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BOŽENA KUČALÁ

UNSPOKEN DIALOGUES AND NON-LISTENING LISTENERS IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S FICTION

Abstract

Retrospection, first-person narration and a confessional mode are hallmarks of Graham Swift's fiction. The first-person narratives in *Waterland* and *Tomorrow* are constructed as forms of oral communication, even if they are narrated primarily or exclusively by the narrators to themselves. Yet each narrator invokes or conjures up a listener for whose sake the story-telling is undertaken, and, consequently, the stories have characteristics of oral deliverance. While Swift's characters believe in the importance of narration and confession as a form of self-understanding, they also intuit the necessity of having an audience. Hence, their interior monologues are carried out as if they were part of dialogues, addressed to listeners whose imagined presence and response shape the structure and content of the narrative. This paper examines the function of non-listening listeners in Swift's selected novels.

Key words

Graham Swift; Waterland; Tomorrow; confessional narrative

If only *life* had an audience ...
Graham Swift, "Watched"¹

Retrospective monologues are a distinguishing formal feature of Graham Swift's fiction. The use of a focaliser in *The Sweet Shop Owner* and *Wish You Were Here* does not depart very far from the mode of first-person narration he favours; indeed it may be regarded as a variation on an unchanging concern in his fiction, i.e. a focus on a subjective consciousness engaged in the task of narrativising its experience. Yet, although failures in communication are among the abiding preoccupations of Swift's fiction,² most of his narrators try to overcome the limi-

tations of their solipsistic world and address their narratives to specific audiences; consequently, their narratives are shaped as if they formed one side of a dialogue. This article will explore the paradoxical situation of unspoken dialogues and non-listening listeners in *Waterland* and *Tomorrow*.

In their classic study *The Nature of Narrative* Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg stated: “By definition narrative art requires a story and a story-teller. In the relationship between the teller and the tale, and that other relationship between the teller and the audience, lies the essence of narrative art” (1968: 240). Modern narratologists likewise stress the communicative aspect of narrative. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz define it as “a multidimensional purposive communication from a teller to an audience” (2012: 3). Gerald Prince argues that “In all narrations, a dialogue is established between the narrator(s), the narratee(s), and the character(s)” (Prince [1980] 2004: 101). Prince’s understanding of the narratee is very broad; he detects his or her invisible, implied presence even in narratives which do not appear to be addressed to anyone in particular (2004: 99). However, Phelan and Rabinowitz distinguish between the narrative audience (“a role that the actual reader takes on while reading”) and the narratee as “the intratextual audience specifically addressed by the narrator.” In other words, they reserve the term for those instances when the narratee is “a character position in the text” (2012: 7).

The narratives in Swift’s *Waterland* and *Tomorrow* are very explicitly presented as utterances aimed at a well-defined audience – or narratee, according to Phelan and Rabinowitz’s use of the term – whose presence is invoked and taken account of within each narrative. Both narrators present themselves as speakers and establish the narratees as listeners. As Phelan observes in *Teaching Narrative Theory*, “the question, Who speaks (or tells)? [...] entails the complementary question, Who hears (or listens)?” (2010: 137).

In an interview with Catherine Bernard Swift commented on the significance of voice in his novels:

Voice is important because [...] I tend to write in the first person, which immediately implies voice, even if that voice is internal and is the voice of someone talking to themselves, within themselves, and perhaps in a way that they wouldn’t in any other circumstances talk. [...] It may not be their real voice. It is the voice they use; it is the voice that is recognizable to them, which is habitual perhaps, but it may not be their true voice. I mean, that is full of potential for the narrative, because then you can show or suggest a breakdown of voice which may or may not reveal some underlying voice, a deeper voice. There are levels of voices. (Swift 1997: 219–220)

The question of levels of voices and the reliability of voices is of paramount importance in *Waterland* and *Tomorrow*, in which the act of story-telling is marked by a glaring discrepancy between, on the one hand, the existence of a narratee whose presence is felt to be immediate because of the supposedly oral mode of

deliverance, and, on the other hand, the denial, or implicit denial, of the narratee's capacity to hear. As in other Swift novels, the narratives of *Waterland* and *Tomorrow* are "performances without audiences" (Lea 2005: 100). It will be argued here that the contradiction in the narrators' approach to their listeners reflects their anxiety over the nature of their disclosures, and their ongoing struggle with their past.

