"REALMS OF CANDOUR AND RAPTURE": DIVINITY, IDENTITY AND PERSONAL SALVATION IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S *WATERLAND*

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Abstract: *This paper aims to trace the various references to the Christian faith and other forms of spirituality in Graham Swift's* Waterland *in an attempt to highlight the extent to which his narrative exposes the failure of conventional religion to provide viable solutions to the kinds of crises contemporary individuals face. The analysis will mainly focus on the evolution of a number of protagonists and their coping mechanisms in the face of grief, loss, and guilt, as well as on the significance and consequences of various forms of transgression, the lure and dangers of religious fanaticism, and above all the causes and outcomes of various (con)fusions between personal and Biblical history, with a special emphasis on terrestrial embodiments of the Madonna and the Saviour and their respective lives and martyrdoms. An important component of this approach will entail a discussion of the various alternatives to ecclesiastical institutions, traditional worship and salvation by faith featured in Swift's novel, ranging from the potential spiritual charge of mundane locations to the redeeming powers of authentic intimacy and communion and the curative function of narration.*

Keywords: *communion; delusion; hubris; identity; Madonna; salvation.*

Considering David Malcolm's frequently quoted and almost universally accepted assessment of Graham Swift as "the most secular of novelists" (90), an analysis focusing on spiritual elements in his prose might initially appear to be a rather misguided approach, yet even a superficial reading of the novel selected for the purposes of this discussion provides ample evidence of the fact that the conspicuous absence of almost any mention of organised religion – which, indeed, "might as well not exist for all it appears in his fiction" (Malcolm 90) – is amply compensated for by a veritable cornucopia of Biblical imagery and references to the characters' complicated relationships with divinity. While revealing little of the intricate fusion between terrestrial and Biblical destinies to be encountered in later chapters, the naive cosmology of Henry Crick's definition of stars as "the silver dust of God's blessing" (*W* 9) cast down on mankind then arrested mid-fall in punishment of the essential wickedness of man, to be found in quite a prominent position on the very first page of the novel, provides a vivid glimpse into the punitive and controlling nature of the divine figure that seems to govern the lives of many of its protagonists. The evocation of both "God's withheld benedictions" (*W* 11) and of the Fens as a landscape deliberately condemned to "unrelieved and monotonous flatness" (*W* 10) so as to allow God "a clear view" (*W* 9) moreover founds "the narrative situation as a paternal act of bequeathing knowledge about the world" (Bényei 50) whose bitterly ironic connotations become increasingly clear with the gradual revelation of Tom Crick's uncertainties regarding Mary's violently aborted baby and his subsequent childlessness, his father's questionable paternity of his first-born son and his grandfather's incest.

The doubts cast upon the "conferred authority of the father" by the scientific (and even theological) inaccuracy of his "naming and narrating acts" (Bényei 50) as well as by the disquieting revelations concerning Dick's true parentage echo the crisis of paternity that Botting (125) highlights as a dominant concern of the novel and that appears to be an equally salient component of the postmodern condition. No understanding of the multifaceted nuances of patriarchal authority would of course be complete without further references to Henry Crick's father-in-law, whose "attempt to realise a fantasy of absolute paternity, to obtain a godlike enjoyment through transgressing and thereby placing himself beyond symbolic law" not only "redoubles the paternal relation with an overwhelming identification with the role of divine Creator" (Botting 126) but goes against natural order, civil law and Biblical precepts alike. The "very special sort of child" (*W* 227)

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that Ernest Atkinson intends (and potentially manages) to sire through paternal incest so as to regale the world with another Saviour is, naturally enough, one of the most symbolically loaded figures in the narrative. Associated throughout his short existence with the eel, an ambiguous being blending the appearance of the deceptive serpent and one of the oldest emblems of the Christian Saviour, Helen Atkinson's child (in reference to whom the politically correct society of the late twentieth century might have employed the term 'special' for quite different reasons than the ones envisaged by Ernest Atkinson in his megalomaniac delirium) can be ultimately perceived as a "scapegoat figure, sacrificed in expiation of society's sins" (Head 206). The unwitting product and occasional perpetrator "of a multitude of sins by blood or association," ranging from sexual jealousy, incest and murder to industrial exploitation, imperialism and a lost political vision, Dick eventually departs his provisional terrestrial home and "swims back to his mythic origins, symbolically confirming the neglect of the natural, but, conversely, putting the society back in touch with the natural cycle through the ritualistic idea of atonement" (Head 206).

