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## **“Skedaddle, Ellie”: Feminine Mobility, Tourism and Capital in Graham Swift’s *Wish You Were Here***

Willy Chapman, the protagonist of Graham Swift’s debut, *Sweet Shop Owner* (1980), commits suicide by going for a walk. This is perhaps the most drastic illustration of the immobility symptomatic for most characters in the author’s writing. Defined and confined by their geographical (as well as, to a large extent, economic) situations, they appear to be anything but affected by the “postmodern refusal of permanent dwelling” (Rachwał, 33): in fact, they are in most cases rooted in the extreme and in some actually trapped. In Swift’s second novel, *Shuttlecock* (1981), the narrator dreams several times of escaping and reports feeling “this urge to take off my tie, my socks and shoes – to go no further – and simply to walk away; as if Clapham Common were some endless, enveloping savannah. But, of course, I don’t” (93). In turn, *Waterland* (1983) announces the fundamental significance of its self-contradictory, all-enveloping, inescapable setting right from its title, establishing it as a model for the protagonist’s perception of reality, history, or subjecthood. The mobility of the small community portrayed in *Last Orders* (1996) is limited virtually exclusively to work and war. Clearly, one could hardly say that in Swift’s works society has lost “the spatial-territorial sense of belonging and rootedness” (Rachwał, 33). Considering how much they are indeed “concerned with the permanence of address, with the regularity and ordering of the state territory,” Swift appears to be describing people living in the modern state, who might indeed be

shocked by the postmodern possibility of “wandering freely across national borders.” (Rachwał, 33) The main character of *Wish You Were Here* (2011), exceptional in actually having some foreign travel under his belt, is nonetheless inescapably determined by a memory of a time when “the notion of being anywhere other than England would have seemed totally crazy ... and quite beyond any circumstance that might include him.” In fact, the experience “still seems to him, even now that he’s done it several times, like something impossible, a trick, even somehow wrong: that you could get into an aeroplane, then get out again a few hours later and there’d be – this completely different world” (55–6). In most cases, Swift’s characters are not even affected by the variety of enforced mobility which Tadeusz Rachwał attributes to the flow of capital and accompanying changes in the availability of labour (34). The vast majority of Swift’s prose figures are bound to a rather restricted geographical space, entangled in a complex web of family relations and permanently defined by their occupations, possibly creating an impression of their author as a writer out of tune with his time.

This apparent anachronism is perhaps not particularly surprising in a writer as ostensibly indebted to the past as Swift, one who boasts a doctorate in nineteenth-century novel (Blodgett, 298) and who “identifies himself closely with a Victorian (and nonexperimental twentieth-century) tradition of storytelling” (Malcolm, 23). David Malcolm further describes Swift as placing “the dull, the prosaic, the unadventurous at the center of the text, with echoes of those masters of the drab quotidian – Thomas Gray, George Eliot, and Philip Larkin” (42), noting that the parallels are by no means limited to the subject matter or stylistic devices employed. At the same time, Swift is presented as undeniably taking a critical stance towards the tradition he inscribes into, subjecting its methods to incisive metatextual consideration. In the words of Pamela Cooper, “Swift is well aware of the ‘great tradition’ ... of English literature within which he writes, and his fictions explore the strengths and limitations of that tradition partly through a deliberate process of imitation” (18).<sup>1</sup> Also, as Adrian Poole observes,

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<sup>1</sup> For an insightful discussion of intertextuality in Swift’s prose, using the example of *Waterland*, see also Bernard Richards, “Graham Swift and the Fens: A Study in Intertextuality.” *Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines*. N° 0 (1992): 1–9.

