

A BRUISE UPON A BRUISE: FORMS AND TRACES OF
VIOLENCE IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S *OUT OF THIS WORLD*
AND *WATERLAND*

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Abstract:

While lacking the physical explicitness of other contemporary British novels, Graham Swift's texts are at least of equal interest in terms of the attention paid to the numerous face(t)s of violence, as well as to the deep if not always detectable marks imprinted on the victims. The centrality of the terrorist bomb attack to the plot of *Out of This World* singles out Swift's fourth novel for special attention as regards the idea of violence and even a superficial reading yields ample material, from the historical background of war and the detailed presentation of major campaigns of the twentieth century to the personal history of its protagonists. This paper aims to trace the different reactions to and manifestations of violence across three generations, then focus on the frequent philosophical disquisitions on the main topic of the text, before moving on to *Waterland* and its intricate palimpsest of bruises upon bruises, hissing guillotines, revenge, murder, suicide, madness and guilt.

Keywords: *history, photography, murder, trauma, verbal violence, war, weapon, wound*

Violence in its various forms is such a predominant concern in contemporary fiction that it is by no means difficult to find examples of this "most condemned and glorified of human acts" (Collins 1) in the works of an impressive number of British novelists. While lacking the explicitness, wealth of graphic details and indeed the tendency to dwell on elaborate descriptions of violent crimes favoured by writers such as Peter Ackroyd, Angela Carter and Ian McEwan, Graham Swift's texts are at least of equal interest in terms of the attention paid to the vast array of types of violence as well as to the deep if not always visible traces it leaves behind. Identifying the exact starting point of any of Swift's plots represents a considerable challenge, yet it would appear that the critical moment in all major characters' lives is temporally located in the immediate vicinity of the Second World War, a "vestigial but determinate presence" (Widdowson 214)

in all his novels. This fascination is hardly surprising given its unparalleled status among the numerous “spasmodic outbreaks of catastrophic violence that marked the twentieth century” (Crosthwaite 13) and indeed the entire history of mankind, not to mention its palpable effects on the self and the wider world outlined in one of the final chapters of *Waterland*:

In 1793 the Apocalypse came to Paris (just a few thousand heads); in 1917 it came to the swamps of Flanders. But in August, 1943 (yes, history soberly records that, despite the scale of that earlier bloodbath, the death toll in the First War was smaller than in the Second, and included few civilians), it came in the form of detonating goose eggs to Hamburg, Nuremberg and Berlin... (299)

It is moreover quite interesting to note that even though there are no battle scenes to be found in any of the novels and most of the characters “remain physically unscathed by combat, they often suffer from personal and psychological problems stemming from events in the middle of the century” (Kaczvinsky 515).

It could be argued that it is the centrality of an IRA bomb attack to the plot of *Out of This World* that singles out Swift’s fourth novel for special attention as regards the idea of violence, yet even a superficial reading makes it amply clear that this intrusion of history on the protagonists’ domestic happiness is only the most recent occurrence in a world of “death, violence, monstrosity, and absurdity” (Malcolm 124), in a history seen to consist exclusively of horrors, from the carnage of the First World War, the mass bombing of the Second and the atrocities chronicled at the Nuremberg Trials, to the Greek civil war, Oran, the Congo, Vietnam, the Falkland Islands and the terrorist attacks of the present. Aggression plays a central part in the story of a family blighted across the generations by violence (Rennison 129) but at the same time founded on it. The narrative brings together a father who progresses from First-World veteran to manufacturer and supplier of arms, “patron of terrorism, a mercenary among mercenaries” (90) ironically killed by people who should have been his grateful customers, a son who specialises in recording visual testimonies of violence by taking “photographs depicting the evils of war” (114), a daughter-in-law who attempts to “translate and transcribe the evidence of killings, atrocities, burnings” (135) and an estranged, sexually aggressive and verbally abusive granddaughter, all subjects of a “traumatized experience of temporality” (Bényei 48).

