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A Fertile Excess: *Waterland*, Desire and the Historical Sublime

What every world-builder, what every revolutionary wants a monopoly in: Reality. Reality made plain. Reality with no nonsense. Reality cut down to size. Reality minus a few heads – I present to you History, the fabrication, the diversion, the reality-obscuring drama. History, and its near relative, Historionics ...

(Graham Swift, *Waterland*)

For Tom Crick, the narrator of Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), history's referent does not exist. 'Reality is that nothing happens' (40). Yet histories, stories and 'making things happen' proliferate, circulate and entwine in fecund excess in the novel, indicative of a desire for history that persists, even flourishes, despite its absence. This desire ensures that, paradoxically, the very void of history generates its surfeit. History always exceeds the attempts to represent it, so both *histories* and desire for *histories* are produced and reproduced excessively. Faced with the excision of his discipline from the school's curriculum, history-teacher Tom abandons lesson plans and embarks upon a narrative that, in its meandering course through a range of historical moments, including many from Tom's own childhood, in an order (or anti-order) determined by his own effort of recall, subsumes history into memory.

Waterland naturalises a desire for history, asserting its necessity and value even as its exploration of the narrativity of history highlights the late twentieth-century crisis of historiography, centering upon the loss of faith in historical pattern and design and, ultimately, in the possibility of historical knowledge. The drive for historical knowledge is recast as a romance, an often urgent desire to return, part of a universalised and essentialised 'human nature'. Following Diane Elam and Catherine

Belsey I examine romance as the excess that conventional history must exclude in its production of itself as the real, as that which exceeds the knowable. Romance and desire are thus positioned as the uncertainty that undermines the assertion of historical narrative's privileged relationship to the real, as those elements that defy the authority of conventional history. I argue that integral to the novel's recasting of history as desire is its embodiment of this relationship of romance to realism, whereby romance appears as the excess elements to be excluded from Tom's wandering and far-reaching narrative, but which nonetheless reappear, disrupting and subverting any attempt at a linear, coherent narrative. These very elements of excess ensure that the model for historical inquiry posed by the novel, an endless questioning prompted by a never-ceasing desire or curiosity, is never finished or complete. The very notion of excess ensures that there are always more elements to consider, more questions to ask.

The novel achieves its characterisation of history and historiography by establishing an opposition between 'artificial' history, including written histories, stories and 'things made to happen', and 'natural' history; that which, supposedly, lies outside of representation, including nature and empty reality itself. This opposition rests heavily upon the novel's evocation of the Victorian era, particularly its association of the period with ideals of historical design and progress and with a view of nature as both sublime and inviting of human effort to control, contain and use it for its own purposes. Moreover, the novel draws upon a concept of nature, conventionalised during the period of Britain's industrialisation, as more authentic, more real than human constructs.

I

Ostensibly a history lesson delivered to students whom Tom will soon no longer teach (history teacher Tom is a victim both of unfortunate personal circumstances and of curricular cut-backs), the novel ranges broadly across many historical periods from AD 695, centring upon the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the early- and mid-twentieth century and finally the late twentieth-century present. However, incarnated by the Atkinsons, it is the Victorian era that looms large over the twentieth century of the novel's making. The ideas attributed to it are integral to the novel, forming a monolith, albeit an unstable one, against which Tom propounds his alternative vision of history and reality. It is the entrepreneurial Atkinsons who make things happen in the Fens. It is they who build the dykes and sluices that make the river Leem

navigable; they who squeeze the water out of the land to grow barley and turn a profit on the reclaimed land sold for farming; they who '[offer] work and a future to a whole region' (16), becoming prominent and revered citizens in the process. The Victorian Atkinsons, entrepreneurial but ostensibly civic minded, galvanised by the twin narratives of Empire and Progress, transform the 'backward and trackless wilderness' (67) of the Fens by 'making things happen'. As Marcel Damon Decoste writes, 'the history of the Atkinson family, as related by Crick, is one, first and foremost, of history as grand narrative, of world-making undertaken under the auspices of a linear, progressive, and purposive theory of history' (Decoste, 2002: 386).

The multiple definition of *historia*, given as an epigraph to the novel, signals at the outset the novel's opening up and expansion of 'history' beyond its conventional meaning. History is treated as a protean form comprising the process of investigating past events, the account given of those events, and also those past events themselves. The epigraph also points to another, less common, use of the term to designate 'any kind of narrative: account, tale, story', which foreshadows the novel's foregrounding of history as narrative.¹

As this epigraph suggests, the novel explores the crisis of historiography outlined in Chapter 1 of this book. *Waterland* weaves stories conventionally considered fictional together with those considered historical. Their distinction from each other is complicated, their difference elided, in order to focus each of them as narrative constructs. As John Brewer and Stella Tillyard suggest in their review of the novel, it can be read as 'an exposition of the modern critical dictum that every text and every story is problematic – opaque and inscrutable' (Brewer and Tillyard 1985: 49). The narrative of *Waterland* is Tom's attempt to account for his current circumstances, in which he faces early retirement and his wife is being treated in a mental health institution following a baby-snatching incident. As we shall see, the inscrutability of these events plunges Tom further and further into the past, confronting ever more opaque stories. The reader shares with Tom the effort to construct the meaning of these events from what has gone before.

Robert K. Irish identifies the deliberate gaps in Tom's narrative, where he poses unanswered questions, or swerves off into yet another tale, leaving the previous one open-ended, as precisely those moments when the reader is forced into an awareness of his or her own role in the production of meaning, is aware that he or she is constructing a meaning not to be *found* or *discovered* in the text itself.

When my assumptions in reading fail to be satisfied and my ability to structure meaning into recognizable patterns is thwarted by the text, I can no longer just 'read' the novel, that is, be absorbed in a world, but am confronted by the fiction of what is absorbing me and by the way it is fashioned. (Irish, 1998: 923)

Waterland thus casts doubt upon the possibility of historical knowledge by dramatising the process of interpreting historical documents. This is compounded by the device of an untrustworthy narrator, or, as Linda Hutcheon describes Tom, 'an overtly controlling narrator' who is not 'confident of [his] ability to know the past with any certainty' (Hutcheon, 1988: 117). Tom allows us to see the way in which narrative can create from speculation the appearance of incontrovertible fact. Reconstructing events from the Victorian period, he recites the litany of reasons his great-grandfather had to be sorrowful, that '(conjectural) inward sorrowfulness', which is invisible to the historical record, becomes, 'surely no longer conjectural' (160). Elsewhere, Tom not only asserts as fact a detail which he had earlier claimed was omitted from the historical record, but also gives two contradictory interpretations of this speculative detail:

history does not record whether the day of Thomas's funeral was one of those dazzling mid-winter Fenland days in which the sky seems to cleanse every outline and make light of distances and the two towers of Ely cathedral can not only be seen but their contrasting architecture plainly descried ... *But such things would have been appropriate.* (82, emphasis mine)

Several pages later the sunshine is no longer conjectural and has become inappropriate: 'compare the *unbefitting* sunshine of old Tom's funeral day' (98, emphasis mine). In addition to highlighting the usually invisible process of truth-making, these 'mistakes' signal, too, the limitations of Tom's knowledge. Far from being an omniscient narrator, Tom casts doubt upon his and all historical narratives, claiming that 'history is that impossible thing: the attempt to give an account, with incomplete knowledge, of actions themselves undertaken with incomplete knowledge' (108). His difficulty in interpreting the historical record undermines its authority and its ability to provide the means to resurrect the past. When Tom references his sources – 'a day's delving into local archives' (10), 'a verbatim copy of this brave and doomed speech' (161) – this does not lend authority to his narrative but suggests that the past is primarily

available to him in the form of texts equally constructed, and in need of interpretation. Tom does not use these sources to *discover* the meaning of history but to *produce* the past in a way that has meaning for him.

