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Ecology, Language, and Water/Land: Ambiguous Fenlands and Challenged Dichotomies of Enlightenment in Graham Swift's Waterland

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As the paradoxical title suggests, Graham Swift's *Waterland* is a story centered on dichotomies and conflicts. These divisions are elucidated early in the narrative, when narrator Tom Crick describes land reclamation while exploring three powerful tensions: water/land, nature/man, and fairytales/rationalist history. These three divisions map onto a fourth split, "Nothing"/Something, reflecting a division between pre-Enlightenment mythology and post-Enlightenment dis-enchantment, between magical thinking and the attempt to replace such "enchantment" with rationality (20-1). Crick acknowledges these tensions, but by demonstrating that the three conflicts are irresolvable, challenges the Enlightenment assumption that modernity can conquer mythology. Suggestively, the ecological stability of the fenlands, the central and crucially important landscape of the novel, more fundamentally undermines the claim of conflict between these forces. This hint towards a flaw in Crick's worldview is subtly supported by Swift's language, which questions the stability of the dichotomies themselves. Despite the narrator's assertions, the novel's perpetual struggles are not the sharply-defined battles of water against land, but the rich, ambiguous tensions of *Waterland*.

In the initial pages of *Waterland*, Crick describes "land reclamation," the process by which human beings turn marshland into soil and waterways, and a conflict between water and land—whether a dichotomy or a blurred partition—is immediately evident. The section opens with a description of the struggle between silt, or fine soil, and waterways: silt "drives back the sea...impedes the flow of rivers...[and] blocks the escape of floodwater" (17). Antagonistic verbs like "impedes" and "blocks" establish a conflict that is personified by tensions between the water people, including the ancient

Cricks, and the land people, like the dyke-building Dutch; both sides murder and execute each other as they fight for the future of the Fens (17, 18).

The descriptions of these two warring sides extend the water/land division into the human element. Crick describes “water people” with animal imagery: they “lived like water rats,” and like Old Bill, probably smelled of “goose fat and fish slime,” wearing “otter-skin cap[s]” and “eel-skin gaiters” (17, 18). Vermuyden’s Dutch “land people,” on the other hand, are described in society’s terms: by what they built and dug, their “practical and forward-looking” natures, and the ninety-five thousand acres they converted into grazing land and planted with domesticated crops (18). As the Cricks become “land people,” they, too, are defined not by wildlife sights and earthy smells but by a list of their names and actions: “repairing...scouring...cutting” (20). Water people are associated with rich, watery, animal-like imagery, while land people are identified by names and achievements; water, Crick implies, is to nature as land to civilized man (to use the gendered term the novel repeatedly invokes).

Meanwhile, the struggle of man against nature—both watery and earthy—forms the extract’s second conflict. “What silt began, man continued,” Crick says, but the men who “reclaim” the land must battle both water *and* silt, which “unmakes as it makes” (17, 19). The struggle is a long and difficult one, requiring “ceaseless effort and vigilance,” and “for a century and a half [the Cricks] dug, drained and pumped the land...boots perpetually mud-caked” (17, 20). Struggling against the natural forces of rivers and silt, the Cricks become “amphibians” not because they live freely in both land and water, but because they must understand both elements to “labor to subdue” either (20). They are frontline soldiers in the battle of humans against nature’s forces; this symbolic struggle

has implications stretching far beyond issues of drainage. Later in the text, land reclamation is explicitly a symbol for historical progress, and it provides a model for the act of storytelling as well (334).

A third tension lies in the storytelling itself. Crick describes land reclamation partly as history, described in a formula familiar from his history-class curricula: the names of great men, like “engineer Cornelius Vermuyden, hired first by King Charles,” and the dates of important events, such as that “in 1713 the Denver Sluice gave way...” (18, 19). Yet Crick also tells a children’s story, with supernatural characters: “Old Bill lived with his wife Martha in a damp crack-walled cottage...Some said that Martha Clay was a witch” (18). Crick acknowledges the tension with the admonishment, “but let’s keep clear of fairytales,” yet he cannot stay away for long; two pages later, Old Bill becomes “a sort of Wise Man” (20). Fairytales and history lessons compete for dominance in Crick’s narration.