Although the actual traces left by violence on the protagonists’ bodies seem quite insignificant when contrasted to their much deeper albeit invisible mental scars, one of the novel’s focal points is Robert’s prosthetic arm, a constant reminder of an old act of heroism or temporary madness, an unconventional yet highly symbolic marker of the passage of time – “I live in a cottage in Wiltshire with a stash of nine artificial arms. [...] These are bits of Dad. They are like an index of the twentieth century.” (199-200) – as well as a

disturbingly important part of the character's ambiguous identity: "was he trying to make his arm like the rest of himself, or the rest of himself like his arm?" (199) In Harry's case the "one, negligible wound" leaving behind nothing but a "neat white zip of a scar" above his white jaw reveals little of his vast experience of violence which is betrayed instead by the "gaunt, taunt face in the mirror, which didn't look like any age" and the eyes that "stared more and blinked less than they should" (12). A similar sense of trauma emerges from the confessions made by his wife, who, although never physically harmed, accurately describes herself as "one of the world's walking wounded [...] a thick-skinned, old-young thing, with a limited capacity for outrage and for assimilating the ills of the universe" (176).

It is however not human bodies but the very map of Europe as seen from Harry's privileged position as an R.A.F. photographer that ultimately conveys the true scope of twentieth-century violence:

I learnt to distinguish the marks of destruction - the massive ruptures of 4,000-pounders from the blisters of 1,000-pounders and the mere pock-marks of 250-pound clusters - and to translate these two-dimensional images, which were the records of three-dimensional facts, into one-dimensional formulae - tonnage dropped as against acreage devastated, acreage destroyed as against acreage attacked (the tallies never included 'people', 'homes'). (47)

Anna's narrative suggests another important aspect of modern cartography, the violence undergone by some of the most vulnerable European countries such as Macedonia, "quarrelled over by Turks and Bulgars and Serbs, and chopped about by the Big Powers" just like the fruit salad its name designates in French and retaliating by developing their own brand of aggressive behaviour: "My grandfathers and great-grandfathers had fought in those bitter little wars that the Great War had swallowed up. No wonder the latest generations, who could officially call themselves Greek, had the minds of brigands. Feuding with each other over piles of tobacco" (176). Further on in the text it becomes apparent how decades after the traumatic events of the great war "half of Wiltshire and Dorset, good lumps of Hampshire and Berkshire are military property. [...] Not country any more - camouflage", hardly surprising given the fact that a single look at the map of Bronze Age Britain provides sufficient evidence of the ancient cartographic imprint of violence: "what would stand out most prominently? Camps, forts, defence works. What was the great invention of the Bronze Age? The technology of warfare. The sword. That went out only in the last century. Strictly speaking, we're still living in the Iron Age." (194)

The novel also contains a reminder of a well-known yet often forgotten aspect of violence, the fact that it leaves its marks on victims and landscapes rather than on the perpetrators. Sent to Nuremberg in 1947 on his first foreign assignment to cover the end of the war trials, Henry Beech wants nothing more

than to find the monsters the whole world is looking for and “capture on film the face of evil” (135), “capture in their faces the obscenity of their crimes, capture in their eyes the death of millions, capture in the furrows of their brows the enormity of their guilt” and finds instead a “collection of dull, nondescript, headphoned men, thin and pale from months in prison, with the faces of people in waiting rooms or people co-opted into some tedious, routine task” (101), thus realizing that what he truly needs to capture is a “terrible ordinariness” and thus show “that monsters do not belong to comfortable tales”, “that the worst things are perpetrated by people no one would pick out from a crowd” (102), that the potential for extreme violence is often too well hidden under the guise of normality. This idea best emerges from the behaviour not of the criminals themselves, but of the executioner who “deliberately bungled the hangings, so that some, at least, of those who died, died slowly and horribly” (104) and of the crowd gathered outside the prison walls after their executions, “waiting for some sign, some revelation, a display of corpses, perhaps, at which they might cheer and raise their fists”, their unremarkable faces wearing a “look of murderous exultation” (102). Another equally interesting revelation concerns the human inability to fathom anything out of the ordinary, including extreme violence, and the consequent need to have the unthinkable scaled down to one’s level of comprehension:

They cannot comprehend a thousand deaths, or routine atrocity, or the fact that there are situations – they arise and spread so quickly – in which life becomes suddenly so cheap that it is worth next to nothing, less than nothing, and killing is as casual as being killed. But they can contemplate one death, or one life. Or a handful of deaths or a handful of lives. And they watch, almost with relief, when the unthinkable facts of a decade are unloaded on to the figures of twenty-one men who are placed, as it were, on a stage with the entire world as audience and the whole thing takes on the solemnized aspect of ritual. (102)

Like the crowds he observes, Harry finds it easier to relate to “personal overt violence, such as murder” than to “institutional overt violence such as war” and even considers resorting to the former variety in order to take revenge on his dead wife’s lover: “Oh, I wanted to kill him. That’s all. I mean, spectacularly kill him. I still have this fantasy. Like to hear it? I’m in this plane. Just me, the plane, and one bomb for Frank. One bomb.” (169)

Then there are also protagonists like Sophie who opt for “personal verbal violence, such as insult” (Gay 305) in an attempt to overcome the “hole with no bottom to it” (109) blasted in normality. It has been argued that while British war fiction may not present female characters as “paragons of traditional feminine virtues” writers seem to express a “longing for a womanly ‘innocence’ effaced by war’s transformation of gender roles and for a home front that might be imagined as distinct from, and untainted by, the violence and treachery of

war” (DeCoste 16). The Beech residence seems indeed to be the perfect refuge, at least for little Sophie, yet there is no masking the fact that it is a sanctuary based on denial, illusion and forgetting and, what is more, one maintained by the manufacturing of arms; there is also no effective way of stopping the world of violence from intruding on Hyfield, first via one of her father’s photographs and then by her grandfather’s falling victim to the very history he had unsuccessfully tried to insulate his family against (Malcolm 124). As for womanly innocence, there seems to be no trace left in the adult Sophie, driven by “unresolved guilt and anger from her past” (Rennison 129) to “indiscriminate adulterous couplings” (Childs 221) and to Doctor K’s couch, where she recounts both her aggressive sexual encounters and her parental issues, in an outpour of abusive verbiage directed not only at her absent father but also at her hapless analyst: “When you think of your father what’s the first word that comes into your head?” [...] ‘How about: “Cunt”?’ [...] ‘Do you love your father, Sophie?’ ‘Fuck you.’” (33-34)

Once the illusion of domestic security is dispelled by the “crude device operated by simple pressure” (22) hidden under the seat of her grandfather’s Daimler, Sophie ends up preferring “the unvarnished threat and violence of New York” (Malcolm 124) and actually confesses to feeling safe in an “unsafe country”, immune in a “perilous city”: “There’s a sort of comfort, a sort of security, isn’t there, in the absence of disguise, in knowing the way things really are? The land of violence, the land of the gun.” (17) This is only the first example of this protagonist’s paradoxical behaviour, whose main household taboos involve toy guns and photographic equipment, by no means a random combination “since ‘loading’, ‘aiming’ and ‘shooting’ are common to both” (Widdowson 217): “Two things I’ve never allowed in the house. Toy guns (six-shooters, rifles, machine-guns or any form of toy weaponry). And cameras. [...] Cameras, though. That’s more complicated, isn’t it? When every true American child, brought up within a certain income bracket, is directing their first home movie at least by the age of fourteen.” (74) The domestic debate on whether it is really natural for children to play fight-games and unlikely for every child who has “ever played with a toy gun” to actually progress to the real thing is ended by Sophie’s references to the children seen on the news, “with little old hard faces, only eleven or twelve [...] dressed up in combat gear and [...] toting real machine-guns around the way other kids tote baseball bats” (73), and the story of a store keeper dying of a heart-attack after being threatened with a water pistol.

