

WATERLAND: A POSTMODERN STORY OF REVOLUTION

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Abstract: This study analyzes *Waterland* as a postmodern *Bildungsroman* by emphasizing its poststructuralist content and form. Graham Swift's novel reflects the postmodern individual's infinite quest to understand himself and the world. The quest reveals a post-structural essence that is marked with concepts such as différance and cyclicity where meaning is infinitely deferred. Thus, the *Existenz* of the postmodern individual bears a fluid, in other words cyclical nature, which is also reflected in the novel's new historicist approach to reality and history. This study aspires to display the temporality of *Existenz* which is shaped in relation to social structure and to the interpretation of life's significance in a postmodernist paradigm.

Key Words: *Bildungsroman*, Graham Swift, *Waterland*, Postmodernism, Post-Structuralism, *Existenz*, Existentialism, Identity, New Historicism.

Waterland: Postmodern bir Devrim Hikâyesi

Özet: Bu çalışmada *Waterland*, post-yapısalcı özellikler taşıyan içerik ve şekline dikkat çekilerek, postmodern bir *Bildungsroman* olarak incelenmiştir. Graham Swift'in romanı, postmodern bireyin kendisini ve dünyayı sonu gelmeyen bir arayışla anlamlandırmaya çalışmasını konu edinir. Bu arayış, mananın sürekli ertelendiği, farklılaşma, öteleme ve döngüsellik gibi kavramlarla öne çıkan post-yapısalcı özellikler sergilemektedir. Böylece, postmodern bireyin varoluşu 'değişken, bir başka ifadeyle döngüsel bir özelliktir ki bu durum, romanın gerçekliğe ve tarihe bakışında sergilediği yeni tarihselci yaklaşımında da görülmektedir. Bu çalışmayla, postmodern bir paradig-mada sosyal yapıya ve hayatın anlamına dair farklı yorumlamalara göre şekillenen varoluşun zamana bağlılığını göstermek amaçlanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Bildungsroman*, Graham Swift, *Waterland*, Postmodernizm, Post-Yapısalcılık, Varoluş, Varoluşçuluk, Öz Kimlik, Yeni Tarihselcilik.

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1. Introduction

Post-structuralism comes as a criticism of structuralism and differs from it by concentrating on the paradigmatic approach to the attribution of meaning to text and reality. Rather than depending on the one dimensional reality of a syntagmatic approach, it analyses the paradigmatic relations in the history of human knowledge that Michel Foucault calls “the archaeology of knowledge.” The intertextual method of post-structuralism provides a broader presentation of reality and knowledge. Moreover, the author earns credibility and reliability in his writing by bringing more than one paradigmatic reality together. In this sense, Graham Swift makes use of ancestral stories of the protagonist Tom Crick and creates a relation between the paradigms of the past and the paradigms of the present. By narrating ancestral stories, Tom is able to perceive the clumsiness of structural reality. As he establishes reality on a paradigmatic level, he is able to make conclusions about his *Existenz*. Graham Swift centers the Derridean idea that reality is versatile or even unreliable, which is operated by the endless chain of differing signifiers, on the novel’s assertion of the essence of *Existenz*. Similar to the concept of the endless chain of signifiers, history in Swift’s novel is described as a never-ending cyclical system where one traces his/her *Existenz* in the past and present [signifiers] in an attempt to find a transcendental signified that would give meaning to the deferred reality.

Waterland also exhibits a new historicist approach to reality and history, which is operated via the concept of “cyclical history” throughout the novel. New historicism is a new interpretation of history, which involves a contextual and relativistic approach that renounces progressivism and connects the present to the past. It also suggests that place and time add layers of meaning to both personal and public experience. Similar to the reader-response theory that emphasizes the primary role of the reader to create the meaning of the text on a personal level, history gains a personal aspect in the specific context of an individual. In other words, new historicism is the interpretation of “history” in the context of personal experience, so that the subjective entity of the individual in a specific cultural context forms history as a flexible and unreliable flow of experiences.

In accordance with Derrida’s theory that written language is a signifier of spoken language, so that written language differs from the spoken, new historicism highlights the fact that history is a written form of signification. As a written form, history is a textual discourse that is developed in a subjective form. Thus, history is a form of fiction: “[...] historiography, contrary to nineteenth-century realist models which urged the pursuit of ‘scientific’ objectivity, necessarily employs literary conventions” (Rubinson, 2000, p. 161). As Rubinson implies, historiography involves literary conventions that are exposed in the very act of the narration of historical events. Being narrated and written down,

history changes hands and becomes a subjective form of reality rather than being the literal, objective and factual reality. That is why, Tom Crick, the troubled history teacher of the novel, rejects the formal discourse of history and creates a more reliable discourse that he calls "his story," which is a postmodern act of defying what is called reality and truth. It is possible to say that this new historicist defiance to the grand narrative of history is a revolution in a post-modern sense.