The narratives in *Waterland* and *Tomorrow* bear distinctive, sometimes even obtrusive, markers of oral discourse. The narrators openly refer to the act of speaking and use first- and second-person pronouns, typical of dialogue. In *Waterland*, and even more so in *Tomorrow*, the narratives are presented in the process of becoming, with the speakers commenting on their story-telling and emphasising stages in their narration. Comprised of a multiplicity of stories, the narrative of *Waterland* requires a great deal of narratorial control. The impression that the novel is disjointed is misleading – it is "a delayed confessional narrative" (Russell 2009: 116), in which the key revelations are deliberately postponed and wrapped up in other stories. To retain his hold on his material, Tom Crick reminds himself "But let's not jump ahead" (192) and frequently introduces another part with the phrase "let me tell you about...". Likewise, Paula in *Tomorrow* delays the supposedly most shocking revelations, trying to achieve a chronological, reasonably coherent account. And so she reminds herself, e.g., "I'm jumping ahead" and asks her listeners to "Come back to Davenport Road in the year that Uncle Eddie died. I need to explain now some difficult and delicate things" (97). The imperative "come back" appears continually in *Tomorrow*, and, in the words of Stephen Benson, "establishes a signature rhythm, something we might read as distantly kin to the formulaic devices of oral storytelling" (2011: 592).

In like manner, the stories told by Tom Crick in *Waterland* contain repeated forms of direct address. Tom, a retiring history teacher, calls his students "children" and urges them to listen. Whereas direct address is only to be expected in the parts presented as accounts of his classes, in the numerous *petits récits* which make up the novel the occasional address "children" serves as a reminder that the story-teller continues to envisage an audience. The exhortation to "listen" creates a sense of immediacy by conjuring up a communicative context. The context is clearly indicated in *Tomorrow*, in which Paula the narrator is in bed throughout her monologue, speaking to her sleeping children. The impression of oral communication is enhanced by numerous deictic devices. She systematically remarks on the current time and place: "*this* house, which we're all in now" (65), "[t]his bedroom" (97), "this night" (28), "these last vigilant hours" (97); in *Waterland* Tom refers to "this stale-smelling classroom in which you are suspended" (51).

A record of the listeners' reaction, or anticipated or imagined reaction, further dramatises their presence, or imaginary presence, by displaying the speakers' awareness of their audience. Paula admonishes her children not to laugh (63) and wonders what they must be thinking about her revelations (75); standing in front of his class, Tom Crick claims to know his students' emotions: "I know what you feel. I know what you think when you sit in your rows, in attitudes of boredom,

listlessness, resentment, forbearance, desultory concentration” (51). Later on he remarks that his students “sneer” at what he is saying (62) and goes on to challenge their attitude. The questions and imperative verbs in *Waterland* and *Tomorrow* cannot generate a response but appear in both narratives in imitation of common conversation strategies, which are normally designed to elicit a reaction. In fact, the speaker usurps the place of the other side of the dialogue.

Despite ostensible features of spoken communication, the monologues in these novels are in reality addressed to listeners whose presence is either debatable (*Waterland*), or only physical but not mental (*Tomorrow*). The narrator of *Tomorrow* opens her story by indicating the paradox of her listeners’ physical proximity and their inability to hear, or, as Benson put it, “their cognitive and constitutive absence” (2011: 590): “You’re asleep, my angels, I assume” (1). In Chapter 2 of *Waterland* the narrator for the first time identifies both himself and his listeners, urging them to attend to his story:

Children. Children, who will inherit the world. Children (for always, even though you were fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, candidates for that appeasing term “young adults,” I addressed you, silently, as “children”) – children, before whom I have stood for thirty-two years in order to unravel the mysteries of the past, but before whom I am to stand no longer, listen, one last time, to your history teacher. (4)

Yet the parenthetical remark that he used to address them *silently* as “children” alerts the reader to the possibility that much of what follows and which is punctuated by this form of address may in fact be silent. This possibility is corroborated by the instances of Tom speaking to two other non-listening addressees – the headmaster of his school and his own wife Mary. For example, inserted in Tom’s conversation with Lewis, represented in Chapter 18 as direct speech, are Tom’s reflections on this conversation which, although shaped like part of the dialogue, evidently remain unspoken. Another, obvious instance of silent address is the episode in which Tom speaks to his wife, who, although physically present, is mentally beyond his reach:

Mary – wherever you are, now you’re gone, still here but gone, somewhere inside yourself, now you’ve stopped and all that is left for anyone else is your story – do you remember (can you still remember?) how once we lay in the shell of the old windmill by the Hockwell Lode and how the flat, empty Fens all around us became, too, a miraculous land, became an expectant stage on which magical things could happen? (101)

In both instances, the distinction between dialogue and narrative is elided.