It must be noted however that Sophie is perfectly aware of the potentially hypocritical nature of her attitude to violence, yet cannot help glorifying legendary violence whilst vilifying its contemporary versions: “Am I a hypocrite? I think little boys shouldn’t play with toy guns, but I think Leonidas, holding the pass with his Spartans, was a fine, brave thing. And once I read

Homer because I was told Homer was the greatest. But what else was Homer singing about so deathlessly than these guys with spears sending other guys down to Hades?" (184) It is even more interesting to note that her much-hated father refers to the same glorious age with considerable less disillusionment and, instead of applying his daughter's double standards to antiquity and the present age, sees the Trojan War and all the confrontations following it as equally sinister blood-baths: "How did this happen? And when? In 1918? In 1945? And what does that mean: to *act* naturally? He nods his helmeted head. Agamemnon, leader of men. Does (naturally) what a man has to do. Says yes to war, myth, action, news, classical literature, the death of his daughter. Acts unnaturally." (189) He moreover exposes, in the same witty yet undeniably serious vein, the patron saint of his country as the embodiment of almost gratuitous aggressiveness rather than someone "holy, gentle, saintly. He was this chain-mailed thug, jamming a spear down the throat of a writhing beast." (156)

As for Sophie, however understandable her aversion to weaponry of any kind, even of a relatively harmless nature, her almost greater horror of photography finds its main justification in her strong feelings towards Harry's occupation and above all in her memory of him taking pictures of her grandfather's burning car "like a man caught sleep-walking" with his eyes "jammed up against a camera" (112), a disturbing image that contributes even more than the actual murder to her realization that "there is no escape from history anywhere" (Malcolm 124). Photography, seen throughout the novel as the "emblematic mode in which modern life deceptively reflects and knows itself" (Widdowson 217), is often associated with the need to confirm the truth of what the eyes perceive but the mind fails to comprehend. The story of the American corporal approaching the Nordhausen camp corpses "with a handkerchief held over his nose and mouth" and a new-looking camera round his neck, in a parody of "the determined sightseer desperate to take snaps for the folks back home" suggests the necessity of convincing oneself, of securing some "future proof of what his own eyes were seeing" (108). The excerpt in question also contains a reference to the equally significant role of the camera in "detraining a traumatic experience" (Bényei 48), acting as a shield in whose absence the corporal might not have been able to get so close to the rows of bodies and whose protection is deliberately eschewed by one of the professional news photographers working on the same paper as Harry Beech: "Before the corpses were removed he deliberately went to look at them, because he thought he should do so without the protection, as it were, of his camera." (108)

There is of course yet another view, according to which picture taking, far from merely recording acts of violence, is in itself an aggressive act, stealing the reality of the "remote tribesman who can still be found living in pre-Bronze Age conditions" (196) and augmenting the suffering of innocent victims. This kind of perspective accounts both for Sophie's hatred and disgust and for the hostile and

sometimes downright abusive reactions triggered by Harry's presence – "Did you see?! That bastard with the camera!" (104) – as well as for the widespread failure to understand why anyone would choose such a loathsome profession:

There were always in those days those two kinds of reaction. Either I was this new type of hero, this okay type of hero, a hero without a gun, without a weapon, but flinching at nothing to bring back the truth. Or (the majority?) there was only one thought: What kind of freak, what kind of sicko stands in front of the maimed and dying and desperate, and calmly (calmly! Stands!) snaps their photograph? And what kind of warped mentality *voluntarily* sets out looking for such pictures in the first place? (118)

Perpetually reminded of the contemporary obsession with the aggressive nature of photography and its impact on human lives (Newton 34) the protagonist finds the term invariably used to criticise his choice of subject-matter and implicitly his choice of a career – "Privacy! That was the word that was always flung at me!" (113) – quite inadequate, given the comparative insignificance of his intrusion after the traumas already undergone by his subjects:

Frankly, I found the idea of 'invaded privacy' curiously misplaced. Since the suffering observed in my photographs was frequently the result of quite literal and traumatic invasions. When civilian homes were bombed or communities forced into refugeedom, or even when a soldier was conscripted into a war he did not understand, this was a theft of privacy of much greater significance than any taking of a photo. (116)

