

ABSTRACT

“The Waters Return”: Myth and Mystery in Graham Swift’s *Waterland*

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The following chapter will engage *Waterland* in isolation from Swift’s other novels and collection of short stories, not because these texts do not mutually illuminate one another, but because *Waterland* deserves a treatment of the kind of depth that warrants an extended, concentrated study. That chapter seeks specifically to counter several of the blatant misreadings of the narrator’s posture and intent within the novel, and to adequately evaluate that posture and intent as they emerge within the full context of the wealth of literary devices Swift employs, including irony, mythical imagery, and scriptural allusion. The mythical images and allusions that are touched upon by other critics comprise here the central study; close reading, biblical hermeneutics, and specific strains of French feminism will interact to allow for a reengagement of *Waterland* beyond the exhausted circular terms of deconstructive relativism.

“The Waters Return”: Myth and Mystery in Graham Swift’s *Waterland*

by

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A Thesis

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts

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Accepted by the Graduate School
August 2008

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to foremost thank my thesis director, Dr. Richard Russell, for his expert guidance and tremendous encouragement to me throughout this project. He was always a pleasure to work with, and his timely affirmation and suggestions helped to make the project exciting rather than intimidating. Along with Dr. Russell I would like to thank Dr. Luke Ferretter and Dr. David Clinton for kindly agreeing to serve on my committee as readers, providing me with invaluable suggestions and challenging me with profound questions that lay at the core of this thesis. I would also like to thank my parents, Arlin and Velma Schrock, and brothers, Chad Schrock and Terrill Schrock, for engaging me in thought-provoking conversations about my academic work and the deeper questions of life. Finally, I would like to thank all of my friends in the Baylor English department for creating an environment of humor, enthusiasm, and support during each stage of this project.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Published in 1983, Graham Swift's third novel *Waterland* accorded him extensive critical accolades and continues to garner the preponderance of critical attention devoted to his expanding oeuvre. Although Swift published two novels and a collection of short stories prior to *Waterland*, and has since published five additional novels, his 1983 masterpiece remains the watermark of Swift's genius, prompting Irish novelist John Banville to wryly remark, "Graham Swift may sometimes have wished he had never written the damn thing" (qtd. in Malcolm 6). In a similar vein, MacDonald Harris notes in his review of Swift's 1992 novel *Ever After*, "It must long have vexed Graham Swift that everything he writes is measured against *Waterland*" (qtd. in Malcolm 7). While elements of theme and style in *Waterland* are picked up in Swift's later novels, *Waterland* by and large retains the position of Swift's preeminent work.

But if *Waterland*, selected as the year's best English novel and shortlisted for the Booker Prize (Janik 74), has somewhat overshadowed Swift's literary career, it has also helped establish his collection of works as, according to Stef Craps, "arguably one of the most significant literary oeuvres of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries" (1). Del Ivan Janik extols the novel by linking its "excellence" to that of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, adding, "the novel confronts crucial human concerns in ways that evoke their complexity and throw them into intense emotional relief at the same time as it satisfies our desire for good stories" (88). Its breadth and depth are singular and

extraordinary, such that, even in the midst of lamenting the general critical neglect given to Swift's other works, Daniel Lea indicates that *Waterland* is "in actuality, something of an anomaly within his oeuvre," adding that "the intensity of playful subversiveness and the broad visionary scope are unusual in Swift's work" (4-5). But if this "labyrinthine [. . .] complexity" (5) is the quality that compels critics, as Lea suggests, to often negatively contrast Swift's other works to *Waterland*, the scope of their response to Swift's body of work in general and *Waterland* in particular has been surprisingly limited.

Waterland is a novel which, above all, begs for skilled, imaginative close reading, for the kind of earnest attention to detail with which its author has imbued it. It is a novel that demands persistent patience with its narrative confusions and convolutions, its paradoxes and ironies, and its limitations and its excesses. *Waterland*'s nuanced concern with both the particularity and continuity of human suffering yields a proliferation of critical possibilities belied by the primarily mimetic readings it has inspired. In short, despite *Waterland*'s astonishing literary richness, with few exceptions, critics over the two-and-a-half decades since its publication have largely confined themselves to reductive theoretical approaches, seldom entering into extensive close reading of the text (Craps 16). Tamás Bényei frankly asserts that "Critical readings of Graham Swift's novels tend to belong to one of two categories" (40), the first, organized around Linda Hutcheon's treatment of *Waterland* as "historiographic metafiction" (qtd. in 40), and the second, devoted to an ethics of mourning, an exploration which usually lends itself to a survey approach of the collected novels (40). While these strands of criticism have yielded important insights and occasioned some healthy theoretical controversy, they have not done justice to *Waterland* as the exceptional novel that it is.

The first and foremost of these dominating interpretive modes scrutinizes *Waterland's* exploration of the contested zone between fact and fiction, history and storytelling, derived truth and constructed illusion. The majority of *Waterland's* critics have rallied behind Linda Hutcheon's 1988 and 1989 book-length treatments of the postmodern interplay between narrative and knowledge, of how what we tell about past and present shapes what we know, and Hutcheon's suggestive analysis of *Waterland* in this context. The warrant underlying this definition of *Waterland* as a "paradigmatic example of historiographic metafiction" (Craps 15) is, of course, that the novel undercuts traditional models of truth-telling by dismantling consoling metanarratives in favor of open-ended multiplicity. Margrét Champion, for example, in a 2003 article draws on Hutcheon and several similar critics, including Pamela Cooper, Robert Irish, George Landow, and John Schad, by using Michael Bakhtin's notion of dialogism to demonstrate that "the energies of the novel are dedicated to constructing an ideal model of communication in which duality or doubleness functions as the ruling mental category" (35). According to Champion, *Waterland's* narrative consciousness operates out of split ideological allegiances, self-consciously foregoing resolution in the interest of creating a salutary dialogic space where a new kind of identity can emerge. Champion develops her argument out of a broad base of critical support, an extensive number of readings that

presume that *Waterland's* divided point of view is generated by a critical consciousness, that it directs its audience, through diverse strategies, toward an equally diverse critique of institutions and mentalities, for instance, of patriarchy, education, traditional historiography, and hegemonic knowledge. (35)

This critical emphasis on diversity, multiplicity, and doubleness in the novel was invoked earlier in Pamela Cooper's widely cited 1996 article on *Waterland*, where the author

explores ambivalent colonial and post-colonial spaces, foregrounding her discussion with comments on the text's "dialectical opposition [. . .] between the discursive practices of narrative and historiography, between the conjuring up of fictions and the setting down of facts" (371). While these readings, in their emphasis on the conflicted subjectivity of the narrator, certainly delineate a principal tension within the novel, they fall short of adequately subsuming the relationship between fictions and facts within the narrator's attempt to encounter and accept the import of human experience. *Waterland* is not simply another novel creatively problematizing the notion of received knowledge and didactic truth; it constitutes rather a narrative gesture *towards* something, towards a posture of meekness before the awful significance of human action and interaction in the world.

Critics utilizing the second most prominent mode of theoretical interpretation recognize the prescriptive gestures that the narrator Tom Crick makes and investigate the terms by which he, as a lonely representative of the modern era's "problematic of mourning and melancholia" (Craps 16), attempts to cope with the overwhelming burden of reality. Bényei, who builds his argument on this second theoretical foundation, explains how the

"historiographic metafictional" reading starts from above, coming to the subject's inscription into history from the level of theoretical statement, whereas the "melancholy" kind of reading starts with the pathological voice of the narrator, qualifying in advance the relevance of any theoretical statement as bearing the mark of the enunciative situation of narrating.
(41)

While it would seem, and Bényei goes on to suggest, that the ethical melancholy readings that start from the more immediate narrative ground of the text and work their way towards abstraction would help preserve the particularity of the characters and events

within *Waterland* and serve as something of a corrective for the more abstract epistemological approach, Stef Craps points out that most critics relying on the ethical approach extend their consideration of ethical dimensions to Swift's larger body of work. As Craps explains, "Almost by definition the survey article favours generalization and abstract analysis at the expense of close engagement with the text" (16), and most ethical analyses of *Waterland* have not accorded it the individual attention that a text so dependent on interlocking and overlapping images and illusions demands. On his part, Craps works to correct this critical lacuna by combining close reading and trauma theory in a book-length study of ethics in Swift's novels.

Craps' book demonstrates the viability and importance of intimate engagement with *Waterland* as a complex textual field in its own right, regardless of the critic's preferred theoretical lens. Unfortunately, as with the historiographic branch of *Waterland* criticism, few critics have limited their application of trauma and ethics theory to *Waterland* alone or given it adequate space within a larger study. Wendy Wheeler, for example, as the seminal critic of the melancholy vein, spends fewer than six full pages (67-72) on *Waterland* in her chapter devoted to "Melancholic Modernity and Contemporary Grief: The Novels of Graham Swift." While Wheeler's overall argument is insightful and persuasive, her discussion of *Waterland* per se is necessarily terse and weak in terms of thoroughly explicating the passages she includes from the text.

The chief pitfall in these diverse interpretive strategies is, as Bényei helpfully cautions, their propensity to make *Waterland* "seem like a text with a clear theoretical and political agenda" and "to rely for their insights on certain of [the narrator's] theoretical statements taken out of a context in which such theoretical statements are

embedded ironically" (40). Any critical piece that concentrates primarily on the characteristics of its operative theory rather than on the nuances of the text in question runs the risk of radically distorting that text in the interest of proving a point. For example, an alarming illustration of improperly contextualized passages occurs in James Acheson's 2005 article "*Historia* and Guilt: Graham Swift's *Waterland*," in which the author interprets several of Crick the narrator's statements about religion in a straightforward manner to support his argument that "Religion, Crick believes, has the same status as a fairy tale: It may comfort us in times of distress, but the comfort it offers is for children, the naïve, and the uneducated" (95). Taken out of context, as Acheson presents it, Crick's assertion that "God's for simple, backward people in God-forsaken places" would certainly seem to support this conclusion, but Acheson ignores the heavily ironic, yearning, and self-incriminating tone in which the traumatized narrator utters these sentiments. In a similar fashion, Acheson treats terms that are highly problematized within the novel, such as "fairy-tale," "make-believe," and "fiction," as categorical and self-evident, summarily dismissing the crucial ambiguity and fluidity of their function in the narrative. Katrina Powell, in her 2003 feminist essay "Mary Metcalf's Attempt at Reclamation: Maternal Representations in Graham Swift's *Waterland*," likewise distorts the impulse of the novel by isolating textual elements that support her incrimination of the author and narrator as anti-feminist in their attitude towards women's bodies, rather than allowing the trajectory and tone of the novel to afford deeper insights. Sketchy and contradictory close readings by critics like these bespeak the profound need for more holistic and, especially, attentive evaluations of this novelistic triumph.

When it comes to *Waterland*, these dominant modes of reading, though interesting and generative of contradiction and controversy, can scarcely be said to exhaust the critical possibilities of so original and extravagant a text, a text that continually reinvests its allusions with increasingly profound signifying resonance. While relatively recent publications like Lea's book-length *Graham Swift* (2005) and Bényei's essay "The Novels of Graham Swift: Family Photos" (2003) demonstrate awareness of these critical impasses and gesture towards alternate horizons of evaluation and understanding, they are only the beginning of what, as with the classics of old, must be a long and fruitful courtship between imaginative critics and one of the most nuanced and insightful novels produced in the twentieth century.

The following chapter will engage *Waterland* in isolation from Swift's other novels and collection of short stories; not because these texts do not mutually illuminate one another, but because *Waterland* deserves a treatment of the kind of depth that warrants an extended, concentrated study. That chapter seeks specifically to counter several of the blatant misreadings of the narrator's posture and intent within the novel, and to adequately evaluate that posture and intent as they emerge within the full context of the wealth of literary devices Swift employs, including irony, mythical imagery, and scriptural allusion. The mythical images and allusions that are touched upon by other critics comprise here the central study; close reading, biblical hermeneutics, and specific strains of French feminism will interact to allow for a reengagement of *Waterland* beyond the exhausted circular terms of deconstructive relativism. In *Towards a Christian Literary Theory*, Luke Ferretter defends the legitimacy of interpreting literary texts "from within the Christian as well as the literary community" (139), an approach which, in the

case of *Waterland*, provides an appropriately fruitful counterpart to the barren deconstructive bent of criticism thus far. Addressing *Waterland* from an orthodox Christian perspective furthermore allows for the biblical allusions and mythical imagery to interpenetrate one another with a vitality precluded by the ethical approach to mourning.

