13. 20th century fiction II

Graham Swift (born 1949)
Graham Swift was born in London and spent most of his life there. He studied literature at university and worked as a teacher for a number of years in London and also in Greece. Not much is publicly known about his personal life but he is the author of many successful novels and short stories and he received a number of awards for his writing. His first book was *The Sweet- Shop Owner* (1980) which tells the story of one day, the last day, in the life of Willy Chapman, owner of a London sweet shop, and in retrospect we learn the story of his entire life, his marriage and family and also the larger history: WW2, life in London after the war, the Cuban missile crisis etc. These "big" events of history remain marginal in the story of Willy Chapman; the focus is on the man in his small world of the sweet shop and his family. *Waterland* (1983) is one Swift's most famous novels, followed by *Last Orders* (1996) and *The Light of the Day* (2003). It has been pointed out that *Last Orders* is influenced by William Faulkner's famous *As I Lay Dying*: in Swift's book, too, we get a story related to a funeral (three male friends and an adoptive son travel from London to deposit the ash of their deceased friend and adoptive father in the sea); the story is a series of interior monologues told by the various characters, including the dead man himself. Swift's most recent book is *Here We Are* (2020), a story of a love triangle of one woman and a famous magician and the man she eventually marries; here too the private history of the characters is mingled with the larger history of England in WW2 and life in the 1950's.

Waterland is a story of the Fens, a story about a family from the Fens, about the parallels and intersections of personal history and large history, it is also about the natural history of the Fens (the eels) and it is also a metatext because it considers storytelling and history. The narrator is Tom Crick, a history teacher who is just being made redundant at his high school because history is no longer a desired subject and because his wife went mad and stole a baby in a supermarket. Tom is challenged by an assertive student Price who finds history boring and unnecessary, perhaps like the headmaster of the school who fires Tom. Tom changes the content of his history lesson into personal history, and it is through the mingling of these layers of history that we learn the family story. Tom grew up in the Fens with his father Henry Crick, a sluice gate keeper, and his mentally retarded older brother Dick. Tom's wife Mary, who has in the "present time" of the novel abducted the baby, grew up in the neighborhood, too, and when Dick and Tom were young they were both in love with her. Then Mary became pregnant; the baby was Tom's but she was afraid to tell the truth to the simple Dick who in his simplicity simply wanted a baby, so she told him the baby belonged to another boy, Freddie. Dick interprets this as a rejection, he concludes that he is not good enough for Mary. In despair he hits Freddie with a bottle and pushes him into the river, Freddie drowns and his body appears the following morning at the Cricks' gate. Freddie's death is believed to be an accident. Mary goes to an old woman, a kind of a witch in the Fens, to have an abortion; the abortion is done is such a horrible and crude way that Mary has to go to the hospital afterwards and can never have a baby again. Dick confesses to Tom, in his simple way, that he killed Freddie and Tom doesn't have the strength to tell him that the baby was not Dick's but his. Then they open a chest together to which Dick has a key; his mother gave him the key on her death bed. In the chest Tom finds a letter from their grandfather, confessing that Dick is the incestuous son of him and his daughter. Tom tries to explain to Dick what is wrong about it. Dick, hurt by Mary's rejection and by sensing that he is somehow "wrong" because his father was also his grandfather, gets drunk and throws himself into the river.

It is a story about love and procreation; at the center are sexual relationships (Mary-Tom, Mary-Dick, Dick's mother-Dick's grandfather) and a "baby" (the one that Mary aborts, the one that Mary steals much later, the one that Dick desires as a proof that he is loved and accepted, and the one that his grandfather's/father's letter prohibits him to have). Accompanying this theme is the recurring motif of the eels which are a very sexual image for their resemblance to sperm, which Swift explicitly notes, and especially also because eel reproduction and eel reproductive organs have long been a

mystery. Swift devotes an entire chapter to the biological description of eels and the history of eel research.

It is also a story of the landscape and the influence of landscape on its people: the Cricks are settled, they stay in one place, they are passive, they tell stories. The Atkinsons are those who create history by their actions, by shaping the landscape, by drainage, by building sluices and gates. The tone is elegiac and lyrical, the story aspires to mythic proportions—in Tom's search for how history shapes and conditions, or perhaps even determines, the present.