Waterland highlights, too, the effect that shaping the past into narrative form has upon historical events, making them appear as a story with a beginning, middle and, importantly, an end. Frank Kermode observes that in every age people have pointed to certain events which appear to indicate the coming of the end, suggesting that 'this anxiety attaches itself to the eschatological means available' (Kermode, 1967: 95). For Kermode the prevalence of apocalyptic imagery in fiction 'reflects our deep need for intelligible ends' (ibid.: 8). He suggests that fictions of endings are an attempt to project the self 'past the End, so as to see the structure of the whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle' (ibid.). The idea of an end satisfies the longing for structure, coherence and meaning. The end is a landmark constructed to support the comforting illusion that history is moving in a particular direction and toward a fixed goal or telos.

Similarly, in her discussion of the use of apocalypse as a metaphor in contemporary fictions, Lois Parkinson Zamora points to the Greek origins of 'apokalypsis' meaning 'to uncover, reveal, disclose' (Zamora, 1989: 10). She, too, suggests that the apocalyptic vision signifies our desire to 'interpret and assign significance to our experience of history' (ibid.: 3). Images of apocalypse permeate *Waterland*, making themselves felt in each of the historical periods to which Tom's narrative returns. Tom's account of the 'Grand Purge' of the French Revolution verges on the apocalyptic, describing the thousands of corpses 'piling up' in the streets and battlefields of Europe (141). Ernest Atkinson employs apocalyptic imagery for his malediction of 1911, telling how 'he foresaw in the years ahead catastrophic consequences ... How civilization ... faced the greatest crisis of its history. How if no one took steps ... an inferno ...' (161). The First World War is described as that 'catastrophic interval to which such dread words as apocalypse, cataclysm, Armageddon have not unjustly been applied ...' (201). Tom describes 'with faltering eloquence, [the] gutted cities, refugees, soup kitchens, mass graveyards, bread queues' (119) of the Second World War. And in the narrative present, 1979, it is the Cold War, and in particular what seems the imminence of nuclear war, which evokes the sense of apocalypse and gives Tom's students nightmares about the end of the world (296–7).

It is this prospect that prompts Price to announce that 'the only important thing about history, I think, sir, is that it's got to the point where it's probably about to end' (7). 'What matters', he argues, is

the 'Here and Now' (6).² And it is in the sense of the end, images of apocalypse, that 'reality', 'history' and the Here and Now' imbricate in the novel. Tom's response to Price reiterates the notion that the end of the world has appeared imminent in every age:

yes, the end of the world's on the cards again – maybe this time it's for real. But the feeling's not new. Saxon hermits felt it. They felt it when they built the pyramids to try to prove it wasn't true. My father felt it in the mud at Ypres. My grandfather felt it and drowned it with suicidal beer. Mary felt it ... It's the old, old feeling, that everything might amount to nothing. (269)

Apocalypse, in the novel, is a rhetorical device, a story that shapes the wider stories that we construct and that we convince ourselves constitutes our reality. The novel rehearses the end of the world many times over, particularly in connection with the two world wars and with the nuclear threat of the novel's contemporary narrative. It rehearses it, too, by the repeated 'ending' of the many stories that make up Tom's larger narrative, which are continually disrupted, aborted or eclipsed by another story which clamours for attention, asserts its importance. The effect of these continually threatened and yet always deferred endings is to call into question the very notion of the end itself.

II

Through recounting the numerous times that the end of history has appeared imminent, and yet has not come, by beginning his narrative in the middle of a story and ending it, similarly, in the middle, and by disrupting each of his own stories before their closure, Tom rejects the notion of the End, and the linear view of history in which it is entrenched.³

Moreover, he connects apocalyptic vision with a glimpse of reality. For against the sense of the End, which is a rhetorical effect rather than a reality, Tom posits an alternative version of reality: 'reality doesn't reside in the sudden hallucination of events. Reality is uneventfulness, vacancy, flatness. Reality is that nothing happens' (40). 'Reality' becomes one of the novel's most slippery terms, defined and re-defined in opposition to other slippery terms, like 'history' (in its multiplicity of meanings) and the 'Here and Now'.

Del Ivan Janik reads Tom's 'reality' as the simple flat existence of everyday life, what he calls 'the empty space of daily life' (Janik, 1989: 85). However, this is closer to headmaster Lewis' notion of the 'real world'

than it is to Tom's 'reality'. Lewis rejects academic history in favour of General Studies, with its 'practical relevance to today's *real* world' (22, emphasis mine). For Lewis, history is a 'rag-bag of pointless information' (23) with little to teach about the 'real' world of families, job prospects and economic difficulties in 1979. Tom explicitly expounds his theory of reality in opposition to Lewis' (40).

Tom's theory of an empty reality evacuates history. That is, it rejects the notion of design that fuels many notions of history. Reality exceeds the claims of historical narratives, since, whatever the story proffered, there are always details that resist inclusion. Or, as Damon Marcel Decoste puts it, 'insofar as narrative and history are at odds with the meaninglessness of the real, insofar, then, as they can never be either coincident with or adequate to it, the real constantly exceeds and eludes them (Decoste, 2002: 395). *Waterland* consistently undermines various Grand Narratives and patterns of history, proffering the narratives of progression, regression, circularity and hubris as examples of a human predilection for positing a shape and meaning to the flux of historical events where there is none. The central thesis of the novel intersects with Jean François Lyotard's suggestion of a postmodern crisis in the metanarratives of progress and Enlightenment which have underpinned science and politics in the West. This is the end of history in the sense of historical design, the end of legitimising, overarching patterns (see Lyotard, 1984).

Tom suggests that any pattern 'found' in history is in fact the illusion of narrative. For him, historical events are without design and without discipline: 'it goes in two directions at once. It goes backward as it goes forwards. It loops. It takes detours' (135). When he refers to reality as empty, he means empty of design, purpose and feature, which all exist only as a product of human desire:

because each one of those numberless non-participants was doubtless concerned with raising in the flatness of his own unsung existence his own personal stage, his own props and scenery ... there's no escaping it: even if we miss the grand repertoire of history, we yet imitate it in miniature and endorse, in miniature, its longing for presence, for feature, for purpose, for content. (41)

In some respects it would seem that *Waterland* supports a view of history as circular rather than erratic, with its fifty-two chapters, its preoccupation with notions of return and the apparent recurrence of events. Decoste suggests that the novel 'follows a circular course, repeating

itself at both the macro- and microcosmic level' (Decoste, 2002: 387). Irish, too, argues that 'history's circularity is reinforced everywhere in the narrative (Irish, 1998: 928). However, as Alison Lee suggests, 'it is clear ... that the narrator's choice of language and form is responsible for the circularity in a way the events themselves could not be ... he synthesizes events in such a way that history itself does indeed seem to repeat and foreshadow itself (Lee, 1990: 42). In fact, apparent 'macro- and microcosmic levels' of history and/or extra-textual reality must also be constructs of narrative since this very notion is dependent upon an ability to stand outside the flux of history, to see its shape, or to construct its shape, as would an author. Similarly, the theory of hubris, which Ronald. H. McKinney suggests is the theory of history favoured by Tom, is, I argue, a narrative effect and conveys rather the capacity for stories to exceed their own boundaries, to bleed into other stories and have effects beyond the original intention. Notions of circularity, hubris and return in the novel signify not the pattern or direction to history, but our 'lostness'. Or rather, that even the idea of direction, and therefore lostness, is meaningless since there is no fixed point outside the flux of history and 'no compasses for journeying in time' (135).

Tom's 'reality' is somewhat akin to Amy J. Elias's notion of the postmodern historical sublime, or 'history itself' which 'has no motivation or dialectical movement' (Elias, 2001: 55). Tom's reality is, like Elias' postmodern historical sublime, 'the realm of terror, of chaos'. However, despite her assertion that 'history itself' is always deferred, receding, Elias' references to 'History itself', 'history itself', 'upper-case *H* History' all seem to suggest Presence. Moreover, the sublime is the residence of 'Truth' (ibid.). In contrast, Tom's reality is never 'the realm of potential revelation' (ibid.). The only revelation it gestures toward is that there can be no revelation.⁴ Since the very notion of an empty, featureless reality is difficult to conceptualise, is even, in the sense used by Elias for the historical sublime, 'unpresentable' (ibid.: 27), the novel's primary representational strategy is metaphor. It establishes two interrelated metaphors for the elucidation of reality, history and the Here and Now, as they inform its theory of history and historiography. Both metaphors derive from a particular, Victorian, view of nature.