Dick's momentous birth, life and "amphibious apotheosis" (Todd 310) do not constitute the only "ironic reworking of the story of Christ" (Nicol 116) to be encountered in Swift's Fenland, as decades after putting herself through a traumatic abortion (perhaps made necessary by the fear of carrying the child of a mentally subnormal Saviour) and warning her prospective husband that "short of a miracle" (*W* 106) they are unlikely to produce any offspring, the "appropriately named" (Nicol 116) Mary also finds herself entertaining the delusion that God will send her a child: "I'm going to have a baby. Because God's said I will." (*W* 135) Part of the sad irony of this outcome derives from the quite radical perspective shift undergone by Mary from merely "pretending there's such a thing as immaculate conception" (*W* 261) to appease the righteous indignation of one of the Crick brothers to actually espousing this far-fetched belief notwithstanding the similarly revolted reaction of the other. Arguably, this repetition can be read as evidence of the extent to which "the eschatological event (the embodiment of the word in flesh in the figure of Christ) is potentially happening in every moment" (Bényei 51-52), yet the rather gruesome details of the various incarnations of the Saviour (including mental subnormality, abortion and kidnapping) seem to allow for little sense of hope regarding the world's chances of redemption.

Critical analyses of Mary's unfortunate decline into fanaticism and madness, culminating in her criminal behaviour and unavoidable institutionalization, tend to insist on the Biblical connotations of her name and their ironic fusion with the uninterrupted yet also uncompleted prayer (Malcolm 90) repeated during Martha Clay's sinister ministrations – "HolyMaryMotherofGodHolyMaryMotherof –" (*W* 307) – and to blame her predicament on fear of the violent and volatile Dick and on the guilt instilled in her as part of her Catholic upbringing (Malcolm 81). It could be however argued that far from being the exclusive product of personal trauma and fanaticism, Mary's immaculate conception delusions can be traced back to a considerably more distant past than the moment of her abortion and the subsequent years spent in isolation from the rest of the world. Raised by a father determined to remain faithful to the memory of a Catholic wife by conferring "the articles of her faith on his daughter" and hopefully raising "a little Madonna, who would be transformed, in due course, into a princess" (*W* 52), Mary engenders a similar sense of reverence in a young man in relationship to whom she acts more like Eve than the Mother of God:

> Even more, perhaps, than Farmer Metcalf, Tom Crick has turned Mary – in spite of the facts – into an untouchable Madonna (that red sacred heart, emblem of the blessed St Gunnhilda, that burns so tantalizingly, so ambiguously, on the breast pocket of her school blazer). (*W* 54)

Praised by the sisters "for being a bright and eager pupil with a thirst for knowledge," Mary thwarts her father's hopes by also "exercising her curiosity out of school hours, particularly in matters sexual" only to curtail her explorations and shut "herself up, hermit-fashion, for over three years" (*W* 122) at an age at which Harold Metcalf would have expected the reverse metamorphosis to take place.

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If one is to consider the extent to which family and history alike are marked by repetition (Childs 231) in Swift's novel, Mary's trajectory can also be read as the most recent version of a destiny replayed with historical and cultural variations across several centuries, from Saint Gunnhilda, "who looked over the devil-ridden Fens and saw visions" (*W* 89), to "the last person one could imagine imitating the patron-saint" (*W* 122) of Gildsey. As Tom Crick's rambling and "endlessly branching" yet cohesive tale of "brothers and fathers and daughters and mothers and lovers, of incest and abortion and idiocy and murder" (Wood 444) eventually reveals, long before Mary's descent into madness Sarah Atkinson's affliction had prompted awed comparisons between her "gaunt yet angelic features" and those of St Gunnhilda in the "precious Gunnhilda triptych" and had resulted in the Gildsey town folk perceiving her not as a "senseless mute" but as a "reincarnation of (...) the patron saint of the town" (*W* 89). Her supernatural qualities are moreover re-enforced by the flood that immediately follows her death in 1874 (Bentley 136), during which her ghost is seen in the graveyard of St Gunnhilda's church.

