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Research Papers

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## History between Oblivion and Storytelling in Graham Swift's Waterland

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### Abstract

*The article focuses on Graham Swift's Waterland from the history – temporality dialectical perspective against the theoretical background of the postmodern view on history and the presence of a realistic trend in the British contemporary novel. Swift's novel illustrates the postmodern characteristics of a pluralist perspective on history, with past events as plausible constructions, discourses modeled on imagination as well; on the other hand, it is a sustainable illustration of the realist tendency in the British contemporary fiction, Swift's novel treating history and temporality as palpable pressures that require to be understood and rebuilt in spite of memories remaining incomplete and histories lacking credibility. Storytelling functions as a modality of saving time against its self-destructive oblivion, the only modality by means of which temporality becomes meaningful in spite of fact randomness.*

*Keywords: discursive history, imagination, metaphysical realism, postmodern temporality, storytelling*

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### 1. The postmodern view on history

In the context of postmodernism, one cannot refer to one reality, but to realities, each representing a plausible variant of one narrator: “the same historical scenes can be configured differently; hence the different meanings of the same events, the whole process being a literary one, typical of fiction.” Hayden White states that historical research may be interested not necessarily in the fact that certain events effectively happened, but in what those events may signify for a particular group or for the worldview of an entire culture.

In postmodernism we witness a refocusing of attention from validation to signification, namely the modality in which systems of discourse confer meaning to the past; hence, a pluralist perspective on history which consists of different, yet equally

plausible constructions. The contemporary historians' interest lies not in the identity of facts, but in how these should be described so that one and not another way of explanation could be preferred. Facts are rather “built” by means of the questions we address to events, while knowing what happened is possible through imagination. The historical truth is represented by the event itself plus the conceptual matrix by means of which it was placed in the discourse, imagination always being involved in the representation of truth.

To think historically in postmodernism means to think critically and contextually. History and fiction are discourses, systems of signification through which we confer meaning to the past; meaning and the general view are not the events themselves, but can be found in the systems that

transform events into present historical facts. The dialogic revision of forms, contexts and values of the past is the only modality of perceiving historical facts in postmodernism. Moreover, in rewriting history, the notions of objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, the transparency of representation, all disappear, while the historian is contaminated by situational discursive elements.

## **2. British contemporary realism and the postmodern historical novel**

The postmodern historical novel is characterized by marginalizing major historical events and skepticism to the official history, the focus falling on minor lives and consciousnesses and on the modality in which these intersect, influence and participate to public events. Thus, the reality of the past is approached from a decentralized perspective. In addition, the postmodern historical narrative implies a re-memorializing imagination (creative stance), a knit of remembrance and imagination as reconstruction. Evoking historical facts and the parodist imitation of the traditional novelistic models represent, also, conditions of the imaginative positioning of the postmodern historical novel: "The postmodern writer is forced to recognize his own historicity and hence the necessity to confront the present, while writing represents the fight for a past always evasive that must be perceived as 'real'."

Realism is a presence within postmodernism, a direction of the contemporary British novel, the realist writers being aware of the epistemological and aesthetic difficulties involved in the literary representation, of the fact that any interpretation of reality is, partially, constituted from discourses: "We can obtain approximately true interpretations of a misleading, recalcitrant reality."

The realist prose does not correspond to reality, does not portray preexistent events, but offers representations that are plausible due to their embedment in the social reality. Michael Devitt asserted that art might represent reality provided there pre-existed the conviction that the reality can be known. Realism implies the existence of a world independent of thinking, which precedes and exists externally. The metaphysical realism, typical to the contemporary British literature, rejects the mirror metaphor and the theories of copying, at the same time rejecting the supposition that the world is noumenal, beyond understanding, thus being able to generate only different versions, vocabularies, and linguistic games. The theory of adaptation (Alvin Goldman) is compatible with

the hermeneutic conception of mimesis as creative reconstruction of reality by means of fiction. According to this theory of adaptation, a causal theory of knowledge, the events cause the sentences to be true or false. Language is constitutive to knowledge, which is always mediated, but which still maintains a link with an independent reality that constrains what can be plausibly asserted about it. This realism offers the possibility of adjudicating among the different accounts of reality, negating the assertion that all accounts are incommensurable, and arguing that there are clear rational criteria according to which the truth of the conflictive points of view can be affirmed. Although access to world is always mediated, this does not hinder formulating pretensions of validity about the world. The contemporary British realist novelists manifest this orientation to the world, the reality itself soliciting to be interpreted, yet interpretations in this context differing from the free play of various vocabularies.

