

**GRAHAM SWIFT'S NOVEL "WATERLAND" APPROACHED VIA WHITE'S
NARRATIVE IN CONTEMPORARY HISTORICAL THEORY**

Clementina Mihăilescu, Assist. Prof., PhD, "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu

Abstract: The paper expands upon Graham Swift's novel "Waterland" approached via White's new theory of postmodern representations with a view to showing that the unification of literary and historical discourse is a perfect formula adequate to the "metafictional historiographical narrative" employed as the basic strategy of decoding the significance of the novel. Since the process of explaining past events interrelate with the concept of time, Ricoeur's approach to historicity as a "structural mode of temporality itself" will be also exploited by us as a gateway to the meaning of the novel.

Keywords: *Historical Theory, chronicle, temporality, spatiality, metahistory, mimesis.*

Narrative has been approached as "a form of discourse" (White, 27) which, according to those concerned with historical studies, can be employed or not, to represent historical events, the choice depending upon whether the main aim is to analyse a historical event or to tell a story. From this approach, there arises the distinction between "historical" and "fictional" stories which resides in their content not in their form. As such, the content of historical stories is the events which really happened, while the content of fictional stories is the events imagined, "invented by the narrator" (27).

Moreover, the story which appears in a historical narrative is an "accurate imitation" (27), a "mimesis" of the "story lived in some region of historical reality" (27). The narrative was differently accounted for by various philosophers as "a perfectly valid mode of representing historical events and even of providing an explanation to them" (38). On the other hand, a chronicle is not a narrative because a narrative discourse "performs differently from a chronicle". And yet, chronology is a code which is shared by both the chronicle and the narrative, but the narrative also uses additional codes and produces meanings quite different from those produced by the chronicle. White also draws upon the fact that in the historical discourse, the narrative is an instrument meant "to transform into a story a list of historical events" (43) which otherwise would be only a chronicle. This statement arises from the very definition of history as "being about the actions of men in the past" (50). As concerns the understanding of historical actions, it implies "to grasp together", as parts of wholes that are "meaningful" (50), the intentions which generate actions. The actions proper together with the consequences are reflected in social and cultural contexts.

As concerns historiography, Ricoeur considers that the grasping together of those elements, of situations in which "meaningful actions" have happened, is directly related to the plot. He firmly posits that "it is the plot that figures forth the historicity of events", placing us "at the crossing point of temporality and spatiality" (Ricoeur, in White, 52). For Ricoeur, historicity is a "structural mode of temporality itself." The same Ricoeur analysing time identifies the fact that it possesses three "degrees of temporality": "within – time – ness", "historicity" and "deep temporality", all reflected in three types of experiences or "representations of time in consciousness". So, there are the "ordinary representations of

time”, which means the time in which events take place, those in which “emphasis is placed on the weight of the past” and those experiences “which seek to grasp the plural unity of future, past and present” (Ricoeur, in White, 51). As concerns the narrative function, Ricoeur states that “it provides a transition from within – time – ness to historicity” by revealing “what must be called the plot – like nature of temporality itself” (Ricoeur, in White, 51).

The narrative level of any historical account brings about the basic difference between the chronicle and the narrative. The chronicle contains events which exist within time, while the narrative is based on those aspects of time where endings are linked to beginnings, forming a continuum. This merging of endings and beginnings can be achieved by “retrospection” and by what Heidegger called human “capacity of repetition” (in White, 52). Historicity understood as repetition induces the idea that in this way we can retrieve our most basic potentialities inherited from our past in the form of personal fate or collective destiny (52). Since historical narrative has, by virtue of its narrative, temporality itself as its ultimate referent; it can be assigned to the category of symbolic discourse characterized by a symbolic structure which endows it with the capacity of shaping out extended metaphors similar to those encountered in literature. Moreover, narrative as symbolic mediates “between different universes of meaning by configuring the dialectic of their relationship in an image”, the image being “nothing other than the narrative itself” (Ricoeur, in White, 55). Hereby, there arises “the metahistorical dominant”, identifiable in any historical discourse.

On the other hand, postmodernism regards both history and fiction as discourse possessing systems of significances which resort to rhetorical and narrative strategies. It goes without saying that the historical discourse is based on chronology and causality both meant to properly render reality and to explain it. However, most of the postmodernist narratives show that reality itself cannot be approached in a static manner. Reality can be “constructed, reconstructed, deconstructed” (Grigore, 123) according to the dominant aesthetic trend.

Graham Swift’s novel entitled “Waterland”, published in 1983, can be approached in relation to the new theory of postmodern representation, due to the fact that it contains issues which uncover the relation between history and literature. It is from the vantage point of this relationship that a summation of the story of the history teacher Tom Crick has become our first interpretative concern. The main character, Tom Crick, draws nearer the age of retiring when he finds out, on the one hand, that the school master has decided to fire him because of the need to economize for the salary funds and because he is considered old fashioned in his approach to history and on the other, that his wife has kidnapped a child from a supermarket. These two issues reveal Tom Crick’s intuitive perception, responding naturally to history, truth and literature (the deeper knowledge of the heart), through his profound meditation on the individual and collective destiny within the troubled XXth century.