CHAPTER TWO

“The Waters Return”: Myth and Mystery in Graham Swift’s *Waterland*

“[God] has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” ~ Ecclesiastes 3.11b.

Since its publication in 1983, Graham Swift’s third novel *Waterland* has incited vigorous scholarly debates over its treatment of the relationship between history and fiction, but critics have given little attention to its pervasive incorporation of biblical allusions. James Acheson briefly addresses this recurrent feature by remarking of *Waterland*’s narrator, “It may seem strange that Crick, who regards religion as a form of make-believe, includes so many biblical allusions in his narrative” (96). Acheson, however, neglects to adequately account for this phenomenon, instead attempting to diminish the spiritual import of several scriptural references in order to underscore his conclusions about Crick as a hardline if tolerant atheist. Offering a more fertile consideration of the subject, Pamela Cooper suggests that “The numerous references in *Waterland* to both the Old and New Testaments give the novel an operative Biblical typology as well as a subtext of religious anxiety and longing,” and proposes that “these allusions and the thematic charge they carry are worthy of an extended study [. . .]” (393). This chapter will explore some of the thematic implications of Swift’s reversion to mythology generally and Biblical myth specifically, as an apparent effort to challenge the simultaneous hubris and reductionism of the modern attitude towards knowledge and human existence. Where Western culture’s mode of scientific positivism seeks to conquer the contingencies of human nature by denying the mysterious origins of

suffering and love, Swift provides, in *Waterland*, a painfully stirring tonic of openness towards the full import of our perpetual yearning after perfect knowledge and intimacy. In its invocation of various strains of Biblical narrative, *Waterland* calls for a return to a recognition of myth as the only means of naming dimensions of human existence for which scientific and factual explanations fail to adequately account.

Far from being dismissive of existential mystery—of either religion, superstition, or fairy tale—Crick’s story-telling relies heavily on a strong undercurrent of inexplicable chthonic forces to illuminate the essential and terrible inscrutability of the real. In light of the novel’s immersion in the Western mythological heritage, Crick’s pointed echo of the beatitudes in an admonition to his pupils—“Children who will inherit the world”—belies Acheson’s explanation that “His point is not that being meek is a virtue but that each generation inherits the world of the preceding generation” (96). On the contrary, Crick’s biblically resonant address, which repeats the word “children” no less than five times in one paragraph, calls for a return to precisely the virtue Christ commended in the Sermon on the Mount, saying, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5.5):

Children. Children, who will inherit the world. Children (for always, even though you were fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, candidates for that appeasing term “young adults,” I addressed you, silently, as “children”)—children, before whom I have stood for thirty-two years in order to unravel the mysteries of the past, but before whom I am to stand no longer, listen, one last time, to your history teacher. (5)

Crick’s preoccupation here and elsewhere with the presence and disposition of children, his explicit allusion to the Sermon on the Mount, and—following his shattering personal crisis—his return to a childlike vulnerability, suggest a spiritual posture not unlike that

which Christ associated with children in his claim that “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God *like a child* shall not enter it” (Mark 10.15, my emphasis).

While Acheson argues that “Crick clings to the stark view, undistorted by fictional *historia*, that God is a comfort to those who lack the strength to face up to life by themselves,” this conclusion denies Crick’s own susceptibility, following his wife’s descent into madness, to the awful mystery of human existence, with its strains of ecstatic love, numbing grief, and debilitating guilt. Crick’s denial of his need—indeed the need of all people—for a consolation deeper than that offered by physical, factual, humanistic explanations comes, not as a straight denial but as an ironic, poignant lament in the face of his wife Mary’s insistence that God instructed her to kidnap an infant:

But God doesn’t talk anymore. 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, our 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.* (268, my emphasis)

The simplicity of Crick’s language reinforces his connection between belief in God and a childlike disposition of credulity, trust, and dependence. But an examination of the passage in the context of the book as a whole imbues the simplicity with a kind of mockery—not of Mary, as Acheson would have it, but of Crick himself, of the presumption and ostensible stoicism which prevented him from recognizing, not only Mary’s profound vulnerability, but also his own.

Crick, after all, belongs himself to a “simple, backward people” in a “God-forsaken” place—the Fens, of which he muses, “it is strange—or perhaps not strange, not

strange at all, only logical—how the bare and empty Fens yield so readily to the imaginary—and the supernatural” (18). How logical too, then, that the Cricks, who for centuries “remain untouched by the wide world [. . .] No ambition [luring] them to cities” (18-9) should have “believed in fairy-tales” (188). Crick, though he has distanced himself geographically by moving to London and spiritually by adopting, in his early adult years, a “realistic” (127) perspective on life, has nevertheless found the mythical irrationality of the Fens seeping back into his life. For, when Crick’s ancestors, the Crick brothers, do see “the wide world,” they see “—but is this only some nightmare, some evil memory they have always had?—that the wide world is sinking, the waters are returning, the wide world is drowning in mud” (19). In London, “the wide world,” Crick himself is forced to encounter a personal nightmare and collective “evil memory” which all of the neat, civilized, scientific consolations of the twentieth century cannot keep at bay. What is more, Crick’s allusion to the obfuscation of the stars by the city lights of Greenwich (268) alters, even inverts, his preceding claims, by suggesting that modernity has not recovered reality at the expense of the fantastical, but rather by obscuring it something has been lost—something primal, something vital, something real.

In fact, the Greenwich observatory which Crick references, with its attendant contemplation of the stars, provides a crucial clue in the apprehension of his spiritual trajectory. The introduction to the observatory appears much earlier in the book, but in a similar context. Crick has just finished describing what for him was Mary’s distressing lapse into her childhood Catholicism and her renewed religious zeal, marked by the “*earnest and receptive gaze* that now and then, in luckier moments, will steal over his listening students” (128, my emphasis). With the resurrection of Mary’s long-buried

faith, and her deferment of their shared Sunday walks for “walks whose object, he strongly suspects, is to attend church,” Crick feels that his wife is “becoming a child again” and accordingly “wants to draw her back, to keep her safe” (128). He himself, however, is the one who feels bereft and abandoned, as he retains the routine they formerly shared together, walking every Sunday to the observatory in Greenwich Park. Since Crick situates this formal, systematic report on the observatory between descriptions of his rising alarm at his wife’s transformation, the observatory serves as a symbolic and literal site for confrontation with mystery:

On top of Greenwich Hill, in Greenwich Park, stands an Observatory, founded by Charles II to search the mysteries of the stars [. . .] From the top Greenwich Hill it is possible not only to scan the inscrutable heavens but to peel back past panoramas [. . .] to imagine these river approaches to London as the wild water-country they once were [. . .] And away, out of sight to the east, the former marshes where, in 1980, they are building a flood barrier. (128-9)

If Crick’s tone seems subtly snide (the “mysteries” of the stars are being demystified, the “inscrutable” heavens are being scrutinized), this narrative attitude is undercut in a number of ways. First, Crick is not in a position to be arrogant; he “stands alone and contemplates the view” (129), forced to bear the weight of his own bewildered isolation since his wife, to the best of his knowledge, is off somewhere at confession, her sudden withdrawal forcing him to reapproach as mysterious a woman and a marriage he thought to be knowable and secured. Secondly, Crick offers a tacit reminder of human frailty by noting the construction of the flood barrier, a recurring but ultimately vain effort, even in this age, to stave off the overwhelming primordial forces of nature.

Despite his and his wife’s relocation from the wild Fens to the civilized streets of London, despite his assimilation of the poise of a factual, scientific grasp of reality, Crick

finds the wild water-country symbolically creeping back, inexorably, into his life, as his wife first reverts to Catholicism and finally succumbs to madness: “If the truth be known, he is frightened. If the truth be known, he doesn’t know what to think. He is telling himself stories” (130). This fear, and the stories rehearsed to deflect it—of “(How a girl and a boy once. . . How . . .)” —restore a childlike humility and wonder before the stars. What they were to the child Crick— “silver dust of God’s blessing” (1)— figures as a mythological precursor to what they are now to the grown, but badly shaken man Crick— timeless manifestations of the monumental *otherness* perpetually threatening human existence.

The observatory’s “locked up collections of antique chronometers, astrolabes, sextants, telescopes—instruments for measuring the universe” (147) will never plumb the horror, the guilt, the confusion, the mystery he encounters when Mary, on a bench inside that very park, articulates her vision. He will want to believe in the timely, manageable explanation of things; he will try to “adopt the position of a certain practical-minded headmaster and teacher of physics”; but he will be forced to believe, “the last thing he wants to”—that “he’s in fairy-land” (148), that “this world which we like to believe is sane and real is, in truth, absurd and fantastic” (233). And with the returning floodwaters of terror comes the return of “the old, old story” (168) of legend, myth, superstition, religion.

A factual account of many of the disturbing events leading up to Mary’s breakdown is readily available; Acheson sums up the rationale for Mary’s descent into madness, saying, “Although he does not reveal what the psychiatrists say about his wife, Crick clearly believes [. . .] that her Catholic upbringing and sense of guilt over having

had an abortion gave rise to the abduction” (96). But where Acheson misses Crick’s—and, I might add, Swift’s—point is in deducing that “For Crick, this is the *plain truth of the matter*, bereft of any fairy-tale or religious cushioning” (96, my emphasis). On the contrary, if *Waterland* is about anything at all, it is not about “plain truth” in any form; it is rather about truth sequestered, fragmented, hidden, secret, and, at times, simply too potent, too “Here and Now” (60) to be borne. Hence it *must* become a story, a kind of fairy tale, for direct language divorced from a larger situating reality gestures only at surface dimensions, neglecting the mythical proportions of human love and suffering.

If a direct account were all that were needed, Crick, for those who, like the officers at the scene of the abduction, “want to know what really—[happened],” grimly offers it: “Very well [. . .] I confess my responsibility, jointly with my wife, for the death of three people,” but is forced to immediately qualify several bewildering, extenuating circumstances: “(that is—it’s not so simple—one of them was never born, and one of them—who knows if it was really a death . . .)” (314). In spite of Mary’s reasonably traceable psychological trajectory, in spite of any sound scientific explanations the psychiatrists might give, the “times cannot be numbered” when Crick, like his ancestor Thomas Atkinson, who culpably but inadvertently sends his wife Sarah into madness, “will ask, Why? Why? And again Why? (For heartache, too, inspires its own sad curiosity)” (79). And, like Sarah, Crick’s ancestor—Mary—or so the book’s trajectory implies—will remain, irreclaimable, in the realms of insanity.

For Crick, then, and for *Waterland*, psychiatry is not the triumphantly enlightened means of parsing out the components of Mary’s disordered and mysterious suffering. She will remain, like Sarah, watching, cloistered, from a high window, locked away in

the mystery of a mute suffering too great to fully articulate; only myth can begin to sound the enormity either of the suffering or the guilt:

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 [the] benefit of psychiatry. (330)

While Crick obviously does not subscribe to the notion of Mary either as saint or witch, his ambivalent stance towards the sciences of the psyche suggest that he mistrusts their ability, not to handle the situation, not to care for Mary, but to *account* for the situation, to—in a word—save Mary. She is now in adulthood what Crick's older brother Dick, retarded, was at birth—"irreclaimable" (37). The traditional ways of accounting for madness, like the old ways of accounting for the stars, if scientifically irrelevant, nevertheless better reflect the gravity of human experience.

Since the depths of love, terror, guilt, and loss cannot be sounded or accounted for directly, Crick resorts to the language of fairy-tale, myth, and indeed scripture, as the only means of expressing the ineffable tragic trajectory of personal and collective human history. As Margret Champion explains, "The limits of clinical maps of the human mind are repeatedly drawn in Tom Crick's family history where major individuals are marked by a primordial symptomology" (41). Among these, Champion cites "his forbears, both the native, reclusive Cricks and the enterprising Atkinsons" (41) as figures borne out of and beset by the fluctuations of original, chthonic forces.