The "photograph of Vietnamese mother, with contorted face, holding a blood-soaked child" promptly identified by an interviewer as a source of endless controversy – "But many people took exception to it. They would say that you invade privacy." – is seen by Harry as a perfect example of the absurd and hypocritical invocation of privacy in situations that render the concept meaningless: "I said that in the case of that particular photo, privacy was hardly an issue. The woman's village had just been destroyed by American rockets." (115) It is interesting to note however that when asked about his actual feelings towards his line of work – 'But do you not often feel, when taking your photographs, like an intruder?' – Harry does not deny the intrusive nature of his activity, but accurately identifies this perceived aggression as intrinsic to the very idea of picture taking: "Yes, I did often feel that. Precisely that. But this struck me as being in the nature of photography itself, especially of news photography. You could not photograph the news by prior arrangement. The great value of photography was its actuality, its lack of prejudicial tact, its very power of intrusion." (117) What the protagonist never explicitly spells out is the potentially preventive, possibly even punitive, or at the very least awareness

inducing nature of his shots, their role in forcing his compatriots and the rest of the developed world to visualise atrocities they would otherwise have been blissfully oblivious of, as Harry himself had once been: “Until I went to Nuremberg in ’46 I had not seen, at ground level, any of the damage done to Germany.” (107)

Harry’s end of the war experience in newly liberated camps includes the opportunity to observe local civilians being “made to file past the emaciated corpses in order to witness facts of which, despite their proximity, they had no greater knowledge than the newly arrived Allies” (107) and several decades later he seems to want to make sure that others acknowledge the “different layers of long, dark, twentieth-century history [...] set into a postmodern collage” (Bradbury 434) through the complicated technique of the photographer:

Cut to north-eastern Congo, October ’64. Three prisoners squatting on ground beneath banana-leaf canopy, hands bound behind backs and necks linked with a rope. [...] Cut to Kyrenia, northern Cyprus, April ’64 (and hold on back projection) Interior scene after mortar attack. A teenage boy crouches by a lacerated victim, but at the moment of the photograph his head has swung imploringly round, without yet registering (the last thing he has expected) the camera. His face is a blurred scream for help. (116-118)

The novel also contains reference to one of his famous early shots, ‘Lancaster pilot’, an image of a “suffering figure, picked out from the random carnage of war” (106) conveying at least in its author’s mind connotations not of heroism but of “pain and absurdity” and likely to promote compassion to the point of forgetting the violent potential of the unfortunate young airman: “You think of him as an unsuspecting schoolboy. You do not think - it would seem almost blasphemous to do so - of the many hundreds of men, women and children who were killed or maimed as a result of the raid in which this young pilot took part. You do not think of the bombs stored in the bomb-bay of the now emptied and shot-up plane in the background.” (105)

A similar degree of unawareness seems to characterise the even less sophisticated protagonists of *Waterland* the moment Freddie Parr’s body floats down the Leem and is regarded as “something extraordinary and unprecedented” (4) notwithstanding the fact that “over the far horizon and in the sky a war is being fought; when mothers are losing their sons every day and every night the bombers are taking off and don’t all return.” (33) In Swift’s most critically appreciated novel to date the “oblique representation of war and empire depicted through a brewing dynasty” (Keen 175) entails an even more uncompromising engagement with the “public and private violence of a modernity” perceived as intractable and never-ending and encourages the reader to see in “private violence the symptomatic foreshadowing of an atrocious century” (Stonebridge 8). If *Out of This World* is at the same time a history of the Beech family and “a

history of twentieth-century warfare” (Widdowson 213), *Waterland* constitutes another incursion into the impossibility of keeping ‘history’ and ‘story’ apart (Childs 230) yet tends to focus more on the miniature wars in the life of its protagonists than on the great one, seen merely as “the peripheral but formative context” in which Tom and Mary grow up. While also dealing with “the incursions of the wider world into a smaller community” (Rennison 129), anticipated from the very beginning by the noise of the trains “like the baying of a monster” (3) closing in on them in their isolation, and to a certain extent by the very landscape, concordant with the grisliest and most unsettling experience possible (Bradford 178), the text pays considerably more attention to the equally traumatic micro-history of abortion, murder, suicide and “all manner of other kinds of death” (Bényei 49), not to mention incest, madness and overpowering guilt: “I confess my responsibility, jointly with my wife, for the death of three people.” (314)