Tomorrow is a novel in which nothing happens while Paula waits for the momentous and life-changing conversation between her husband and her children;³ in fact she is delivering her own “talk” to her children before Michael speaks to

them the next day, occasionally remarking on the passage of time and “tomorrow” becoming “today.”²⁴ Although the static situation depicted in *Tomorrow* is wholly constituted by a voice, this voice is not heard even within the novel; rather, it is a voice designed for silent “speaking” and hence not for being heard. It appears that the monologues in both novels remain partially or completely unspoken.

In contrast to *Tomorrow*, in *Waterland* Swift offers no clarity regarding the context. Parts of the narrative picture Tom addressing his class but the passages are invariably narrated from his point of view and obfuscate the distinction between a report of the present moment, a recollection or, indeed, an imaginary encounter with an audience. The sense that the children whom Tom continues to address are not always there before him is substantiated in the latter part of the novel, which intersperses chapters depicting Tom meeting one of his students in a pub with accounts of the tragic events of his youth, which are ostensibly addressed to his class as well. What conclusively illustrates the existence of separate narrative levels, or “levels of voices,” is the final part of the novel. Whereas Chapter 48 recounts Tom’s retirement and his last encounter with his students, his narrative continues for another four chapters, in which he apparently continues to speak to his students, as before. The bewildering anachrony of the novel, the variety of accounts it ties together disguise the circumstances of Tom’s narration. However, as early as Chapter 8 the narrator hints at the absence of an actual audience. Addressing his students, he offers them a definition of man as “the story-telling animal” (53) and immediately passes from this generic denotation to a personal reference. Although he describes the individual in the third person, it cannot be made any clearer that the story-teller is himself. What is more, this act of story-telling occurs after the narrator’s retirement, when he obviously no longer has an opportunity to address his class:

And when he sits, with more leisure but no less terror, in the midst of catastrophe, when he sits – as Lewis can see himself sitting, for the sake of his children – in his fall-out bunker; or when he only sits alone because his wife of over thirty years who no longer knows him, nor he her, has been taken away, and because his schoolchildren, his children, who once, ever reminding him of the future, came to his history lessons, are no longer there, he tells – if only to himself, if only to an audience he is forced to imagine – a story. (54)

Much as the narrators need an audience, even to the point of imagining it, there are occasions when their determination to speak to a specific audience audibly slips. Both the linguistic register and the nature of the information they impart occasionally make it doubtful whether a given part of their narrative is indeed meant to be shared. For example, early on, Tom reports on his conversation with the headmaster, making parenthetical comments about his superior supposedly to the students, but there is little probability that his words are actually spoken to them:

Children, there's this fellow called Lewis – better known to you, indeed to me, as Lulu – who's trying to make out that I'm a bad lot, that I'm even just a bit off my rocker. (18) [...] Once upon a time, in the bright mid-sixties, when you were being born and Lewis, apart from being appointed Head (his only rival a history teacher, a senior man who nonetheless wanted to remain in the classroom), was busy begetting his own little ones, there was plenty of future on offer. Good times for headmasters. (20)

In the course of the narrative, more doubts regarding the audience's presence arise given the intimate nature of the personal details that his narrative includes.