Crick distinguishes the two branches of his ancestry in pointed metaphorical terms: his mother's family, the Atkinsons, are a people of the land, represented by ideas, abstraction, ambition, facts, material progress, and its attendant enthusiasm. The Cricks,

on the other hand, are “water people” (10): people of fluidity, deliberation, melancholy, superstition, faith, and stories—always stories. When the Atkinsons arrive on the bleak scene of the Fens, determined to drain its land and enliven its morose people with the jollity of good beer, Crick reports that his father’s family “ceased to be water people and became land people; they ceased to fish and fowl and became plumbers of the land. They joined in the destiny of the Fens, which was to strive not for but against water” (13). On second thought, Crick continues:

Or perhaps they did not cease to be water people. Perhaps they became amphibians. Because if you drain land you are intimately concerned with water; you have to know its ways. Perhaps at heart they always knew, in spite of their land-preserving efforts, that they belonged to the old, prehistoric flood. (13)

The oldness and pre-historicity of the Cricks, connected with the scriptural flood, as juxtaposed with the newness and ambition of the history-making Atkinsons, models Crick’s conviction that ultimately the primeval, the aboriginal, and the extra-rational dimensions of human existence, in their war with the rationality and artifice of civilization, will always resurge and prevail, necessitating the language of myth to account for disruptions in the surface of being.

It is the Cricks, then, amphibious and story-telling, who, though they are perpetually hacking up the phlegmatic discharge of their watery-based constitutions, are better equipped than the Atkinsons for survival in a world for which the Fens are but a symbolic microcosm, a world where, regardless of the efforts and ingenuity of man, “the waters rise: the waters return” (103). Crick’s father typifies the amphibious nature of the Cricks, as he at once serves as lock-keeper to the sluice and spends his free time netting eels; and Tom Crick, significantly throughout the novel, privileges the posture of the

phlegmatic, amphibious Cricks over the land-squeezing Atkinsons, whose approach to reality is overly abstracted and optimistic and, consequently, in the face of the waters' inevitable return, doomed. The Atkinsons' flimsy veneer of optimism and positivism is associated thematically with their vocation of beer-brewing; in Crick's humorous, if succinct evaluation: "And that is another difference between the Cricks and the Atkinsons. That whereas the Cricks emerged from water, the Atkinsons emerged from beer" (64). As a human concoction and an instigation of unsubstantiated "good cheer" (66), the Atkinsons' beer—and, conversely, their approach to reality, "the Atkinson belief in progress" (94)—is destined to dissolution before the inexorable, melancholy tides of Crickian water and phlegm. As Crick reports modestly of his father's family, "Too much enthusiasm never went with their phlegmatic natures [. . .] they know that what water makes, it also unmakes" (73).

Crick's recounting of the rise and fall of the Atkinson brewery empire thus concerns how their aggrandizement is disrupted by strange, elemental phenomena—irrational violence triggering a bizarre case of madness, and excessive grief channeling into incestuous passion, both instances of which give rise to the building of an asylum, as a kind of oblique effort to cloister the preternatural woundedness of existence. In the latter case, an aging and gout-ridden Thomas Atkinson, in a fit of groundless jealousy over Sarah, his beautiful but devoted young wife, "whilst giving vent to the most unwarranted accusations and abuse, arose from his chair and struck [her] hard on the face" (77). Crick remarks that "Doubtless, even if this action had not had the terrible consequences it did, it would have been regretted infinitely"; but, unfortunately for Thomas and Sarah, the repercussions prove disproportionately horrific: "Sarah not only

fell but in falling knocked her head against the corner of a walnut writing-table with such violence that, though, after several hours, she regained consciousness, she never again recovered her wits” (77). Despite an anguished Thomas Atkinson’s elaborate expenditures for medical intervention and, when that fails, his frenzied investigations into the workings of the human mind, Sarah Atkinson remains locked and remote, rigidly watching the activities of the Atkinson’s bustling world from her second-story window—and, as the local rumors would have it, predicting and manipulating the future. Crick, in his recitation of the events, cultivates these rumors and their implications, even as he playfully scoffs at them: “Sarah’s work perhaps,” he suggests as the cause of various cataclysmic happenings, “But let us keep to the facts” (87). He does not, of course, keep to the facts, but doggedly returns to these rumors throughout his narration of the Atkinson history.

The rumors, in fact, serve as a playful springboard for Crick’s serious contemplation of the origins of guilt and madness, particularly his guilt and Mary’s madness. On the import of Sarah’s rain-soaked funeral, Crick lightly remarks, “Rain is good for a funeral: it masks human tears and suggests heavenly ones [. . .] those who hold that rain is a good sign [. . .] far outnumber those who hold it is bad” (97-8). But Crick proceeds to deepen the story’s fantastical appeal by implicitly invoking the Old Testament flood: “But the rain doesn’t stop. It doesn’t stop for two days and two nights. For two days watery palls unfurl themselves over the Fens; for two nights God’s arrested stars are *blotted out*” (98, my emphasis). Crick’s diction, syntax and imagery echo the Genesis account of the great flood: “And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty

nights [. . .] [God] *blotted out* every living thing that was on the face of the ground [. . .] They were *blotted out* from the earth” (Genesis 7.12, 23a, my emphasis).

By alluding to “God’s arrested stars,” Crick references his father’s supposition that “the stars [. . .] hang in perpetual suspension because of our sins” (115), a notion which also correlates with the scriptural rationale for the flood, as provoked by God’s remorse for creating a humanity disposed towards wickedness: “And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth [. . .] So the Lord said, ‘I will *blot out* man whom I have created from the face of the land’” (Genesis 6.6a, 7a, my emphasis). Crick extends the parallel still further, droning, “The waters rise. They creep up the slopes of Water Street” (99), with the “slopes” of the street recalling the slopes of Mt. Ararat submerged by the Biblical flood. In a kind of mesmerizing chant, Crick repeats, across his poetic account, the refrain, “The waters rise,” no less than four times, imitating a scriptural convention and inducing a similar sense of impending, inevitable doom. Thus, even though Crick avers that “thoughts of divine weeping and so forth are soon put to one side as the flood takes hold” (98), such thoughts are not put aside from the text, but continue to infuse and direct it.

The flood, in turn, is conflated with Sarah Atkinson and her mysterious madness, as “Rumour is unleashed with the floodwaters” (102), and several accounts of ghostly visits by a strange woman are disseminated through the town:

[M]ore than one mystified if not frightened witness will later claim to have seen during these confused times a female shape [. . .] seeming to glide, some say, over the rising water; seen [. . .] at the door where Thomas Atkinson brought his young bride—seeming to implore entrance. Which was soon granted—*if not to her, then to the swollen waters of the Leem.* (102, my emphasis)

Even Crick ventures that “Rumour is but rumour [. . .] But *several* rumours, of similar vein, from different sources, *cannot be ignored*” (102, my emphasis). The preponderance of rumor, like the preponderance of water, must in some way be taken into account, eliciting Crick’s grave inquiry: “The waters rise: the waters return [. . .] Has she returned, too, not just from the dead but from the former life that was hers before a knock on the skull dislodged her brains for ever and jumbled up her past, present, and future?” (103). Crick’s question, though not, perhaps, to be taken literally, cannot be trivialized since, in his own life, the waters have risen, the waters have returned, and his own wife has been swept away into the realm of madness.

What is more, Crick situates the flooding in a perpetual present, tying it, first, to the unremitting task of land reclamation, and second, to the resurfacing of the bottle used as the weapon in a murder for which Crick is indirectly to blame: “Meanwhile, the rain continues. It transforms the lands [. . .] back into the old swamps they once were. Drainage. Begin again. The Cricks get to work. And down the swirling, swelling, slowly relenting Leem come willow branches, alder branches, fencing posts, bottles . . .” (105). The morass of the past is one with that of the present—guilt, suffering, madness—all hearken to some lingering, elemental wound flushed recurrently by the aboriginal tides of heedless, involuntary nature, as if the predisposition of all things human were to incur guilt, to suffer, to go mad.

Thus, with a tongue-and-cheek, self-referential tone, Crick apologizes for his perpetuation of the rumors surrounding the rise and fall of the Atkinson empire, imputing the more fantastical features of his narrative to “People who drew simple-minded comparisons and conclusions, people whose sense of history was crude, who believed

that the past is always tugging at the sleeve of the present, people of the sort who claimed they had seen Sarah Atkinson when Sarah Atkinson was dead—” (160). Crick himself, however, can hardly be said to have escaped the tugging of the past; the entire scope of *Waterland*'s narrative is, after all, the confession of a man whose life has been radically and irrevocably interrupted by the repercussions of a checkered and troubled past.

Though Crick ostensibly excuses himself for his association with people “of the sort” who perpetuate such improbable tales, his apology is a thinly-veiled, gentle mockery of himself; for he, like they, begins “to speak again of a curse upon the Atkinsons” (160) knowing this curse, as it were, will come to rest on his own head, in the form of monumental consequences to confused, half-understood, partly-inherited crimes. His appeals to the legacy of the Atkinsons—whether of beer, facts, abstractions, progress, or “solid ground” (86)—are thus delivered with a duplicitous irony, well illustrated in the following passage:

Children, you are right. There are times when we have to disentangle history from fairy-tale. There are times [. . .] when good dry textbook history takes a plunge into the swamps of myth and has to be retrieved with empirical fishing lines. History, being an accredited sub-science, only wants to know the facts. History, if it is to keep on constructing its road into the future, must do so on solid ground. At all costs let us avoid mystery-making and speculation, secrets and idle gossip. And, for God's sake, nothing supernatural. And above all, let us not tell *stories*. Otherwise, how will the future be possible and how will anything *get done*? So let us get back to that clear and purified air [. . .] Let us get back to solid ground . . . (86, emphasis in original)

Crick, of course, is well aware that children, “above all,” *want* stories, *want* mystery-making, speculation, secrets, idle gossip, the supernatural; that children, above all, abhor abstraction and “good dry textbook history.” What's more, since Crick has taken care to launch that history into “the swamps of myth” as regularly as he gleefully fishes it out

with empirical lines, his sympathies clearly lie with the natural disposition of the children. Adopting their open-minded, imaginative curiosity, Crick probes beyond the “solid ground” of “dry textbook history” in search of the spell-binding manifestations of the real. And for Crick, this super- or sub-empirical exploration has taken on a visceral urgency.

When, three generations of Atkinsons later, Tom Crick’s young future mother creates chaos within the local recruiting parade by her sheer unparalleled beauty, Crick readily obliges his pupils and himself by resurrecting that tenacious legacy of Sarah Atkinson: “And just a few, amongst the older sectors of the community (notwithstanding that we’re already fifteen years into the twentieth century of hard facts and hard technology,) had yet another version: It’s *her*. It’s her work” (219, emphasis in original). What is more, notwithstanding twentieth century “hard facts” and “hard technology,” Tom Crick’s grandfather, Ernest Atkinson, falls prey to a much more disturbing manifestation of the curse, of sexual love gone unspeakably awry, of the primal forces that invigorate human life inverted “like a stream wanting to flow backwards” (228).

Oddly, it is at the pinnacle of reason and progress, the ideological height of the Atkinson legacy, that the extra-rational effects its most devastating disruption: “What is happening to my grandfather?” Crick queries, “Can it be that he too has succumbed to that old Atkinson malaise and caught Ideas? And not just any idea, but Beauty—most Platonic of the lot. The Idea of Ideas” (219). But underneath the ecstatic rationale Ernest Atkinson supplies in his journal lies a pernicious and far less abstracted reality, for “this is no idea. It’s a living being. It’s his flesh-and-blood daughter. And there’s nothing Platonic about it” (220). Embittered with life, aggrieved over the loss of his wife, and

holed up with his burgeoning daughter, Ernest Atkinson, like the “deadly Coronation Ale” (220) he concocts, ferments, and bottles up as his legacy an ale potent as fire, an ale which yields drunkenness, not jollity, and an ale that will ultimately enable the murder of Freddie Parr by Tom Crick’s half-brother Dick. But Ernest Atkinson, in his state of anguished and impassioned madness, passes down the ancestral curse in a much more insidious form, by impregnating his daughter in the hopes of siring a “Saviour of the World” (220).

Dick Crick, the progeny of this incestuous union, incarnates, not salvation for the world, but the triumph of primordial forces over the Atkinson ambition and hubris. In Champion’s words, Dick, that “cursed child,” is “the novel’s most powerful archaic image, one of those figures that operates like opaque metaphors in poetry, striking phrases that carry a different kind of meaning, *mysterious*, *irrational*, outside the common bounds of knowledge” (41, my emphasis). And Dick’s presence in the novel, infantile, ponderous, opaque, operates as a “disintegrating force” (Champion 41), linking him with the inexorable waters of the Fens and all of its secretive, primordial processes.