2. The Fens, Cyclical *Existenz*, and Ancestral Stories

The Fens, or also the Fenland, is an essential motif of the novel. While the stories of Tom Crick's youth and of his ancestors are set in the Fenland, Tom's present housing is in Greenwich, which is also known to be on the zero-degree longitude. Thus, Tom's present day perspective from Greenwich is a symbol of the intermingling of past, present, and future. Time in this sense is on the level zero where past is present and present is past. It suggests that there is a perpetual connection between the "here and now" and history. Accordingly, the stories Tom narrates do not compose a straight storyline as a traditional *Bildungsroman* does. The narration opens in Tom's childhood, then it goes to the ancestral history of the Crick family, and at times jumps back to the present. In this conjunctive state of time, the Fens reveal the sediment of the past which come to the surface when the waters recede:

Who would opt for this endless and stationary war against mud? [...] It would dull even the brightest soul. And yet it has to be done. Because it won't go away. [...] Because silt, as we know it, is the builder and destroyer of land, the usurper of rivers, the foe of drainage. There's no simple solution. We have to keep scooping, scooping up from the depths this remorseless stuff that time leaves behind (Swift, 2010, p. 342).

The Fenland is a marshy region, basically "a low-lying region of eastern England" (Swift, 2010, p. 15), and "the chief fact about the Fens is that they are reclaimed land, land that was once water, and which, even today, is not quite solid" (Swift, 2010, p. 16). The town is situated at the junction of the rivers Leem and Ouse; so with the water's movement the accumulation of silt creates a swampy ground where the biggest problem is drainage (Swift, 2010, p. 17). The Fens is the place where Tom grew up and left in 1945, at the age of eighteen, to join the army in Europe. Tom's memories and stories expose the presence of the Fens – the past – in the here and now. Tom asks and answers: "What is this thing that takes us back, either via catastrophe and confusion or in our heart's desire, to where we were? Let's call it Natural History" (Swift, 2010, p. 141). This cyclicity is truly revolutionary; in fact, Tom describes revolution as

“a turning round, a completing of a cycle. [...] A reaffirmation of what is pure and fundamental against what is decadent and false. A return to a new beginning” (p. 141). With the symbolism of the Fenland, history appears as a cycle of events where one never arrives at an origin. The supposed beginning of history or a historical event is actually an effect of a prior cause, in which case the idea of an original starting point can only be identified as a “transcendental signified.”

Frequently, Tom also refers to the rise and fall of the river water. He relates the high and low tides to the experiences of his family and his life: “For centuries the Cricks remain untouched by the wide world. [...] Till history performs one of its backward somersaults and courts destruction. The waters return” (Swift, 2010, p. 26). Here, Tom points out to two destructions: One is the First World War itself which is the reason for a worldwide tragedy and loss haunting the generation that grew up with it. Tom’s uncle and father, George and Henry Crick are summoned to the army in 1917 where Henry is wounded in his knee. The war befalls him as a harsh reality: “He [Henry] thinks: there is only reality, there are no stories left” (Swift, 2010, p. 27). Secondly, at the expense of recruiting men into the army, the tasks of drainage and reclamation are left unattended, which causes flooding and excessive silting (Swift, 2010, p. 26). However, a specific success or failure does not represent a complete story. Life is fluid and it is the whole story that is to be evaluated. Neither failure nor success is permanent. So, Henry “recovers” (Swift, 2010, p. 27): He marries Helen, the nurse who cares for his wound.

The cyclical nature of history and experience that is symbolized by the activity of water signifies that success and failure, progress and regress, coexist. Contrary to the illusion that a specific development bears positive results only, Tom illustrates the natural flow of history as not as objective as it is presented:

It cannot be denied, children, that the great so-called forward movements of civilization, whether moral or technological, have invariably brought with them an accompanying regression. [...] That the invention of the aeroplane led to the widespread destruction of European cities along with their civilian populations during the period 1939 to ’45 [...]. And as for the splitting of the atom – (p. 139)

Tom gives multiple examples about this coexistence of success and failure in the ancestral stories and personal experience. In fact, the motif of inevitable failure is at the heart of each of his stories. This way, Tom deconstructs the notion that history is a series of independent events that end either in success or failure, or that it develops in a progressive motion:

It goes in two directions at once. It goes backward as it goes forward. It loops. It takes detours. Do not fall into the illusion that history is a well-disciplined and unflagging column marching unswervingly into the future. (Swift, 2010, p. 139)

The course of success and failure within the cycle of history resembles silt, “because silt obstructs as it builds; unmakes as it makes” (Swift, 2010, p. 19); “silt provides a gloss on the course of narrative-guided, repetitive history more generally and suggests that the process of making history tends to defy the very significance at which it aims” (Decoste, 2002, p. 389). History loses its claim to progress and be objective while constructing reality, and reveals a “seed of self-contradiction” (Decoste, 2002, p. 390). As a general comparison, history bears a cyclical nature just like water. As waters return eventually, the past returns as well in a cyclical form, which Swift (2010) explains in the introduction as the “intent on creating and preserving some permanent present tense” (p. xi). Swift demonstrates that misfortune is not left back forever, it is in the here and now and it can happen again at any time, and humanity does not progress from the past to the present by leaving misfortune behind and by expecting a growing success.