this awareness has inevitable implications on the ideological dimension of Swift’s works. In fact, the intertextual references serve to bring out the fundamental differences between the two periods at least as distinctly as they point to analogies between them: “Swift’s novels could be said to mourn some of their own literary antecedents ... Where they could still mourn the passing of certain religious, mythical and metaphysical justifications for ‘terrible accidents,’ Swift’s fiction is left to mourn the impossibility of such mourning.” (164–165). Wendy Wheeler takes this line of thought to its logical conclusion and, noting the melancholic mood pervading the 19<sup>th</sup> century with its progress and consequent loss, ascribes to Swift the postmodern task of moving beyond this melancholia into a healthy mourning (65). In terms of the interrelation of Swift’s style and ideology, this means that he

amalgamates postmodern and classical realist techniques in an attempt to reflect the ambiguities, contradictions and nuances of contemporaneity. What this means is that Swift is utilising realist conventions to imitate society’s use of constructed models of “truth” and reality such as photographic images, literature and textbook history. Simultaneously, however, he challenges their status as absolutes by deconstructing and undermining their foundations, revealing their illusory nature. (Woollons, 6)

Despite his own protestations,<sup>2</sup> the postmodern standpoint of Graham Swift is apparently strong enough in his writing to invite a teleological perspective which is rather popular among critics despite its threat of an oversimplified perception of the novelist’s work. This approach implies a change, a progress, a liberalisation of the author’s presumed policy. Indeed, as Wendy Wheeler proposes, Swift’s interests lie precisely in exploring the juncture of the modern and the postmodern, the moment in which old paradigms lose their validity and new forms of order appear out of the confusing transition.<sup>3</sup> She further postulates that

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Woollons quotes the author’s declaration of being “almost ignorant of the revolutions and counter-revolutions in critical theory ... and I do not regret this ignorance. I am not very interested in critical theory” (10).

<sup>3</sup> One might consider also Gary Davenport’s “Novel of Despair” where *Last Orders* is ascribed an “oppressive sense of transience without transcendence” (440) or Lewis

the outcome of postmodernity, seen as the attempt to live with loss and uncertainty as a permanent condition, might be the discovery or invention of ways of being in the world which move beyond the harsh individualism of utilitarian modernity, and towards a different way of accounting for and valuing human needs. (65)

Wheeler's text sets out to demonstrate that this discovery is also progressively more and more completely realised in Swift's prose, from *Sweet Shop Owner* to what she sees as the crowning achievement of *Last Orders*. Since the author's writing (in)famously focuses on male perspectives, male protagonists, male narrators, it might perhaps be revealing to observe these changes with reference to his female characters. In this, I will follow some suggestions of Harriet Blodgett's informative analysis, which draws attention to the somewhat neglected relations of Swift's struggling fathers with their daughters and displays precisely the kind of teleological, developmental approach in stating, for example, that "given the quiet but firm emphasis Swift has maintained on father-daughter relations, he may just as well, without allegorizing, be increasingly showing up the flaws in patriarchy" (299). Indeed, the exploration of the dominant modes of constructing gender roles in Swift may be argued not only to bring their costs and limits into ever sharper focus but also to open increasingly more vivid alternatives before his characters. This is to be observed also – although by no means exclusively – in the situations of the Swift's daughters who, as Blodgett herself points out, are entirely determined by their circumstances, alienated from their families or indeed overlooked in his early works, and in his later novels become more active, more free and successful in forming more satisfying relationships with their parents.

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MacLeod's "In the (Public) House of the Lord," arguing that "Jack's friends have not really lost the sense of a spiritual world (or the desire to feel its 'presence'), they have just lost the conventional rules and procedures used to approach that world; they experience religious longing under the conditions of post-modernity, searching for spiritual integration in a historical moment after the 'manifest loss of plausibility of the so-called modern master narratives,' after the authority of conventional religious life has been compromised" (148).