The realist novels tackle with the problematic of knowing history and the authenticity difficulties embedded in such a process. The tension of rebuilding the past does not generate totalizing accounts and, although the focus often falls on incertitude, discontinuity, confusion, and fragmentation, the realist novelists insist on the fact that these aporias do not invalidate the historical knowledge. History always remains incomplete, always existing due to its interpreters. The sources used for understanding the past are not neutral documents, but interventions carrying a particular finality. Yet, history, always indirectly known, exerts a certain pressure on those who want to understand and to rebuild its meaning.

The historical sources constrain the modeling of events in narrative forms, there being explicit reference to facts and the attempt to explain them. Although the sources can be contradictory and difficult to interpret, not only do they impose strict limits to what can be affirmed about the past, but they also offer the basis of any history knowledge. This knowledge is obtained by appealing to texts, yet their textuality refers back to a recalcitrant historical referent that cannot be removed or ignored. The meaning of this palpable reality sets the limits of fictitiousness in the English realist novels. The reality cannot be dissolved entirely into language or text. The abdication in front of imagination as the only modality to perceive the past, embracing textuality only and the rejection to recognize a modeling referent, all lead to asserting

relativism and, at the same time, to resigning in front of dominant meta-narratives by means of which history can be falsified. "The winner will thus take not only the laurels but the right to truth as well."

Novelists such as Graham Swift, Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie, situating within the inescapable context of postmodernism, try to undermine and contest its limits and, being aware that absolute, complete knowledge cannot be achieved, they attempt to labor history into meaningful accounts of it, considering the moral implications of their interpretations as well. We shall further discuss Graham Swift's *Waterland* as a suggestive illustration of the history and temporality dynamics within the realist trend of the British contemporary novel.

### 3. Graham Swift's *Waterland* – "No-pie-in-the-sky" or the dredging of history

#### 3.1. Tom Crick - History as histories, juxtaposed chronologies and the truth of fabulation

Tom Crick, the protagonist of Graham Swift's *Waterland*, stands for the prototype of the dilemmatic historian, the skeptical postmodernist, for whom history does not mean the linearity of time but, on the contrary, a dynamic process of amalgamating the reality data with the imaginative introspection of the one who seeks to know it. For Tom, history is "a lucky dip of meanings. Events elude meaning, but we look for meanings. Another definition of Man: the animal who craves meaning."

The novel relates intertextually to Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*: both novels start and end with the image of the "marshy land", with characters – Pip, Price, and Tom Crick – overwhelmed by history but differently responding to it. While for Pip the historical experience has a didacticist character, the protagonist assuming and learning from the errors of his past, Tom Crick does not succeed in negotiating favourably either with his history or with the history of humanity. Tom Crick confesses: „It [history] goes in two directions at once. It goes backwards as it goes forwards. It loops, it takes detours. Do not fall into the illusion that history is a well disciplined and unflagging column marching unswervingly into the future."

Andrzej Gasiorek, in *Postwar British Fiction: Realism and After*, compares Crick's perspective on history with Thomas Carlyle's from "On History", according to which only a partial

observance of events is possible, the historian managing to approximate past events, incapable of clearly defining the scenario of what happened. For Carlyle, history is "a complex manuscript, covered over with formless inextricably-entangled unknown characters", or "a Palimpsest from which some letters, some words, may be deciphered, but it can be fully interpreted by no man." Writing history means imposing a teleology, a linearity on the events that took place simultaneously: "It is not in acted, as it is in written History: actual events are nowise so simply related to each other as parent and offspring are; every single event is the offspring not of one, but of all other events, prior or contemporaneous, and will in its turn combine with all others to give birth to new: it is an ever-living, ever-working Chaos of Being, wherein shape after shape bodies itself forth from innumerable elements."

The historian's focus falls either on the social context or on the secondary events that work together so that the significant moments may appear, given the historian's difficulty to understand and explain them if his attention focused only on them: "Laws themselves, political Constitutions, are not our Life, but only the house wherein our Life is led: nay, they are but the bare walls of the house: all whose essential furniture, the inventions and traditions, and daily habits that regulate and support our existence, are the work not of Dracos and Hampdens, but of Phoenician mariners, of Italian masons and Saxon metallurgists, of philosophers, alchemists, prophets, and all the long-forgotten train of artists and artisans."