III

The entrepreneurial Atkinsons provide the novel with its central metaphor. The novel's Fenland setting is a watery wasteland which the

Atkinsons' ingenuity reclaims for habitation, water transport and farming via a complex system of dykes, sluices and drainage, but which is ever susceptible to flooding. For Tom, the empty, flat, formless Fens symbolise his version of vacant reality, 'and no one needs telling that the land in that part of the world is flat. Flat, with an unrelieved and monotonous flatness' (2). The dykes, sluices and channels that give the Fens their provisional shape represent history, the stories and 'things made to happen' with which that reality is filled. Just as the land which is reclaimed appears firm and solid, so do the 'fragile islands' (341) built out of the formlessness of reality give the appearance of solidity, truth and actuality.

Initially the novel distinguishes between two means by which chaotic, formless reality is filled, or reclaimed. The first is embodied in the languorous, 'phlegmatic' Cricks who, 'born in the middle of that flatness, fixed in it, glued to it even by the mud in which it abounds', outwit reality by telling stories: 'and there's no saying what meanings, myths, manias we won't imbibe in order to convince ourselves that reality is not an empty vessel' (41).

Stories, told by both his mother and father as well as read in books, infuse Tom's childhood: 'made-up stories, true stories; soothing stories, warning stories; stories with a moral or with no point at all; believable stories and unbelievable stories; stories which were neither one thing nor the other' (2). Since *Waterland* is an assemblage comprising history and fiction, and makes no uncomplicated distinction between these categories, historical narratives are included as story-telling possibilities here. Indeed history-teacher Tom becomes the most prominent embodiment of this method for outwitting reality.

The second means of filling an empty reality is embodied in the 'sanguine' Atkinsons, Crick's maternal ancestors, who, being from the hills of Norfolk, look down and 'see in these level Fens – this nothing-landscape – an Idea, a drawing-board for plans' (17), the opportunity to make things happen:

and there's no saying what consequences we won't risk, what reactions to our actions, what repercussions, what brick towers built to be knocked down, what chasings of our own tails, what chaos we won't assent to in order to assure ourselves that, none the less, things are happening. (41)

The Atkinsons are associated with the (apparently) solid images of 'civilisation', maps, bricks, buildings and projects. Indeed their New Brewery is a monument to the narrative of Progress, and the description

of it, beginning at the bottom, advancing inexorably upward and ending with its crowning glory, encapsulates the same Ideas (90).

Avatars of civilising Progress, the Atkinsons envisage themselves as effecting the advance of not only their own families, but those of their town and country, and so enjoin themselves to the national project of Empire. Indeed, the Atkinson ideology is coterminous with that which informs Britain's imperial thrust (92–3).

However, the distinction Tom initially makes between the 'Atkinsons [who] made history' and the 'Cricks [who] spun yarns' (17) is rendered unstable by the double resonance of 'making history', which signifies both the 'happening' of past events and the recording of them. These are consistently represented in the novel as familial acts: 'I present to you History, the fabrication, the diversion, the reality-obscuring drama. History, and its near relative Histrionics' (40). By employing terms such as 'histrionics', 'theatre' and 'stage' Tom thus suggests that 'making history' is more about performance than 'reality'. The Atkinsons' entrepreneurial zeal is a story, part of a larger narrative of progress, to which they are committed. In fact, insofar as it invokes the idea of drama, or theatrical story, rather than the real, history-making is related ever more closely to telling (hi)stories and opposed to 'reality'.⁵ Indeed, the story-telling Cricks 'come to work for [the Atkinsons]. They make their great journey across the Ouse' (16), and 'thr[o]w in their lot with the drainers and land-reclaimers' (12). Moreover, 'some say' that the history-making Atkinsons, too, were 'originally Fenmen' (63). Telling stories bleeds into making things happen. And things made to happen both emerge from and contribute to the production of meaning via stories told. The Atkinsons and the Cricks are each invested, then, in what the novel terms 'artificial history'. While the stories they tell are different, each is committed to evading the flatness of reality with history-making. The key difference between them is not that between the making of history and the telling of stories, for these are familial acts.

Rather, the key difference between the Atkinsons and the Cricks is that the Cricks remember the fictiveness of their stories. That is, they remember that the stories told and the meanings produced are constructs. They are made, not found. It is a difference encapsulated in the dual vision of nature that the metaphor of land reclamation incorporates, centering upon water, that 'liquid form of Nothing'.

In his discussion of the Victorian formulation of, and response to, the 'Arctic Sublime', Chauncey C. Loomis attributes to that period a notion of the 'Natural Sublime' which recognises at once the 'magnitude [and] immensity of creation', and an 'irregularity and natural order

that is beyond man's ken'. This produces two contrary responses in the observer: 'part of him goes out to it in rapture; part of him withdraws from it in fear' (Loomis, 1977: 98). The Victorian reaction to the Natural Sublime, he argues, 'began with the desire to conquer it and ended with the knowledge that what is human and finite in us, terrified on the brink of the mysterious abyss of nature, will draw back trembling from the inhuman and the infinite' (ibid.: 99).

The first key element of the metaphor of land reclamation reflects the desire to conquer. It is the human struggle to control, contain and triumph over nature: 'The obstinacy of water. The tenacity of ideas' (69). Here, nature is a vessel to be shaped to human desire, a sentiment most clearly enunciated in the novel by the Victorian Thomas Atkinson who builds an empire upon his ability to shape and mould the Fens. As Decoste puts it, the Atkinsons 'obscure the real by conjuring up universalist narratives which underwrite the active transformation of the Fens to their ends, and which enable the recasting of the real in the image of their own desires' (Decoste, 2002: 386). For the Atkinsons, nature can be modelled by steps taken, actions effected, things made to happen in service of an ever-brighter future, ensured by history's overarching pattern of progress. Finally, Judith Wilt describes the Atkinsons as 'builders and brewers on the rise, in league with progress' for whom 'the things that happen, are done, are made, *are* reality' (Wilt, 1990: 111–12).

A sense of patronage, and of offering a bright future insured by material measures and precautions and bolstered by cheery rhetoric (and by the provision and consumption of alcohol), links the Atkinsons with Lewis, a twentieth-century, like-minded stalwart of Progress. Promoted to headmaster above the older and more experienced Tom, he leads the school community as the Atkinsons led their town: 'a good, a diligent, a persevering man ... He cares; he strives; ... Our school a new ship bound for the Promised Land' (23). As McKinney suggests, Lewis and the Atkinsons share the belief 'that the human imagination can fundamentally change reality for the better'. This is manifested in their faith in 'the science and technology by which we can control reality' (McKinney, 1997: 827). Just as the Atkinsons build elaborate systems of locks, sluices and Relief Channels to guard against the 'perennial' danger of floods (100), so Lewis builds a nuclear fall-out shelter to protect him and his family from what seems to be (at least the physical manifestation of) the threat of his time. 'So it's all right, children. No need to be afraid. Lewis is here. Don't be gloomy. To all these morbid dreams, a simple answer: the nuclear fallout shelter' (154).