It is quite clear that the coordinates of Sarah Atkinson's life, from the jealousy and rage triggered by her beauty to her inert and unresponsive stance following significant physical trauma, bear obvious similarities to the plight of her twentieth-century avatar, whose tragedy is augmented (or, alternatively, diminished) by the temporal dissonance between her condition and the period in which she lives:

> In another age, in olden times, they might have called her holy (or else have burnt her as a witch). One who hears the voice of – One to whom – They might have allowed her the full scope of her mania: her anchorite's cell, her ascetic's liberties, her visions and ravings… Now she gets benefit of psychiatry. (*W* 328)

It is however equally important to note that this story that "not only haunts the future but is repeated in Mary's life" (Childs 231) represents but one episode in a considerably longer series, as the decades between Sarah's death and Mary's birth witness the emergence of yet another addition to this line of charismatic females doomed to arouse reverence and suffer trauma at the hands of the men closest to them. In the light of this awareness of repetition even a minor slip such as Fiander's use of the name of Tom's mother to refer to his future wife – "Tom Crick and his girlfriend Helen" (38) – appears to find some justification in Tom's remark that "Henry Crick once had a wife whom Harold Metcalf might have doted on for a daughter" – and can be read as further reinforcement of the circular nature of both public and private history. If one also considers little Tom Crick's longing "to return to that time before history claimed us, before things went wrong" (*W* 140) by finding once more or reviving "the image of his departed Mummy" (*W* 282) in the form of another living, breathing human being (Cook 140), a disturbingly Oedipal facet of his youthful fascination with Mary starts to take shape and the "mother-son charades" that seem to define the parameters of their married life acquire a doubly bitter irony.

As regards the crucial link between the Atkinson dynasty and the humble Cricks, although never on the receiving end of physical violence like either Sarah or Mary, Helen Atkinson has to cope with the suffering of the wounded soldiers in her charge as well as with her father's disquieting desires, although the awe she inspires in all of them would seem to place her on a higher plane of existence, far above such mundane concerns. Perceived by her father as the flesh and blood embodiment of Beauty itself, the most platonic of ideas (*W* 220), and by her future husband as an "angel in a nurse's uniform," a "white-aproned goddess" (*W* 225), Helen is singled out as the only vessel worthy to carry a new Saviour and worshipped throughout her lifetime and even more so posthumously:

> Surviving occupants of the Atkinson lock cottage were perhaps united in a common belief that Mother who was dead wasn't really dead at all, that from some hidden vantage point she still watched over them and held the cottage under her protection. (*W* 283)

It is moreover worth mentioning that whereas in Sarah Atkinson's case it is unclear "whether the brothers themselves regarded their mother as *oracle*, *priestess*, *protectress*, or merely allowed these

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rumours to circulate as a means of securing the favour of the town" (*W* 89) and in Mary Metcalf's there is a significant discrepancy between the female protagonist's own desires and inclinations and the reactions and expectations she elicits, as far as Helen is concerned the sense of religious adoration appears to be both genuine and deserved. Whilst illustrative of the distinct personalities and destinies in Tom Crick's Fenland, these details do not detract from the fact that the sometimes excessively high pedestals on which Sarah, Helen and Mary alike are placed by their immediate families, lovers and sometimes entire communities provide them with insufficient protection from the various acts of patriarchal violence perpetrated against almost any embodiment of the feminine principle, from martyr saints, ethereal angels and terrestrial temptresses to nature itself. In this context, the treatment applied by the Atkinson men to the women they ostensibly revere parallels their violation of natural landscapes, as pointed out by ecocritical readings of *Waterland* and similar texts:

> In patriarchal cultures swamps have by and large been reduced to surface and then penetrated by phallic heroes who *in*vaginate the surface, draw it back within itself as virgin (wet)lands in order to deny the depths of the mother. (Gibblet 17-18)