Neither Tom nor the others can escape their pasts. *Existenz* is tied to the exploration and evaluation of the past, because the past naturally surfaces in the present: “something in nature wants to go back” (Swift, 2010, p. 24). Unless the individual explores his past and accepts what he has become out of it, the journey will not be an existential experience. While Tom manages to survive his existential journey, the unaccomplished self is doomed to fail in some way or another. Dick, one of the weak characters who cannot manage this, commits suicide by letting himself be taken by the water – the cyclicity of history, the returning past. The secrets of the past revealed by the returning past lead Dick’s story to an end. Similarly, Tom’s wife Mary is doomed to a mental institution because she has not been able to get settled with her past. Graham Swift makes use of multiple characters and their stories to complete the story of Tom. In a postmodern setting, the value of *Existenz* of an individual is tightly connected to environment and experience, so that the places one has been and the people one has known interact with the core of the individual: “And that is why to record part of himself, Tom must also record so many other histories, for they all intertwine, echo, and reverberate; causes, responsibilities, limits become difficult to locate” (Landow, 1990, n.p.).

As Gannon (2014) indicates in her article “Walter Besant’s Democratic Bildungsroman,” side characters are included to support the development of the protagonist:

[...] minor characters are made use of and cast off as the protagonist achieves full development. Indeed, through this formal technique, many bildungsromans suggest that the minor characters cannot be protagonists because they are of inferior intelligence, incapable of developing rich interior lives. (p. 378)

Moreover, the accounts of Dick as a retarded boy and Mary as a troubled woman who cannot have a baby after her miscarriage, reflect the postmodern sensibility toward the marginal and ignored realities of the periphery. As Jones (2011) states, it is “the others” that are included in the postmodern *Bildungsroman*: “The bildungsroman now reflects the diversity of authorial experience, including the lives and cultures of others such as women, the disabled, gays and lesbians, immigrants, the diasporic, and the girl” (p. 446).

When Tom deconstructs history, he is faced with the “value and danger of knowledge” (Janik, 1989, p. 74), which he desperately manages to handle. In fact, the ambiguous feeling in Tom stems from the failures of his family members. He sees that his wife and brother cannot hold on to life because they cannot manage with the “value and danger of knowledge” that emerges from the past. While they prefer to forget the bad memories, Tom prefers to face them, because forgetting an incident does not prevent it from striking the present day. He is the one character who survives the cyclical nature of life by deconstructing the given meaning and then adding meaning of his own. In this way, he not only escapes from the externally structured, synthetic reality, but also avoids falling into a potential emptiness of meaning as Janik (1989) points out: “Making history, like the Atkinsons, and telling stories about it, like the Cricks, are two different ways to outwit the emptiness we glimpse (and fear) at the heart of reality” (p. 85). Although it may seem a danger, a potential emptiness of meaning is also an opportunity for the individual to create an authentic existential meaning. Thus, the postmodern individual gains independence and forms an existential reality for himself through the emptiness of reality. In other words, history changes from being a signifier of a certain reality to being a signified whose meaning is infinitely deferred. As such, reality is an “empty vessel” (Swift, 2010, p. 46) which can be loaded with any desired meaning. Decoste (2002) writes that “What Crick’s narrative reveals about narrative itself is that it tends to carry us inexorably back to reality’s void, and thus to undermine narrative’s very project of infusing the world with order and significance” (p. 388). This is the level where objectivity and order are no more, and story-telling is appreciated as a way to ascribe meaning to *Existenz*.

Tom’s ancestral stories reveal the paradigmatic pattern of reality. He narrates stories of the Atkinsons – the maternal ancestry of Tom – and stories of the Cricks – the paternal ancestry of Tom – just to display a similar pattern of

Existenz, which is characterized with rises and falls in no progressive way but rather in a fluid way – similar to the movement of water. As Tom narrates once a story of the ancestry and another time a present-day incident in an overlapping style, the paradigmatic structure becomes more apparent as it reveals similarities between the past and the present. Notably, there is a vital difference between the Cricks and the Atkinsons. While the former are a story-telling family, the latter live in the here and now, and “what moves them [Atkinsons] is indeed none other than that noble and impersonal Idea of Progress” (Swift, 2010, p. 97). As Berlatsky (2006) explains, the Atkinsons represent “the patriarchal metanarrative of progress and expansion [...] which parallels closely the expansion of the British Empire” (p. 264). He adds that it is a “masculinist paradigm of narrative” (p. 264) which “excludes many others” (p. 265). Tom displays the inevitable fall of the patriarchal, i.e. the master narrative, through the success and failure stories of the Atkinsons.