The choice of the central event at the level of ‘grande histoire’ seems to be determined by the morbid yet essentially human fascination with gore – quite unchanged over the course of history, from the hunger in the faces of the Place de la Révolution crowd “who watch, wet their lips, jeer and cheer” (270) to the equally blood-thirsty audiences of the present – and by the history teacher’s need to find a subject famous and gripping enough for the blasé teenagers in his class: “Yes, this is the fact that every schoolboy knows about the French Revolution. That it was all to do with guillotines. This is what makes even the most bored and insouciant pupil find History just a little bit engrossing. That hiss-hiss of the descending blades.” (270) However, it must also be noted that while the oppressive presence of the Second World War among the recurrent motifs in Swift’s fiction almost implies that the novelist “‘dates’ his modern world from the catastrophic events of the mass warfare” (Widdowson 214), Tom Crick’s *Modern World* seems to have begun somewhat earlier, “with a Parisian blood-letting” (5) and “six thousand corpses, not to mention the thousands of corpses in greater France” (141). The French Revolution, with its “widespread draining away of blood” (69) and “its quaint notion that it had bestowed on the world a New Beginning” (7) is not the only example of extreme violence under the guise of progress, as Crick’s history lessons contain frequent references to “the great so-called forward” movements of civilization that have invariably brought with them “wars, butcheries, inquisitions and other forms of barbarity” (135), from the “revolutionary messiahs” of 1789 and their prototype, the murder of Caesar (138), to the invention of the aeroplane and the subsequent “widespread destruction of European cities” (136).

Notwithstanding the isolation of the protagonist’s small community – apparently “little affected by [...] the muffled noises-off of world events” (181), unaware of the existence of “guttled cities, refugees, soup kitchens, mass graveyards” (119) – and the general unwillingness to acknowledge the “nasty

things that [...] human nature can get up to” (221), local history is characterised by its fair share of violence, from the men “who cut the throats of King Charles’s Dutch drainers and threw their bodies into the water they were hired to expel” (10) to the “sabre-weaving dragons” (74) summoned to crush the mob running riot in Ely in 1816. It is in a way irrelevant how long it takes “for echoes of the wide world” to penetrate the arguably more peaceful universe inhabited by the Cricks, who listen to news of the rebellion in the Colonies, of Waterloo and Crimea and repeat “what they heard with wide-eyed awe, as if such things were not the stuff of fact but the fabric of a wondrous tale” (18), as history is simultaneously written on a global and local scale. As Tom Crick is forced to learn the hardest possible way, “evil isn’t something that happens far off – it suddenly touches your arm” (35) and history itself is nothing but a “a thin garment, easily punctured by a knife blade called Now” (36), and while the Here and Now can at times unlock “realms of candour and rapture,” (61) it has a tendency to appear more often “dressed in terror” (51). In the protagonist’s case reality imposes itself quite abruptly “in the form of a sodden corpse” (263) and of “livid-tinted blood, drawn by a boat-hook” (61), making him realise that history is more than a myth, a pleasant invention, a fairy-tale: “a series of encounters with the Here and Now gave a sudden pointedness to my studies. Until the Here and Now, gripping me by the arm, slapping my face and telling me to take a good look at the mess I was in, informed me that history was no invention but indeed existed – and I had become part of it.” (62) The narrative stream prompted by this traumatic event gradually reveals that violence in all its forms dominates all the ‘petit récits’ associated with Tom Crick’s family tree, at least on the Atkinson side of the family, from Thomas Atkinson’s “dreadful fit of rage” (84) and Sarah’s “shrieks of the most uncooperative and defiant, of the most hideous and alarming kind” (95) to the “(childish) tantrum” (132) thrown by the teenage Tom on hearing that the “neat and neutral phrase ‘Accidental Death’” (131) did not after all apply to Freddie’s disappearance and his final confrontation with Mary years later when “locked in elemental violence” (266) the history teacher bruises the kidnapped baby and gives their own canine baby-substitute “a sharp, a sudden, a ferocious kick” (268).