YOUTUBE
Waterland full movie, by Old Curios and Antiquities
Watch from 9:10 to 16:05
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOniFl3p8Rs

The Cricks are storytellers but Dick can't read and write and he can scarcely speak. He is one with the landscape (like the river, he smells of silt) and with things (his motorbike). Dick, who can't tell stories because he can hardly speak at all, is really partly an animal; in the book he is described as being half-eel (notice again also the sexual connotation—he is too big, and when he wants to make love to Mary he can't because he is too big), he smells of silt, he is a "potato-head," he is also a half-machine.

It is also a story about myth and fact, or about fairy tales and reality, and how these two relate to each other. and how they merge, as they do in the character of Tom Crick himself: he is both a storyteller (his family tradition) and a history teacher. Appropriately Swift chooses two mottos for the novel, one a scientific, linguistic definition of the word "history" and one a quotation from one of the greatest English storytellers, Charles Dickens. There are very many fairy tales and legends and folk tales and superstitions and even ghosts present in the story, and then there are the hard facts: the dead body of Freddie Parr, the official "large" history of the Fens and the drainage and the sluices built by the Atkinson family and the history of eel research.

It is also a story about the future and about children, for obviously these two are interconnected. A story of waters, of rivers—these are themselves images of time, or perhaps time is an image of water, or both are images of movement and constant change. Another image of time is silt, the slow gathering of material like the layers of history, like memory, collecting all kinds of material without distinction. And that is perhaps Swift's point in writing a metatext on history and literature (for what else is literature than a form of myth and fairy tale): that these two cannot be reliably separated and that they always exist together and it is only through their combination that we can inhabit the world. Tom comments on his understanding of history:

So I began to look into history—not only the well-thumbed history of the wide world but also, indeed with particular zeal, the history of my Fenland forebears. So I began to demand of history an Explanation. Only to uncover in this dedicated search more mysteries, more fantasticalities, more wonders and grounds for astonishment than I started with; only conclude forty years later—notwithstanding a devotion to the usefulness, to the educative power of my chosen discipline—that history is a yarn. And can I deny that what I wanted all along was not some gold nugget that history would at last yield up, but History itself: the Grand Narrative, the filler of vacuums, the disspeller of fears of the dark?

Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But 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. Even in his last moments, it's said, in the split second of a fatal fall—or when he's about to drown—he sees, passing rapidly before him, the story of his whole life.

This is Swift commenting on this central issue years after he wrote *Waterland* in a 1997 interview:

[Swift] The story is the heart of the matter. However you talk about it, however you analyze it, it is this ultimately magical, marvelous, mysterious, wonderful thing. It's got to be there. That's what makes the reader read. Whatever else you're attempting, whatever else you're doing, it's the story that remains. I know it is not a very fashionable view of fiction.
[interviewer] I think we're rediscovering the value of storiness, the more we understand that experience is simply stories. We survive by telling ourselves stories, by fictionalizing our lives.
[Swift] Absolutely. Quite apart from the special domain of novels, in life generally we're constantly telling stories, constantly comforting ourselves, each other, entertaining ourselves and each other, strengthening ourselves and each other through telling narratives of one kind or another; they don't have to be sophisticated.
[interviewer] Meaning-making in a sense is story-making. Story-making conditions the way we make sense of our lives and the world.
[Swift] Yes, so that it only makes more ridiculous that question writers get asked, "So what is the meaning of your novel?"-because the meaning is the story.

YOUTUBE
Graham Swift on Waterland and reading excerpt:
Writing Waterlands, by the British Library
1:25-1:49, 2:39-3:45

Julian Barnes (born 1946)
Shortly before Swift published *Waterland,* Barnes published *Metroland* (1980), his first book, set among young urban intellectuals of London. Barnes grew up in the larger London area; his parents were both French teachers and Barnes himself is a Francophile. He studied modern languages at Oxford and worked as a lexicographer, literary editor and reviewer. As a writer he became very famous with his third novel *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), inspired by a parrot who appears in a short story by the French author Gustav Flaubert. The book is about Flaubert's story and its characters, about all kinds of parrots, about a French professor of literature and Flaubert specialist and engages in literary analyses and discussions of Flaubert's works. Obviously the book became very popular in France, but also in England, despite its focus on problems of literary history and theory. It is an eccentric, funny, fragmentary compilation of anecdotes, episodes and curiosities.