Crick’s descriptions of Dick’s physicality situate him figuratively as an eel-like creature of the mud, incarnating the admixture of land and water with his “muddy complexion,” “limp” mouth (26), “fish-eyes” (33) and inexpungeable silt-scent. A creature more completely of the water than any amphibious Crick (he is only Crick by adoption), Dick is poised on the brink of gliding back into the aboriginal obscurity of the deep ocean—which he will at the novel’s close, “Obeying instinct. Returning. The Ouse flows to the sea . . .” (357). As such, Dick bears the curse and embodies the downfall of the Atkinson legacy; his father (and grandfather) Ernest Atkinson, heir of the Atkinson

belief in progress, optimism, and the primacy of ideas, succumbs to the most aberrant, irrational impulses of all and, consequently, sires a son of his quintessential enemy, water; thus Dick, like the instinctual, inscrutable eels, returns to his origins, the waters from which he came.

But where Dick Crick goes, Tom Crick cannot follow; the origins of this curse, of the guilt, madness, suffering and loss it leaves in its wake, are hidden from his—and our—view. That he sired an illegitimate child once with Mary; that he allowed her to undergo a brutal abortion; that he indirectly (through the first action) prompted the lie which led to Freddie Parr’s murder; and indirectly (through the second action) contributed to Mary’s psychological disintegration—of all this Tom Crick is all too aware. Of this and more. Through Crick’s painful and poignant recounting of his personal and collective history, Swift embroils us in the problem of what it means to be inexplicably cursed, to be ordinary, human, and fallen—to have half-understood passions and actions unleash multi-generational reverberations of agony and horror. That sublime sexual experimentation, that the curious, innocently pleasurable interaction of “holes and things” (42), can produce the disproportionately terrifying repercussions of “an unwanted pregnancy, an abortion, and a murder” (Acheson 98), not to say of emotional and physical sterility, a nervous breakdown, and a suicide, is a plea for reexamining the mysterious origins of guilt itself, so prominent a catalyst in the trajectory of human history and the development of the human self. Like his forebear, the errant Thomas Atkinson, who, through an impulsive outburst, sentenced his wife to fifty-six years of mental entropy and himself to untold agonies of remorse, Tom Crick unleashes a fury of

afflictions neither intended nor foreseen, and accordingly turns backwards and outwards to the “old, old story” of myth to reapproach his disrupted and devastated reality.

Near the close of his analysis of *Waterland*, Acheson asserts that Crick “wants to place his guilt in a larger context—to suggest that, although his wife’s abortion and the part he plays in making her unhappy are of the utmost importance to the two of them, they pale into insignificance in the context of eternity”; later, Acheson again confirms this sentiment, saying, “In placing his guilt in a larger context, Crick is trying to minimize its importance” (99). I would suggest, on the contrary, that Crick’s narration serves precisely the opposite purpose. By situating his narrative pastiche amidst scriptural and mythological allusions, Crick insists that both the experience and implications of his guilt are larger and more momentous than any human science can circumscribe.

For Crick, something looking suspiciously like good and evil is lurking beneath the empirical cause-and-effect sequences of historical and personal narrative. Rather than abstracting and minimizing his and his wife’s tragedy, Crick obliquely rescues history itself from its supposed abstraction, anonymity, and remoteness, returning it to its uneasy equipoise between the empirical and the mysterious. This is not to suggest that the generalized pervasiveness of guilt as the human condition somehow emancipates Crick from the particularities of his own crimes. On the contrary, it is the very sordid particularity of Crick’s crimes that awaken the reader to guilt as the human condition—that we cannot simply hold trysts, and make babies, and have babies, and give vent to our passions moment by moment like the beasts without—without *this*. Without language, without history. Without guilt. The waters rise; the waters return.

Unconscious nature runs constantly in blind, instinctual cycles of reproduction and destruction but only “the story-telling animal” (60) incurs the consequences of these cycles in spiritual agony; the universe is full of causes and effects, but only the languaged human race is riddled with guilt, a guilt wedded to the very fabric of its capacity for language. Crick’s initial response to the discovery that his friend Freddie Parr’s murder, occasioned by Mary’s passing Freddie off as the father of her baby, has been written off as an accident is to seek a false freedom through a fraudulent language: “Because that neat phrase [‘Accidental Death’]—it was official—meant that no one was guilty. If death was accidental then it couldn’t have been murder, could it, and if it couldn’t have been murder than my brother couldn’t have been—And if my brother wasn’t, then Mary and I weren’t—” (131). What the boy Crick fails to consider is that language not only accounts for the difference between things—accidental death and murder, for example—but it also creates that difference. What he knows as murder cannot be altered through official absolution.

Mary intuitively recognizes this distinction when the shaken but hopeful Crick meets her by the windmill with the intention of continuing their secret sexual tryst: “It’s all right,” Crick exclaims, alarmed at Mary’s desolation, “Haven’t you heard? Accidental death. So it’s all right. All right. Nothing’s changed” (131). But what Crick attempts to cover with language, Mary reveals as a reality language has irrevocably created: “It’s not all right. Because it wasn’t an accident. Everything’s changed” (131). The youthful Crick, having “[taken] in these words [. . .] looked around at the innocent fields and dykes and saw in them *treacherous* conspirators” (132). Mary’s words of condemnation match a language of moral import already present in Crick’s mind; he thus looks out at

the fields and dykes—which are really neutral—and reads his own linguistic/moral trajectory from innocence to treachery.

Because human intercourse, unlike that of the eel, involves more than “holes and things,” because it involves language—itsself always part empirical data, part essential mystery—the possibility of a perversion of being arises—desire becomes lust, signs become lies, killing becomes murder, and “the Here and Now” becomes a nightmare. That “neat and neutral phrase ‘Accidental Death’” (131) emerges as inescapably and horribly complicit. The blind-eyed, phallic eel thrust into Mary’s knickers struggles out again free, untainted; but human interaction with reality finds itself tangled in layer upon layer of culpability and pain; as the peasant abortionist Martha remarks dryly, “‘Tent goin’ to be so much fun gittin’ it out as it were puttin’ it in” (303). To insert one’s self literally and figuratively into a languaged world is to enter human history, and to enter human history is to participate in a system fraught with culpability and moral danger.

What the motto of the Atkinson brewery, “*Ex Aqua Fermentum*,” for nature means merely “Out of Water, Activity,” for the hapless human turns out to mean “Out of Water, Perturbation” (86). The same material processes—copulation, killing—which, in the animal realm, are simply blind and mute instinctual activities, are, in the human realm, complicit, duplicitous, hung upon a thousand strands of linguistic and moral implications. Guilt is the price we pay for our entrance into the tainted world of language—the capacity to think, imagine, remember, anticipate, believe, hope, and love. To his terror, Crick finds that “only animals live entirely in the Here and Now [. . .] Only nature knows neither memory nor history” (62). The innocent, instinctual “Here and Now” of experimenting with “holes and things” belongs to nature, to the eels, alone, that

“obscure and anonymous eel existence” (254); human beings cannot sustain it, for all they, and most avowedly the young Crick, wish to.

Thus *Waterland*, with its invocation of the Biblical concept of the curse of sin hanging over humankind since the Fall, asks less for an exact summation of Tom Crick’s personal answerability and more for a resurrection of the age-old question, *Why must we suffer all this just because Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit?* This question may be rightly asked, not as a denial of personal guilt, but as a lamentation of the tragedy of human history. Crick, like Oedipus of old, is both comprehensively guilty and consummately victimized. Did Oedipus murder his father and marry his mother against the warning proffered him by the gods? Yes. Did he fully understand what he was doing as he did it, or comprehend the reasons behind it afterwards? Indeed not. It is the mystery of culpability in a world of language that constitutes the horror of both Crick’s and Oedipus’ tales. To be human is at once to know and not to know, to suffer repercussions without comprehending reasons, to embroil oneself and one’s loved ones in forces of good and evil far beyond finite understanding. And to ask “why” when the punishment does not fit the crime.

If Crick, in his moral blunderings, like his father’s clumsy mutilation of Freddie Parr’s face in the attempt to draw him out of the sluice, adds a bruise to the body of history, he can only add “a bruise upon a bruise” (26). The first bruise is already there—a torment of mystery, a taint of guilt from the first initiation into language, into life. The body will come sliding into the sluice and Crick will add his bruise, in error, in weakness, in confusion, in sin. The crime hanging over all of human existence will ensnare yet another unwitting Oedipus, and bruise will obscure bruise upon bruise, until, as for Crick,

“that incessant question Whywhywhy [becomes] like a siren wailing in our heads and a further question begins to loom: when—where—how do we stop asking why? How far back? When are we satisfied that we possess an Explanation (knowing it is not a complete explanation)?” (107-8).

The background fable of the Fall, of Eve’s ingestion of the forbidden fruit, serves, along with Crick’s provocative inclusions of various mythical narratives, less as an attempt at explanation in *Waterland* than an attempt to adequately articulate the dilemma. It is not enough for Crick to recognize that fornication, abortion, murder, and neglect are all morally reprehensible actions. Somehow, from the very beginning, the brief Paradise of sexual exploration was predisposed to turn sour—but the source of corruption, of fermentation, of perturbation, eludes him. He is guilty indeed, but he bears even more guilt than his actions and intentions can account for; the body of history is passed down to him already strangely, ambiguously bruised, and his bruise, though it imbricates him in a morass of culpability, is not the fatal bruise.

Given our predisposition towards failure and incrimination—as if we were born already guilty and only graced with a few years of illusory innocence—what kind of hope for eventual wholeness is possible? Crick, struggling with the terror of failure as inevitable and suffering as futile, offers, in real perplexity, an account of his contradictory vocation as history teacher, that of warning the youth of their doomed role in a cycle of destruction: “It doesn’t work out; it’s human to err (so what do we need, a God to watch over us and forgive our sins?)” (235). What Crick pronounces in the enveloped, even elided parenthetical context suggests the subliminal role of myth in the formulation of modern empirical consciousness. Having denied the substantive nature of myth, save as

a kind of opiate, the would-be strictly empirical mind cannot readmit its explanations to the domain of the real, which can only be established through the hard sciences. Myth thus operates within the parenthesis or along the periphery of the seeking mind—an ancient ghost no longer recognizable, a possibility whose true import can neither be considered nor assessed, since God has been dead and we without sin for too long. Our needs are accordingly diminished to match the diminished proportion of our misbehavior (sin) and rehabilitation (salvation).

But Crick's rhetorical question about God, with its painfully inaccessible resolution, seems to leak out of its limiting parenthesis, instead focalizing the entire passage of his anguished inquiry into the purpose of educating children, "since everyone knows that what you learn from history is that nobody—[learns from history]" (235-6). Crick's parenthetical appeal to faith lends, through its very erasure, the pathos to his predicament that soothing, sentimental aphorisms like "It doesn't work out; it's human to err," cannot even begin to intimate. Salvation is simultaneously bracketed and highlighted, as the history-teacher's euphemistic names for the perverse propensities of history, including his own tangled history—"bungles, botches, blunders and fiascos" (235)—together scream sin.

Crick's overwhelming sense of complete culpability and futility looms in the background of this meditation, and along with it the potential for the sudden, irreversible closure assumed by his grandfather Ernest Atkinson, who, after incestuously siring the son he determined to be the "Saviour of the World" (220), "sat down with his back against a tree, put the muzzle of a loaded shot-gun into his mouth, and pulled the trigger" (235). The urgency for a supernatural salvation—Ernest, Mary, Dick—seems to coincide

with madness and suicide. With the bleak culmination of the Atkinson dynasty occurring in the preceding passage, Crick cannot help but flirt with a similar alternative for ending his own misconceived life. Painfully aware of recent history's thwarted experiments with redemption, Crick struggles against history's implications for his own need to violently escape the mockery of this self-enclosed cycle of sin, repression, helplessness and madness.

He thus sees himself briefly as having nothing, less than nothing, to encourage and guide his surrogate children, the history students. He sees himself, not as source of wisdom for the young, but potentially as "An obstructive instructor, a treacherous tutor. Maybe he's a bad influence. Maybe he's not good to have around . . ." (236). All he has to offer them is the unfailing account of human failure, a relentless recitation of "what goes wrong" (235). If we are destined to recycle the mistakes of the past, then why keep on—? But this is not all Crick has been offering them. He has been providing them and himself with something else, something they all want very much—these "new lessons [he's] been giving"—"Stories [. . .] Fairy-tales." (237). And "see how they want the old, old story" (168).