Both the fairytale storytelling style and an emphasis on nature, in the form of mud and animals, appear most strongly when Crick describes “water people” like Bill, Martha, the old Cricks, and Tom’s lock-keeping, eel-catching father. The historical storytelling style and an emphasis on people as named, accomplishing humans is strongest around the descriptions of “land people.” Thus, throughout this passage, these three oppositions are linked: water, nature, and mythology in contrast to land, man, and history. A fourth opposition, one that encompasses the three earlier divisions, is added at the end of the extract when Crick asks, “for what is water but Nothing?” (20-1). Crick does not complete the dichotomy, but implies that on the other side of the binary we can add “Something”: an affirmation of land, humanity, and rational history (20-1).

As Dr. Wendy Wheeler asserts, this Nothing/Something, Water/Land, Nature/Man, Myth/History set of dichotomies expresses a division between enchanted pre-modernity and the dis-enchanting Enlightenment. The idea of rational human progress, marked by names, dates, and victories over nature, reflects the Enlightenment beliefs that real-life Dutch drainers, as well as Swift's fictionalized versions, loudly espoused. In their worldview, land, man, and rationality were fated to overcome the irrational forces on the other side of the division.

This Enlightenment model of understanding has hardly remained unchallenged for the past four centuries. Twentieth-century thinkers, like Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, challenged the presumption of rationality's superiority. Horkheimer and Adorno used the term "dis-enchantment" to describe attempts by rationalists to conquer or control nature. Fairytales, mythology, and everything else on the "nothing" side of the dichotomy are part of the semi-magical world of nature that Enlightenment thinking threatens—but has not eliminated. Swift's narrator continues this tradition of accepting a rational/irrational divide while challenging the perceived dominance of rationality. To use the novel's own terms, Crick rejects Enlightenment presumptions of superiority and demonstrates that the "Something," or "Enlightened" powers, have not and cannot permanently defeat the "Nothing" of "Enchantment."

For instance, in the struggle between water and land, silt creates "land constantly liable to flooding," the victor in the struggle forever changing. In the conflict between humans and nature, Crick says, "the Fens are still being reclaimed even to this day. Strictly speaking, they are never reclaimed, only being reclaimed," so a final victory is impossible (17). Finally, Crick's own narration demonstrates a continuing conflict

between history and myth. Beginning with the myth-like description of silt that “drives back the sea,” he then describes the seemingly-historical murder of Dutch drainers, drifts into stories of fairytale witches, abruptly switches into rational facts of history, and finally slides back into the mythical language of superstitious fathers, Wise Men, and a “Fen-child” asking questions of its “elders” (17-21). In all three cases, “Something” has not conquered “Nothing,” and it seems like it never will.

This model of perpetual struggle alters the land/water division by turning an apparent conflict into a deadlocked tie. But Swift’s chosen landscape serves to undermine his narrator’s worldview even further: the ecological reality of the fenlands is not one of perpetual conflict, even an unresolved one, but is in fact a model of stable, cooperative coexistence. Crick describes the fens’ water and land as “impeding” and “eroding” each other, but fenlands are hardly the natural location for a water/land conflict. As Dutch paleoecological scientists put it in 2006, “research has shown that basiphilous fen vegetation in river valleys can be stable for several thousands of years,” existing without erosion or disastrous flooding (Grootjans et al 180). In fact, rather than water eating away at soil or peat growth impeding water, the two maintain each other: “A slow groundwater flow in fen systems...prevents peat erosion,” and the natural flow of water positively impacts the chemical composition of soil (Grootjans et al 182, Lamers et al 118). Furthermore, attempting to reclaim land by removing water not only hurts the soil itself, but also damages the entire water table; as the land deteriorates, water levels drop across a broader region (McCartney and de la Hera).

The ecological research demonstrating these realities may not have been as fully developed at the time of *Waterland*’s composition as they are now, but the fundamental

truth behind the research is essentially self-evident, even in the book's own description of the fens: before human intervention, fenlands existed for thousands of years with almost no change, and removing either water or land effectively destroys the landscape.

Fenlands, as an ecological entity, represent the extraordinarily stable coexistence of water and land. This landscape, so central to the novel, is a very poor symbol for warring and incompatible forces, and directly contradicts the meanings Crick imposes on water and land.