The other key element of the metaphor of land reclamation is that nature cannot be controlled, or not for long, the idea 'that, however much you resist them, the waters will return; that the land sinks; silt collects; that something in nature wants to go back' (17). This formulation of nature appeals to the sublime, the sense that nature dwarfs humanity, and is indifferent to it. Nature, in the novel, exists outside of history, typified by the eel which 'doesn't care two hoots about History, or what the history books call history' (195). The river, too, is characterised by a 'continued contempt ... for the efforts of men' and the 'ungovernable desire to flow at its own place and in its own way' (144) despite efforts to channel a new path for it. In fact, representative of natural history, and opposed to the artificial kind, the river is 'true and natural, if wayward' (145), the antithesis of the revolutionaries, prophets, champions of progress who 'can't abide it' (205). Opposed to artificial history, nature becomes another version of the real, so that Tom tells his students: 'if you want to be in the real world, let me tell you ... About the Ouse' (142).⁶

By virtue of their long habitation in the empty, watery and natural Fens, then, the Cricks are linked more closely to nature, and to the knowledge that it is indifferent to human effort. When the Atkinson Lock is opened the Cricks, who have worked upon it, 'do not cheer as heartily as the other spectators ... And though they draw pride from their part in the making of this newly navigable, brightly gleaming river, they know that what water makes, it also unmakes' (73). For despite Tom's claim that in going to work for the Atkinsons his ancestors 'ceased to be water people and became land people, [joining] in the destiny of the Fens, which was to strive not for but against water', he is forced also to acknowledge that 'perhaps they did not cease to be water people. Perhaps they became amphibians. Because if you drain land you are intimately concerned with water; you have to know its ways. Perhaps at heart they always knew, in spite of their land-preserving efforts, that they belonged to the old, prehistoric flood' (13). He makes a 'virtue' (15) of the Crick humour, phlegm, claiming that the reason that the Cricks worked for the Atkinsons, tending pumps and sluices and locks, but rose no further, was because of 'that old watery phlegm which cooled and made sluggish their spirits' and ensured 'they did not forget, in their muddy labours, their swampy origins; that however much you resist them, the waters will return; that the land sinks; silt collects; that something in nature wants to go back' (17).

Analogously, then, the Atkinsons believe their own stories. They mistake their history-making for reality, while the Cricks remember that they are only stories, able to be re-written. This distinction emerges most clearly in the novel in relation to paternity. For the Atkinsons, invested in empire and progress, paternity is related to the desire to control reality, to shape the future. Wilt argues: 'the Atkinson vision thus privileges paternity as the ultimate sign of reality: Atkinsons will seek fatherhood, invest it with godhood, be unable to relinquish it' (Wilt, 1990: 113). In contrast, the Cricks are not so heavily invested in Progress. They are willing to work on Atkinson projects but they are not passionate about Empire, they do not see themselves as servants of the future so much as doing their job in the present and, as Wilt suggests, they do not share the Atkinson obsession with paternity: 'for the Cricks, fatherhood is what it was to primitive peoples, man's hallucination his favourite fiction ... A Crick will not believe his own fatherhood nor insist upon it, nor, on the other hand, will he be destroyed by it or by its lack' (ibid). Thus, Tom's father, Henry Crick, accepts Dick, fathered by his wife's own father and passed off, to the general public, as Henry's own. His final words to Dick confirm this sense that fatherhood is performance, a tale to be written, a story that can be made true: 'Dick, it's all right! Dick. *I'll be your father*' (356, italics mine). The Cricks do not invest fatherhood with the same significance as the Atkinsons, they do not mistake paternity for the building of empires, and nor do they mistake the building of empires, the narrative of progress, with its linear shape, its beginning and end, its continual advance, for reality itself. Paradoxically, the stories told to relieve the vacancy of reality must be believable enough to fulfil their task, but at the same time, in a kind of negative capability, as McKinney suggests, 'we should acknowledge the fictiveness of our fictions' (McKinney, 1997: 826).

This second element of the metaphor, nature's refusal to be contained for long by human effort, its indifference to human initiative and history, places excess at the centre of its meaning. Specifically, it depicts an encounter with the excess of nature, which always exceeds the boundaries that human inventiveness builds for it. Just as the waters break their banks and cause flooding, forcing a confrontation with the limits of human ingenuity, so the effects of history, stories and things made to happen exceed their boundaries: they come to the limits of their power to explain.

For the stories that are created in order to fill reality are fertile, they exceed their own boundaries and produce unforeseen effects. Things

made to happen, and the stories that both beget and are begotten by those happenings, reproduce promiscuously, with unanticipated and unimagined consequences:

the dissemination of Christian tenets over a supposedly barbarous world has been ... one of the prime causes of wars, butcheries, inquisitions and other forms of barbarity ... the discovery of the printing press led, likewise, as well as to the spreading of knowledge, to propaganda, mendacity, contention and strife ... the invention of the steam-engine led to the miseries of industrial exploitation ... the invention of the aeroplane led to the widespread destruction of European cities along with their civilian populations ... And as for the splitting of the atom – (135–6).⁷

Stories are, like phlegm, of ‘equivocal comfort’, of ‘ambiguous substance’ (344). Indeed a host of ambiguous substances become metaphors for story-making and its effects. Phlegm is ‘benign’ yet ‘disagreeable’ (344); the East Wind is ‘twins, and one twin kills and the other ripens’ (290); and importantly, silt ‘obstructs as it builds; unmakes as it makes’ (11). The cumulative effect of the multitudinous history-making undertaken to fill reality is as silt in the drained waterways of the Fens:

every so often there are these attempts to jettison the impedimenta of history, to do without that ever-frustrating weight. And because history accumulates, because it gets always heavier and the frustration greater, so the attempts to throw it off ... become more violent and drastic. (136–7)

This is Tom’s explanation for the prevalence of apocalyptic visions throughout the historical record; that the weight of our history-making, and its unforeseen effects, bring us to the limits of our powers to explain, our abilities to tell stories. As history and stories are wound together and then tied to making things happen, they also form a complex link to the Here and Now. For despite what appears a radical separation between history (and stories) and the Here and Now – ‘life is one-tenth Here and Now, nine-tenths a history lesson’ (61) – the boundary between the two, like that between history and fiction, is porous. They are not discrete categories, but rather leak into each other, forming a substance as ambiguous as the Fens.

The Here and Now is an intense experience with ‘more than one face’. Bringing ‘both joy and terror’, it is encountered, in the novel, via

such diverse experiences as the discovery of Freddie Parr's body, which 'pinioned [Tom] with fear' so that 'he ceased to be a babe' (61); sexual discovery, 'which unlocked for [him] realms of candour and rapture' (61); and the blow to the head which commits Sarah Atkinson to a waking coma: 'horror. Confusion. Plenty of Here and Now' (77).

Those moments described as an encounter with the Here and Now are confrontations with the limitations of stories. They are proof that history is a 'thin garment easily punctured by a knife blade called Now' (36). For, strangely enough, though they are the effects of history-making, these moments are 'tense with the present tense ... fraught with the here and now' (207). While the Here and Now results from history it is also, conceptually, opposed to it, as in Price's rejection of history: 'what matters is the here and now' (60). The vexed nature of this term, its grasping of a present that is continually slipping away, prompts Crick to wonder: 'what is this much-adduced Here and Now? What is this indefinable zone between what is past and what is to come?' (60).

The Here and Now can be understood as what Linda Hutcheon calls 'brute reality' (Hutcheon, 1988: 155); it is present experience in that fleeting moment before it becomes the past, narrativised and emplotted. Or, as Janik puts it, the Here and Now is 'direct, unmediated, unintellectualized experience' (Janik, 1995: 178. See also Janik, 1989: 84–6). It is an encounter with the limits of our powers to explain. That is, it is that moment when we confront an event which seems inexplicable, for which we have no contextualising, explanatory story. For this reason, the Here and Now is also an aperture where, very briefly, reality, in Tom's sense of 'emptiness', is glimpsed.⁸ This evanescent experience is the closest we come to non-narration, to being 'outside' story and meaning. It is the moment when history is made 'nonsense by that sensation in the pit of your stomach ... the feeling that all is nothing' (270). It is the reminder that there is no guiding purpose, or over-arching pattern and meaning to history; meaning is (provisionally) provided only by the stories we tell. Thus, an encounter with the Here and Now is always a more or less bloody apocalypse, an encounter with the end; the end of meaning, the end of a particular story which has framed and filled reality. Thus when Price proclaims the end of history just as Tom is confronting the limits of his power to explain Mary's baby-snatching actions, it prompts Tom to launch himself into the past, to break away from teaching the French Revolution and try to come to terms, instead, with his own sense of the end and to elucidate the moments of crisis in his life which elude meaning and defy explanation. 'There are a thousand million ways', he reflects, 'in which the world comes to an end' (155).