Not only are the children captivated by this foray into personal and mythical narrative, Crick himself wants the old, old story. His bemused observation recalls the famous traditional hymn, "Tell Me the Old, Old Story," whose lyrics prove strikingly suited to *Waterland's* lament of the human condition and preoccupation with story-telling and salvation: "Tell me," the lyrics tantalize, "the old, old story of unseen things above, / Of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love. / Tell me the story simply, as to a little child, / For I am weak and weary, and helpless and defiled." On the one hand, this hymn,

along with its well-known counterpart “I Love to Tell the Story,” echoes the longing that may be said to underlie the entire structure of *Waterland*, summed up in the curious and uniquely human exchange, “*Tell me [. . .]*” . . . “*Let me tell you*” (125, 142, my emphasis).

The luxuriating delight that emanates from the hymn’s simple lines suggests the extravagance, the insistent gratuitousness of the act of storytelling itself; it is winding, convoluted, layered, repetitious, unhurried, uninhibited, and fundamentally communal and ancient: “*Tell me the story slowly [. . .] Tell me the story always [. . .] Tell me the old, old story, / Tell me the old, old story.*” We might go so far as to say that story itself is intrinsically mythic, beyond the scope of the empirical world that proffers only data, which are in themselves mere opaque sequences and processes. As Walker Percy contends, “science as we know it cannot utter a single word about what it is to be born a human individual, to live, and to die [. . .]” (288). Hence our urgent and inevitable recourse to story, which is wedded to language, wedded to meaning, wedded to myth, wedded to origins, of which science can speak nothing. Hence our return, in times of trouble, to the old, old story, to see if it can ease “that incessant question” of “*Whywhywhy*” (107).

Not only do the novel and the hymn share the passion of storytelling, but also the longing for a realization of the heart of the hymn—“That wonderful redemption, God’s remedy for sin”—is the driving force of Crick’s collective reflections. For Crick, this force is no sentimental, nostalgic yen, a mere titillation by an antiquated meta-narrative; it is rather a deeply painful capitulation to a privation long thought eliminated by a strictly realistic approach to life. Singular among myths in its report of redemptive incarnation, the birth of Christ signifies the perfect salvific interruption of history’s

deadly cycle, in that it occurs simultaneously from within that cycle, as human reproduction, and outside it, as a divine breach. This then, is precisely the event Crick will invoke at the long-awaited climax of his tangled narrative: his encounter with middle-aged Mary and her newly-stolen baby boy.

By explicitly invoking the story of Christ's nativity, Crick deepens the shock, not only of how wrong things are, but also of how right they could be and how right he suddenly wishes they were. The irony of his account is too painfully exquisite, too uncannily perfect, to be described merely as a burnt-out bitterness. It is more than simple, cruel parody; it is anguished inversion of what ought to be:

And there she is, sitting on the sofa, at half-past four on a Friday afternoon, waiting for me to arrive, with a child in her arms [. . .] 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. (265).

The weariness of barren womanhood dissolving into the ecstasy of a new mother constitutes something ostensibly greater than a return to the pre-lapsarian Eden of the ruined windmill trysts—not only is such a return not possible, but also it is no longer desirable. The symbolic grouping of the Madonna and child traditionally represents the transformation of the fateful transgression of Eden into the *felix culpa*, the good fortune of sinners.

As such, the Madonna and child represent a new condition altogether, the unprecedented, unparalleled fullness of redemption—not simply sexual exploration left unpunished, but erotic love conceiving its highest fulfillment. The Creator God of Eden's Eve, whose visitations and withdrawals left room for curiosity to wreak havoc, has

become the Madonna's Lover, the fruit of whose womb is not the forbidden apple of knowledge but the invitational Bread of Life. A straightforward parallel between the Virgin Mary and Mary Crick would thus find the "fidgety and roving-eyed" fifteen-year-old Mary at rest, with her curiosity not dissipated, but engaged to the pitch of perfect stillness. And the beauty of this conflation is overpowering to Crick, even as he struggles to find his proverbial empirical footing: "There's no denying it, she's serene, she's seraphic. Fifty-two years old. She's beautiful" (265). His rising grief and panic are infinitely compounded by the mythical proportions of this beautiful mystery of mother and child, the possibility now vividly awakened that the guilt and pain of sordid history might be subsumed by unspeakable love and delight.

As Crick encounters this astonishing scene, poised so tremulously between the sweetest dream and the bitterest nightmare, he reveals the extent to which the unbelievable has invaded the reasonable landscape of his piously empirical adult perceptions. Crick manifests, in the face of the unbearable, a certain unpretentious helplessness, an emerging humility, that at once intensifies the irony of the collision between glorious myth and appalling fact and redirects that critique onto his own consciousness. Even as he discloses the horrific disconnect between Mary and the baby as a Madonna and child and Mary and the baby as "a girl with a doll" (266), Crick underscores the inadequacy of his own habitual way of looking at the world:

Your history teacher stands in the doorway, presenting, before this bizarre *Nativity*, the posture of an awestruck *shepherd* (outside, in the night, his *flock* of pupils are dispersed, having learnt about the dawn of a new age) [. . .] He steps forward. Approaches the sofa. But he does not stoop before the blanket-wrapped bundle (a pink, puckered face, tiny groping hands), kneel down, place palms together and let his eyes fill with wondering reverence. His eyes fill with disbelief. The baby howls. But it's real. (266, my emphases)

While the juxtaposition of “eyes fill[ed] with wondering reverence” to “eyes fill[ed] with disbelief” at first glance suggests religious skepticism, what Crick is encountering as incredible is not the moment’s disconcerting resemblance to the Christian Nativity, but the actual, indisputable presence of a live baby in Mary’s arms. Hence the unexpected transition, “The baby howls. But it’s real.” Instead of reassuring Crick—“The baby howls. So it’s real”—recalling him to an appropriate reasonable response in the face of a concrete situation, the facts themselves exacerbate his growing panic through their participation in the larger phenomenon of an inscrutable reality.

He is psychologically unprepared to believe the real itself, as it encompasses both fact and signification. The facts mean too much for him to be able to immediately accept, much less understand them. In these few, acute impressions, Crick demonstrates the destabilizing force of the real on the structure of human consciousness in general and his own in particular. As Marion Montgomery contends, “Always reality reasserts itself, to the confusion of those holding false principles” (10). Feeling the ground of a manageable world shift treacherously under his feet, Crick cautions himself, “Now tread carefully, history teacher. Maybe this isn’t your province. Maybe this is where history dissolves, chronology goes backwards” (265). The empirical stability of factual cause and effect—a world that makes sense—has betrayed him.

Bound up in this passage is the paradox of reality experienced as both the abysmal inversion of mythic grandeur—beautiful symbols signifying the radical absence of the salvation they reach for—and reality experienced as simple, matter-of-fact material processes—Crick’s approach, the baby’s cries, for example. His terror stems precisely from reality’s sudden, surreal excess of its strictly material realm, its invasion in the form

of the “Here and Now” as an awesome and terrifying “Nothing” (297); he struggles to reorient his mind in the face of this essential but destructive “liquid form of Nothing” (13), the waters’ return. Crick reaches the devastating realization that Mary “hasn’t made do ([as] he thought) with nothing” (126), with the lowercase “nothing” that he and she have lived with for so long, an unblinking empiricism which obscures the depth of the abyss of signification. Mary’s ostensible relentless ascription to that steeled unbelief destined her for madness, as unqualified myth rushed back to reclaim the dry, barren selfhood concealed “behind all the stage-props of their marriage” (126) and life together. Crick’s own hitherto imbalanced consciousness is, likewise, apart from a return to the amphibiousness of his Crickian ancestors, marked for dissolution, for drunkenness (236) if not suicide. The intensity of the Here and Now destroys the provisional contentment of the empirical mindset, stripping away its peace with an insignificant world. Stunned by the force of the suprarational, Crick awakens, in turn, to the hidden terror of a myth-less mentality: “the old, old feeling, that everything might amount to nothing” (269)—the love, the guilt, the suffering—all accidental, futile, and absurd. A little, lowercase nothing—a worthless life. *Waterland* as a whole is a gesture counteracting this prospect of worthlessness by subsuming it in the myth-soaked act of storytelling.

If the impinging reality of the Here and Now is not simply its self-evident material sequences, a non-signifying “nothing,” it is equally not the solid *Something* of pat religious conclusions, of monolithic myth neatly piecing together the distressed and disparate actions of human beings in the world. In place of wondering reverence for the image of the Madonna and child he invokes, Crick rightly concludes his wife has succumbed to madness. But the implicative presence of the Christian myth, in its

insistence on the Something that could be, that ought to be, provides shape to the “inexplicable cruelties” and “inexplicable wonders” (115-6) of the real in a way that factual sequences have no tools to articulate, enabling Crick to express the horror of the Nothing that is that takes the place of the Something that ought to be. In the diminished world of the lowercase, empirical nothing, freed from the fictions of informing myths, how can we know that what is falls short of what ought to be? But Crick now knows his quiet, unassuming, reasonable and realistic adult life has fallen critically, even fatally short of how a human being ought to live in the world. A very momentous and weighty, awesome and terrible Nothing *is*.

Inscribed into Crick’s account of the crucial scene shared by him, Mary, a howling baby, and a bewildered golden retriever, is Crick’s emerging assent, by means of mythic associations, to the bankruptcy of his condition. He has failed to interrupt the tragic trajectory of history and finds himself unable to effect the salvation desperately needed to save himself, his students, Mary, the world. The “posture” he presents, of an “awestruck shepherd,” associates him with the terrified recipients of the angelic tidings of Christ’s birth, at the same time that the dispersion of “his flock of pupils” suggests a correlation with Christ himself, or the Good Shepherd, whose disciples scatter to spread the message of his salvation. Both links imply the extent of Crick’s own existential poverty; he has neither received nor can he offer any redemptive promises.

He thus senses a “self-contradiction” in his role as a history instructor who cannot supply any good news to the youths who seek signs of hope for the future in his account of historical revolutions: “While [a Savior would] say, Here’s how to do it, he says, And here’s what goes wrong. While [a Savior would] tell you, This is the way, this is the path,

he says, And here are a few bungles, botches, blunders and fiascos . . .” (235). Human history, for the history teacher Crick, represents an uninterrupted cycle of error, and the only significant news it heralds is the possibility that it will come to an end altogether in the unprecedented destruction of human life. This is the “dawn of a new age” that Price, the precocious rebel of Crick’s classroom, gravely announces: “The only important thing about history, I think, sir, is that it’s got to the point where it’s probably about to end” (7). Unable to refute this dire pronouncement, and in an attempt to shepherd his frightened flock and his own frightened soul, Crick closes the textbook and presents his class with the entirety of *Waterland*, with the only potentially viable alternative to the closed cycle of curricular history: “the most unbelievable yet haunting of fairy-tales, their own lives” (7). Under Crick’s shaping hand, the story of ordinary human life urgently takes on its true extraordinary significance.

The assent to mystery is the one redemptive gesture Crick can make in place of despair, but in the initial encounter with Mary as the impossible new mother, he reverts quickly to a desperate demand for immediate, no-nonsense explanation. Unable and unwilling to assume, for the moment, the posture of the humble enquirer, a panic-stricken Crick calls for the truth, plain and simple, saying ““Mary, you’d better explain”” (266). But her insistence that she got the baby “from God” (266) only prompts a frustrated, “That—That’s utter nonsense [. . .] You’ve got to tell me. You’ve taken that baby from somewhere—[. . .] You’ve got to explain,” and, finally, “Give it to me!” (266). In his anguished urgency to uncover the straightforward reasons for Mary’s shocking behavior, Crick is demanding something from Mary that drives her to violate the contingencies of the real generally and of her own nature in particular. All of the love and the suffering

and the fear that has fed into the moment of fragile, compromised bliss—the holding of a baby all her own—cannot be remotely addressed, even registered, by the simple empirical facts.