The obvious echoes connecting the different generations also seem to suggest that the dichotomy employed in the title of a chapter focusing on the unlikely relationship between Mary Metcalf and Dick Crick – "About Beauty and the Beast" – can be applied with equal success to at least two other pairs of protagonists, further reinforcing the (con)fusion between Biblical history and fairy tales first introduced in the context of Harold Metcalf's wishful thinking. As far as the male terms of the respective equations are concerned, Thomas Atkinson, Ernest Atkinson and Dick Crick provide different yet equally interesting examples of *hubris* in the sense employed in Athenian legal parlance, of assault against a citizen, statutory rape or any kind of violence (Sacks 164) as well as in the alternative understandings of the term, employed in the New Testament as well as across millennia of philosophical writings, as "the outcome of allowing the passions to rule," the mistake of forgetting that one is human and "that God has the last word" (Barclay 130), "a form of overweaning pride, a reckless arrogance" (Booker 326) invariably leading to disaster. In response to his students' implicit sneers, Tom Crick suggests yet another possible interpretation of the term as an expression of the law of natural balance, a view reminiscent of the literal meaning of *hubris*, originally considered a "defiance of the cosmic order, that state of perfect balance which ultimately holds the universe together" (Booker 326): "Who administers this grand and rough justice? The gods? Some supernatural power? (...) But even nature teaches us that nothing is given without something being taken away." (*W* 77) Examples of this equilibrium range from the individual epiphanies of superstitious Fenmen such as Jack Parr, whose traumatic experiences convince him that "God, who sometimes brings about by way of punishment, inexplicable cruelties and drowns a man's own son, also performs inexplicable wonders" (*W* 120), to the history of Christianity, including one of the few open condemnations of organised religion to be found in Swift's fiction:

> It cannot be denied, children, that the great so-called forward movements of civilization, whether moral or technological, have invariably brought with them an accompanying regression. That the dissemination of Christian tenets over a supposedly barbarous world has been throughout the history of Europe – to say nothing of missionary zeal elsewhere – one of the prime causes of wars, butcheries, inquisitions and other forms of barbarity. (*W* 139)

As regards the smaller scale of personal history, it would appear that the main act of barbarity ostensibly ratified by God consists of Mary's appropriation of a young woman's baby – "Schoolmaster's wife admits theft of child. Tells court: 'God told me to do it.'" (*W* 5) – and the relatively violent struggle that ensues as soon as her husband attempts to remove it from her arms, although the details of the scene in which Tom Crick returns home after teaching the French Revolution to find that his wife has "committed a revolutionary – a miraculous – act" (*W* 264) of her own belie her subsequent vilification by the media as 'The Baby Snatcher of Lewisham' and

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'The Child Thief of Greenwich' and suggest that Mary has finally fulfilled the Madonna potential envisaged by her father and the two Crick brothers:

> And she's not wearing the looks of a villainous child-thief, she's not wearing the looks of a vicious criminal. She's wearing the looks of a young mother who's never been a mother before. Her face has shed a succession of masks (menopausal wife, ex-age-care officer, history teacher's life-long, long-suffering mate); she's all innocence and maidenhood. A Madonna – and child. (*W* 264)

Confronted with "this bizarre Nativity," the perplexed history teacher also finds himself donning several different masks, with the initial "posture of an awestruck shepherd" relinquished in favour of the stance of "a ruthless Herod" (*W* 266) as speechless amazement gives way to a disheartening disquisition on God's silence that seems to sever all possible ties between present and past states and identities:

> But God doesn't talk any more. Didn't you know that Mary. He stopped talking long ago. He doesn't even watch any more, up there in the sky. We've grown up now and we don't need him any more, out Father in Heaven. We can fend for ourselves. He's left us alone to make what we will of the world. In Greenwich, in the midst of a vast city, where once they built an observatory precisely to stare back at God, you can't even see at night, above the aurora of the street lamps, God's suspended stars. God's for simple, backward people in God-forsaken places. (*W* 268)