Situated on the cusp of reality and history, the Here and Now forms the knife's edge separating, but also linking, these in the novel. If the Here and Now constitutes an aperture through which reality, as the absence of meaning, might be glimpsed, this encounter is fleeting and the chasm quickly closes, rewritten in and as story. Tom's example is Marie Antoinette who, during her famous return from Varennes to Paris, 'was aware not only of the Here and Now but that History had engulfed her' (61).

If, as Elias suggests, metahistorical romance 'gestures toward the sublime and attempts to enunciate the boundary or limit where lived human experience meets the past' (Elias, 2001: 53), then for *Waterland* this limit exists as the Here and Now, the point at which an event defies understanding. It is pure experience that cannot yet be spoken and therefore textualised, but which also, paradoxically, throws one into history. No sooner does the encounter with the Here and Now produce a glimpse of meaninglessness than the mind performs its work of narrativisation, the experience is again harnessed by story and ascribed meaning. 'The reality of things – be thankful – only visits us for a brief while' (33). The moment passes and all that is left is the telling of it. Tom observes that 'so often it is precisely these surprise attacks of the Here and Now which, far from launching us into the present tense, which they do, it is true, for a brief and giddy interval, announce that time has taken us prisoner' (61). The Here and Now is an encounter with meaningless reality but also, always, an encounter with history, for the intensity of the Here and Now incites the demand for explanation, and that explanation incites the demand for more explanation until, as Tom puts it, 'that incessant question Whywhywhy has become like a siren wailing in our heads' (107).

IV

Decoste makes this endless questioning central to his discussion of *Waterland*. He pertinently identifies the tendency of Swift scholarship to focus upon *Waterland's* treatment of history as narrative, and to 'elide', therefore, 'the text's own unease with such endorsements of history as narrative (including the inextricable textuality of both its sources and its form) and leave relatively unexamined the tension obtaining between *historia* as narrative and *historia* as inquiry' (Decoste, 2002: 379). He rightly argues that, for the novel, the narratives that are used to regulate and shape a chaotic and destructive reality themselves become dangerous if they seek finality and are not themselves subjected to further

inquiry. Once naturalised, they 'become as senseless and threatening as the reality they are meant to ward off' (*ibid.*).

Ernest Atkinson's engulfment by a story of his own making is a case in point. Ernest is the late-Victorian, doubting figure, schooled, as no Atkinson has been before him, at Cambridge in 'European socialism, Fabianism, the writings of Marx' (156). It is through Ernest's fingers that the Atkinson empire slips when he doubts the future of humanity and the narratives of empire and progress on which this future has been built. Typically, Crick offers two explanations for Ernest's being 'a renegade, a rebel' (156). The first, 'realist' version, is that he assumes his 'inescapable' role as director of the Atkinson empire during what Crick calls 'a period of economic deterioration from which we have never recovered' (157), as the first Atkinson 'to assume his legacy without the assurance of its inevitable expansion, without the incentive of Progress, without the knowledge that in his latter days he would be a richer and more influential man than in his youth' (157). The second explanation Crick offers is a more symbolic one, drawing upon the novel's leitmotif of water, natural history, as that which counters and undermines 'the artificial stuff'. Crick suggests that since Ernest was born during the notorious floods of 1874, 'affected by the watery circumstances of his birth, he wished that he might return to the former days of the untamed swamps, when all was yet to be done, when something was still to be made from nothing' (158). Born amidst watery chaos his affinities are not those of his father, 'who was not a master of the present but a servant of the future' (157) and who greeted the economic downturn by becoming more politically active, 'a staunch advocate of forward imperial policies (for here, after all, expansion was still possible)' (157). Ernest returns, instead, to the origins of the Atkinson empire and focuses upon brewing beer. 'What finer cause could there be to labour in than the supplying of this harsh world with a means of merriment' (158). Selling off the Water Transport Company and retaining only the Gildsey Pleasure Boat company, Ernest wishes, it seems 'for nothing more than to be an honest and unambitious purveyor of barrels of happiness' (158). This is figured in the novel as a retreat from the vision of reality upon which the Atkinson empire was built. Tom describes drunkenness as 'a let-out for the march of history' (236).

'And that is another difference between the Cricks and the Atkinsons. That whereas the Cricks emerged from water, the Atkinsons emerged from beer' (64). Beer is another symbol of making things happen, of filling and forming a chaotic reality. The Atkinson company motto, Tom

notes, 'does indeed mean, simply "Out of Water, Ale";' and can even be construed, as perhaps Thomas intended, 'Out of Water, Activity' (86).

For reclaimed land is highly fertile, and Atkinson beer, brewed from its yield, is expected to 'cause a new flooding of the Fens, but not a flooding of water – a flooding of beer' (90). And also of good cheer. For drunkenness 'makes reality seem not so really real' (236), not so very empty. It also, like the Here and Now, 'occurs in many sudden and wonderful forms' (172), and has diverse effects; more than one face: 'pleasure, satisfaction, well-being, elation, light-headedness, hot-headedness, befuddlement, distraction, delirium, irascibility, pugnaciousness, imbalance, incapacity ...' (171). Indeed, drunkenness is the summoning up of the Here and Now. It erases meaning.

The townspeople disapprove of Ernest's rejection of politics, this 'unpatriotic shirking ... in this time of arms-racing and gunboat-sending' (159). However, despite his watery origins, Ernest is an Atkinson and thoughts of the future do infect his sought-after jollity. When Ernest announces his return to the political sphere, spurred by his conscience and fears for the future, it is as a Liberal candidate in the general election, criticising the Conservative tradition that has long influenced the town. 'He did not shrink from accusing his own father (muttered protests), for berating him as one of those who had fed the people with dreams of inflated and no longer tenable grandeur, who had intoxicated them with visions of Empire ... thus diverting their minds from matters nearer home' (161).

The novel would, perhaps, approve, thus far, Ernest's questioning of the narrative of progress into which he has been born. However, outcast by the town he retreats to Kessling Hall with his daughter and becomes immersed in another story, a fairy tale. 'Can it be that he too has succumbed to that old Atkinson malaise and caught Ideas? And not just any old idea, but Beauty – the most platonic of the lot?' (219). Having seen the power of his daughter's beauty to disrupt a military recruitment parade (218), and, symbolically, the future-destroying war, he inscribes Helen as Beauty itself, and his worship of his daughter increases in proportion to his disgust with humanity as the war goes on. He 'starts to believe that only from out of this beauty will come a Saviour of the World' (220). Not only would this double, or reinforce Ernest's paternity (as father of both child and mother), it would bestow godhood indeed; as father of the saviour Ernest would be the Origin and, according to the Christian narrative invoked, the End. For the Christian narrative the Saviour of the World is the author of history, is *history itself*, its origin and end. The Saviour of the World is the original, non-produced, meaning.

Engulfed in this story and mistaking it for reality, Ernest's attempt to exclude all that does not 'fit' his particular vision of reality – including the marriage of his daughter to Henry Crick – ends in his own, miniature, endorsement of apocalyptic conflagration.⁹ First comes the creation of Coronation Ale, which quickly and spectacularly inebriates the entire town and ends in the fiery destruction of the Atkinson brewery. Then, the end for Ernest himself comes early when, having written a letter to his future son, and after drinking his potent Coronation Ale all day, Ernest suicides. Finally, his son, born to his daughter, is Dick Crick, a 'potato head', with 'clumsy mental faculties' (38) who murders a schoolboy before killing himself. The narrative in which Ernest becomes engulfed and fails to question, indeed, the reality of which he rigorously asserts, produces effects in excess of his own envisioning.