Similarly reasoning, Carlyle concludes that the writer who is attracted to the high history, to the major events and thus ignoring the commoners' biographies, will end by being considered more of a journalist than a true historian. Tom Crick's position as a historian will centre on the attention conferred to "personal history": the biographies of the unknown individuals are repositioned and considered the true engine of public events.

Tom Crick, the history teacher to be, has lost his confidence in the capacity of history to offer him answers, a naïveté he experienced in his youth. Searching for the truth whose finding would have meant redeeming and understanding and which, more than that, would have meant successful introspection, Crick discovers its opposite: the fabulous – the only accessible space of the truths: "I began to demand of history an



Explanation. Only to uncover in this dedicated search more mysteries, more fantasticalities, more wonders and grounds for astonishment than I started with, only to conclude forty years later that history is a yarn. And I can 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?

Becoming conscious of the impossibility of a synthesizing narration of history leads to imposing the acceptance of histories: the totalizing spectacular missing, the only chance of the historian is to cope with the common events of history and to bring them together into a significant ensemble, thus removing the awe of nonsense.

Following Carlyle, Swift does not conceive history as a linear narration but as juxtaposed chronologies. Crick's story brings together four different periods of time: the 1790's, the 19th century, the 1940's and nowadays. These temporal delineations mean the overlapping of the minor stories – the history of the Atkinsons and the Cricks for two centuries, the experiences of the history teacher during the 1940's as well as his present biography – with the Grand Narratives – the French Revolution, World Wars I and II –, the latter functioning as the former's background: “And that is how, children, my ancestors came to live by the River Leem. That is how when the cauldron of revolution was simmering in Paris, so that you, one day, should have a subject for your lessons, they were busy, as usual, with their scouring, pumping and embanking. That is how, when foundations were being rocked in France, a land was being formed which would one day yield fifteen tons of potatoes or nineteen sacks of wheat an acre on which your history teacher-to-be would one day have his home.

Tom Crick ignores the official performance of history, reorienting himself towards the representation of day-to-day life: the concept of “natural history”, metaphorically associated with the “human dredging” or land retrieval, becomes central in his view on history. “Crick satirizes all notions of a past arcadia or a future utopia and offers instead a bleak conception of history as a form of retrenchment.” However, the approach to the past is dual: Crick oscillates dialectically between investigation and fabulation, between the perception of history as solid referent and its perception as an imaginative background, the two antagonistic poles being liable to a

compromise such as the “historiographic metafiction.” Alison Lee observes history being connoted as “inquiry, investigation, learning” and, on the other hand, as “a narrative of past events, or any kind of narrative: account, tale, story.” Consequently, the stylistic modes of approaching history will be different, as Pamela Cooper remarked: “lyrical myth-making” versus “brisk documentation”, directly reflecting the opposition between “the discursive practices of narrative and historiography, between the conjuring up of fictions and the setting down of facts.”

The protagonist combines the different worldviews of his families, the Atkinsons and the Cricks, alternating commitment and passivity, action and narration: the Atkinsons used to 'make' history, getting involved in its construction, while the Cricks used to spin yarns about what happened. “How did the Cricks outwit reality? By telling stories. Down to the last generation, they were not only phlegmatic but superstitious and credulous creatures. Suckers for stories. While the Atkinsons made history, the Cricks spun yarns.” These are the reasons why Tom Cricks' attitude to history varies between 'avoidance' and 'confrontation', between declaring the inaccessibility of the past and thus equating history with fabulation and, on the other hand, recognizing the referential structure of the past of which the historian cannot escape. This differentiation is commented by Ronald H. McKinney as well: those who model history “delude themselves into thinking that they can know and control reality”, while the contemplatives “never satisfy their curiosity and keep asking ever more questions.”

The very act of narration is attributed different finalities: by means of storytelling, the characters either construct the significance of their existence – Helen Atkinson believes that stories are “a way of bearing what won't go away, a way of making sense of madness”, or they annul reality, transforming it into an invented story – Henry Crick remembers nothing about his World War I experience.