As regards the “uncomprehended crime” (Wood 973) at the centre of the novel, it is highly appropriate that the murder weapon is an empty bottle of the infamous Coronation Ale “used first to intoxicate than to bludgeon” and “thus qualifying itself to be regarded in any inquiry into the death of Freddie Parr [...] as Exhibit Number One” (320). It may be the constant bid of water to “recapture its former territory (...) the reclaimed land, land that was once water, and which, even today, is not quite solid” (8) that best reflects the “destructive wrath of intermittently unleashed elemental forces [...] spectacular in its scope and scale” (Guggisberg and Weir ix) yet secondary to human violence. It is however the other liquid element constituting Dick and Tom’s “dynastic historiographical

identity" (Todd 310) which acts as the truly "dangerous conduit through which repressed stories and feelings return" (Bentley 137); which presumably prompts Thomas Atkinson to strike his wife hard on the face (77); which intoxicates an entire community in the summer of 1911 and which drives the only acknowledged heir of Ernest Atkinson to murder and then self-murder. One of the most striking details to be found in the initial chapters of the novel concerns the different elements involved in the evolution of the two families – "whereas the Cricks emerged from water, the Atkinsons emerged from beer" (64) – and by the end of the narrative the fate of their descendants is sealed by the violent potential latent in both liquids.

The unlikely union between a member of the Atkinson dynasty and a descendant of the "stick-in-the-mud Cricks" (63) moreover serves as a reminder of the inevitable coexistence at the heart of every social relationship of overt physical and economic violence and the "violence of credit, confidence, obligation, personal loyalty, hospitality, gifts, gratitude, piety" (Bourdieu 196). While Helen's "knack for telling stories" (2) might have been strong enough to dispel the spectre of madness and incest and convince the "broken-minded" (227) Henry Crick to enter a rather disturbing alliance, the "home and future employment" (230) provided for the former soldier through the offices of his prospective father-in-law represent a clear instance of that most potent form of symbolic violence, the gift that has "the power of founding either dependence (and even slavery) or solidarity" (Bourdieu 196). The reference to the terraced house in Gildsey "bought for the young couple with begrudging magnanimity by the bride's widower father" (338) can be seen to serve above all as yet another reminder of the circular nature of history, seen by the protagonist as nothing but "a series of loops and detours in the journey through time" (Janik 84): "How it repeats itself, how it goes back on itself, no matter how we try to straighten it out. How it twists and turns. How it goes in circles and brings us back to the same place." (142) However, it also suggests the extent to which Tom Crick's marriage to Mary Metcalf is marked by the same "most economical mode of domination" (Bourdieu 196) as his parents' unlikely union, difficult though it may be to attribute that "most refined symbolic violence", "the gentle, invisible form of violence, which is never recognized as such, and is not so much undergone as chosen" (Bourdieu 196) to someone as unsophisticated as farmer Metcalf. Indeed, the true meaning of his final concession is quite clearly revealed by the various references to the beet and potato grower's desire to emulate "the role of gentleman farmer" (46), from the reproving hand that slapped his daughter's for stooping to the lowly work of milking cows, to the punishment inflicted by the same "shamed and angered father, a man capable of stern measures" (117) and the rage directed at his apologetic neighbour: "Harold Metcalf [...] being a farmer of lofty if unrealized ambitions, will not waste the

opportunity to play the high and mighty squire, not to mention the outraged father” before Henry Crick’s “humbled and suppliant serf.” (318)