This more dangerous aspect of the excesses of history-making (both as story-telling and making things happen) is prefigured in Tom Crick's childhood dreams when, feverish with the flu:

the stories which his mother told him, in her inimitable fashion, to soothe and console him, failed to perform their normal office. For, far from issuing from his mother to confer on him their balm, they seemed instead to be rising up to envelop and overwhelm her, casting round her their menacing miasmas, so that through his hours of fever he strove to cleave a passage through to a mother who was becoming less and less real, more and more besieged by fiction. (272)

As Tom suggests, 'there was prophesy in little Tom's dreams' (273), because his mother catches his flu whilst telling these stories and dies as a result. His dreams also prefigure Mary's engulfment by fiction. As Mary becomes lost in her story, Tom 'is constrained to hug his wife as though to confirm she is still there. For in the twilight it seems that, without moving, she is receding, fading, becoming ghostly' (148). As with his mother in his dream, he must strive to reach her.

For Mary, too, exemplifies the need for, in Decoste's terms, '*historia* as inquiry, not just narrative' (ibid.: 378). Mary's curiosity, 'which drove her, beyond all restraint, to want to touch, witness, experience whatever was unknown and hidden from her' (51), comes to an abrupt end with the death of Freddie Parr. Her abortion, which disrupts teleological history, marks too her rejection of history, stories and things made to happen and the meaning that accrues to them. Mary determines to live without stories and without making things happen, to embrace reality, 'to make do ... with nothing. Not believing either in looking back or

in looking forward, she learnt how to mark time. To withstand ... the empty space of reality' (126). Although they move together to historical Greenwich, Tom tells us that 'in her heart she'll always remain in the flat fens' (341).

Yet Tom has already claimed that 'there are very few of us who can be, for any length of time, merely realistic' (41). That is, he asserts again our inability to accept the emptiness of reality, the absence of overarching, explanatory meaning. If Mary appears to live most of her life incurious about the stories and things made to happen amidst the nothingness of reality, she does, at a decisive moment, return to the realms of story, and of making things happen.

Invoking the narrative of the religion with which she grew up, she suddenly announces 'I'm going to have a baby. Because God said I will' (130). And in fact she does, though it is one she takes from someone at the supermarket, convinced it is from God. It is as though her long residence in the realms of the merely real produces in her the need to retreat into a story large enough to fill a big emptiness. As a result she becomes trapped in the story, because 'sometimes the happening won't stop and let itself be turned into memory' (329), into a story with a beginning and, importantly, an end: 'so she's still in the midst of events (a supermarket adventure, something in her arms, a courtroom in which she calls God as a witness) which haven't ceased' (329).

Mary has been engulfed by her own story and by making things happen because of that story. And yet, because she cannot tell the story again, because she cannot accept that it is simply a story, she cannot relieve herself of its burden. Or, more importantly, her inability to submit her chosen narrative to questioning, to subject it to the question 'why?' leaves her embedded in it as a version of reality.

Mary's story makes curiosity vital to the novel's depiction of historical knowledge, and this adds an important dimension to inquiry, which Decoste's account does not fully apprehend. The novel does indeed stress the importance of *historia* as inquiry, not simply narrative. Yet Decoste seems to place the questioning of narratives outside of narrative itself, a reading that the novel, with its assertion of the ubiquity of textuality and meaning-production, does not support. Just as history cannot exist as a fixed point outside the flux of historical time and events, nor can we stand outside these narratives to pose our questions. We cannot cross over the (even linguistic) boundary to extra-textual, empty reality. The endless 'whywhywhy' that Tom describes is provoked by crisis, at those times when far from standing outside of history, we realise we are deeply entangled in it. As Tom puts it, 'the past gets in the

way; it trips us up, bogs us down; it complicates, makes difficult' (108). For the novel, historical inquiry is not a detached questioning because of a 'responsibility' (ibid.: 398) to do so. Rather it is a desperate yearning for history as meaning, the desire for explanation, 'knowing', Tom suggests, 'it is not a complete explanation' (107–8).

V

Thus, a model of historical inquiry is re-configured, in the novel, as desire, around the 'vital force' (51) of curiosity: 'which doesn't want to push ahead, which always wants to say, hey, that's interesting, let's stop awhile, let's take a look-see, let's retrace – let's take a different turn? What's the hurry, What's the rush? Let's *explore*' (194, emphasis in original). Curiosity does not want to leave the past behind in an effort to push forward to the future. It is thus opposed to a more conventional notion of historical inquiry that seeks

to uncover the mysteries of cause and effect. To show that to every action there is a reaction. To show that Y is a consequence because X preceded. To shut stable doors, so that next time, at least, the horse – To know that what we are is what we are because our past has determined it. (107)

Historical inquiry as curiosity is embodied by Tom's narrative itself, which, although fuelled by the question 'why', digresses into tales of beer bottles, winds, floods, the French Revolution, the reproductive life of eels, and so on. Although it scurries into the past it does not mark out a straight trajectory, but stops, ponders, considers, pursues the desire to be 'sniff-sniffing things out' (194). The novel mimics its own lauding of historical inquiry as curiosity by sparking the reader's own.

Similarly, endless curiosity is inscribed in Stan Booth's words at the end of the novel: 'someone best explain' (338). While Geoffrey Lord observes, rightly, that the answer to this question, the explanation, lies in what has gone before, that 'the reader is thrown back into the text' (Lord, 1997: 148), it is also true that the answer *does not* lie in what has gone before: the explanation exceeds the stories that are meant to achieve it. And whereas DeCoste describes this moment as one that emphasises 'the exploration of, and exhortation to, *historia* as inquiry and not just as narrative' (Decoste, 2002: 378), I argue that its significance is, additionally, that it installs in the reader the *desire* for explanation. Even though we know that explanation is impossible, we are curious.

The novel's repeated elicitation of desire for its narratives, which end at a point of climax, unresolved, marks it as romance. For whereas realist narratives court, and ultimately (appear to) achieve, final explanation, closure and coherence, romance narratives, like *Waterland*, court the desire for narrative, the 'seditious' force of curiosity that refuses to arrive at the end of itself but, rather, exists as excess. The model for historical inquiry advocated by the novel, which resists a unitary history, 'reality cut down to size' (206), is recast as romance.

Again, the Fenland setting provides an illustration for the disruption of unitary, realist history by the excess of romance. As Pamela Cooper suggests, it is both the 'story-teller's realm of free imaginative play ... and the site of the historian's exact, disciplined investigations' (Cooper, 1996: 371). It could equally be construed as the setting of both romance and realism. Indeed, in its opening pages the novel enacts postmodernism's displacement of realism as Diane Elam conceives it, 'shifting the site of the representation of historical events to romance' (Elam, 1992: 14). Tom observes that it is, perhaps, 'only logical' that 'the bare and empty Fens yield so readily to the imaginary – and the supernatural' (18). The Fenlanders see marsh sprites and will-o'-the-wisps and observe 'a catechism of obscure rites' (18) cultivated by their swampy surrounds. In this 'fairy-tale place ... Far away from the wide world' (1), the explanations offered by myths are as crucial for comprehending experience as those offered by discourses conventionally considered factual. While Mary's abortion at the hands of the local 'witch' Martha Clay is one probable cause of her infertility in later life, the Fenland superstition stating that a live fish in a woman's lap will make her barren (18) is offered as at least as important to understanding her inability to conceive as any other more 'rational', 'real' or 'historical' reason.¹⁰ Elam argues that 'realism, as far as postmodern romance is concerned, ceases to be the privileged form of representation for the 'real', for historical reality' (ibid.: 14).