By exacting from Mary this kind of explanation, Crick eerily reenacts the sequences of violence hitherto committed against Mary’s body. The prior scene of transient, tenuous rapture quickly deteriorates into one of “elemental violence,” as Crick struggles desperately to reclaim the stolen child from Mary’s arms and to reclaim Mary from the realm of madness:

[A]n astonishing scene ensues, confounding all affinities with a mock Adoration. Worthy, rather, of the attention of the NSPCC. The husband makes a grab at the baby. The wife clutches it—now bawling frenziedly—to her breast. Thwarted, the husband starts to shake his wife. The rocking motion has the inadvertent effect of quietening the baby; but now the wife starts to scream. (266)

By shaking Mary’s middle-aged body, Tom Crick reenacts his older brother’s past frustration and violence against the young Mary’s body, a body which would not yield a baby in response to his devoted affection. Frightened that Mary may be rejecting him because he is somehow “defective,” Dick Crick struggles to produce the baby by the force of his feelings,

And, just for good measure, with his big, bewildered hands, he shakes her hard by the shoulders . . . And what can Mary say? That she can’t give him love (let alone a baby)? [. . .] So she says, Yes, all right, she’ll make him a baby. She’s scared by that shaking. He shakes her again. Yes, yes of course, she didn’t mean to. They’ll love each other, yes, and have a baby . . . (261)

Indeed, what can Mary say? She will give over what is demanded from her by force. Just as she capitulated to Dick out of fear in the past, seeing no other alternative, she will give her thwarted husband in the present the answer she knows he is seeking, the only

one he will accept: “All right, all right,” she relents, “I got [the baby] from Safeways. I got him from Safeways in Lewisham” (269). In the humility of his future reflection, Crick will quietly admonish himself, “But this is no way of getting explanations—shaking them out by force” (266); in the despondency of the moment, however, he fights to regain a sense of control over this cataclysmic occasion in his life.

Desperate to return the situation to a semblance of normalcy, Crick tries to physically wrench the pieces back into proper position; unfortunately, the bodies of this woman and this child, independent, unrelated at the level of strict materiality, are inextricably joined in the timeless realm of love and suffering. Because of their relation to a loss that has never been recompensed—the fetus ripped out of Mary’s womb and dumped by Crick into the river Ouse—they cannot be simply separated. As Crick elsewhere broods,

[I]t is an [. . .] illusion that what you throw (or push) into a river will be carried away, swallowed for ever, and never return. Because it will return. And that remark [. . .] that we cannot step twice into the same river, is not to be trusted. Because we are always stepping into the same river. (146)

The eternal present of the un-atoned-for violation of the abortion finds Crick “stepping into the same river,” once again participating in a violent transgression of Mary’s inmost being. And, once again, he is doing so with horror; he is blundering, groping, hating his bewildered role, now that of a “ruthless Herod” (267), in encroaching upon a reality beyond his ken.

He is made doubly culpable in violating the person he loves most in the very midst of his efforts to reclaim the realistic world of dammed rivers and dry land, just as he once wanted nothing more than for life to return to the ignorant bliss of making love in the ruined windmill. His blunderings, like his father’s mortifying gash on the corpse of

Freddie Parr, will only reenact the original crime and leave their telltale “bruises” (267) upon the baby’s fragile body: “The wife pulls. The husband pulls. Baby blankets unravel [. . .] As the husband pulls he cannot suppress the sensation that he is pulling away part of his wife. He is tearing the life out of her. And perhaps he is” (267). Mary relives, not merely in a figurative way, the agony, first, of having her unborn infant sucked from her bleeding womb, and second, of pressing her crushed spirit into a life of realism, of stoic self-denial. Her brief but fiercely determined attempt to reclaim by force the lost lives of baby and mother falters before Crick’s relentless pragmatism—but not without a last gasp of anguished fury at the cruel injustice of two aborted lives, that of her child’s and her own: “yielding the baby at last to his stronger grip, the wife collapses, slumps on to the sofa, buries her face in the seat cushion, sobs, turns her head, reaches out with one arm, wails: ‘He’s my baby! He’s my baby . . .’” (267). The trauma of separating Mary from the child is so profound, Crick finds himself awash in the floodwaters of the ruthless Here and Now, momentarily “driven to think: And supposing, and just supposing . . .” (267). He has suffered the disorienting influx of the real, prompting him to entertain the irrational idea that Mary, at age fifty-two, may have borne them a child. While Mary has not, in fact, undergone such a miraculous delivery, her heartbrokenness at relinquishing the baby from Safeways marks a cruel paradox: while our guilt and our deprivations return to us, accumulating even across generations, we cannot return to the past, not even one instant ago, to avert those senseless, needless disasters, those confused and half-understood crimes that reverberate irreversibly for untold years to come.

Through myth, Crick gestures toward the impenetrability of guilt, suffering, love, and loss, offering a tentative account for that for which no account can be given. And by

doing so, he does greater justice to the gravity of his and Mary's guilt and suffering than any "plain truth" approach could provide. Since the "plain truth of the matter" is not accessible to him, to shape his narrative as if it were would be to falsify experience, to obscure the cold, unpalatable mystery of the stars with the artificial aurora of civilization's lights, to exclude rumor upon rumor intimating the activity of larger, nameless forces in the universe. And, finally, it would be to turn a blind eye to the inevitability of the waters' return. Best, like the phlegmy Cricks before him, to allow for some seepage of superstition into the soul, lest the creature at home on land alone find itself hopelessly awash in a sea of bizarre upwelling and chthonic revenge—lest the creature spawned in beer find itself, like the ale following the infamous floods of 1874, mysteriously diluted, dissolving into a watery reality beyond the reach of human rationale.

Conversely, the attempt to eliminate all traces of mystical and mysterious dimensions to human existence is, like the total drainage of lowlands, a veritable "invitation to flooding" (12) by manifestations of an overpowering *otherness* of being. *Waterland* counsels against the hubristic and fatal approach of strict material rationality, the comprehensive reclamation of the dry land of facts and scientific positivism, since "reclaimed land shrinks—as anything must shrink that has the water squeezed out of it" (12). The waters of the Fens constitute a life-source as well as a terminal threat; to expulse them altogether is to upset the balance and invite destruction: "There is no exaggerating the dangers" (12) of trifling with the Fens—or of excluding the extra-material in approaching reality. Tying together history's various land-squeezing visionaries and entrepreneurs, Crick expostulates at length:

Children, there's something which revolutionaries and prophets of new worlds and even humble champions of Progress (think of those Atkinsons and their poor living fossil of Sarah) can't abide. Natural history, human nature. Those weird and wonderful commodities, those unsolved mysteries of mysteries. Because just supposing [. . .] this natural stuff is always getting the better of the artificial stuff. Just supposing [. . .] this unfathomable stuff we're made from, this stuff that we're always coming back to—our love of life, children, our love of life—is more anarchic, more seditious than any Tennis Court oath ever was. That's why these revolutions always have the whiff of the death-wish about them. That's why there's always a Terror waiting around the corner. (205-6)

Far from advocating a return to “solid ground,” to nothing but the facts, Crick satirizes a strictly empirical approach to reality as reductivist and ultimately generating the most insidious moral and psychological aberrations: “Reality made plain. Reality with no nonsense. Reality cut down to size. Reality minus a few heads” (206). Crick's allusion to the French Revolution—“Reality minus a few heads”—also darkly puns on his persistent preoccupation with historical madness, a reality “minus a few heads” in an altogether different sense.

At the same time, however, Crick's conflation of the two kinds of distortions suggests a similar impetus behind them, that of squeezing the water, the mysterious complexity—and therefore the life—out of human existence, foreclosing the fantastical “nonsense” that speaks something crucial to bewildering straits of being, and charting the unfathomable heights and depths of human experience with tidy empirical maps. For Crick, for all his playfully pedantic remonstrations on revolutionaries, has something altogether more intimate on his mind: in a paragraph removed from his banter on world-builders, Crick suddenly pronounces:

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's part of our perverse, madcap love for this

impossible planet we inhabit. *People die when curiosity goes.* People have to find out, people have to know. (206, my emphasis)

Crick is implicitly contemplating, not the unfortunate fate of the victims of the guillotine, but rather the spiritual and psychological death of Mary, who, for twenty years of their marriage, having violently repressed her gaping need for an explanation, an account, a recompense for the trauma she suffered as a youth, belatedly emerges with a voracious appetite for knowledge and fulfillment, only to be overcome by the unleashed floodwaters of madness.

Significantly, Mary's disposition as a youth, before her discovery of Freddie's murder, and again shortly before her derangement, as a middle-aged woman, is characterized by intense curiosity and hunger for mystery, the former primarily of a sexual concentration, the latter emotional and spiritual; only the sterile stretch in between features the paralysis in which "Mary's not interested [. . .] She's not interested in stories. Not curious" (296). Recalling his early instances of sexual intimacy with Mary, Crick announces, "Mary itched [. . .] In her fifteen-year-old body curiosity tickled and chafed, making her fidgety and roving-eyed. Curiosity drove her, beyond all restraint, to want to touch, witness, experience whatever was *unknown* and *hidden from her*" (51, my emphases). When, presaging her abduction of the baby, Mary again manifests an urgent curiosity, a marked turn-around from her decades of quiet if ominous passivity, Crick is forced to reassess what he believed at the time to be his wife's stoic strength, her mature decision to be "realistic": "Once there was [. . .] A history teacher's wife who (so the history teacher thought) was realistic. Who did not need (since she had learnt her lessons) to go back to school. Who did not believe any more in miracles and fairy-tales, nor (having experimented in her younger days) in *New Life and Salvation*" (127).

Mary's sudden conspicuous disinterest in stories, which encompasses the closure of childlike curiosity, marks her sadly successful efforts to minimize all encounters with love, pain, and mystery.

It is thus Mary's mental and emotional collapse, rather than her years of stoic repression, that compels Crick to surrender his pervasive sterile skepticism as the superior means of encountering the unquantifiable pain of human existence. Both Metcalf and Crick suffer the psychic constraints of a bankrupt, barren economy of desire, but Metcalf, as a woman, experiences that pain in a peculiar way in connection both with her biological givenness and the cultural archetypes available to her. Of women, French Feminist philosopher Helene Cixous predicts, "When the 'repressed' of their culture and their society returns, it's an explosive, *utterly* destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions" (256, emphasis in original). Since Cixous stresses the nature of this resurgence as "*utterly* destructive," we may infer that the inevitable return of the feminine repressed results in irreversible madness, or the complete and final dislocation of female identity by the influx of its own knowledge and desire in unbearable, spontaneous excess.

This is not to argue for some kind of essentially fragile dimension of the feminine psyche, but to acknowledge that Western culture, particularly over the last century, has denied, through fear of its longstanding historical denigration, the connection between women and nature, including the nature of their own bodies. *Waterland*, against the grain of the contemporary celebration of female autonomy, stresses the indissoluble, mysterious bond that humans, both male and female, share with the earth and its creatures, with the fluctuating Fen waters and the mythical, mud-born eels. This

emphasis flies in the face of the West's presumptuous attempt, from the Enlightenment onward, to liberate itself from its dependence on physicality, ancestry, tradition, and all trace of superstition, or mythic connection to the extra-rational. This hubristic drive disguises itself in the form of a liberating autonomy, concealing its stringent but doomed denial of the primordial ground of human evolution. Thus women, whose reproductive cycles and economic and social subservience have historically positioned them closer to the workings of nature, have, through their recent quest to achieve equality within a scientific, patriarchal economy, fallen prey increasingly to the same kind of symbolic sterilization that men have cultivated through the rise of the rational scientific gaze (Evans 34).

Waterland's insistence on an obsessive return to the locus of sexuality, desire, and guilt, as they bubble up from some unfathomable, original depth, presses through the dry crusts of data and wriggles free into the boundless waters of mythic implication. Such an artistic exploration is crucial at a time when, as Carolyn Enns observes, "contemporary women have been pressured to 'do it all,' and have found their deep feminine values to be questioned and devalued during the past several decades" (128)—ironically, the period of feminism's own development and, arguably, assimilation into Western culture. The significance of associating the objectifying, transcendent gaze of scientific enterprise with the "woman-sterilizing symbolic" (Evans 28) is a crucial step in identifying Western culture's widespread but largely hidden contemporary suppression of "woman's chthonic aspect," an aspect of which Swift, like Cixous, is "joyfully unafraid" (Evans 29). The novel itself accordingly puts forth a deep, primordial vision of human sexuality, inscribing within it the valorization of female sexuality and desire, with the underlying

goal of recovering a balanced and consequently tenable approach to reality, an authentic and viable subjectivity for men and women alike—but differently, insofar as biology and culture interact to create distinct male and female experiences of the world (Evans 34). In *Waterland* Swift calls for the kind of return to disregarded, devalued erotic depths that specific strains of French feminism and ecofeminism posit may lead to the looked-for reintegration of female sexuality in its own right into the symbolic order.