Swift's female characters in general display a greater tendency for mobility in most of his novels than their male counterparts. One of the very few males who does try to leave the past behind is Matthew Pearce, a Victorian ancestor of the protagonist of *Ever After* (1992). After deciding that he cannot reconcile his life as a family- and clergyman with his loss of faith, he prepares to leave for the New World but his boat promptly sinks right after leaving port. Swift's female characters are frequently trapped in unsatisfying relationships, or in other ways oppressed by their circumstances, but once they determine to change that, they do not experience this kind of difficulty. In a sense, the fate of Anna, the mother of one protagonist in *Out of This World* (1988) and the wife of the other, constitutes the polar opposite to that of Matthew's: she dies in a plane crash at the point where she is determined to end an affair and return to her marital commitment.<sup>4</sup> Her death also opens up intriguing implications for the future of her daughter, Sophie, who delivers roughly half of the narrative. When telling the story, Sophie is herself on the verge of ending a ten year period of estrangement from her father, following her escape from the stifling family environment in England to America.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the novel, she is boarding a plane which is to take her back to be reconciled with the same man to whom Anna was returning on her fatal flight. If the conclusion of *Out of This World* is to be seen, as David Malcolm suggests, as “partly optimistic” (111), the emphasis should thus probably fall on the adverb, since the denouement raises doubts about the desirability of the characters' embracing traditional modes of existence (voiced several times by the narrators themselves, commenting on the suspiciously conventional resolutions of their struggles). However, as suspended as the happy ending of *Out of This World* may be, most of the other daughters in Swift's output do not exhibit nearly as much goodwill as Sophie in their tense relationships with their parents. In *Sweet Shop Owner*, Willy's suicide is in fact directly motivated by being cut off by his daughter,

<sup>4</sup> This convenient analogy is admittedly complicated by the fact that at the moment of the crash, Anna is pregnant with her lover's baby and has made up her mind to have an abortion.

<sup>5</sup> In this, she reverses the pattern set by her mother, who once travelled to Greece to discover her roots.

who has left her parents well before the beginning of the narrative without ever looking back. If Dorothy has a model to follow in this respect, it is her mother Irene, who once escaped her own parents into the marriage with Willy. In *Last Orders*, three daughters abandon their London homes (one goes as far as Australia) and the one who is fundamentally unable to absent herself is never truly present either: indeed, her father's rejection of his obligations towards the mentally handicapped June constitutes one of the principal conflicts of the text.

Things do begin to look somewhat differently in Swift's later novels, where the female characters not only are increasingly mobile, but, in their mobility, undermine the stability of the male protagonists – or, perhaps, get them out of their rut. In *Light of Day* (2003), the appearance of a Croatian refugee marks the beginning of the dissolution of a marriage, culminating in the murder of the unfaithful husband by his wife (even though the lover has moved on by this time). On the other hand, the daughter of the protagonist, George Webb – as rebellious as her mother once was, having come out to her father as a lesbian – eventually returns to form a mature relationship with the estranged man in a way unprecedented in Swift's body of work. Helen's return aids George's reforming of his life after a dishonourable dismissal from his work as a police officer and his wife's condemnation of this failure, ending in a divorce. His unprecedented achievement reinforces the impression that the novel does offer an alternative to the (self-) destructive model of masculinity generally explored in Swift's oeuvre. In this article, I would like to focus my attention on Swift's most recent novel to date, *Wish You Were Here* (2011), in which the mobile – and mobilising – qualities of the female subjects are felt profoundly, motivating some of the central conflicts of the text.

The evolution of the motif of travel between Swift's *Last Orders* and *Wish You Were Here* illustrates in an interesting way the transition from pilgrimage to tourism, postulated by Zygmunt Bauman as characterising the postmodern understanding of identity (19–31). In the former novel, the journey is a communal effort; a desperate attempt at (re)activating an identity-confirming ritual, while in the latter mobility is predominantly a reflection of the characters' increasing individualism and shedding of fixity. The characters of *Last Orders* struggle to reaffirm and