Swift combines literary discourse and historical narrative in order to reveal Crick’s attempts at understanding what went wrong in his private life. The novel develops as Crick’s fictional autobiography, suggesting that this literary species has survived and can be still turned to good account at the end of the XXth century. Crick’s personal history subtly blends with real history, that of the moor region and of the people who live there. The unification of literary and historical discourse turns out to be a perfect formula adequate to the “metafictional historiographical narrative” (Grigore, 124) employed as the basic strategy of the novel.

Swift questions all the time what makes people tell stories, with a view to uncovering whether what we say about ourselves reflects our true nature and whether it reveals the truth regarding what happened. Drawing closer upon Swift's strategy, while reading the novel we find out that he is only indirectly presenting such issues, giving the impression that this literary contribution is some sort of thriller dealing with what made Mary, Tom's wife, kidnap the child from the supermarket. This action will drive her crazy, being finally hospitalized in an institution which treats people who suffer from serious nervous breakdown. Searching for understanding the reasons which generated his social and private failure, Crick turns into a committed narrator, who recalls his entire life and the life of the Atkinsons, another outstanding family from the moor region.

We hold that only apparently, the reconstructive process of Crick draws upon the emotional memory of his past experience, as, on the deeper level, it serves to question the relation between truth and fiction, with a Swift responding to the concrete creations of other literary predecessors who dealt with such issues such as Dickens' *Great Expectations* and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*.

While offering us a view of his story, Tom Crick ponders over people's narrative capacity, and, by extension, on that developed by history itself, of revealing and explaining past events or experiences in order to help us acquire a complete understanding of them. Moreover, as a teacher of history, Tom Crick proves to be well familiar with White's approach to history as story telling meant to offer genuine guidance to the students in the sense of teaching them how to draw conclusions from unhappy events and how to avoid repeating the same mistakes again.

And yet, the students concerned with the here and the now, disregarding the past and exclusively honouring the future fail to understand him. In their acts of criticism, they strongly reject the teacher's statement that every happening has a logical explanation, considering it false, disregarding thus historiography itself (Grigore, 125). Since Crick relies on the valuable concept from the historical theory according to which historical significance can be inferred only from facts, he narrates to his students his own history, rooted in the Waterland. In this way, Swift reconstructs history itself because, as White argues, "a historical narrative is a mimesis" of the "story lived in some region of historical reality" (28).

Narrating his life story, Crick tries to grasp the real meaning of his past and present life. Since the "ordering process" (Gilder, 57) of grasping and explaining past events must take place across a conception of time, Ricoeur's approach to historicity as a "structural mode of temporality itself" is useful to be mentioned and used as a gateway to the meaning of the novel. Following Ricoeur's interpretation of time as possessing degrees of temporality, we will identify each of them and shortly comment upon them within the modern context offered by Swift's novel. So, "within – time – ness" refers to the time in which Tom Crick faces a twofold dilemma in the sense that he is about to be fired by the school master and that he has to find an explanation and a solution to his wife having kidnapped a child from supermarket.

Historicity, as the second degree of temporality, implies an analysis of the past events in the characters' life, meant to explain their present psychological crisis. So, Tom and Mary, both born in the moor region, lived for a while in an almost unreal world of happiness and love until they found out the corpse of a fellow-player, Freddie Parr. There followed a dramatic period for the couple caused by Mary's abortion, by the death of Dick, Tom's elder

brother who commits suicide due to the incestuous relation of Tom's mother. Abortion, incest and suicide spoil the fairy-like atmosphere of *Waterland*. Confronting themselves with "standards of truth under which no man can live" (Booth, in Gilder, 140) they become estranged from each other, even from themselves.

Such an inquiry "into the original" (Locke, in Gilder, 143) also implies analysing the natural element, which is related to various events in the character's life and also to real historical events. Placed in the context of the same Ricoeur, the discussion about nature follows naturally in the sense that he has assigned both historical and fictional narrative to the category of symbolic discourse. Moreover, he regards narrative as a symbol which mediated between different universes of meaning. Swift's novel expands upon the relation between history and literature, by "configuring" the dialectics of their relation in an image" (127). And what is *Waterland* but an extraordinary image of the natural space. According to the neoclassicists, the natural space is influenced by the divine order. Once, this divine order is disrupted, Mary and Tom are driven out of this terrestrial paradise and have to face the present charged with almost unbearable challenges and consequences.

Under such circumstances, narrating one's life story seems to be the only alternative of breaking free from the tyranny of time and of history, as well. As history teacher, Tom Crick has studied various historical theories, for didactic purposes, theories which prove to be irrelevant and useless for understanding his own life experience.

Swift's postmodernism arises from his twofold ontological concerns; on the one hand, he is concerned with individual destiny within a troubled historical period after WW II, which is rendered concrete through the unbearable dark secrets from the characters' life, secrets which partly remain unsolved up to the end of the novel. On the other hand, Swift's ontological concerns are related to the basic image of *Waterland*, a powerful agent which influences the characters' life. Swift intended to show the way in which history influences human life. Moreover, the novel also demonstrates that present history can be neither controlled nor influenced by the wisdom of the past, or by the eternal human aspirations towards goodness either (Grigore, 128).

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