Among the many other novels Barnes wrote, including some crime stories which he published under the pseudonym of Dan Kavanagh, is his novel *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), a winner of the Man Booker Prize. The plot concerns an ageing man, Tony, who was married and divorced; he has a grown up daughter who has a family of her own. As young man Tony had a girlfriend, Veronica; they broke up and Veronica started a relationship with Tony's best friend Adrian. After several months Adrian committed suicide. Tony, at the present time of the novel, when he is an old divorced man, suddenly receives a letter informing him that Veronica's mother died and bequeathed him 500 pounds and a document. The document turns out to be Adrian's diary but it is missing from the package. Tony gets in touch with Veronica, after some forty years, and receives just a photocopy of the last page of the diary, which is so enigmatic that he can't make anything out of it but it ends with an unfinished sentence "So, for instance, if Tony." Tony learns from her that she burnt Adrian's diary. She is not very nice to him and doesn't communicate much. During one meeting she hands him an old letter which Tony recognizes as written by himself; it is a letter which he wrote after he and Veronica broke up and

she started dating Adrian. It is a mean, vile, hateful letter. Tony is shocked. He completely forgot he wrote it. In his mind it simply did not exist.

I noticed the date at the top, and the handwriting: my own, as it used to be, all those years ago. 'Dear Adrian,' the letter began. I read it through, got to my feet, took my glass of wine, poured it rather splashily back into the bottle, and made myself a very large whisky.

How often do we tell our own life story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts? And the longer life goes on, the fewer are those around to challenge our account, to remind us that our life is not our life, merely the story we have told about our life. Told to others, but— mainly—to ourselves.

Dear Adrian—or rather, Dear Adrian and Veronica (hello, Bitch, and welcome to this letter), Well you certainly deserve one another and I wish you much joy. I hope you get so involved that the mutual damage will be permanent. I hope you regret the day I introduced you. And I hope that when you break up (...) you are left with a lifetime of bitterness that will poison your subsequent relationships.

Shocked at being thus confronted with his forgotten hateful reaction, he apologizes to Veronica but she doesn't reconcile with him; instead, she takes him to see a group of mentally handicapped men who obviously know her. Tony is perplexed and because Veronica refuses to communicate clearly he decides to find out for himself. One of the men resembles Adrian so much that Tony is sure he must be Adrian's son. He concludes that he is the son of Adrian and Veronica. Only when he talks to the caretaker of the handicapped men, he is given to understand that this man is not Veronica's son but Veronica's brother. And then he realizes the full story: after Adrian read that hateful letter which Tony wrote back then, and which mentioned that Adrian should ask Veronica's mother about what kind of girl Veronica really was, Adrian really did talk to her mother and they became lovers. Veronica's mother got pregnant by Adrian and the baby was born handicapped. Tony is somehow involved in all of this because of that nasty letter he wrote to Adrian and Veronica and because he even recommended Adrian to go to Veronica's mother.

This is a tale of history, memory and forgetting. It is narrated by Tony as an old man and much of the story is his pondering the very issue of history and what becomes of one's life. The book is divided into two parts: the first shorter part tells the story of Tony and Adrian's student days and Adrian's suicide, the second part focuses on returning to the history after Tony received the unexpected money from Veronica's mother. The second part opens with Tony's reflections on the passing of time and of life:

Later on in life, you expect a bit of rest, don't you? You think you deserve it. I did, anyway. But then you begin to understand that the reward of merit is not life's business. (...) What you fail to do is look ahead, and then imagine yourself looking back from that future point. Learning the new emotions that time brings. Discovering, for example, that as the witnesses to your life diminish, there is less corroboration, and therefore less certainty, as to what you are or have been. Even if you have assiduously kept records—in words, sound, pictures—you may find that you have attended to the wrong kind of record-keeping. What was the line Adrian used to quote? 'History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation.'