This holistic approach to *Waterland* in general and Swift's representation of female sexuality in particular counteracts the more superficial and mistrustful treatment feminist critic Katrina Powell has recently given the novel. Although some critics feel that *Waterland* has been established as a postmodern text with its acts of circular and fragmented story-telling, with its interplay of fact and story, history and myth, Powell contends that her discussion

[. . .] moves beyond a postmodern analysis of the novel's historical narrative and investigates, in terms of postmodern notions of subjectivity and the body, the ways in which Swift's representations of women's bodies [. . .] contribute to his privileging of the (male) act of story-telling as means to control reality. (60)

In light of this, Powell explains, she will “suggest that while Swift's narrative is postmodern, his representation of women's bodies is not” (60). If, however, we accept Liz Evans' proposition that “language is shaped by the body” (34), Powell's project proves problematic from the outset, since, it would seem, only “postmodern notions of subjectivity and the body” could give rise to what Powell herself accepts is a postmodern narrative. Perhaps, then, it is Swift's incorporation of traditional archetypes—particularly those of the virgin, the Madonna and child, and the madwoman—that accounts for Powell's rejection of Swift's representation of Mary Metcalf and Powell's

overt suspicion of the male narrator and male author, the latter of whom she directly charges with a chauvinistic construction of the novel (75).

In her efforts to depict Crick and possibly Swift himself as chauvinist in their representation of women's bodies, Powell obscures the fact that it is Crick's repression of storytelling for thirty years of marriage, not his privileging of it, that deprives Mary of a legitimate expression of her anguish, and his return to storytelling after her crisis that affords an appropriate context for that expression. Powell refuses to recognize Crick as a penitential, self-incriminating narrator, distorting the highly vexed relationship he has had to his ancestral bent for storytelling with the blanket indictment that:

Crick has constructed a story for Metcalf. He convinces himself that she is still the strong woman he knew as an adolescent. For if he continues to tell himself this story, he will not have to (actively) face the reality that his wife still punishes herself for the adolescent abortion. While Crick's means of coping with the reality of the abortion is to tell stories, Metcalf, who refuses to tell stories, is seen as insane. (66)

Contrary to Powell's assertion, Crick as narrator does not "continue" to tell himself the story of Mary as "the strong woman he knew as an adolescent"; his account of himself once telling himself such a story is rather full of sad irony. What is more, Crick's storied account of the abortion only appears some 298 pages into a 358 page novel, indicating his profound resistance to submitting this dark corner of his memory to the light of signification; he has not been in the habit of coping with the abortion through storytelling. He has been in the habit of coping (or not coping) with it through engrossing himself in the facts of other, historical pasts. By the same token, Mary's ascription to the Catholic myths of her past, the Annunciation and the Virgin Birth, can hardly be interpreted as, in Powell's words, her "[refusal] to be held by the illusion of stories because of their very passive and 'escapology' nature" (66). She is found insane

precisely because she capitulates unequivocally to the explanatory power of myth, of the unverifiable explanation, not because, as Powell suggests, she refuses to submit to Crick's patriarchal pressures to represent her trauma through story.

Mary becomes, in one sense, the ultimate storyteller, returning—quite against her husband and society's wishes—to the quintessential Story of her religious heritage. It is this capitulation, in turn, that will prompt Crick's return to the storytelling heritage of his superstitious, amphibious ancestors. By arguing that "Crick's fictionalization of reality through story-telling is not a viable option for the action-taking [Mary] Metcalf, who determines that stories are a passive means of coping with reality" (65), Powell overlooks the fact that it is *Mary's* return to story-telling ["God told me. God . . ."] that sets off Crick's awareness of the inadequacy of their *shared* means of coping with reality—stoic empiricism or the claim of a nonfictionalized reality. In the face of catastrophe, Crick recovers an ancestral awareness that what passes under the auspices of maturity, strength, and realism, is, in fact, a defiant denial of the human condition and, as such, will inevitably crumble before the white-water wall of the in-rushing real.

The older story-telling narrator of *Waterland* is not, therefore, synonymous with the hard-line empirical-minded younger Crick who finds impressive Mary's "appearance of toughness, endurance, as if she had made the decision to live henceforth without any kind of prop or refuge" (120). The former is a broken man, swamped by the devastating flood of a reality exceeding his understanding or control, and a man compelled to relinquish his long-standing dependence, not on storytelling, but on its precise opposite, a life reclaimed from the watery clutches of myth. Crick the narrator, by submitting the past to the medium of story, allows for a holistic picture of Mary to emerge, one that

inscribes her into the text as a mysterious and precious agent, one who, from beginning to end, exceeds the narrator himself in courage, insight, and the capacity, even and especially in her madness, to signify the real. What Crick comes to recognize all too late is that what he interpreted as maturity and strength, Mary suffered as a kind of spiritual coma; had he intervened, had he compelled her earlier to search for an adequate expression for her anguish and confusion, the waters of mystery may have crept back into the drained land of her soul with healthful deliberation. Instead, with the old Atkinsonian madness, its floodwaters rushed in and wiped out her capacity to approach reality at all. Hence Crick's insistent charge to his treasured pupils: "Children, don't stop asking why [. . .] Though it gets more difficult the more you ask it, though it gets more inexplicable, more painful, and the answer never seems to come any nearer, don't try to escape this question Why" (130). To escape it is to escape mystery, and to escape mystery is to escape desire, and to escape desire is to die.

Mary's madness is finally the defiance of an excessively masculine, denuded approach to her very womanly anguish, rather than a convenient construct Crick and society impose upon her for the containment of her bold sexuality. In order to define the dynamics of Crick and Mary's relationship within the terms of sheer patriarchal power-struggle, Powell contends first that "While Crick's means of coping with the reality of the abortion is to tell stories, Metcalf, who refuses to tell stories, is seen as insane" (66), and later repeats, "While Metcalf sees the infant as a gift of God, Crick (and the rest of society) sees the kidnapping as insane" (72). Powell's phraseology clearly suggests, first, that Mary's insanity is an oppressive patriarchal construction; and second, that Mary's perception of the kidnapping as a participation in divine intervention is somehow

empirical and free of story—both notions of which are problematic. The first implication puts us as readers in the uneasy position of having to reinterpret Mary’s act in light of improbable remaining alternatives: that Mary is sane and malicious, or that Mary is correct in claiming divine intervention. Not apparently prepared to champion either of these possibilities, Powell loosely interprets the act of kidnapping as “a horrible reality” (73). If, as Powell implies, Crick and society’s reaction to Mary’s theft is inherently chauvinistic, what favor is Powell performing for Mary by interpreting her gesture as “horrible”? Does this reading purport to be a purely objective horror, and does interpreting the gesture as one of malice rather than of madness really do justice to Mary as subject?

Powell’s reading, though clearly intended to rescue Mary’s status as agent, thus denigrates the probability that Mary actually wishes to become, on the one hand, a storyteller, and, on the other hand, a mother. The moment in the past that Mary turns violently away from story—“No wasted emotion. Facts. Facts” (56)—is, after all, the same moment that Crick recognizes “something’s gone from her face. Curiosity’s gone” (57). It seems contradictory to argue that agency begins where curiosity leaves off. Free agency, as represented by the “prehistorical, pubescent times” (52) when Mary’s bold sexual curiosity roamed without hindrance, is no longer possible, but it is not the fear of punishment inflicted by the patriarchy on a promiscuous woman that compels Mary to undergo an abortion—it is the fact that the fruition of her beloved fertility, the delight of her pregnancy, has come at the expense of another’s life, that of Freddie Parr. Powell remarks that “Metcalf’s desire to fill the vacancy of her womb, to be a mother, is the *traditional notion of woman* as represented by Swift’s narrative” (69, my emphasis), and,

in so doing, implies that the “desire to fill the vacancy of [a] womb, to be a mother,” is, by default, a patriarchally-conceived need.

While clearly some women do not wish to become mothers, it is no more empowering to insist that Mary’s natural desire was to remain childless than it is to insist that she wished for a child. Along these lines, Cixous defies the idea that the liberated woman must unequivocally reject traditional desires ascribed to her; Cixous calls for an embrasure of the full range of the female erotic, saying,

We’re *not going to repress* something so simple as the desire for life. Oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive—all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive—just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood. We are *not going to refuse*, if it should happen to strike our fancy, the unsurpassed pleasures of pregnancy which have actually been always exaggerated or conjured away—or cursed—in the classic texts. (261, my emphases)

Cixous’ emphasis on a willing and pleasurable welcome of all things experienced by the female body works against the endeavors of those who would, even in the interest of saving feminine subjectivity, radically disconnect it from the Western metaphysical tradition and thereby deny woman the full pleasure of her givenness as woman and her recognition of the seeds of her inherited experience articulated within that tradition.

In the particular case of Mary, there is no indication at any point in the text that she would have preferred to experiment sexually without the eventual repercussion of pregnancy. Prior to the discovery of Freddie Parr’s body, the knowledge of Mary’s pregnancy seems to produce only a mild apprehension in the two lovers:

And down by the Hockwell Lode we still cling and cleave and sigh. So we’ve made a little one. And it’s on the way. But we love each other, don’t we? Yes we love each other. And love takes its course, doesn’t it? It means we’ll have to tell the world, that’s all, and face the music. And then get married. It happens all the time. It’s an old, old story . . . (263)

Powell assumes, however, that Mary is being pressured to tell stories, through a patriarchal society and marriage, at the same time that she is clearly being pressured to remain realistic and tough-minded. What of the possibility that Mary yearns to approach reality through story, to situate herself in the perpetual human narrative of love and suffering, but, feeling the overwhelming pressure to be uncompromisingly pragmatic and rational, denies her deepest desires? Mary's defining act as agent may, in fact, be her return to the Catholic Church and her insistence that she be given recompense for her years of self-inflicted denial of the significance of her deprivation. By concentrating on what she perceives to be a violating vision of Mary as woman, Powell puts forth a skewed and therefore reductive version of the novel while failing to provide a viable alternative to what she argues is a biased representation of women's bodies.

Reading *Waterland* as an inherently chauvinistic novel finally flies in the face of the novel's project to recover a balanced and consequently tenable approach to reality, one that calls for the life-saving interplay of fact and story, history and myth, skepticism and humility. While Powell is right in placing responsibility for much of Mary's suffering on Crick, her analysis of his failures concerning Mary falls short, misleads, along the same lines as Acheson's. That is, through Powell's narrow accusations and underlying mistrust of the narrator, as well as the author, she misses not only the full import of the narrator's guilt, but also the extent of his own conscious self-incrimination and, most important, the extent of his love for Mary, which continues in the present, as Tom visits her in the asylum. While Powell rightly underscores the cruciality of storytelling within the novel, she unfairly conflates the act of storytelling with patriarchal control, a position that proves untenable in light of the novel's core development,

particularly its feminization of the superstitious, storytelling Cricks and its masculinization of the ambitious, abstracted Atkinsons. By focusing too stringently on clichéd notions of gender bias, Powell overlooks the evidence of a legitimate overarching power struggle in the novel, that of madness in its triumph over patriarchally-conceived scientific progress.

Treating the novel's representation of insanity as a patriarchal power-construct not only misses but also directly inverts the novel's important connection between madness and the resurgence of primordial sexuality, traditionally the realm of the feminine. Powell's most alarming obfuscation occurs, therefore, when she erases the novel's essential Crick/Atkinson binary by arguing that "Mecalf's sexual curiosity and attempt to reclaim a child by kidnapping parallel the Atkinson's reclamation of land *and* the Cricks' telling of stories [. . .]" (66 my emphasis). Since the Cricks' telling of stories is painstakingly juxtaposed against the Atkinson's reclamation of land, the unilateral conflation of the two does not make sense and completely obscures the crucial function of the interlocking mythical and ancestral narratives in the shaping of the story of Tom Crick and, more importantly, of Mary Metcalf.

Powell is not the only critic to diminish, inadvertently or otherwise, the significance of these undergirding stories which, in themselves, constitute far more to the text than narrative digressions intended to further whet the reader's appetite. Robert Irish comments with bemused irritability on the novel's pattern of "digressiveness," saying, "[Crick] delivers a detailed history of various scientists' search to discover the [eel's] reproductive organs, habits, and breeding ground, *simply because* there was a 'specimen placed by Freddie Parr in Mary's knickers [. . .]" (926, my emphasis). Irish goes on to

say, “My response to this digression has, of course, changed in rereading the novel, but its shape remains much the same: initially the *irrelevance* is off-putting” (926, my emphasis). While Irish later concedes that “each digression becomes something to decode,” he does so in order to emphasize the usefulness of the digression for “modifying a reader’s response and undermining the possibility of a master narrative” (927). Doubtless the digressions do both, but such an interpretation overlooks the indigency of their attributes to the novel as a whole. In fact, citing them as “detours” (926) from a primary storyline unhelpfully reconfigures the novel in strictly linear and one-dimensional terms when, in fact, the historical and mythological undergirding serves as a kind of sub-narrative field out of which the more immediate story of Tom and Mary derives both its existence and significance.