Arguably, it is precisely this divine silence "or, indeed, absence" that can be seen as the catalyst for "all human endeavour, from story-telling to empire building" (Konkal 99), with the vast majority of attempts to overcome this "loss of the solaces of a personally revealed God" (Wheeler 65) by means of the latter category ultimately resulting in disaster. Of all the efforts to fill the "empty vessel" (*W* 30) of existence made by Swift's protagonists, it would appear that story-telling and genuine communion with other flesh and blood beings are the only ones powerful enough to cope with the "great flat monotony of reality; the wide empty space of reality" (*W* 24), which would explain why the empire-building Atkinsons are more prone to melancholia, self-murder, "heavy drinking, madness and sudden acts of violence" (*W* 24) than the humble Cricks, "suckers for stories," "superstitious and credulous" creatures "down to the last generation" (*W* 25). In light of these observations, Tom Crick's insistence on the need "adults have of children to tell stories to" (*W* 15) can be read as an expression of his humanist faith in language (Hutcheon 184) and its potential to facilitate "the mastery of trauma" (Wells 68) and helps explain why Helen Crick, a tireless narrator of stories "she got from books as well as out of her head" (*W* 10) to help her son sleep at night manages to escape the fate of her Atkinson forebears and why her son Tom keeps his sanity while his wife gradually drifts into the arena of the unwell: "Once upon a time there was a history teacher's wife who, for quite specific and historical reasons, couldn't have a child. Though her husband had lots." (*W* 59) Tom's stubborn refusal to relinquish storytelling after the loss of his wife and his profession, his two passions and the vital coordinates of his existence, thus emerges not as an indication of his final surrender to the madness and despair that had claimed so many of his precursors and contemporaries but as a survival strategy: "To comfort himself he tells himself stories. He repeats the stories he's told in class." (*W* 329)

Far from merely exemplifying the "apathetic secularism" (Bradford 28) characterising postwar British society and indeed virtually all other Western democracies, Tom Crick's narrative seems to provide the best evidence that in the kind of world that constitutes the setting of Swift's narratives "transcendence comes not through the Holy Spirit (...) but with the light of passion and devotion" (Malcolm 214). In Mary's case passion seems to amount to intense yet transient moments of rapture punctuating an otherwise grim existence and is invariably associated with the presence of a lover, ranging from the terrestrial Tom and the amphibious Dick to the celestial figure that her husband finds himself unable to compete with:

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> in the year 1979, a woman of fifty-two, she suddenly began looking again for Salvation. She began this love-affair, this liaison – much to the perplexity of her husband (from whom she could not keep it a secret) – with God. (*W* 48)

The clandestine nature of her religious experience is reinforced by Tom's ironic linguistic choices – "She confesses she has been talking to a priest. She confesses she has been to confession." – while the initial need for secrecy can be justified by means of references to Mary's history of infidelity, her penchant for contradictory narratives and the discrepancy between her new preoccupations and her husband's worldview: "She brings home books whose very titles (If Jesus Returned; God and the Bomb) appal him." (*W* 132) Tom's incredulity is based on a strong belief in his wife's "capacity for realism," confirmed by the calm and fortitude displayed in the course of their first encounter after her "temporary communing with On High" and the apparent ease with which she "put aside her sackcloth and sanctity" (*W* 47) and adapted to married life:

> He expects to find – and accept – a nun, a Magdalen, a fanatic, a hysteric, an invalid… But he sees, even as he steps from the train, a woman (no girl) who impresses him with her appearance of toughness, endurance, as if she has made the decision to live henceforth without any kind of prop or refuge. (*W* 125)

Perceived by Tom as entailing little more than "making a virtue of necessity," the three-year interval of self-imposed "solitude, atonement and (...) celibacy" remains shrouded in mystery – "Not even she has ever said how far God came into this lonely vigil." (*W* 47) – like so many other fragments of "Mary's story, pieced together and construed" by a biased and frequently misinformed narrator:

> Whether God spoke to her (then too) as He spoke, above the howls of demons, to St Gunnhilda; whether she found Salvation; whether, perhaps, she was visited by the ghost of Sarah Atkinson, the Brewer's Daughter of Gildsey, who, so local lore has it, offers companionship to those whose lives have stopped though they must go on living… Or whether the truth of those three years was that nothing, nothing at all, occurred and that the future Mrs Crick, gazing day after day from her farmhouse cell at the level fields, was only, wittingly or unwittingly, preparing herself for her later marriage – which would be a sort of fenland. (*W* 122-123)