support their identities like Bauman’s pilgrims. The group of men spend a single day travelling from London to Margate with the urn containing the remains of their friend, Jack Dodds, who, despite his absence, remains a unifying point of reference in the group and clearly directs the reassessments to which all the others subject their experiences and identities. As Lewis MacLeod puts it: “In performing such a duty, Jack’s friends (inadvertently, it seems) participate in a long tradition by which some physical journey is used both to signify the spiritual dislocation death initiates and to hint at the possibility of some kind of rebirth or reintegration” (147). MacLeod’s analysis focuses on the “idiosyncratic but ordered procedures of a particular community of believers, a community composed of the four men ... carrying the ashes, with Jack himself acting as their central figure of contemplation” (147). *Last Orders* may therefore be categorised as a tale of modernity, if we consider its central preoccupation with “nothingness waiting to become something, if only for a while; ... meaninglessness waiting to be given meaning, if only a passing one” (Bauman, 21). The four mourners join the long succession of characters in Swift’s prose, embarking on an attempt to put back together the pieces of their shattered lives.

In turn, the primary concern of the characters of *Wish You Were Here* is rather, in Zygmunt Bauman’s terms, to “beware long-term commitments. To refuse to be ‘fixed’ one way or another. Not to get tied to the place. Not to wed one’s life to one vocation only. Not to swear consistency to anyone and anybody” (24). In *Last Orders*, Jack’s widow, Amy, does not come on the peculiar pilgrimage, having chosen an alternative form of mobility inspired by Jack Dodds’ stubborn renouncement of their mentally handicapped daughter. Amy has been commuting for years to visit her now grown up child in her institution and because she was never joined by her husband, she in turn refuses in turn to join his friends, who fulfil his final wish to have his ashes scattered in a holiday destination of great significance to both of the spouses. Her gesture is repeated – and significantly modified – in *Wish You Were Here*. Jack Luxton finds himself travelling to his home village to attend the funeral of his brother Tom unaccompanied by his wife Ellie, whose decision is not overtly motivated by any grudge she might bear against her brother-in-law. If anything, it expresses her wish to be free from obligations

towards her own and her husband's past, mirroring the behaviour of Jack rather than Amy Dodds. Issues relating to the abandoning of one's inheritance also play a central role in both novels: Jack's adoptive son, Vince, thwarts his father's dream of establishing a family tradition of Dodds butchers when he chooses a different career and the plot of *Wish You Were Here* revolves around the struggle of the young generation of Devon farmers to get rid of the burden of their heirloom. In its exploration of this motif, *Wish You Were Here* puts unprecedented focus not only on mobility in general but in particular on its specifically postmodern manifestation: tourism. Admittedly, the alteration is rather more profound than the temporary displacement of a holiday, since the protagonists change their profession and permanent location, but doing this in fact involves abandoning the rootedness of an ages-long tradition of milk farming in favour of running a caravan park. In a sense, Ellie and Jack's situation reflects Rosi Braidotti's injunction to view postmodernism as a historically specific time of profound changes to the system of economic production affecting social and cultural structures as well. For the Western world, this means "the shift away from manufacturing toward a service and information-based structure [which] entails a global redistribution of labor" (2) and a reconfiguration of the traditional patriarchal shape of our culture. In a move typifying these tendencies, Jack and Ellie choose to "become the proprietor of the very opposite thing to that deep-rooted farmhouse. Holiday homes, on wheels" (Swift 2011, 29), rather than follow in their parents' footsteps and devote their lives to "hard work for the softest, mildest thing in the world" (41) on the dairy farms whose tradition extends as far back as the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. A shift away from patriarchal patterns is also quite clearly implied: the driving force behind the change and the organiser of the new life is Ellie, having chosen freely – as if in spite of herself – to live with the big, (potentially) threatening Jack.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Michael Luxton, it was true, could sometimes scare her. He wasn't scary in any obvious way, but he could sometimes frighten her. If there should be a choice of fathers with whom you'd have to live alone for the foreseeable and barely thinkable future, then she'd choose her own father, small and nimble, not towering and looming ... Her father owned her, but he didn't scare her. She'd choose him of the two. But then she'd chosen Jack, who could sometimes look the image of his father" (109).