The story of the Atkinsons displays the theme of unsustainable progress, which Decoste (2002) explains:

Swift’s text thus asserts that any apparent advance brings with it the promise of new terror, that human works lay the grounds for their own subversion, that history, both as a narrative imposition of meaning and as the actions undertaken in accordance with this narrative, will return with dread regularity to the horror of the real. (p. 388)

Starting with Thomas Atkinson, an ancestral grandfather of Tom’s mother Helen, the Atkinsons build a fortune on land reclamation, which is, as the nature of history begets, intervened by misfortunes. The rise of the Atkinson family is sustained by breweries, drainage, and control of the navigation of the river Leem. It seems that their fortune has no point of climax, that it grows and grows, until Thomas strikes his young wife Sarah for unjustified reasons of jealousy, and Sarah loses her mind as a result. Thomas suffers a lifelong remorse for this incident which destroys all the success of his life. The past is always haunting Thomas with the presence of his mad wife Sarah. When both Thomas and Sarah die, their sons George and Alfred prefer forgetfulness, which is an “ever-recurring need to begin again, to wipe the slate, erase the past and look to the sparkling landmarks of the future” (Swift, 2010, p. 87) in order to start building a new empire of the Atkinsons. However, they fail to notice that the past – the waters – will return (p. 108) and cause another misfortune, which Tom calls “move[ing] in circles” (p. 140); so there is no paradise (p. 145) or salvation to be awaited (p. 140). After the death of Sarah, “the Atkinsons beers [...] show a gradual yet distinct decline” (p. 110).

When Thomas' great-great-grandson Ernest Atkinson inherits the Atkinson brewery and lock system, he sustains the growth of the family heritage by developing the beer. The beer of the Atkinson Brewery is progressively perfected and called the Coronation Ale, but soon the Atkinson brewery burns down and the fortune of the Atkinsons is yet again interrupted by a decline. Adding to the misery, Ernest and his daughter Helen start an incestuous relationship. After leaving a letter to his prospective son, he kills himself. Meanwhile in the present, Henry has to bear the fact that his son Dick is actually an incestuous child of his wife Helen and her father Ernest.

Tom's father Henry Crick is a war veteran. He returns from the world war as a limping man who chooses to "forget what a mad place the world is" (Swift, 2010, p. 223). However, Helen Atkinson, the nurse whom he later marries, teaches him "a way of making sense of madness" (Swift, 2010, p. 225). Madness, of course, is forgetfulness, "but that's just a trick of the brain. That's like saying: I don't care to remember, and I don't want to talk about it" (Swift, 2010, p. 223). Henry learns from Helen that the past cannot be "erased," but one can "make it into a story" (Swift, 2010, p. 226). While Henry loses his sense of reality until the "miracle" arrives in the form of Helen, as time lapses he is struck with other miseries such as "the ill luck that took away, six years ago [in 1937], his wife; the ill luck that had his first son born a freak, a potato-head (for that's what Dick is). And more curses, more curses perhaps, as yet unknown" (Swift, 2010, p. 39); the greatest curse being the incest of his wife and the reality that Dick is not his son.

The stories expand over generations and all reveal a similar structure of reality where the failures of the past return in a new form to the present day. The individual has two choices to form his *Existenz*: either forget the past and ignore the probability of failure, or forgive the past and accept that failure is an integral part of reality. Thomas is faced with the reality that fortune is not ever-lasting. Ernest fails to notice the recurrent past; "he felt a great vacuum inside him and he started to fill it with beer" (Swift, 2010, p. 234) which symbolizes forgetfulness. George and Alfred fail for reasons of forgetfulness: they hope for a paradise while they are suddenly struck with a misfortune. Henry's life bears the misfortunes of the past. Dick prefers drunkenness and forgetfulness as he cannot forgive the past. First, he kills Freddie Parr after drinking a bottle of ale – intensifying his drunkenness. Upon learning that he is an incestuous child, "he blurts out, as if it's all his fault, as if he, being the effect, is to blame for the cause" (Swift, 2010, p. 321). He can neither forgive the past nor make sense of it.

In an understanding of history as a fluid entity, the postmodern individual "can avoid both mindless optimism and hopeless despair" (McKinney, 1997, p. 821). While the Atkinsons are a victim of their "mindless optimism" which is

rooted in the perpetual “idea of progress,” Mary is the victim of her “hopeless despair” as she fails to heal herself out of the trauma of the past. On the other hand, Tom’s awareness that progress and regress replace each other in the cyclical nature of history helps him to sustain his *Existenz*.