As far as Tom Crick is concerned, the passion for history engendered by his mother's tales provides him both with an obvious career choice and a way of coping with the trauma of childlessness that has such damaging effects on his wife, whilst simultaneously equipping the "river of children – new lives, fresh starts" flowing through his classroom with the means of surmounting reality:

> He made a living – a life's work – out of the past, for which his justification was the children to whom he offered daily lessons that the past affords. To whom he presented the equivocal gift of history – burdensome yet instructive – to carry into their futures. And thus the history teacher – though his relation with his young charges echoes first the paternal, then the grand-paternal, though he sees in their faces (but does not admit it) less and less the image of the future, more and more that of something he is trying to retrieve, something he has lost – could always say (he acquires a penchant for paradox) that he looked back in order to look forward. (*W* 110)

Whether based on the grand repertoire of history or the miniaturised imitations of Grand Narratives in the unsung existence of his ancestors, Tom's classes entail a relentless questioning of the past and a constant emphasis on the importance of critical inquiry in "obstructing historical injustice" (Horton 73) and above all in the survival of the human spirit:

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> Children, be curious. Nothing is worse (I know it) than when curiosity stops. Nothing is more repressive than the repression of curiosity. Curiosity begets love. It weds us to the world. It's part of our perverse, madcap love for this impossible planet we inhabit. People die when curiosity goes. (*W* 178)

A self-proclaimed purveyor of "bungles, botches, blunders and fiascos" (*W* 177) whose final classes represent a veritable compendium of the tragic mistakes committed by whole generations of Atkinsons (and, to a lesser extent, of Cricks), Tom is quite justified in reinforcing this particular lesson, having once witnessed the devastating changes wrought in Mary's psyche by a loss of curiosity that his tentative narrative was unable to cure:

> Cradling Mary in my arms, invoking the bedtime voice of my mother (but I'm the infant, and she –) I start to say, in the frail tones of grown-ups who in the midst of crisis try to maintain before their children that all is well: 'Do you remember, Mary, when we first came here, when we, when –?' (...) But Mary's not interested. Her face is white and clammy. Her eyes clench. She's not interested in stories. Not curious. (*W* 255)

Tom's much later attempts to rekindle Mary's spirit in the empty husk that seems to constitute the only remnant of the "adventurous, inquisitive, unrestrainable" (*W* 122) girl he fell in love with consist of the same nostalgic reminiscences pervaded by a strong belief in the sacredness of their ostensibly impure relationship:

> Mary, wherever you are – now you're gone, still here but gone, somewhere inside yourself, now you've stopped and all that is left for anyone else is your story – do you remember (can you still remember?) how once we lay in the shell of the old windmill by the Hockwell Lode and how the flat empty Fens all around us became, too, a miraculous land, became an expectant stage on which magical things could happen? Do you remember how we looked up at the sky, into blue emptiness, and how out of the sky (because I told you: my homespun religiosity for your Catholic sophistication) God looked down on us; how He'd lifted off the roof of our makeshift home of love, and we didn't mind? How no one else could see us in our windmill bower but He could, and we let Him? (*W* 121)

In Tom's worldview the abandoned windmill in which the Here and Now unlocks "realms of candour and rapture" (*W* 66) becomes the site of a more authentic communion with divinity than any of the ecclesiastical institutions frequented by his middle-aged wife, much in the same way in which the interior of the pub in which Ray awaits his fellow pilgrims in *Last Orders* appears to be more conducive to epiphany than the daunting walls of one of the oldest Christian structures in England, with their implicit disregard for the puny mortals who dare cross its threshold: "I'm Canterbury Cathedral, who the hell are you?" (*LO* 194) Quite appositely described by Lea as an "areligious religious novel" (166) seeking "a transcendent logic in the gestures of apostasy," *Last Orders* entails from its very first paragraphs a juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, with the "shaft of sunlight coming through the window, full of specks" and the "bottles racked up like organ pipes" (*LO* 1) evoking the interior of a church and encouraging the reader to "conflate the experiences of devotional and recreational social gathering" (Lea 166). Likewise, *Waterland* provides numerous examples of sacred experiences occasioned by profane interactions in secular but nevertheless spiritually loaded spaces comprising not only the fateful windmill but also the humble "lock-keeper's cottage, by a river (…) away from the wide world" (*W* 9), the river bank under the sky swarming with "stars which seemed to multiply" (*W* 9) and countless other Fenland locations.

