

# Man: The Story-Telling Animal<sup>1</sup>

Katerina Gkotsi

Structured as a fictional autobiography, Graham Swift's *Waterland* interrogates the human need to tell stories, exploring their truth and limits. The novel's narrator, Tom Crick, a history teacher confronting the collapse of his marriage and professional life, revisits his past to make sense of the traumatic events that have shaped his existence: his friend's drowning, his wife Mary's teenage abortion, and his brother's suicide. His nonlinear, digressive narrative mirrors the structure of the unconscious and the associative logic of psychoanalytic discourse. Like psychoanalytic *anamnesis*, Crick's storytelling concerns not objective facts but subjective truth. Miller notes that analysis is "not a question of saying what is" but about "bringing discourse to what could not take place in it".<sup>2</sup> Similarly, by retelling his life, Crick inscribes the past into discourse, thereby, like the psychoanalytic subject, completing "the current historicization of the facts that have already determined a certain number of the historical 'turning points' in his existence".<sup>3</sup>

The novel's tension between history and the overwhelming Here and Now - which evokes the real that eludes articulation - is prominent. Patricia Bosquin-Caroz<sup>4</sup> observes that, at the threshold of *jouissance*, language can only encircle the real, offering a "lying truth". Crick's stories, like the floodable Fens' drainage system, try to impose symbolic order on uncontrollable nature, while the novel's title embodies the paradoxical interplay of water (drive) and land (meaning), encapsulating both *jouissance* and word. "All the stories were once a feeling in the guts"<sup>5</sup> says Crick. In *Waterland*, sexuality and death often escape narrative containment, surfacing as fragments of the real - gaps in Crick's story or Mary's religious hallucinations. Encounters with the real confront the main characters to the limits of meaning, requiring responses that are necessarily unique. While Crick turns to history, "the filler of vacuums",<sup>6</sup> Mary is caught in a never ceasing present and her final muteness and insanity signal a failure to historicize trauma.<sup>7</sup>

Through his family saga, Crick seeks hindsight and understanding, yet he finds that truth is never whole but shifting - echoing Lacan's notion of truth as variable, multiple, and inherently deceitful.

1 "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." Swift, G., *Waterland*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1983, p. 85.

2 Miller, J.-A., "Truth Coupled with Meaning", *The Lacanian Review* 2, 2016, p.10.

3 Lacan, J., "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis", *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink, New York/London: Norton, 2006, p. 217.

4 Bosquin-Caroz, P., "Varity. Variations of Truth in Psychoanalysis. Presentation of NLS Congress Theme 2026., p. 8. Available at: <https://www.amp-nls.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/ARGUMENT-NLS-CONGRESS-2026-PBC.pdf>

5 Swift, G., *op.cit.*, p. 408.

6 Swift, G., *ibid.*, p. 85.

7 For an in-depth reading on subjectivity, meaning and the limits of symbolization in *Waterland* see Lea, D., *Graham Swift*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005, pp. 72-98.

“By forever attempting to explain we may come, not to an Explanation, but to a knowledge of the limits of our power to explain”<sup>8</sup> admits Crick. His realisation that history offers “no shortcuts to Salvation [...] only the dogged and patient art of making do”<sup>9</sup> parallels the end of analysis, which, as Philippe De Georges notes, is “not a triumph of light [...] the True of the True”<sup>10</sup> but an acceptance of limitation: “we are made of the substance of our nightmares and our traumas [...] we cannot undo what has been [...] Yet the subject can forge a truth of their own, from materials that belong only to them, wrested from their anguish and their body”.<sup>11</sup>

8 Swift, G., *op. cit.*, p., 149-150.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 149.

10 De Georges, P., « Lo que vale la pena ser dicho », *El Psicoanálisis*, nº 15, 2020, Edición digital.

11 *Ibid.*