3. “History” versus “His Story”

Tom Crick has worked as a history teacher in Greenwich, London, since he returned from the war in the year 1947 and married his childhood date Mary. His career ends when his wife steals a baby and the crime is made public through the local paper. However, there is an earlier change in Tom’s career. He leaves the official course of the syllabus and narrates personal stories upon one of his student’s, Price’s, underestimating remarks on history, claiming it to be a fairy-tale of past events that are unnecessary and unrelated to the present and future. Also the headmaster of the school, Lewis Scott, forcibly convinces Tom into an early retirement and adds that he plans to close the department of history as “an unavoidable reduction” (Swift 2010, p. 29). Obviously the headmaster, himself a physics and chemistry teacher, perceives history as a useless area of study. When he admits his distaste for history, he implies that history has no “practical relevance to today’s real world” (p. 29), reflecting the pragmatism of the structuralist approach and its inadequacy to make connections.

Lewis’ attitude resembles, as Southgate (2009) puts, to the empiricism of nineteenth and twentieth centuries, according to which “historians accept their own exclusion from any confrontation with issues that are contemporary or of practical importance” (p. 12). Thus, history is merely “an anodyne theoretical construction of no practical consequence, concerned only with the recital of [...] banalities” (Southgate, 2009, p. 12). Southgate (2009) states that history “as a modern ‘science’” (p. 12) “seemed to deny the validity of just those qualities and characteristics that are most prized in the humanities, including the expression of subjective experience, imagination, feeling, and a sense of wonder” (p. 13). Although Tom knows that Lewis is not pleased with his new teaching method, he continues to do what he thinks is true. By challenging the grand narrative, which connotes objectivity and empiricism as well as lack of connection between past and present, Tom revolutionarily follows

[...] the direction that history, both in theory and in practice, is now taking; a direction that leads toward a redefinition of the subject that embraces heart as well as head, feeling as well as reason, color as well as grey (or black and white) (Southgate, 2009, p. 13).

Lewis represents authority and its overwhelming influence that demands submission. He is “defending stability at all costs” (Irish, 1998, p. 924), while Tom “tends to undermine attempts to totalize” (Irish, 1998, p. 925). The domi-

nance of authority is also noted in the relationship between religion and society. As the objectivity of history is questioned, the objectivity of religion is also undermined and religion is seen as a tool to impose an authorized meaning on others:

One of the Bible's ideological functions, then, is to ensure obedience, presumably to God but in reality to the various secular and religious authorities who assume the privilege of interpreting it. The willingness with which people default that interpretation to others is the principle danger of such texts (Rubinson, 2000, p. 166).

While Lewis represents positivist and formalist authority and thus escapes reality, Mary escapes reality by taking refuge in the assumed objectivity of religion. She steals a baby from the street with an excuse that she believes will justify her: “God told me. God...” (p. 268). However, Tom outlines the post-modern stance to God, who is no longer a useful voice of the real: “We’ve grown up now, and we don’t need him any more, our Father in Heaven. [...] God’s for simple, backward people in God-forsaken places” (p. 268). The “Father in Heaven” image connotes God as an authority who watches people from above and demands obedience. However, God has lost its reliability as authority and objectivity are demolished by postmodernism. As the area of knowledge and reality is limited under the circumstances of a commanding God, religion is no longer a reliable determinant of *Existenz*.

Externalizing a post-structural essence, Tom’s perception of history is something that is outside formal the order, or more than the order has to offer, which eludes “a structural invasion that failed to recognize its [history’s] movement, spontaneity, and internal dynamism” (Foucault, 2002, p. 224). Realizing this, Tom ceases teaching the structural grand narrative of history to his class, and instead, starts narrating stories. The grand narrative fails to connect the past to the here and now and to the future – hence Price’s objection to history: he wants a future on which he believes the past has no effect (p. 145). However, history is not only about the past; history happens in the here and now as well, so that past, present, and future events are intrinsically connected: “It’s a curious thing, Price, but the more you try to dissect events, the more you lose hold of them – the more they seem to have occurred largely in people’s imagination...” (p. 144).

The postmodern opposition to the grand narrative is also related to the grand narrative’s assumption that the modern discourse of reality is constructed on a system of idealism that actually generates only a self-proclaimed objectivity. As Marais (2014) observes through John Fowles’ postmodern Bildungsroman, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, the postmodern “concern is thus with the episte-

mology of literary forms, which because steeped in specific understandings of reality, do not simply describe that reality constatively but predispose readers to see it in certain ways – manipulating, misleading, and even lying to them” (p. 253). Postmodernism presents the ultimate subjectivity of reality which can be better traced through personal stories than general history. As Tom says,

[...] remember that for each protagonist who once stepped on to the stage of so-called historical events, there were thousands, millions, who never entered the theatre – who never knew that the show was running – who got on with the donkey-work of coping with reality (p. 46).