Lacking the far-ranging historical dimension of Tom's stories in *Waterland*, on the level of family history Paula's account likewise comprises very private details, mainly to do with her relationship with her husband. Although what she is silently saying to her sleeping children cannot reach them, she still considers some parts of her narrative too intimate even for this undelivered account. Her uncertainty and embarrassment do not, however, stop the flow of narration but compel her to ask her children to stop listening at some points (e.g. 77). The self-contradiction inherent in speaking to a non-listening audience is thus compounded by the request not to be heard.⁵ Interestingly, in *Tomorrow*, despite the fact that the relations between the narrator and the narratees do not change, the narrative reveals inconsistencies which undermine Paula's narrative control and reveal her awareness of the "cognitive absence" of listeners. In referring to her husband, she persistently wavers between "your dad" and "Mike." This indicates a fluctuation in her perspective, which by turns includes or excludes the audience. While recalling an occasion when she needed her lover's unresponsive presence to trigger her thoughts, Paula hints at the true circumstances of her present monologue:

I just lay awake, not particularly wishing to sleep, or even feeling ignored. [...] Just thinking steadily to myself, as if I actually needed this sleeping stranger at my side to set my thoughts in motion.

Not unlike now. (178)

The narrators in *Waterland* and *Tomorrow* not only conjure up an audience, but cast themselves in certain roles as well, which they excessively emphasise. Tom stresses his position as a teacher (although during at least part of his narration he no longer is)⁶ whereas Paula refers to herself as a mother, and both occasionally speak of themselves in the third person, adopting the point of view of their audiences, which is reflected in frequent switches between first- and third-person pronouns. The switch to the third person is also a way to distance themselves from the most distressing sections of their stories. Daniel Lea (2005: 76) notes that Tom tends to retreat "behind the mask of the dispassionate storyteller" chiefly when he discusses his relationship with Mary. There, he not only speaks of himself in the third person but also adopts the formulaic phrase "once upon a time" to make the story less personal, as in the following passage: "Once upon a time

there was a future history teacher and a future history teacher's wife for whom things went wrong, so – since you cannot dispose of the past, since things must be – they had to make do" (109).

Paula's "talk" to her children is in reality an interior monologue; and, although the status of Tom's narrative is less clear,⁷ his story is at least in part narrated to himself as well. The impression of the existence of a communicative context which both narrators strive to convey is of course misleading – and deliberately so. Paradoxically, because the narrators address specific audiences whose presence is immediately put in question, it might be supposed that the narrators' need to conceal their stories is even stronger than their need to share them. Concealing a story is the most effective strategy of retaining control over it.

Both Tom and Paula create situations in which they act as figures of authority, which they self-consciously underline by referring to themselves as "your teacher" or "your mother," respectively. But this self-elevation corresponds to the reduction of their audiences to the status of naive children, who are to be lectured, instructed and enlightened in the ways of the world. In fact, neither Tom's students nor Kate and Nick Hook are children any longer but both narrators choose to ignore this fact. When he addresses his audience for the first time in the novel Tom admits that he applies the term "children" to young adults (4) while Paula, whose children are roughly the same age, likewise admits at the outset that the term she is going to use is quite inadequate:

But sixteen years have passed and sixteen's like eighteen once was, maybe. But that doesn't matter. To me, tonight, you're still little kids, you're tiny babies, as if you might be sleeping now, not in your separate dens of rooms, but together as you once did in a single cot at Davenport Road. Our Nick and Kate. (2)

Self-invested with authority, the teacher and the mother embellish their narratives with generalisations and words of wisdom which endow their stories with a didactic dimension. In a teacherly manner, Tom punctuates his stories-lectures with questions, which he then goes on to answer himself.

Corresponding to the relationship between narrator and narratee is the chosen mode of narration. Again, parallels emerge: both Tom and Paula offer their stories in the form of fairy tales, or bedtime stories. Tom chooses this mode at the beginning of his narrative, when he introduces the place and time of his childhood as a fairy-tale world: "Fairy-tale words; fairy-tale advice. But we lived in a fairy-tale place" (1). Although the story he tells is for the most part factual and at times even approximates historical narratives, Tom repeatedly returns to the convention of fairy tale. A recurrent phrase in his narration is "let me tell you a story." Paula promises her sleeping children "a bedtime story" (9) and reiterates this denotation throughout. The evocation of the bedtime story convention strongly contrasts with the contents of both stories. A bedtime story is told in order to send a child to sleep whereas Paula's story, if heard, would certainly have the opposite effect,