The willed dispossession of the spouses is paralleled by the fate of Jack's younger brother, a soldier eventually killed during a mission in Iraq. Tom escaped the family farm on his eighteenth birthday to join the army and since then led anything but a rooted life. Excluded by the furious father from his will, he has effectively broken off all involvement with his remaining family, only once replying to Jack's letter and not attending their father's funeral. In fact, Tom is as headstrong about remaining on the move as Willy Chapman is about remaining motionless: just as Chapman only decides to move when he chooses to die, Tom only returns to his native village in a hearse. More significantly, the analogy also applies to both characters' relation to the restricting models of masculinity available to them: whereas Willy Chapman takes his life upon realising the failure of the only shape he can imagine for his relationship with his daughter, Tom in fact escapes in order not to contaminate Jack with the disease "already eating away" at his dad – and himself. "He'd got it from his dad. Jack was made of tougher stuff, maybe, better stuff than he was. A good brother, a better brother. And a better father, sometimes, than his father" (199–200). The disease is a clear metaphor for the destructiveness of specific structures of masculinity, revealed most fully in the character's realisation "that he, Tom Luxton, had the killer instinct in him. And he'd have to put a lid on it" (209). This discovery comes in the aftermath of the traumatic shooting of Tom's sick dog by Michael who asks his younger son to pull the trigger. Tom refuses and, witnessing the execution, has to listen to his father's disturbing remark: "And I hope one day, when it's needed, someone will have the decency to do the same for me" (143). In motivating his departure from the family farm, the narrator considers Tom's fear that he might one day fulfil this wish. For this reason, he treats the army not only as a means of escape but also as a "strangely unresented punishment" (200–1) for his guilt as well as a disciplining institution, "a perfect opportunity for firing off lots of cool, disciplined single rounds of anger" (206).

Rachwał points out another aspect of increased mobility characteristic of contemporary culture: "[t]hrough mobility, like labour, has become a necessity to most people, it has also become a token of economic success. Tourism mobilises us to mobility at what is called leisure,

as opposed to the mobility at work" (35). Appropriately, tourism plays a central role in the expression of Jack and Ellie's new identity not only as their new profession but also their pastime, even though their attitude to their increased mobility is not unanimous. The enthusiasm of Ellie, who is the *spiritus movens* behind all of these enterprises, is countered by the reluctance of Jack, who feels guilty about abandoning their old way of life. In fact, the tropical winter holidays during the low season on the Isle of Wight become so much of a routine – not to say "obligation" – that the dramatic discord between the couple of protagonists that constitutes the frame of the narrative is the result precisely of a clash between the duty of burying Tom's remains and that of going on holidays. This situation is worlds apart from that of Ellie and Jack's parents, although there is a telling analogy here as well, since the only two holiday outings the young Luxtons have ever made were the effect of the relentless insistence of their mother:

She must have said to Michael, with perhaps more than her usual firmness with him, that she was going to give those two boys a holiday, a seaside holiday that when they'd grown up they'd always have to remember. They weren't going to go without that. And Michael must have relented – for two years running – though Jack would have counted then, even at thirteen and fourteen, as full-time summer labour on the farm. (65)

At the same time, Jack's first holiday is also the occasion to write his first postcard. Already at the age of thirteen, in sharing his excitement with Ellie, he exhibits a sense of limiting attachment and guilt about leaving. Writing, with his mother's prompting, the "most uninventive" message on the card, he feels "a mixture of honesty and guilt. Yes, he really did wish she was there. But if he really wished that, how could he be so happy in the first place? Wishing she was there was like admitting he was happy without her. It was like saying he was writing this postcard because he'd betrayed her" (66). In fact, since it is his sense of obligation that undeniably provides the motivation for most of his actions, Jack's desire to liberate himself from the constraints imposed by his situation approaches that of Ellie only in the most

