-tales**, of listening ears on which to unload those most unbelievable yet haunting of **fairy-tales**, [...]."³¹

Through the frequent references to fairy-tale stories in the context of historical events, the reality of those events is questioned. On the other hand the inflation suggests reality for the recipients in the following chapter, in which the term fairy-tale is hardly mentioned. The aim of this technique is to make the history of the Atkinson family credible and plausible. The effect is supported by Cricks comments: "While

²⁵ Ibid., p. 237.

²⁶ Nünning, (see footnote 2)

²⁷ Waterland, S. 8

²⁸ Ibid., S.1

²⁹ Ibid., S.3

³⁰ Ibid., S.7

³¹ Ibid.

the Atkinsons made history, the Cricks spun yarns."³², "All this, it is true, was much later in the 1870s -- [...]."³³ In the ninth chapter the rise of the Atkinsons is interrupted by a short comment by Crick about the hubris theory. During this interruption and a reference to the "true" European history of Napoleon, Crick reacts with the sentence "this is getting all too much into fairy-tales again."³⁴ He then continues the history of the Atkinson family. A further clue for the "fairy-tale seeming" traditional history can be found a few pages later: "And here, so the ludicrous testimony of a bargee hat it -- she dived 'like a little mermaid' beneath the water never to surface again."³⁵ The testimony, which is an acceptable source for traditional historiography is called ridiculous, untrue and fabulous here. The "history of the Fenlands" which Crick narrates in the same context is distanced from such "fairy-tales".

To sum up the above, one can say that historiography on the time level of history has a status of untruth, a status of fiction. On the other hand the history of the Fenlands which is the history of the (subjective) protagonist and his family, achieves a character of truth, it becomes a fact.

3.3. Tom's Youth

This time level can be taken as the central level of the novel, not only in the context of time. It contains the causes of Crick's problems in the narrative present, and moreover, the effects of the history of the Fenlands can be seen here. On this time level it is also made explicit that history and (his) stories became indistinguishable: "[...] history merges

³² Ibid., p. 17.

³³ Ibid., p. 85.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 72.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 104.

with fiction, fact gets blur with fable..."³⁶ The blur of symbolism and myth with reality becomes also clear in chapter 24, when Freddie Parr puts an eel into the underpants of Mary Metcalf. Haefner considers this eel, which is called phallic as a "Lebensspender"³⁷. In the third chapter, however, the myth that "a live fish in a woman's lap will make her barren"³⁸ is mentioned in the context of the Fenlands as "fairy-tale land"³⁹. Mary's juvenile pregnancy and her later barrenness are again blurring these symbols and fairy-tales stories.

Moreover, the situation is emphasised by the fact that Crick "notes, in true historically observant fashion"⁴⁰, that the situation "[is] too much for your history teacher's [Crick's] unpractised objectivity."⁴¹ The reason for his reaction is that "it's tense with the present tense. It's fraught with the here and now."⁴² History blurs with the present. The boundaries seem removed. The protagonist can not recognise this removal, "he escapes to his story-books."⁴³ On the other hand the narrator accepts the interference, he has already begun "to ask where the stories end and reality begins."⁴⁴ Therefore, he describes the youthful protagonist in the third, not in the first person. His initial and personal reality becomes a 'history' in the role of a manifested narrator.

4. Conclusion

³⁶ Ibid., p. 208.

³⁷ Haefner, Gerhard, *Geschichte und Natur in Graham Swifts Waterland*, in: Gross, Konrad et al. [eds.], *Das Natur / Kulturparadigma in der englischen Erzählliteratur des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts: Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Paul Goetsch*, Narr, 1994

³⁸ *Waterland*, p. 19.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 19.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 207.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 207.

⁴² Ibid., p. 207.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 207.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 208.

On the time level of the narrative present Crick's stories are described as fictional. At the same time the character of the protagonist Tom Crick is described as credible. However, his stories of the Fenlands, which can be found on the level of history, boil down to the same thing as the 'history of the Fenlands'. On each of those two different levels of time the narrator creates an opposition between history and stories. The value of truth of each of the different elements, which is contained in such an opposition, depends on the control of the narrator. This narrator, who is presented as credible, is able to appear subjectively or objectively. The subjectivity or objectivity, which is used by the narrator to describe a fact or a fictional event, has an effect on the presentation of the main opposition of the novel: The opposition between historiography and story-telling. By mixing up subjectivity and objectivity on the level of Tom's youth, the narrator also mixes up credible and implausible elements of the novel. The consequence is a blurring of historiography and story-telling. The narrator teaches to us that story-telling mostly contains history, he lets us know that historiography is nothing more than story-telling.

5. Literature

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