Within this highly fertile and signifying landscape—the Fens, if you will, of the narrative structure itself—the eel, through the particularity of its biological, historical, and mythical status, pointedly complicates and deepens *Waterland*’s presentation of sexuality. Far from appearing in the text as a mere digressive follow-up to its introduction in Mary’s underpants, the eel slithers into the very first page, setting the stage, amidst other crucial autochthonous allusions, for the novel’s exploration of primal enigma:

[W]e lived in a fairy-tale place. In a lock-keeper’s cottage, by a river, in the middle of the Fens. Far away from the wide world. And my father, who was a superstitious man, liked to do things in such a way as would make them seem magical and occult. So he would always set his eel traps at night. Not because eel traps cannot be set by day, but because the mystery of darkness appealed to him. (1)

The eel is here immediately presented within a dense network of intuitive, erotic, extra-rational impulses: the “superstitious,” “magical,” “occult,” and mysterious context

overrides the pragmatic concern of maintaining a livelihood or the appetitive concern of acquiring food. As the narrator points out, there is no practical connection between nightfall and the setting of eel traps; on the other hand, there is a highly significant connection between the setting of the eel traps at night and the death of young Tom's mother: "since my mother's death," he reports, "which was six months before we lay by the eel traps under the stars, my father's yen for the dark, his nocturnal restlessness, had grown more besetting" (2). Tom Crick, like his father, will learn in the latter stages of his life to gravitate towards the "magical and occult," not because definitive facts are not available to him or because he is unwilling to disclose those facts, but because he is drawn by the primeval mysteries of nature—of love and death, of Fens and frogs and mother's milk (1). This Crickian bent is not simply a defense mechanism, in the pejorative sense, an attempt to reconstitute empirical knowledge in a more palatable form; it is rather the rendering palatable a dimension of knowledge, the knowledge of the signifying real, that remains absolutely untouched by the instruments of scientific investigation, except as they too are devoured and assimilated by the creeping waters of signification. As Crick's father and Crick himself come to appreciate in the wake of severe trauma, at times there is more to be apprehended in the darkness of an endlessly ramifying mystery than in the light of a conclusive scientific report. The empirical eel may be flushed out of its murky environs at noon, but the signifying eel must be laid for in the secrecy of night-watchfulness.

Not only is the eel specifically enmeshed from the very outset of the novel in the narrator's preoccupation with mystical knowledge, but also it answers as the perfect subversive, elusive, and inclusive symbol of aboriginal sexuality. A recognizable phallic

symbol, the eel is also moist, fluid, and uncanny in its physique—indissolubly bound to the feminine realm of its watery habitation—and thereby provides the ideal corrective to the rigid, sterile phallicism represented by the Atkinson brewery; the narrator explicitly designates both the brewery chimney and the eel as phallic icons, but each of a very different order from the other. As the New Atkinson Brewery prepares the Fens for a “flooding of beer” and thrusts its cranes and hoists inexorably upwards, the narrator points to “the chimney, phallically rising to *abash* the Fenland sky” (90, my emphasis). The violent denotation of the verb “abash” highlights the violating quality of the chimney’s figurative penetration, a personified sexual movement which the narrator takes pains to emphasize. What the careful reader might have deduced for himself, the phallic quality of the chimney, the narrator straightforwardly provides, forcing a new level of interpretative investigation into the sexual significance of the chimney in particular and the brewery as a whole. Set beside a second explicit phallic allusion, the inadequacy of the chimney as a representation of masculine vitality becomes apparent:

Not to mince matters, and to offer you, in passing, an impromptu theory, sexuality perhaps reveals itself more readily in a flat land, in a land of watery prostration, than in, say, a mountainous or forested terrain, where nature’s own phallic thrustings inhibit man’s, or in towns and cities where a thousand artificial erections (a brewery chimney, a tower block) detract from our animal urges. (182)

Here the brewery chimney is clearly linked, not with excessive male sexuality, but with inhibition, detraction, and artifice—and temporary artifice at that, since, after the New Atkinson Brewery burns to the ground, the narrator will call attention to an important absence: “Don’t forget to deduct something, too, from the background: a brewery chimney—we’ve got the picture” (217). The chimney as phallus is dry, fixed, ugly, violating, and ultimately susceptible to a prophetic destruction by fire; the eel, by

contrast, is moist, supple, surprising, appealing, and immemorial—in the narrator’s words, a “snake-like, fish-like, highly edible, not to say phallically suggestive creature” (196). While the mechanistic and hubristic phallicism of the Atkinson brewery invites the two-fold apocalyptic disasters of flood and fire, the eel remains impervious to the clamor of civilization and the rise and collapse of human inquiry; it can be neither flooded nor burned, since makes its home in mud and water. Accordingly, following his description of how World War I interrupted human inquiry into the eel’s reproductive cycle, the narrator appends, “yet it must be said that this catastrophic interval, to which such dread words as apocalypse, cataclysm, Armageddon have not unjustly been applied, *does not interrupt the life cycle of the eel*” (201, my emphasis). Because the erotic impulse to life must precede life, and existence must precede inquiry, the lowly eel, as representative of what is prior and perpetual, surpasses the lofty chimney, which represents the human impulse to an artificial mastery of things past and things to come—a twisted erotic desire to control through knowledge rather than to know through love.

Just as the late West seeks to appropriate all existence by mastering knowledge through objective, scientific discourse, the Atkinsons sought to manipulate the course of the Fenland waters so that they served the ends of the Atkinson empire. Since the unmitigated imposition of the human will over nature, knowledge, and givenness can only be carried out through a denial of that will’s dependence on origins outside its reach and dimensions of existence outside its control, such imposition constitutes a voluntary blindness towards the humble position of the human person in his dependence upon what came before him and his inability to determine what will come after him. The New Atkinson brewery chimney abashes the Fenland sky as a self-conscious gesture of

defiance towards the preeminent givenness of nature, while the eel, incapable of such rebellion, undulates unconsciously in the mud below, participating unfailingly in the course of involuntary instinct, “a mechanism,” according to Crick, “more *mysterious*, more *impenetrable* perhaps than the composition of the atom” (204, my emphasis).

While the composition of the atom has, over the course of the time, been thoroughly “penetrated” and demystified—charted and exploited by the scientific West—Crick carefully reserves a symbolic space for the eel that will remain, like the origins of pain and love, beneath and beyond the range of human mastery.

Presaging his extended, suitably sinuous meditation on the haphazard history of human inquiry into the eel’s reproductive cycle, the narrator provides a parenthetical qualification that crucially overrides scientific positivism, or the notion that scientific inquiry is destined to bring all that is knowable securely to light. In order to connect the presently undetermined reproductive locale of the eel with the interminably inscrutable origins of human sexuality, Crick reports that “no one could find (*and no one ever will*) in all the waters where the European Eel dwells, from the North Cape to the Nile, an eel bearing ripe milt” (196, my emphasis). He later returns to this peculiar insistence on the limited potential inherent in any attempt to fully and precisely delineate the life cycle of the eel, saying, “But even if we learnt how, and what and where and when, will we ever know why? Whywhy?” (204). The rhetorical answer is, of course, no—but that is where Crick’s warrant for a childlike approach to knowledge comes into play; if the answer cannot be fixed, it cannot be mastered—but it can be desired, sought after. And this vulnerable seeking after the truth of human experience, set against the willed reduction of it to manipulatable terms, is what Crick pleads for when he admonishes his students,

“Children, don’t stop asking why [. . .] Though it gets more difficult the more you ask it, though it gets more inexplicable, more painful, and the answer never seems to come any nearer, don’t try to escape this question Why” (130). The elusive, unprepossessing eel, with its enigmatic copulatory strategy, provides Crick with a palpable symbol of primordial vitality—not over and above, but beneath and beyond the human blundering after knowledge and power:

How long have eels been doing this? They were doing it, repeating this old, epic story, long before Aristotle put it all down to mud [. . .] They were doing it when they stormed the Bastille and when Napoleon and Hitler contemplated the invasion of England. And they were still doing it, still accomplishing these vast atavistic circles when on a July day in 1940 Freddie Parr picked up out of a trap one of their number [. . .] and dropped it down Mary Metcalf’s navy blue knickers. (205)

This astonishing intersection of the surprised eel with a very *un*-native element, namely, Mary Metcalf’s equally shocked nether regions, leads Crick into the contemplation of “this unfathomable stuff we’re made from, this stuff that we’re always coming back to—our love of life [. . .]” (205). It is this love, this overpowering desire to know—not the literal physical location of the eel’s reproductive organs or breeding ground—that exceeds now and always the frontier of factual calculation.

Not only does the eel serve as a comprehensive symbol of erotic mystery throughout the novel, the intimate encounter between Mary and the eel reverberates textually as implicative in the *specific* mystery of “Mary’s story” (261; 262), a story whose desire and pain Crick can gesture towards as mysterious through the fluid voices of mythical traces. The eel is linked to Mary’s desire, suffering, and madness through allusions to the scriptural myth of “immaculate conception” (198), the folk myth of “a live fish in a woman’s lap” causing barrenness (18), and the mythical conflation of Dick

Crick and the eel (190; 250-3). Although Crick cannot know what Mary's story is in the sense of the "why" of her moment by moment suffering, he can infuse the telling of her story with mythological images and allusions that bring the significance of the question "why" to bear upon the reader. Only in this way can he seek to comprehend and do justice to the mystery of Mary's life.

As with the symbolic origins of the eel, the origins of Mary's discrete existence and peculiar pain cannot ever be unambiguously mastered through an exhaustive accumulation of facts or the precise application of explorative techniques. Instead, Crick calls forth fluid primordial symbols and trenchant biblical allusions to take up the pitiable facts of Mary's (and his own) diminished being and put them to rest deep within the mysterious ground of their origin; by embedding Mary's story in the inexhaustible riches of mythological import, he restores to her what the language of psychiatry has denied, "the full scope of her mania: her anchorite's cell, her ascetic's liberties, her visions and ravings" (330). That is, though his gesture of love comes in many ways too late for Mary, he allows her the dignity, even and especially in her madness, of being fully and painfully human. In referencing Crick's work as storyteller, George Landow mistakenly claims that "Telling stories, particularly one's own story, turns out to be absurd and even comical when viewed by any cosmic scale, but for all that it is a necessary act, something that one does [. . .] to keep our [sic] heads above water" (210). On the contrary, it is the situation of the human story within a cosmic scale that rescues it from the terror of absurdity and utter worthlessness.

While *Waterland* is not what might be called a Christian or theistic apologia, its pervasive underpinnings of Biblical and superstitious myth calls for a reclamation of

mystery as an authentic and necessary mode of apprehending reality. The painful crisis of Tom Crick's latter years points to the insufficiency of conventionalized empirical ways of encountering human experience when it comes to the disruptions of inexplicable and primordial forces across personal and collective history. As Percy observes, "precisely that which is distinctive in human behavior [. . .] is not accounted for by the standard scientific paradigm which has been sovereign for three hundred years" (288). The title of the novel anticipates its underlying premise, that the world in which we live cannot be fully examined through the lens of rational empiricism, that to repress all intimations of extra-rational reality is to artificially and dangerously expulse the native element of a land that does and will always return to its aboriginal state as *Waterland*.

By situating his personal experiences and ancestral narratives within a resonant mythical frame, Crick seeks and finds an adequate means of reapproaching the tangled traumatic strains of his past. Having spent far too many of his adult years cloistered in the consoling realm of the factual, the pragmatic, and the objective, Crick turns radical storyteller, for "simple, backward people in God-forsaken places" (268) have to "find some way of explaining [the] incongruous," and tradition hands us only "A myth . . . Yet in every myth there is a grain of truth . . ." (215). By digging so many textual ditches, purportedly in an attempt to solidify consciousness by draining off its superfluous fictions, Crick, in fact, knowingly invites the overwhelming return of the waters.

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