just as she expects her husband's words will jolt Kate and Nick awake tomorrow. On the eve of the fateful day, she admits: "And what I'm feeling now is simply the most awful thing: that we might be wrenching you for ever from your childhood, in the same way as if you might have been wrenched once prematurely and dangerously from my womb" (2–3).⁸ The disclosure will "awaken" her children and confront them with disturbing questions; rather than comforting them, the truth may plunge them into a crisis of self-doubt and estrange them from their parents. Hence, Paula's bedtime story is her last and self-negating attempt to treat them as children. The same paradox may be observed in *Waterland*, in which the term "story" is applied to all the accounts that make up Tom's narrative, be it local folklore, glimpses of the two world wars, regional history or Tom's family history and, above all, the tragic events of his youth – to which he devotes the most attention. Again in stark contrast to fairy tales, his stories offer no comforting resolution. David Malcolm notes that the fairy-tale echoes in *Waterland* are negative ones and involve failure and destruction. In accordance with Tom's reminder that fairy tales are not all "sweet and cozy," his stories frustrate expectations of a happy ending. Notably, the reunion of lovers (Tom and Mary) as adults cannot restore their previous relationship and ensure a happy ever after (Malcolm 2003: 89–90). Although Tom's stories are supposedly told to assuage his students' fear of the end of the world, they can hardly be regarded as soothing. Underlying his perception of history is a view of cyclical disasters: the flood waters will return whatever draining effort the Fenmen make, man does not learn from history, wars will happen at regular intervals, etc. His family story is fraught with trauma as well: it includes incest, murder, abortion and madness.

If the audience cannot hear the story, or not the whole story, then it might be assumed that the glaringly inappropriate narrative mode has been chosen to comfort the speaker rather than the listener. Combined with the choice of narratee and the construction of the narrator–narratee relationship, the fairy-tale convention in both novels has the effect of alleviating the narrator's difficulty in confronting facts. Indeed, as long as *Waterland*'s narrator remains at more abstract levels of history, he can avoid a confrontation with the traumatic incidents from his own life, including his present crisis. Retired, estranged from his wife, haunted by the trauma of his past, Tom describes his situation in the following terms: "To comfort himself he tells himself stories. He repeats the stories he's told his class" (287). Lea claims that Tom's narrative is "in essence a form of talking cure, designed to provide structure and shape for the chaotic circumstances of the present" (2005: 93). Thus the narrators' versions of their past are fabulations also in the sense of being, at least in part, intentional manipulations of reality.

The apparent inconsistencies and self-contradictions in both narratives are indicative of the narrators' confusion and inner conflict, or projections of their own struggle to come to terms with the facts they talk about. The complexity of the accounts is intensified by the narrators' ambivalent motivation: the desire to tell one's story and elicit a response is undermined by a reluctance to share the truth with others. The opposing impulses result in the paradoxical situation of both tell-

ing and not telling, revealing the truth and concealing it simultaneously, of seeking a listener and yet choosing someone who is in no position to receive the story. Frequently resorting to metalanguage, Paula owns up about her irreconcilable impulses: “I want you to listen to these things I’m telling you and not to hear them at all” (180). Furthermore, her listeners’ inability to hear is acknowledged as the precondition for the story to be told at all: “... both of you are usually far beyond consciousness in the early hours of the morning. I hope you are now” (134); “... while you sleep [...] let me tell you ...” (139). Apart from these explicit disavowals, the narrator’s incongruous intentions are discernible in her occasional emphasis on the secrecy and unbreakable confidentiality of certain parts of her story.

The core of the problem is that both Tom and Paula are prominent characters in their own stories and it turns out some of their actions were embarrassing, disgraceful, or even, in the case of Tom, bordering on the criminal. The speakers’ awareness of alternative narrative modes, more appropriate than that of the fairy tale, is implied on a number of occasions. Those hints reflect the ambiguity of the narrators’ motivation as well as their anxiety over the things they reveal. Both Tom and Paula feel a need to confess their misdeeds, subject their actions to judgement and possibly obtain some kind of absolution, but this need is underlain by a half-conscious fear of how the confession will be received and an uncertainty whether a favourable judgment will be passed.