So do water and land represent two halves of a division, two sides of a conflict, as Crick seems to suggest? Two elements in a stable and mutually beneficial relationship, as the landscape hints? Or are they not truly separate at all? The idea of an unwinnable battle challenges pure Enlightenment faith in rationalism's victory, and the suggestion of coexistence subverts the conflict-ridden concept of "Enlightenment vs Enchantment" in the first place. On the level of language, Swift's prose goes still further and undermines the very dichotomies the narrator seeks to establish. A number of liminal words hint at the blurring of boundaries: Cricks as "amphibians," swamps as both water and land, story as both fairytale and history (18). The passage opens with "equivocal action," and ends with illusory land, both defying clear boundaries (17, 21). Most subtly, in this extract Swift shifts away from the clear word "reclamation" towards the muddier "drainage."

"Reclaim" appears seven times on page 17, but "drain" becomes the predominant term on pages 18-21. As a whole, the text features variations on "drain" four times as often as versions of "reclaim."¹ The few references to "reclamation" are almost all made

¹ 47 pages featuring the words "drain(s)," "drained," "drainer(s)," or "drainage," against 11 pages featuring "reclaim(s)," "reclaimed," "reclaimer(s)" or "reclamation," according to searches in the Google Books version. Some of the incidences of "drain" and "drains" are nouns, but

in the context of outsiders, like the Dutch, or “reclamation” as a theoretical or general practice. “Drain” is the preferred word overall, but especially whenever the action is actually occurring or Cricks and Atkinsons are featured—by those who actually perform drainage, and have authority on the subject (18-21).

The difference is significant, as “reclamation” supports the dichotomy between land and water, the validity of a human-centered worldview, and the unimportance, or “Nothingness,” of water. Humans reclaim land from water, setting up a conflict between man and water as well as the sharp separation between land and water. Furthermore, the “re-” prefix suggests the land was originally intended for human use, and is being taken back—not claimed for the first time. The word “reclamation” is land- and human-oriented, supporting a view of the Fens in which water is Nothing and land is Something: Something meant for humans in a morally uncomplicated way.

Drainage, in contrast, is a messier word. Grammatically speaking, “drain the land” and “drain the water” can refer to the same act, an interchangeability that softens the division between land and water. Water also drains itself, into the sea, and land drains itself after rain; neither will ever “reclaim” itself, yet “drain” is a verb shared by both humans and nature. Most profoundly, “drain” is a water-centered verb, and one that often has a negative connotation, suggesting that water is not only Something, but maybe something valuable. Draining is the act of taking away, a loss. Can one meaningfully take away Nothing?

If water is not Nothing, then perhaps, too, nature and myth are more than Nothing, which would call the Enlightenment/Enchantment dichotomy into question. Swift

provides numerous examples of blurred boundaries to reinforce this doubt. Water and land are united in swamps (and in the novel's title). Humans are a part of nature, as animals and as part of the very landscape: this section's chapter is called "About the Fens," but it is also about the Cricks, suggesting people and nature are linked, not oppositional. If these are not sharp dichotomies, then can we truly separate fairytales and history?

Crick's verbal movement away from the moral clarity of "reclamation" and towards the more ambiguous "drainage," combined with the liminal presence of amphibian people, swampy marshes, and a historian who tells fairytales, implies that "Nothing" and "Something" are hardly clear-cut categories. Through these undermining words and blurred boundaries, Swift seems to go even further than Horkheimer and Adorno: while they wrote that rather than being separate entities, "myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to myth," *Waterland* asks whether they were ever separate enough to "revert" at all (xviii). But as Crick continues to occasionally use the word "reclamation" and never explicitly challenges the stability of the dichotomies he uses throughout his story, this deeper challenge to Enlightenment thought remains subtle and implicit.

In a single early passage from *Waterland*, the narrator Crick establishes three divisions: water/land, nature/humanity, and myth/history (17-21). All are linked to a concept of water as "Nothing," implying land, humans, and history are "Something." While these divisions seem to align with Enlightenment thinking, the narrator suggests that an Enlightenment-style victory of "Something" over "Nothing" is impossible and the struggles are eternal, while the ecological realities of the landscape suggest the possibility

of stable, non-confrontational coexistence of the metaphorically-powerful “land” and “water.” Further undermining Enlightenment thought, Swift’s language of reclamation and drainage hints at the possibility that the divisions and dichotomies are less firm and more fluid than they would appear. While Crick suggests a constant battle between water and land, the novel’s language implies that the two are inextricably intertwined, inseparable: united in swamp.

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