Tom Crick justifies his history teacher career choice as the result of his mother's influence, who used to tell stories when Tom was afraid of darkness: “It helps to drive out fear. I don't care what you call it – explaining, evading the facts, making up meanings, taking a larger view, putting things into perspective, dodging the here and now, education, history, fairy-tales – it helps to eliminate fear.” At the opposite pole, Crick explains the role of history to teach us how to be

realistic and thus to ignore the efficiency of the stories he used to proclaim: "History is that impossible thing: the attempt to give an account, with incomplete knowledge, of actions themselves undertaken with incomplete knowledge. So that [...] it teaches us only the dogged and patient art of making do. I taught you that by for ever attempting to explain we may come, not to an Explanation, but to a knowledge of the limits of our power to explain. Yes, yes, the past gets in the way; it trips us up, bogs us down; it complicates, makes difficult. But to ignore this is folly, because, above all, what history teaches us is to avoid illusion and make-believe, to lay aside dreams, moonshine, cure-alls, wonder-workings, pie-in-the-sky – to be realistic."

Once again, the irreconcilable ambivalence of the protagonist's conception of history is asserted in categorical terms: on the one hand, a textualist approach according to which history is a form of fabulation that transforms reality in an imaginative construct by means of narration and, on the other hand, a positivist one, the study of history being a modality of knowledge that ensures the access to reality. "Waterland thus suggests that although historical knowledge may be incomplete, and its procedures inexact, it nevertheless confronts an object domain that resists being turned into a species of fairy-tale." Ronald McKinney defines this approach to history as "a theory of hubris": "Like silt, stories help us cope with the harshness of reality by driving back the waters of chaos. Nevertheless, as a historian, he is always aware of the fictiveness of our fictions. He knows that the chaotic darkness of reality will sooner or later snuff out the consoling candlelight of our stories."

### 3.2. History as cyclical temporality

Besides this dichotomy that pervades the whole novel, Tom Crick conceives history as cyclical and thus the ideas of progress, evolution, and teleology are eliminated. Roland McKinney comments: "The noble dream of Kant's *Universalgeschichte*, through which humanity was to become ever more rational, has been left far behind. So has the 'ruse of reason' by way of which Hegel could claim that history, for all its disasters, had a meaning and purpose unknown to its actors. Crick's scaled-down model for history has jettisoned the Enlightenment's transcendental aspirations and replaced belief in progress with an ethic of retrenchment."

Previously swinging between the ontological and the epistemological perception of

history - "As an example of what Linda Hutcheon has called 'historiographic metafiction', Swift's novel taps into scholarly debate on the ontology of history and the cognitive status of both fiction and historiography in the late twentieth century" – the protagonist brings forth, by asserting a "politics of retrieval", the pragmatic side of the whole historical process. If history repeats itself, "bring[ing] us back to the same place", then nothing of the civilization upsurge, or the "artificial history" can be conceived in final terms. Civilization is an artifact that can easily be destroyed, yet it is this precariousness that makes it even more valuable and specifically human. "Children, there's this thing called civilization. It's built of hopes and dreams. It's only an idea. It's not real. It's artificial. No one ever said it was real. It's not natural [...]. It's built by the learning process; by trial and error. It breaks easily [...]. No one ever said it would last for ever."

At the same time, Tom Crick states that life is "all a struggle to preserve an artifice. It's all a struggle to make things not seem meaningless. It's a fight against fear." Consequently, a significant difference between Tom's view on history and the postmodern perception consists in the fact that the former suggests a cyclical theory of history as a replacement to unity and progress, dominated by pessimism and the regret of helplessness, while the latter decrees heterogeneity and indifference.

Reality in Graham Swift's *Waterland* stands inevitably under the sign of temporality. The novel is the battleground against which two mentalities on time dispute their supremacy: the mentality of the societies wedded to nature and the Judeo-Christian assumption of time. According to Berdiaev, "A movement without the perspective of coming to an end, denying eschatology, is not history, [...] does not have an intrinsic meaning [...] and degenerates, one way or another, into a circular movement." In addition, "Christianity introduced dynamism since it initiated the idea of the unrepeatable events, an idea refused to the ancient world."