Moreover, the individual is more likely to change rather than develop into perfection, because perfection does not define cyclical *Existenz*. Just as history is a never-ending cycle, the story of an individual indicates a lifelong process too. Thus, Tom does not evolve into a perfect individual. His problems are still existent at the end of the novel. In a postmodern setting, “the individual is present not as the expression of a coherent self, but as the central problem of the story. [...] For posthuman subjects, these are stories about learning what it means to be human” (Davin Heckman, as cited in Jones, 2011, p. 446). Appropriate to the postmodern reality, his story presents awareness and change that does not have a final conclusion at the end of the novel since Tom’s story is still developing just as time and history develop. Tom explains this to his students as being “realistic”: “I taught you that by forever attempting to explain we may come, not to an Explanation, but to a knowledge of the limits of our power to explain” (p. 113). So, Tom’s *Bildung* is not toward an ultimate truth or ideal self. In fact, “Crick’s reality refuses to satisfy our longing for purpose and looms instead as an inescapable ontological ‘something’ which is also a metaphysical or semiological ‘nothing’” (Decoste, 2002, p. 381).

In addition, his development represents “bildung not as the achievement of ‘inner culture’—or the individual’s realization of an ideal self through the cultivation of private subjectivity—but as a collective process that contributes to the development of humanity through the act of imagining an ideal, democratic nation” (Gannon, 2014, p. 373). Of course idealism, if understood as perfection, is not a substantive element of reality. Apparently, “an ideal nation” refers to the “democratic” state of a society where the mind is free from an “imperfect” (in the sense that it lacks the paradigmatic connection of the past to the present), structural reality. Tom Crick’s resolution to renounce History as a History teacher signifies that he wants to change the order, at least, by his individual effort in the school. Although his students, and especially Price, confront Tom’s understanding of the confluence of the past and present, in the end they protest against the headmaster’s decision to dismiss Tom. During the farewell speech,

Price, much to Tom's surprise, cries loudly: "No cuts! Keep Crick!" (p. 332). It is possible to say that Tom's revolution has a social aspect. But then, it is to have a social aspect because what he deals with is not personal. Tom discusses concepts such as history and reality which necessarily concern the community. As a result, his reflections on the issue of *Existenz* address the public audience rather than being mere personal insights.

Similarly, linearity is as unrealistic as perfection. Past is not past for the human mind; it associates the past with the present and the future, and thus, overcomes the traditional notion of time and makes it an overwhelming entity instead. The novel conjugates past and present in a new historicist sense by fragmenting the narration with Tom's ancestral stories: "Since Waterland is built of such repeated digressions, they become the pattern, and each digression becomes something to decode, modifying a reader's response and undermining the possibility of a master narrative" (Irish, 1998, p. 926). The fragmented storyline not only keeps the suspense but also creates a complex structure. Moreover, such fragmentation and complexity serve to the postmodern sense of cyclical *Existenz*, which does not have a "closure": "[...] throughout the novel closure is avoided through the many digressions, which themselves are interrupted rather than closed. Such untidiness both opens narrative possibility and upsets story order" (Irish, 1998, p. 928). Accordingly, neither the ending of the novel where Dick drowns himself, nor Tom's present state where he is left jobless and his wife is institutionalized, offers a final conclusion. In the first case, he feels "obscurity" and what he notices lastly is "a motor-cycle" (Swift, 2010, p. 355) (emphasis added). Tom's personal story in the present ends ambiguously but it still reflects change: "Crick doesn't know what to say" (Swift, 2010, p. 333) for he is surprised by Price's reaction, which shows that Tom has changed his students as well as himself. From this point of view, Tom's development is a complex one. With regard to its postmodern character, it involves not only personal but also social drives. For this reason, Tom's development is traced through the stories of characters he chooses to narrate. By learning about other characters through Tom's comments, the reader is at the same time informed about Tom and his conception of reality.

Being a senior history teacher, Tom realizes that what he teaches as history is just another form of constructed narrative. The narration of the past, be it general history or personal stories, is ultimately a discourse. While history is perceived as an objective account of events, it is nothing more than a perspective on the events: "That is, the illusory 'wholeness' and 'completeness' of narrative creates the illusion that the subjective, random, or ideological choices of the historian of what to include seem natural, whole, and inviolate" (Berlatsky, 2006, p. 257). So it is no doubt that history is a subjective narration of the past. While Tom's outstanding student, Price, calls history a fairy-tale of past events

for the reason that “what matters is the here and now. Not the past. The here and now – and the future” (p. 14), Tom’s perspective on history as a fairy-tale is based on its constructed composition of the past in a subjective manner that claims to be objective, and points out that reality can be different and many-sided than what the history book offers:

So we closed our textbooks. Put aside the French Revolution. So we said goodbye to that old and hackneyed fairy-tale with its Rights of Man, liberty caps, cockades, tricolours, not to mention hissing guillotines, and its quaint notion that it had bestowed on the world a New Beginning (Swift, 2010, p. 14).