In *Tomorrow*, the reader may observe a gradual change in Paula’s categorisation of her own story, in parallel to what she is revealing. In accordance with the fairy-tale paradigm, her story initially focuses on the early stages of her relationship with her future husband, presenting it as idyllic and insisting that their family life has always been happy. As her story progresses, however, less idyllic episodes come to light; as Paula says to her children, “And now it’s time you were told – you’re sixteen now, after all – the full, unexpurgated fairy tale” (87). More and more often Paula refers to her talk as a confession. The truth she discloses at a later stage in her narrative is that her husband is not her children’s biological father (or, as she says to them in yet another self-contradictory statement, “Your dad isn’t your dad” [157]) and so it appears that the children have been intentionally misled as to their identity. Abandoning the genre of “bedtime story,” Paula expresses her desire to confess and be forgiven: “Now I’m confessing to you” (167), hoping that the children will nevertheless accept Michael as their father. But there is more to come: she also admits to an affair – a fact unknown to her husband, which she is still determined to keep secret. Despite her protestations to the contrary, the Hooks’ family life loses its appearance of perfect happiness. In fact Paula has a double confession to make. One will soon be made jointly with Michael to the children and will concern their true paternity. The other, which she would like to but does not dare make to Michael, concerns her infidelity. The unfortunate coincidence that Michael has booked for their wedding anniversary the same hotel in which she once betrayed him might prompt the disclosure which, however, she knows she will never make: “I can’t get out of it. I’ll just have to pretend, smile and pretend. Or treat it as some grotesque and appalling

opportunity for confession. On top of everything else? Mikey, forgive me, forgive me. It was, believe me, all in a good cause” (179). In her analysis of the novel, Isabelle Roblin argues (2009: 79–80) that it is the second secret, i.e. the incident of adultery, that is “more important to Paula and more difficult to reveal than the first.” Roblin draws attention to the narrator’s strategies of procrastination, her very oblique hints at the affair before it is finally admitted, and her insistence on playing down the significance of her infidelity.

Paula’s choice of non-listening listeners stems from her tacit refusal to disclose all her guilty secrets. The constitutive contradiction in her unspoken confession results from her combined need for absolution and her inability to be completely honest, which undermines the validity of her confession. Although she says to her sleeping children, “So now you know what awaits you, what your father will tell you in his own words” (154), her story contains much more than what they are going to hear. Paula’s carefully constructed, self-conscious narrative at times reveals gaps and inconsistencies which destabilise the version she is intent on conveying. Despite her emphasis on Michael’s paternity, even after the revelation that he is not Kate and Nick’s biological father, Paula admits that after all the twins do not resemble him: “When I look at you, I don’t see, I can’t see, your father” (196). Her account of her affair is immediately followed by an affirmation that she loves her husband (178).

Paula evokes yet another discourse, related to the religious significance of confession, which is supposed to disclose the truth and whose reliability is subject to assessment – that of court testimony. Her father was a judge and while watching him in his professional capacity Paula was impressed by his stern, authoritative manner. Her present apprehensiveness about being judged may be due both to her sense of guilt and her intention not to disclose vital secrets, which amounts to giving a distorted testimony. In what is effectively another act of betrayal, Paula will allow her husband to run the risk of being rejected by the children (her status as mother is of course secure) while herself withholding an essential part of her statement:

Tomorrow you’ll start a new life. And you’ll have to choose between your fathers, if you see what I mean. You’ll have to give judgment on who that man is.

I won’t be the one on trial, but in any case I’m giving you now my testimony in advance. What would your judgement be of me? (202)

The children are “integral to the account” because, as Benson argues, “it is in their gift to acknowledge, to understand, to respond, to judge, and perhaps most importantly, to accept and to believe” (2011: 594). Paula’s decision to address her sleeping children rather than engage in a straightforward self-examination may be a way to avoid self-confrontation and self-judgement. Imagining an audience helps her to manipulate her narrative and tell half-truths to herself, which effectively makes her her own listener.⁹ F.K. Stenzel once defined mediacy of

presentation as “the generic characteristic of narration”: “Whenever a piece of news is conveyed, whenever something is reported, there is a mediator – the voice of a narrator is audible” (1984: 4). If in Swift’s novel there is no one to hear the voice, then it may be assumed that the mediacy between the events and the narrative of these events serves the narrator’s own needs.