It is perhaps appropriate to observe at this stage in the analysis the rather interesting details of Henry Crick's apparent rejection of faith towards the end of his life and attempt to shed some light on the paradox of a man who perceived the stars on the firmament as "broken-off bits of heaven" (*W* 9) using his last breath to curse the Christian call to prayer – "Those bells, those damned bells, gonging and echoing through the vaults of his delirium." (*W* 297) – more likely than

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not oblivious to the chiding voice in the background (the voice of his Catholic daughter in law? the God-fearing Fenland community he had been born and raised into? God himself? his own conscience?) reminding him of the wisdom of departing the world as contritely as possible: "don't damn church bells, Henry Crick, not on your death bed. Remember God on your death-bed. Pray to God on your death bed." (*W* 297) If one is to consider the thread of loss and bereavement woven through the tapestry of this humble Fenman's existence, from the traumas of the battlefield to the loss of the woman who seemed to have successfully cured the physical and psychological wounds inflicted by the war, the drowning of a relatively innocent boy in the sluice he was supposed to be supervising and soon afterwards of his own (and yet not his own) brutish and possibly murderous son, it is hardly surprising that Henry Crick ends up renouncing the God whose authority and conditioned benevolence permeated his earlier discourse. An alternative explanation would however focus on the wording of his recriminations (which are, incidentally, reported rather than conveyed by means of direct speech) to point out that berating the noise made by the bells is not synonymous with renouncing God and to suggest that, like his son Tom, Henry Crick might be denouncing the institution whilst preserving a more personal and purer relationship with divinity.

The final point in Tom Crick's impassionate appeal – "And was it the same God, looking down on us then, who spoke to you?" (*W* 121) – is strongly reminiscent of the equally problematic question in William Blake's "The Tyger" and potentially meant to be left unanswered, although the wide range of approaches to divinity featured in the narrative and the constant emphasis on the importance of subjectivity might tilt the scales towards a negative reply. Tom's rejection of "a monolithic official narrative" (Bentley 133) in favour of an "osmosis between rival historiographies" (Todd 308) that bleed into each other can be said to highlight the complex and multiple nature of faith as well as history, in view of which any ultimate certainty emerges as no more solid than the identity of the "imaginary figure looking down from the sky (let's call him God)" (*W* 139). It thus becomes increasingly clear that the convoluted plotline of *Waterland* occasions encounters with both the innovative strategies of literary postmodernism and the often contradictory idiosyncrasies of a wider cultural paradigm, a relevant one in this particular case being the dissolution of "the universal truth claims" of religious (as well as political and scientific) ideologies into "interchangeable micro-narratives" (Greaney 2). In this context, the headmaster's determination to cut "back on history" (*W* 28) so as to better prepare students for the future provides an insight into the limitations of the "Thatcherite religion" of privatization and efficiency (English 13), Mary Crick's disturbing delusions of holy motherhood can be read as concrete examples of the insidious intrusion of ideological fanaticism into the moral void created in societies "where traditional religious, moral and political values have ceased to be convincing and relevant to the constitution of subjectivity" (Zima 54), whereas Tom's resistance against the sweeping tides in both his professional and domestic life is symbolic of the individual's struggle to move towards a freer identity by disentangling oneself from outdates grand narratives (Driscoll 148) on the one hand and misguided notions of progress on the other. Notwithstanding the gloomy endings of all the "seemingly disparate stories which only gradually are shown to relate to each other" (Bentley 133) woven in Tom Crick's narrative, the final outcome can be seen as a "compelling defence of storytelling as a human (and humane) essential" (Rennison 129), ensuring the sanity and survival of those who manage to secure "receptacles for their stock of fairy-tales, of listening ears on which to unload those most unbelievable yet haunting of fairy-tales, their own lives" (*W* 15).

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