Thus, Tom tells his story. “Children, be curious. [...] People die when curiosity goes. People have to find out, people have to know. How can there be any true revolution till we know what we’re made of?” (Swift, 2010, p. 207). Post-modern existential accomplishment, which Tom calls “revolution,” depends on the quality of knowledge. If knowledge is limited to what we are told is reality, it is not possible to have an existential revolution: “What every world-builder, what every revolutionary wants a monopoly in: Reality. [...] So shall we get back to the syllabus?” (Swift, 2010, p. 207). Tom, who says he “is no longer sure what’s real and what isn’t” (p. 47), realizes that history as a series of events listed in the syllabus represents only the monopolist reality of the grand narrative. He bypasses this fake reality by prioritizing his own narrative over the grand narrative. After all, story-telling is a tradition of the Crick family, and it has an important function: “How did the Cricks outwit reality? By telling stories” (Swift, 2010, p. 25). While the trauma of tragic events drags most people to forget the tragedy rather than face and accept it, story-telling is a form of reconciliation between the past and the present in order to construct a sustainable reality.

History has no end, but the beginning of history is as unknown as the end: “Whywhywhy has become 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?” (Swift, 2010, p. 112). But asking questions is still better than forgetfulness (p. 113). Accordingly, the floating dead body on the river where Tom’s father Henry is employed as a lock-keeper functions as a starting point for the revelation of ancestral and personal stories of Tom. The dead body of Freddie Parr is a set point from where the before and after is traced.

Back in childhood, there lies a story revolving around sexuality that affects the future of Tom and his family. In a summer day of 1940, Tom, his brother Dick, his friends Freddie Parr, Peter Baine, Terry Coe, and the girls Mary and Shirley, sit on the banks of the Hockwell Lode (p. 183). Tom and Mary are thir-

teen years old at that time, like all the others except Dick, who is a seventeen-year-old “potato head.” As curiosity “simmers” naturally, they arrange a swimming competition whose winner can see Mary’s private parts. Dick is surprisingly the winner, but the other boys play a joke on Mary and finally Freddie puts an eel into Mary’s pants.

Mary and Tom grow intimate when the two travel to school together. Their relationship gains a sexual aspect upon Mary’s implacable curiosity, and she gets pregnant in 1942, at the age of fifteen. When Dick learns about her pregnancy, he assumes it is Freddie Parr’s misdeed; so he kills him. Mary gets a crude abortion, which is the cause of her lifelong infertility.

When they get married in 1947, both of them know that they cannot have children. They also do not adopt a child, because it “is not the real thing” (p. 132). For reality must be cleared from illusions and deceptions. At the core, reality is “an empty vessel” (p. 46) whose meaning is infinitely deferred, while the emptiness is constantly filled with meaning. Thus, history is ascribed with a subjective meaning whose substance is fluid and changes according to the present-day conditions of the interpreter. Coherence is a vital element of reality, for it prevents past incidents from a loss of meaning. However, the coherence of the stories is subjective. “In *Waterland*, the reader is faced with a story that both promises and undermines coherency” (Irish, 1998, p. 928) since it undermines the coherency of the grand narrative, and at the same time, structures a subjective but personally coherent story out of the past. That is why reality is a continuous and cyclical entity where, as Foucault (2002) states, one cannot decode past events and “discourses [...] without discovering the profound continuity that links them, and leads them to the point at which we can grasp them” (p. 221). Mary manages to uphold her *Existenz* to a certain degree by trying to forget the past, but her forgetfulness leads to a failure to accept and forgive the reality of not being able to have a child. It is understood that she forgets instead of forgiving the past, so that when the nostalgia of the past, which is the inevitable result of a circular movement of reality, strikes her around thirty years later, she is literally defeated by it. As Cooper (1996) suggests, *Waterland* portrays “the past as evanescent but everywhere inscribed” (p. 374). Mary cannot maintain the meaning of her *Existenz* against the harsh face of reality which is “everywhere inscribed.” Instead of creating a story out of her past and the here and now, she creates an illusionary reality which she calls “a miracle”: “God came down to Safeways and left her a gift, a free product” (p. 309). Not being able to handle and control reality but rather attributing her forgetfulness to God, Mary fails her *Existenz* and ends up in a mental institution.

Likewise, Dick fails to sustain his *Existenz* when he is faced with the reality of being a child of incest. Dick – potato head – is the rotten product of Helen and her father Ernest Atkinson, who engage in a love relationship until Helen

marries Henry Crick. Ironically, Ernest wants a child from Helen, who will later be the “Saviour of the World” (p. 228). The Saviour of the World turns out to be a potato head, because there is no world to be saved: “this world which we like to believe is sane and real is, in truth, absurd and fantastic” (Swift, 2010, p. 234). The savior of an absurd world can only be a retard. In this sense, Dick symbolizes the falsity and delusion of the constructed reality of History as the grand narrative, which fails in the last analysis. “Where narrative is said to explain the inexplicable, Dick is presented as the failure of explanation” (Berlatsky, 2006, p. 282). Accordingly, Dick drowns himself in the river Ouse. The novel ends with the symbolism of the death of the “Saviour of the World,” in other words, the defeat of history and traditional narrative in the form of a progressive and linear account of reality.