As regards the actual traces of violence, the first visible mark present in the text is the bruise inflicted by Henry Crick’s boat hook on Freddie’s corpse, conveniently obliterating the similar one left by the murderer but perceived by the superstitious and relatively simple-minded sluice-keeper as “a sin more heinous than to wound the living” (31). However, the several hundred pages between the description of this bruise and that of the less permanent marks on the arms and upper body of the baby stolen by Mary Crick and forcefully retrieved by a husband unable to “suppress the sensation that he is pulling away part of his wife” and “tearing the life out of her” (267) are filled with much more unsettling stories and fragments of history, with “things which happen outside dreams which should only happen in them” (308) and with revelations of wounds that go far beyond the physical level. The protagonist’s father returns from the Great War in 1918 “not only wounded in the knee but profoundly dazed in the mind” as are virtually all the “other bescarred, becrutched and bepatched-up victims” and “would invariably reply that he remembered nothing” (149) when asked about his memories of the War, a walking example of the “splitting or cracking of the ‘self’” of trauma victims “into a conscious history accessible to memory, and an unconscious knowledge which cannot be tapped because the violence of the original event precludes experience” (van Boheemen-Saaf 61). Although she bears no outer signs of the brutal abortion undergone during her adolescence, the protagonist’s wife has to go through life with an invisibly wounded but nonetheless barren womb as well as a maimed consciousness, trauma inscribing in her case a kind of death-in-life, briefly interrupted by an episode of religious fanaticism and finally resulting in enforced isolation from a world she had in actual fact long ceased to inhabit: “She stares, vigilantly and knowingly (the common ruse of the inmate: it’s they who are mad, not me)” (330) As for Tom, the last living descendant of the Cricks and the Atkinsons, he finds himself all alone, his wife locked away in a mental institution, the rest of his family dead, his subject amputated from the school curriculum – “We’re cutting History.” (25) – his only companion an injured retriever as unable to forget its master’s vicious outburst as its master is to find peace: “He can’t sleep. [...] He’s afraid of the dark. And when he does sleep – what dreams!” (331)

When the leader of “the Holocaust Club – the Anti-Armageddon League” (236) uses the evidence of “certain topics of the day (the Afghan crisis, the Tehran hostages, the perilous and apparently unhaltable build-up of nuclear arms)” to support his conviction that history “got to the point where it’s probably about to end” (7) Tom Crick recalls having already had in 1946 a “vision of the world in ruins” (240) which never became reality. However reassuring this detail might have appeared at that particular point in the narrative, the uncomfortable

suspicion that the dreams he goes on to have might be considerably more appalling than his students' collective nightmares suggests that it is private rather than public violence that wounds more deeply. Swift's novels generally hint at the power of narration as a way of overcoming trauma, and the main reason why *Waterland* has been perceived as the most negative in tone is that its narrative seems to offer "no hope, no point of exit out of its multilayered circularity" in which every moment of time is hollowed out by the repetition of the same traumatic event (Bényei 52), in which history "undergoes periodic convulsions" (137) and demands every so often "a bloodbath, a holocaust, an Armageddon" (141). The impression that *Waterland* "identifies 'event' with trauma" (Bényei 49) and 'history' with 'violence' is corroborated by the fact that, despite their best efforts to escape their Fen origins, the Atkinsons invariably fall victim to "heavy drinking, madness and sudden acts of violence" (17) including both murder and suicide, although there is a considerable difference between the dramatic exit performed by Ernest Atkinson, who "put the muzzle of a loaded shot-gun into his mouth, and pulled the trigger" (235) and the drowning of his (grand)son Dick, in a way a mere return to the aquatic origin of all life. Narrative is the only defence the less privileged but perhaps more fortunate Cricks have against "the great flat monotony of reality; the wide empty space of reality", the melancholia and self-murder by no means uncommon in the Fens: "How did the Cricks outwit reality? By telling stories. [...] While the Atkinsons made history, the Cricks spun yarns." (17) The most important stage in Henry Crick's recovery is his understanding of the fact that telling stories constitutes an essential part of the healing process – "Don't erase it. You can't erase it. But make it into a story." (225) – and the reader's assessment of the tone of the novel greatly depends on whether one sees his son's decision to stop teaching history proper and instead recount the story of his family as a harbinger of hope or an exercise in futility. After entrusting his wife to the care of psychiatrists, the protagonist "tells himself stories" to comfort himself and remarks that "We all wander from the real world, we all come to our asylums" (331) and it is perhaps up to the individual reader to decide whether Tom's ability to use narrative to keep madness and suicidal thoughts at bay is enough to outweigh the ancestral streak that threatens to turn him into a mere link in a yet unbroken cycle of violence.

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