

# Graham Swift's *Waterland* as soliloquy of suffering

*John Burnside* discusses an elegy for the erasure of history in the pursuit of progress.

In his 2017 lecture to the British Academy, John Burnside discussed an important strand of British fiction over the last thirty years – exemplified by work by Graham Swift, Adam Thorpe and Michael Bracewell – in which the growth of ‘cultural totalitarianism’ has engendered a profound grief for the consequent loss of communal and ritual life, as well as for the land itself which has been ‘savagely degraded’ over the same period. In this extract, he talks about the 1983 novel *Waterland* by Graham Swift.

For those unfamiliar with the book, *Waterland* concerns the history of two East Anglian families, the Cricks and the Atkinsons, separated by social class and wealth, but linked by a tragic secret. The narrator, a history teacher named Tom Crick, is about to be forced into retirement and, though he has personal grief of his own to contend with, we feel that, more than anything else, it is the age in which he lives, an age that denies history any place in the education system, that Crick grieves for most. For some reason, this novel’s place as an English masterpiece didn’t come overnight, perhaps because some readers were discombobulated by the suspicion that it was mainly about eel migration or, possibly, the nicer points of land drainage. In fact, it treated so many of art’s ‘major themes’ that it is hard to look back and think of it as just one book. The tragic nature of childish curiosity, kinship, the play of water and land in East Anglia, the extremes – and the banal facts – of grief, all these and more are treated with astonishing skill in the pages of *Waterland*. However, I want to focus on Crick, and his view of history because, while the other losses this book deals with are familial or personal, the loss of history – the deliberate erasure of the

subject from school syllabuses and from the communal consciousness – that became a hot topic in the Thatcher/Reagan era was, and continues to be, a matter for collective grief. The technocrats of the 1980s demanded that we sacrifice history so that progress could work more freely: history is bunk, they said, in a modern industrial society. Not only that, it might serve to temper our enthusiasm for the randomly new. As Crick points out:



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There’s this thing called progress. But it doesn’t progress, it doesn’t go anywhere. Because as progress progresses the world can slip away. It’s progress if you can stop the world slipping away. My humble model for progress is the reclamation of land. Which is repeatedly, never-endingly retrieving what is lost. A dogged, vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business. But you shouldn’t go mistaking the reclamation of land for the building of empires.

Of course, *Waterland* is all about history – and specifically, the history of land reclamation, its temporary victories, and its return to the water. Reclamation, like maintenance, is work that is obliged to take the long view, and yields little or no quick profit, though it may pave the way for prosperity, as it does here for the great brewing family, the Atkinsons, who rise and fall, just as the water levels rise and fall, in what seems like a natural rhythm. (Their rise depends on the work of anonymous ditchers, meadmen and drainage workers, though, naturally, these workers will not share in the consequent wealth.) History, of course, teaches us how to understand, and even sometimes to predict Nature’s rhythms, but Crick’s boss, Lewis, and the one pupil the

history teacher dangerously befriends, are both at pains to express their fashionable rejection of history's wise counsel and complexities. 'I want a future', the boy, Price, says. 'And you – you can stuff your past!' To have a future, in this boy's view, means to confine oneself to the here and now, not in the sense of Be (fully) Here (really) Now, but simply in that progressive sense of being prepared for whatever may come on the glorious journey into an ever-more prosperous and happy time ahead. Which never comes, of course, because as Crick says:

[O]nly animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. Man, man – let me offer you a definition – is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right.

What head-teacher Lewis and his ilk would do is to bulldoze those stories into the ground (for our own good, naturally) in the relentless and reckless onward pursuit of – what? It is difficult



to tell what the antagonists *value*. Lewis, for his part, is an acolyte of an emergent school of thought for which looking back, taking stock or doubting are cardinal sins and the only permissible mental state is a prescribed optimism. He is, of course, right in thinking

that any serious study of history precludes such silly optimism, and he is happy that it – and Crick – are to be scrubbed from the curriculum. What he forgets, however, is that humans need stories to live well, with others and with nature, and that, when the progressives bulldoze their way through what they think of as the redundant past, what they are really doing is stealing from others a set of narratives, and a way of life, that is, for them, the vivid present, that is: *tradition*. This is why progressives always get tradition so wrong: they think it pertains to the past; but in reality, tradition always operates in the present. How would it not? At the same time, what Lewis is concealing, or may not even be aware of in himself, is the proto-fascist tendency that guides mediocre people to take upon themselves extraordinary authority (a common sight in British society). For now, but not for much longer, Crick is there to question his intentions:

Children, beware the paternal instinct whenever it appears in your officially approved and professionally trained mentors. In what direction is it working, whose welfare is it serving? This desire to protect and provide, this desire to point the way; this desire to hold sway amongst children.

He sounds, of course, like Cassandra. Soon, however, he – and his history – will be gone. ■

The full text of John Burnside's lecture "'Soliloquies of suffering and consolation': Fiction as elegy and refusal', published in the *Journal of British Academy* in December 2017, can be read freely via [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/journal-british-academy-volume-5-2017](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/journal-british-academy-volume-5-2017)

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vote, **Professor Anne Phillips FBA** warns that 'we should not assume too readily that modernity is on our side or that, if we just wait long enough, things will sort themselves out. The suffrage campaigners knew that there was no inevitability in the achievement of women's suffrage, and we need to emulate them in our own campaigns.' And in her reflections 'On Struggle, imagination and the quest for justice', **Professor Mona Siddiqui** observes that justice is often a process, not a decision, 'and it's often the process that we see unfolding before us. The Hillsborough Disaster, in which 96 Liverpool FC fans died in a crush watching an FA Cup semi-final, is the most serious tragedy in UK sporting history, but it took 26 years for the survivors and families of the dead to get justice for their loved ones.' Audio recordings of both of these 2018 lectures can now be listened to.

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