Although *Waterland*, like *Tomorrow*, is a confessional narrative, the narrator’s guilt is at first less apparent due to the multiplicity and diversity of the tales he offers to his audience. The fairy-tale mode has the effect of relegating even recent events to a legendary past, and the narrator focuses on the narrative itself rather than a potential judgement. As Malcolm argues, in *Waterland* stories are “a means of controlling, coping with, and evading the real; by no means do they give unmediated access to it, nor are they really meant to” (2000: 192). But self-judgement does come, towards the end of the narrative, when Tom, at once evoking the notions of confession and legal testimony, pleads guilty. Characteristically, the confession is silent, but has a double addressee: the police officers who investigate the case of his wife stealing a baby, and the students to whom the entire narrative is addressed. In a moment of crisis, Tom admits: “I confess my responsibility, jointly with my wife, for the death of three people ...” (272).¹⁰

Neither of Swift’s novels, however, makes a case for the necessity of truth-telling. Apart from self-serving motives, the narrators of *Waterland* and *Tomorrow* are aware of the potentially devastating effect of their disclosures. It was, after all, Tom’s communication of his retarded brother’s true paternity that prompted Dick’s fatal jump into the river. In the scene recounting his father’s death, Tom imagines him mentally reliving his breakdown after his return from the Great War. His inability to speak coexisted with his desire to tell his story (297). Admonished not to speak, with his last breath Henry Crick made a futile effort to talk, imprinting on his son’s memory an image of lips moving and yet failing to produce a sound: “The lips tremble, form a quivering circle. // Once upon a time –” (297)

It appears that throughout his narrative Tom has been trying to imitate his father’s effort at telling a story, and, like him, has learnt to be wary of truth. Despite the profusion of the tales he tells, it is probable that most of the time no sound is made.

If Tom is “trapped in the tension of contradictory impulses between verbosity and silence” (Lea 2005: 90), in *Tomorrow* the narrator copes with the tension by keeping her “logorrhoea” (Roblin 2009: 76) and reticence completely separate. In both novels, the narrators are motivated by mutually annihilating needs: to confess one’s faults, subject oneself to impartial judgement and to comfort oneself by constructing an acceptable version of one’s past. These contradictory goals can only appear to have been achieved if the narrator is his or her own judge and confessor, hence the enterprise requires a degree of deception and self-deception. Speaking to a non-listening listener is an essential part of this “adroit exercise in self-absolution” (Lea 2005: 99).

Notes

- ¹ From the poem “Watched,” in: Graham Swift, *Making an Elephant...*, p. 245.
- ² David Malcolm (2003: 15) notes that incomplete utterances, which are either due to a character’s inarticulateness or aposiopesis (“the intentional failure to complete a sentence”), are a distinguishing trait of Swift’s writing.
- ³ Reviews of *Tomorrow* are generally unfavourable, a common criticism being the novel’s scarcity of action. David Leavitt in *The New York Times Book Review* sums up the action in the book as “a woman tossing and turning in bed” (2007: 26). However, more insightful analyses concentrate on the narration itself (e.g. Roblin 2009, Benson 2011).
- ⁴ Stephen Benson sees an analogy between the heroine’s story-telling as “a stalling tactic” and *Arabian Nights* (2011: 593).
- ⁵ Reviewing the novel, Michiko Kakutani remarks on the implausibility of Paula revealing intimate details of her life to her children (2007: E42). But the point is that of course she does not.
- ⁶ On one occasion, Crick becomes a surrogate parent when he pretends in a pub that the student Price he is talking to is his son. Richard Rankin Russell claims that Price is instrumental in triggering the process of narration because he has replaced Crick’s aborted child (2009: 118).
- ⁷ It might be, in parts, a lecture, a written historical narrative, or an interior monologue.
- ⁸ The novel carries an epigraph from John Donne’s “The Good-Morrow”: “Were we not wean’d then?”, which the reviewer Alan Brownjohn is inclined to interpret in accordance with the content of the poem as a description of the awakening love between Paula and her future husband (2007: 22). However, it is more likely to apply to the awakening to the truth which awaits their children in the morning.
- ⁹ Benson (2011: 589–590) draws attention to the fact that at the outset of narration, having made sure that the children are asleep, Paula in fact establishes *herself* as a listener. She says: “Everything’s quiet, the house is still,” “Your father is gently snoring,” “Outside I can hear rain just starting, softly plopping on leaves” (Chapter 1).
- ¹⁰ Tom played a part in three deaths: the murder of his friend Freddie Parr, the abortion of (most likely) his own child and his brother’s suicide.

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