One of the greatest postmodern fears is the end of the world, which Tom’s student Price frequently points to: “The only important thing about history is that history has reached the stage where it might be coming to an end” (p. 157). However, Tom believes that history proves otherwise. Progress succeeds regress, and regress succeeds progress in a constant flow. So, there is no end of history at the point where it is anticipated to end. What happens is that the cycle of progress and regress begins once more: “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” (Swift, 2010, p. 146).

Tom outwits reality, but he does not fall into the trap of sticking to the past or present while telling his stories. He is aware that reality is circular; it has no definite beginning or end so that one cannot attach one’s *Existenz* to a certain level of it only and exclude oneself from other parts, nor does it progress forward. As the exploration of the past is unending, the formation of the individual does not end either: “self-mastery is never final, but rather always tenuous, because the self, in its incompleteness, is constantly becoming otherwise than it is and was” (Marais, 2014, p. 245). To sustain his *Existenz*, Tom outwits reality by constructing a reality of his own that is based on the circularity of life and the presence of the past in the here and now, which he explains in the metaphor of “the reclamation of land”:

There’s this thing called progress. But it doesn’t progress, it doesn’t go anywhere. Because as progress progresses the world can slip away. It’s progress if you can stop the world slipping away. My humble model for progress is the reclamation of land. Which is repeatedly, never-endingly, retrieving what is lost. A dogged, vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business. But you shouldn’t go mistaking the reclamation of land for the building of empires (p. 334).

In short, sustaining *Existenz* within a postmodern atmosphere pertains to the fictionalization of fiction, which Tom observes by narrating his story instead of history, with the awareness that reality is not solid and that meaning is added. To explain it in Foucault's (2002) words,

It [archaeology] is nothing more than a rewriting: that is, in the preserved form of exteriority, a regulated transformation of what has already been written. It is not a return to the innermost secret of the origin; it is the systematic description of a discourse-object (p. 156).

The *Bildung* of Tom suggests a revolution for its capacity and ability to make paradigmatic connections between personal and impersonal, and past and present events, as well as for its ability to deconstruct the notion of progress. He accepts the past (in the sense of regress) and anticipates its return for the essentiality of *Existenz*: "Be brave, be brave. We're going to restore – We're going to return. [...] Back. To go forward" (p. 311). Accordingly, the end of the novel revolves to its beginning and to the past, to the year when Freddie Parr is killed and Dick commits suicide.

4. Conclusion

Waterland depicts *Existenz* as a revolution that is attained only when the protagonist overthrows the structuralist form of history and reality. It is suggested that the structuralist approach fails to notice the cyclical nature of history, which provides a paradigmatic aspect of reality. In this sense, the re-narration of the past and the present with the ability to make connections and to observe that history is fluid instead of progressive, is how the postmodern individual forms his *Existenz*.

Postmodernism differs from earlier modes of thinking in its inadequacy and reluctance to suggesting a general solution in its social critique, because coming to a conclusion is impossible as long as the individual refers to his *Existenz* with a post-historical perspective. In fact, the postmodern conclusion is that there is no conclusion just as history never ends. It abstains from determining absolute sets of solutions on a massive scale because it places the subjectivity of the individual in the center. The individual is expected to face the self by rejecting the unreliable traditional mechanisms of society. Considered within a post-structural frame, *Waterland* emphasizes time as a whole and displays the continuity of experience. Thus, it is not possible to reach an ultimate stage of development as history is claimed to have no end. Reality is fluid and deferrable just as meaning is always and infinitely deferred in a post-structural order. For this reason, Tom Crick does not develop into a perfect man who is finally enlight-

ened about the absolute reality of life. Rather, he develops his postmodern self and dares to re-narrate history. In his deconstructionist way, he defies the grand narrative and creates his own reality. He establishes his postmodern *Existenz* by posing “his story” against “history.”

Waterland conceptualizes a connective form of reality. Accordingly, Tom Crick sustains his *Existenz* by being aware of a returning past and by narrating past stories that relate to the present. He connects the past to the present and perceives the ever-recurring history that offers both success and failure in a cyclical mode. Meaning is fluid because one must constantly refer to a process of change rather than progress of events. As time is fluid, so is meaning. With this understanding, Tom deconstructs the metanarrative of history and displays that our relation to the past is subjective, and every account of the past is a subjective form of narrative that is similar to a fictional story. Referring to Derrida’s post-structuralist thought, the cyclical nature of history results in an endless chain of signifiers where a seeming conclusion only marks the beginning of another signification. As a result, it is not possible to speak of a linear history. In this case, *Existenz* is more socially-driven, interactive and fluid rather than bearing preordained and absolute meanings. Moreover, a new worldwide war and the Cold War deepened the skepticism toward the grand narrative. Based on skepticism and subjectivity, *Waterland* portrays the *Bildung* of its protagonist in a post-structuralist pattern of endless *différance*. In a comparative historical outlook, it can be observed that the historical context plays a vital role in the formation of a *Bildungsroman* and its philosophy of *Existenz*.

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