Both Natural and Artificial histories in *Waterland* are prey to the rhythms of the cyclical time. The reality of the Fens is monotonous and flat; it is an "empty wilderness", a 'wasteland' that lies around the river Leem, around the Ouse, themselves vessels of disparate and solitaire remains of reality: "The Leem brought down its unceasing booty of debris. Willow branches, sedge, fencing, crates, old clothes, dead sheep, bottles." The Fens, following the regularity of waters, are uneventful

and “approximates to Nothing.” Though their bareness is contagious and infects everything, the dryness of the land is only one pace of the tempo of reality. The Fens and the river display an ambiguous and contradictory manifestation: when a sign of fertility, rain, appears against the 'bleak horizon', it transforms into an omen of anarchy and vividness transforms into catastrophe, causing destruction. Silt, abundant after the overflow of waters, “demolishes as it builds; which is simultaneous accretion and erosion; neither progress nor decay.” The richness of the waters proves malefic for the land, for what should be the solid ground of reality. Life brings death, fertility causes chaos and provokes nothingness to install, all inscribing under the ambiguous performance of waters. Reality's creative agent, its dynamo, “obstructs as it builds; unmakes as it makes.” Silt operates equivocally, “just as it raises the land, drives back the sea [...] renders the newly formed land constantly liable to flooding and blocks the escape of floodwaters.” No progress seems possible and when this is worked out of the waters, when land is reclaimed, what is constructed out of it fatally obeys the same cyclical rhythm.

The tempo of nature also corrupts the time of the people inhabiting it. These become amphibious and adopt the 'ways of water.' When the land is flooded, when nothingness reclaims substance and content, abnormality becomes its correspondent in people's behavior. They are contaminated by this blind and forceful drive of the chaotic nature and thus “heavy drinking, madness, and sudden acts of violence” infiltrate the monotony of human life. Abhorrent perversions become normality, conforming to nature's paradigm. Thus Price will declare his fear in front of such a deadly nothingness and its handmaids: suicide, murder, abortion. Phlegm is the humor that dominates and controls the Fens', “a preponderance of this being able to produce the following marks of temperament: stolidity, sobriety, patience, level-headedness, calm, but also their counterparts: indolence, dullness, fatalism, indifference, stupor.”

### **3.3 Ways of coping with reality: madness, storytelling, taking action**

Forgetting sobriety and indulging in merriment is one of the ways of coping with reality; it is a chaotic, unconscious adaptation to the anarchic nature itself. Another response to the strong, yet sterile, doses of reality is telling stories. The Cricks and all the others who adhere to the contemplative

stance resist reality by transforming it into myth and fairy-tale. Telling stories, suggesting fictions, recounting myths and legends, is but another moment of the cyclical time; they return, thus, to an Eden-like beginning whose strength and purity can save them from an ever-deteriorating reality. As Robert K. Irish puts it, “The only way to outwit reality and conquer the fears is by spinning fantastic tales.” Fearsome situations (war), abnormal realities (Sarah Atkinson's death) become bearable only by being transformed into cathartic fairy-tales: “The Cricks are credulous and superstitious [...] they spun yarns.” As silt was reconstructing reality against the destructive, chaotic floods, so stories help the Cricks tame and subdue the harsh, consuming reality. Thus, fictitiousness resists the dullness of reality and also reinstalls order, serenity surpassing the awe in front of meaninglessness. However, stories are about the feared reality and its abnormal happenings; therefore legends inherit the destructive germ and turn themselves as destructive as the water-chaos they intended to order - Dick commits suicide - the cycle closing upon itself.

The third way of coping with reality is to make things happen, to construct against the empty space of reality. The Artificial History is born out of the desire to retrieve solidity from the floating nothingness. Human siltation, as land reclamation, unites under the same impulse to resistance and construction, both revolutions and anonymous fights, protagonists on the stage of history and silent workers of insignificant events, all longing for “presence, feature, purpose, content.” Facts - myths as well - prove to have the same role, filling the empty space of reality. If only contemplating reality, man does not fall prisoner to time; however, taking action projects him in time and installs the cycle of history. Thus, history is no longer a mythic pleasant invention, a make-belief, but initiates memory and allures future. History begins with the 'joy and terror' of the Here and Now, carries along troubles and regrets, until it petrifies into a corpse people would eradicate and then, they would begin again. Yet, “you cannot dispose of the past, since things must be.”