Yet while romance precedes, exceeds and displaces realism for a time, Tom also locates this romantic place with an increasingly detailed, realist, precision. It is a lock-keeper's cottage at the Atkinson Lock 'on the River Leem, two miles from where it empties into the Ouse' (3) in the middle of the Fens, 'which are a low-lying region of eastern England, over 1,200 square miles in area, bounded to the west by the limestone hills of the Midlands, to the south and east by the chalk hills of Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and Norfolk' (8).¹¹ Tom persistently, although rather ironically, marginalises and attempts to discredit romance, urging his students to 'avoid illusion and make-believe, to lay aside

dreams, moonshine, cure-alls, wonder-workings, pie-in-the-sky – to be realistic’ (108). However, in the form of myths, fairy-tales and alternative histories that continually interrupt the flow of Tom’s narrative, romance repeatedly erupts into, and disrupts, the realist account of Tom’s personal history. As Elam observes, if

romance-writing appears as an excess to be cut out, this excess simply cannot be regulated. Excess is in the nature of the genre: romance returns even at the point where it is most violently excluded in the name of realism, making even a clear distinction between realism and romance impossible. (Elam, 1992: 7)

The excess of romance is, for Elam, its political value. Romance ‘exceeds’ realism’s nostalgia, claiming ‘because we can never fully come to terms with the past, we can never justly represent it’ (ibid.: 15). While realism desires closure, romance delights in the pleasure of curiosity. Indeed, to return to Elam’s claim, cited at the beginning of this chapter, if romance is indeed disruptive and subversive, a ‘counter-discourse on history and the real which modernism must repress in order to establish itself as the statement of the real’ (ibid.: 3) then curiosity can be considered *as* romance. In fact Tom does name it as ‘an ingredient of love’ (51). For, in the depiction of historical inquiry as desire, curiosity – which is ‘our insatiable and feverish desire to know about things’ (194) – is ‘complex and unpredictable’ and, therefore, ‘is the true and rightful subverter and defeats even our impulse for historical progression’ (194). Curiosity, like romance, does not want to discover the univocal meaning of history. Never satisfied, its desire is always in excess of itself. It wants to explore, digress, and uncover multiple meanings, myriad stories. Itself characterised by excess, the romance that is curiosity ‘contaminate[s] history’ (ibid.: 14) with this excess, and thereby ensures that history-making is endlessly productive, a ceaseless inquiry, not a seeking toward finality and closure.

Therefore, alongside Tom’s depiction of land reclamation and, by virtue of his metaphor, historical inquiry, as ‘a dogged, vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business’ (336), he also depicts history-making not as a carefully considered process of questioning narratives, but as a far less ordered process, ‘anarchic, seditious’ because governed by our ‘love of life’ (205). For as curiosity begets stories, it also ‘begets love. It wedds us to the world. It’s part of our perverse, madcap love for this impossible planet we inhabit. People die when curiosity goes’ (206). History, in this transaction, becomes desire.

Elias, too, makes the desire for history essential to human nature, writing, ‘people are inquisitive animals and they will always ask wh-questions, and the key one that they ask is ‘Why?’” This question, she asserts, is ‘hardwired’ into us (Elias, 2005: 159). She argues that meta-historical romances like *Waterland* are driven by the ‘construction of, or desire for, the historical sublime, which is a kind of warmed-up or negative idealism; it is a weak hope and desire that history, the space of ontological order, exists somewhere, but also the belief that human history will never reach it’ (ibid.: 160). Yet she also describes this weak hope, rather paradoxically, as that obsession which is characteristic of postmodernism in the arts, an ‘obsession with history and a desperate desire for the comforting self-awareness that is supposed to come from historical knowledge’, coupled with a scepticism about the possibility of such knowledge (Elias, 2001: xvii).

In *Waterland*, the desire for history is more akin to obsession than a weak hope. It is an urgent and unremitting longing: ‘can I deny that what I wanted all along was not some golden nugget that history would at last yield up, but History itself: the Grand Narrative, the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears of the dark?’ (62), asks Tom. The novel, like Elias, installs and naturalises a desire for history. Tom teaches his students:

children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man – let me offer you a definition – is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories, he has to keep on making them up. As long as there’s a story, it’s all right. (62–3)

The novel achieves this essentialising and universalising move¹² by situating human nature within its rubric of natural history. They are aligned in the novel as ‘those weird and wonderful commodities, those unsolved mysteries of mysteries’ (205). Specifically, it is pubescent sexuality that belongs to the same articulation of the real which the novel accords nature, belonging, with the river, to what Elias calls a ‘mythic, spatialized time that preceded Western, scientific time’ (Elias, 2001: 57). Thus, in their childhood, ‘in prehistorical, pubescent times’, Tom and Mary drift to the windmill ‘instinctively, without the need for prior arrangement’ (52). They are barely conscious of the bombers that fly overhead, the intimation of the world of linear time and history.

Sexuality is naturalised here and is opposed to textuality, to the imposition of historical, linear time. Desire is grafted onto the opposition between natural history and its artificial counterpart, so that it is somehow most authentic before it is channelled and contained or, in Tom and Mary's case, inhibited by the imposition of time and history, when they must meet by appointment (48–9).

The novel's second metaphor for history and reality accommodates this expanded notion of historical inquiry as desire. The female body, like the empty fens, is 'equipped with a miniature model of reality: an empty but fillable vessel. A vessel in which much can be made to happen, and to issue in consequence. In which dramas can be brewed, things can be hatched out of nothing' (42). This metaphor reiterates the notion of reality as a blank canvas upon which meaning can be etched. Woman here is as nature, so that this thought intersects with what Genevieve Lloyd calls the 'long-standing antipathy between femaleness and active, "male" Culture' in Western philosophical thought. Rational knowledge, she suggests, has been associated with maleness; 'construed as a transcending, transformation or control of natural forces; and the feminine has been associated with what rational knowledge transcends, dominates or simply leaves behind' (Lloyd, 1993: 2).

This has particular resonance in the novel because Mary, Helen and Sarah are all linked as those who '[offer] companionship to those whose lives have stopped though they must go on living' (118). Mary and Sarah are further linked by their association with madness. Mary takes her place 'amongst the senile' (123), first by working with them, then, at the close of the novel, by joining them; those for whom 'life has come to a kind of stop' (122), though, like Mary, they must go on living. Sarah is reputedly placed in the asylum that her family builds in her honour (95). They are a strange version of that image, popular in Victorian poetry, of the embowered woman. However, in contrast to Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott*, who looks down to Camelot, they each adopt 'the paradoxical pose of one who keeps watch – but over nothing' (78).

Obsessively desired by the men who surround them in the novel, each of the key women becomes symbolically over-determined by the stories that attach to them. Helen Atkinson personifies Beauty itself, which marks her, her father thinks, as the mother of the next Saviour of the World (219), and is associated, by Tom, as 'the Brewer's Daughter of Gildsey', with 'ghosts and earnestly recounted legends' that inhabit the villages along the Leem (18). Mary Metcalf, too, is re-written as the Madonna, first by her father (46) and then by Tom Crick (48), in whose

mind she is also the restoration of his dead mother (48). Tom also inscribes her, in her exile, or vigil, as Saint Gunnhilda (118), a princess awaiting rescue (120), his own dead mother (283) and as his maternal forebear Sarah Atkinson (118).¹³ Meanwhile, Sarah is 'Guardian Angel, Holy Mother, Saint Gunnhild-come-again ... [and] an intrepid Britannia' (94). She is alternately a benevolent and prophetic goddess credited with safe-guarding the prosperity of the region (83–8), and a 'stark raving' lunatic (95) blamed for floods, fires, riots and inability to conceive (88).

Written and rewritten by and as male desire, the meanings that accrue to them make the women slippery, so that Mary appears 'ghostly' to Tom (148), and reports abound after her death of a ghostly Sarah watching over her own grave (102), seeking admittance to Kessling Hall (101) and to the maltings (104) and diving 'like a very mermaid' into the Ouse (104). The effect of the many and wondrous stories with which these women are inscribed is such that the women seem to haunt the novel, both marginal to it and, equally, filling it. Characterised by desire, which Catherine Belsey describes as 'the irrational, arbitrary, inexplicable residue which exceeds or defies the category of the knowable' (Belsey, 1994a: 11), women disrupt history-making.