This is of course a prophetic line in the development of the plot; and this opening of Part Two ties in with the concluding words of the book:

You get towards the end of life—no, not life itself, but of something else: the end of any likelihood of change in that life. You are allowed a long moment of pause, of time enough to ask the question: what else have I done wrong? (...) There is accumulation. There is responsibility. And beyond these, there is unrest. There is great unrest.

Ian McEwan (born 1948)
McEwan is a very successful novelist, short story writer and author of screenplays. His early fiction was of the dark kind, hence his nickname "Ian Macabre." His famous novella called *The Cement Garden* (1978) begins with the sudden death of the father of a family, just as he was preparing to turn his garden into a paved area. The mother dies shortly afterwards and the four children, aged 6 to 17, decide to bury her dead body in the basement and cover it with left over cement, because they don't want to go to foster care. They do this and continue in the house on their own; the two eldest siblings, a sister and a brother, take the role of father and mother and they also gradually develop a sexual relationship. The story has a gothic quality, Poe-like horror elements: the children are not nice, they are tough and bitter, and tough and hard is also the natural setting of the novel: a desolate suburb with weeds and broken concrete, paralleled by the cement garden created by the father.

In 1998 McEwan won the Booker Prize for his novel *Amsterdam* which probes into the issue of euthanasia, again in a dark, perhaps satiric or cynical way, as two friends, a music composer and newspaper editor, agree to perform euthanasia on each other if their health deteriorated badly. What happens instead is that they get involved in an ugly argument and "euthanize," or simply murder each other.

Atonement (2001) is one of McEwan's most famous novels, also because it was made into an Oscar winning film. The story begins in England in 1935 with the developing romance between Celia, a daugther in a rich family, and her family's housekeeper's son, Robbie. Celia's sister Briony is 13 years old; she walks in on Celia and Robbie as they make love and misunderstands what she sees as an act of violence. When their cousin Lola is raped by a man in the dark, Briony claims that the man was Robbie, although she could not see clearly who the man was, and accuses him of the rape. Robbie is sent to jail and Celia promises to wait for him. After his release from prison Robbie is sent to fight in WW2, and it is only his hope of being reunited with Celia that keeps him going. Briony, in the mean time, has realized her mistake and feels deep regret for ruining the lives of Robbie and Celia and starts a training as a nurse. When Celia and Robbie are reunited during Robbie's leave from the army, Briony asks their pardon; they cannot forgive her, but Briony promises to try to make things right. The final, fourth, part of the book is set in 1999; Briony is an ageing woman who faces the diagnose of a gradual loss of memory. We gather that she is a writer, and that the previous story we read about Celia, Robbie and Lola was actually Briony's novel to which she has given a happy ending (having Celia and Robbie reunited) while she explains that in reality both Robbie and Celia were killed independently of each other during the war and Celia was never able to ask their forgiveness. The happy ending is her way of atoning for what she did to them. So this novel is a metatext, a reflection of writing, literature, fiction, and on history. In the concluding part of the novel Briony reflects on the (im)possibility of atoning for real events in fiction:

It is only in this last version that my lovers end well, standing side by side on a South London pavement as I walk away. All the preceding drafts were pitiless. But now I can no longer think what purpose would be served if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect means, that Robbie Turner died of septicemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station. That I never saw them in that year. That my walk across London ended at the church on Clapham Common, and that a cowardly Briony limped back to the hospital, unable to confront her recently bereaved sister. That the letters the lovers wrote are in the archives of the War Museum. How could that constitute an ending? What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? I couldn't do it to them. I'm too old, too frightened, too much in love with the shred of life I have remaining. I face an incoming tide of forgetting, and then oblivion. I no longer possess the courage of my pessimism. (…) The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her.

There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all. I've been standing at the window, feeling waves of tiredness beat the remaining strength from my body. The floor seems to be undulating beneath my feet. I've been watching the first gray light bring into view the park and the bridges over the vanished lake. And the long narrow driveway down which they drove Robbie away, into the whiteness. I like to think that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet. If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration ... Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at the Trials of Arabella? It's not impossible. But now I must sleep.

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