As Natural History, through catastrophe and confusion, through telling stories, takes people back and places them in a new beginning, so Artificial History, by means of its turning points (revolutions), or by means of people's blindness to salvation and ignorance of meaning, transforms the so-called progress into regress and moves



backwards. "History goes in two directions at once. It goes backwards as it goes forwards. It loops. It takes detours. Do not fall into the illusion that history is a well-disciplined and unflagging column marching unswervingly into the future." Groping into the desert of reality, lacking meaningful action, man is prey of nostalgia and moves into the great circle of time. Was it not the same cycle that controlled the fearsome nothingness of the Natural History? "Every revolution contains within it the idea of return; a redemption, a restoration, a reaffirmation of what is pure; a return to a new beginning." Was this not the same purpose of telling stories about reality? "Natural History doesn't go anywhere. Cleaves to itself. Perpetually travels back to where it came from." Yet, "the natural stuff is always more anarchic, more subversive" than any constructed history.

We must all be dredgers - asking 'why' is a form of dredging. Progress, Tom Crick says, is not letting the destruction get ahead of where it was when you started working. He tells Price that the children's job is to make sure they do not "let the world get any worse", a stoic's definition of progress. Is there salvation in Tom's world? Alternatively, is salvation for him merely the struggle to endure, to keep the water (time) from annihilating the land (culture, civilization, history) which is only an artifice? He says that "civilization, which we've been building for 300 years, is an artifice," while life is "all a struggle to preserve an artifice. It's all a struggle to make things not seem meaningless. It's all a fight against fear." This is the darkest of Tom's lessons, because it tells us that, for him, underneath the artifice, everything is meaningless indeed, and we have to acknowledge that and yet at the same time not give up our fatiguing labors to preserve this thing, this precious artifice called history or civilization that is not 'natural', not real. It does not deserve to exist any more than the land of Fens, but if we do not try against incredible odds, heartbreak, and desires to relinquish the struggle to preserve it, then meaninglessness, nothingness will prevail. "Children, be curious. Nothing is worse [...] than when curiosity stops. Curiosity begets love. It weds us to the world. It's part of our perverse, madcap love for this impossible planet we inhabit. The past, that which accumulates and of which one cannot disperse, always remains as memory and may turn into extraordinary or uncanny; it becomes irreversible when it starts to make sense, when it is accounted for and opposed to amnesia,

the prison of idiocy".

The progress of civilization is recuperating what is lost; the genuine progress occurs when the circularity of time breaks into the linearity of history. "There is this thing called progress. But it doesn't progress. It does not go anywhere. Because as progress progresses, the world can slip away. My humble model for progress is the reclamation of land, which is repeatedly, never-ending retrieving of what is lost, a dogged and vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business. But you shouldn't go mistaking the reclamation of land for the building of empires."

Regaining what is lost and preserving it, saving the artifice of civilization from following the course of Natural History, all happen when meaning is fought back, when making sense structures making do. Dredging the meaning starts with curiosity and asking why, when explanation is demanded of history. Future will no longer be a possible new beginning when the past is understood as real, solid ground.

The historical process is made up of imagined reasons for our dissatisfactions and perplexities. Meaningful history is born out of the chain of causes and effects, and man can give account of his present as determined by his past. The history of humankind is to be inquired into so that worlds should be reconstructed and reality regained. "History is an attempt to give an account, with incomplete knowledge, of actions themselves undertaken with incomplete knowledge. [...] But to ignore this is folly, because, above all, what history teaches us is to avoid illusion and make believe, to lay aside dreams, moonshine, cure-all, wonder-workings, pie-in-the-sky; to be realistic." Being realistic is acknowledging that the world is a "lucky dip of meanings" craving for our curiosity to be explored and enchained into the linearity of time. Fear will overcome being, the world will immerse into nothingness and history will be again the fragile artifact liable to sudden dispersion into pieces, only when curiosity and wonder no longer prevail and meanings are no longer explored.

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This paper was written in the framework of the project "Rețea transnațională de management integrat al cercetării postdoctorale în domeniul Comunicarea științei. Construcție instituțională (școală postdoctorală) și program de burse (CommScie)" (Transnational integrated management network of postdoctoral research in the field of Communication of Science, Institutional Construction [postdoctoral school] and scholarship programme [CommScie]) - POSDRU/89/1.5/S/63663, financially supported by the Sectorial Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013.

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