Sarah Atkinson impedes the onward and upward march of the Atkinson dynasty, and by extension, of Progress, indeed history itself, by subverting her husband's energies for expansion and redirecting them toward herself. When she is injured by a blow to the head from a jealous Thomas, 'he no longer attends to the expanding affairs of Atkinson and Sons. He no longer reads his newspaper ... History has stopped for him' (80). Patriarchy, which is implicated in notions of Progress and Empire, is also disrupted, for although Sarah bears Thomas two sons, these become the first Atkinsons to have difficulty in begetting heirs, 'inhibited by that woman up there in that upper room' (88).

Helen Atkinson is, as we have seen, similarly disruptive of history, making a mockery of progress in a way her father, for all his diatribes, could not: 'once upon a time there was a beautiful girl at a parade of soldiers, and the silly soldiers with their rifles bumped into each other and forgot how to march because they all wanted to look at the beautiful girl' (218). And it is in her relationship with Ernest, her father, that Helen further disrupts and subverts the centrifugal, expansionist tendencies of the Atkinson dynasty, so that the outward thrust of progress turns back upon itself, and history, instead of 'marching unswervingly into the future' (135), is similarly redirected, 'because when fathers love daughters and daughters love fathers it's like tying up into a knot

the thread that runs into the future, it's like a stream wanting to flow backwards' (228).¹⁴

Mary's abortion is the consummate disruption of a linear and teleological notion of history. As Judith Wilt argues, 'the novel dramatizes neither birth nor death but abortion – the disruption of the teleological narrative of beginnings and ends, the biological-historical fable of centred structure (Wilt, 1990: 390). The abortion subverts the one-directional flow of history as 'what the future's made of' (308) is not allowed to develop, but is instead cast into the river. Moreover, Mary's disruption is represented as an attempt to abort history itself. Mary's empty vessel has been filled, things have been made to happen inside her, just as history is made to happen within an empty reality. When Mary decides to abort the baby she makes an attempt to discard history (including things made to happen), and embrace the vacancy of reality. She is waiting for 'Nothing to happen. For something to unhappen' (295). The abortion is thus associated with other attempts to cast off the burden of history, perhaps the most violent yet. She literally takes Tom out of historical time by leading him to Martha Clay's mud hut: 'children, have you ever stepped into another world? Have you ever turned a corner to where Now and Long Ago are the same and time seems to be going on in some other place?' (303).

Women are thus associated with the excessive, subversive elements that disrupt history-making as it is conceived in the novel. As objects of male desire, women represent the romance element of the novel. Associated with many and fantastic stories, they communicate and embody the notion of history as desire because, as the traditional 'other' of rational, realist history, they are the disruptive excess that realist history attempts to exclude. They are, therefore, part of natural history, 'which doesn't go anywhere. Which cleaves to itself. Which perpetually travels back to where it came from' and which is 'always getting the better of the artificial stuff' (205).¹⁵

Furthermore, the use of metaphor to equate the desire for woman with that for history enables the novel to naturalise its characterisation of historical inquiry as desire. For the novel, desire for history is, paradoxically, an ahistorical given, separate from and impervious to history-making and its effects. Understood this way, the emptiness of reality is actually always-already inscribed. And, indeed, Tom's central metaphor for this empty reality, the Fens, is an imperfect one. In the mind of the young Tom, the Fens is always already a 'filled' reality, an ordered realm, so that he can only imagine its emptiness: 'and yet this land, so regular, so prostrate, so tamed and cultivated,

would transform itself, in my five- or six-year old mind, into an empty wilderness' (3). By analogy, even the space that we imagine belongs to 'reality' is always already mapped. It is unavoidable.

The novel's attempt to represent the unrepresentable, an empty reality, devoid of overarching pattern and meaning is therefore undermined or countered by the category of natural history, which naturalises the human condition and makes a continued desire for history, in the face of the problematisation of historical knowledge, a universal and timeless quality. Tom's installation of natural history as a category of the real suggests that his empty reality does posit Truth, that of nature, in much the same way as Elias cannot avoid her metaphysical idea of 'History' as that which is beyond what we live (the present) and remember (the past). Yet, whereas for Elias, the Truth that constitutes the historical sublime is 'opposed to or other to, the materiality of lived history' (Elias, 2001: 53) the novel attempts to avoid a metaphysical positing of truth by making it material. Desire is the fundamental truth of human nature, just as the desire to return is the fundamental truth of natural history. Both these truths are firmly housed not in a metaphysical concept, however, but in the materiality of bodies and of nature.

Committed to representing the late-twentieth century crisis of historiography, the novel nonetheless posits the continuing value of seeking historical knowledge, even if that knowledge is provisional. For reclaimed land is highly fertile. The Fens yield 'fifteen tons of potatoes or nineteen sacks of wheat an acre' (16). Similarly, the emptiness of reality, the absence of over-arching pattern and meaning, invites inscription, proliferates stories, which produce a multiplicity of meanings. These meanings are not guaranteed by a perspective outside of the stories themselves and, as such, are always open to revision, to new meanings. Indeed history-making is abundantly fertile. As we have seen, stories and things made to happen beget more stories and things made to happen, so that while 'history itself' might be empty, history-making is a swarming, irresistible fecundity.

Often the stories produced in and by history-making are, like civilisation itself, 'precious. An artifice – so easily knocked down – but precious' (240). As Decoste observes, this celebration of civilisation does not equate to an Atkinson-like faith in progress, but rather, a belief in process. Civilisation is equated with ceaseless inquiry:

for this artifice that keeps the void at bay is, for Crick, itself a process and not a final destination. The civilization that must be husbanded and ceaselessly renewed is, indeed, the operation of inquiry itself,

that which refuses to foreclose, with whatever degree of violence or finality, on the question why. (Decoste, 2002: 397)

And what the tentative, provisional, ultimately unverifiable stories do is teach 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' (108). For Tom this is valuable knowledge. Accepting 'the burden of our need to ask why' (108) prevents the mistaking of reality for the building of empires.

Historical inquiry thus takes a shape not dissimilar to the movement Keith Tester ascribes to the 'will to know' in *The Life and Times of Post-Modernity* (1993). He says, 'the will to know implies the transcendence of any fixed and evidently formal identities. It implies not certainty, but relentless movement; it implies not the safe havens of ascription but, instead, the never ending and never consummated struggle for achievement'. He contrasts this to the 'will to certainty' which 'implies the creation and imposition of fixed identities'. The will to certainty asserts the centrality of the human, the 'will to know makes the human small and perpetually peripheral' (Tester, 1993: 55).

Fittingly, then, there are direct parallels between Tom's method of historical inquiry and his 'testament' to the value of education:

It's not about empty minds waiting to be filled, nor about flatulent teachers discharging hot air. It's about the opposition of teacher and student. It's about what gets rubbed off between the persistence of the one and the resistance of the other. A long, hard struggle against a natural resistance ... I don't believe in quick results, in wand-waving and wonder-working ... but I do believe in education. (239)

And what gets rubbed off in the opposition of history-making and reality, order and chaos, is fear itself, leaving behind the 'vital force' (51) necessary for embracing life. Thus, whereas Elias posits the desire for 'history itself', and as a child Tom desired the Grand Narrative, what the novel actually dramatises is the desire for the process of historical inquiry, for historical recollection governed by curiosity.

In *Waterland*, romance is the counter-discourse of curiosity. This counter-discourse subverts, disrupts and interrupts history-making's pursuit of order and finality of meaning. It is, therefore, the favoured mode of historical inquiry, the favoured genre, too, for history-telling. Yet, curiosity is not, primarily, a hermeneutic or investigative tool but, like its double romance, is primarily desire. The novel positions this

desire as an alternative to the realist project of remembering history in order to come to terms with the past, to put it behind us, and so foreclose it. Committed to an (anti) representation of 'reality' as absence, meaninglessness, but also to the value of seeking historical knowledge, to re-membering the past in our stories, rather than foreclose history or pronounce its end, *Waterland* refigures history as fecund excess, a compelling, even imperative force that begets knowledge, even if that knowledge is provisional and limited. The excessive histories and stories it comprises are depicted as fertile, not futile.