extreme of circumstances. If, as Bauman has it, identity is an invention of modernity which from its very origin “was a problem and therefore ready to be born” (146), Jack’s longing for the state before the complication of a fixed identity during his sombre solitary journey to his brother’s funeral situates him in a curiously pre-modern position. He observes the “foreignness” of the very words “city” and “citizen” and remembers that it was only when acquiring a passport that he realised he is himself a citizen: “Not so long before, the very idea of possessing a passport would have seemed ridiculous. A farm was its own land, even its own law, unto itself. As for being a ‘citizen’ – citizens hardly lived on farms” (146).<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, haunted by the feeling of guilt also during this trip, Jack is neither willing to establish a fixed identity for himself nor to escape the fixity into an ever-changing array of masks to put on and take off at will.<sup>8</sup> Instead, he is pestered by a wish to be free of the task of identity altogether: “He felt like a man on the run. He felt a great desire not to know who he was” (223). Jack’s wish is at once more radical and less achievable than the very practical form of freedom sought by Ellie. This divergence resonates with the tendency ascribed by Braidotti to contemporary feminism to see the postmodern “crisis” as signifying “the opening up of new possibilities,” stressing the significance of not romanticising the condition but above all of abandoning any “nostalgia for [an] allegedly more wholesome past” (2). In this light, Luxton’s wish to shed his identity may be seen to represent the utopianism of the longing for a pre-modern Eden. Speaking about the ethnic dimension of subjectivity, Braidotti makes observations which correspond closely to Jack’s experience of “the disenchanting experience of dis-identifying [himself] with sovereignty altogether” (10). Braidotti supports her postulate of the necessity to subvert univer-

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<sup>7</sup> The bizarre, de-subjectifying experience further confirms Luxton’s pre-modern situation: “But it had still seemed strange to Jack to discover that he was a citizen and that in order to pass through Gatwick Airport he had to prove it. Gatwick Airport itself had seemed like some weird, forbidding city, though he hadn’t felt like a citizen, shuffling through and showing his clean new passport. He’d felt more like a cow at milking time” (146).

<sup>8</sup> Only at one point does he begin “to invent for himself – in case he should come to be questioned – an alias as a salesman” (258).

salising notions of subjectivity by referring to Foucault's work on the topic:

He argues that the constitution of the fragile, split subject of the postmetaphysical era is in fact a process of culturally coding certain functions and acts as signifying, acceptable, normal, desirable. In other words, one becomes a subject through a set of interdictions and permissions, which inscribe one's subjectivity in a bedrock of power. The subject thus is a heap of fragmented parts held together by the symbolic glue that is the attachment to, or identification with, the phallogocentric symbolic. (12)

In more than one way, for Ellie and Jack, tourism becomes a way of questioning their positions as subjects and loosening the grip their former identities had on them. In fact, however, the re-shaping of the couple, whose "tastes and requirements had been raised considerably in recent years" (Swift 2011, 221), fits all too well the doubts that Rachwał brings up concerning the actual nature of the mobility of the female subject when considered as representative of the contemporary condition. On the one hand, Ruth Bankey's observation is here invoked that women are pathologised in Western culture as "unstable, deceitful, naturally inferior and irrational" (qtd. in Rachwał, 37). To an extent which is undesirable from society's point of view, women increase the mobility of the subject, by nature fulfilling – potentially at least – Rosi Braidotti's call for "nomadic subjects," transcending fixed borders, destabilised and antihegemonic, leading to what Rachwał terms "the feminine de-identifying hyper-mobility" (38). On the other hand, however, Bauman's sobering remarks are referred to, positing the deceptive promise of the contemporary freedom of increased mobility, which actually "is very well channelled and in fact distributed" (37). Jack's experience during his journey to the funeral provides a convenient metaphor of the state. It includes the sense of disorientation and uncertainty in the traveller's feeling of relief at the "tunnelled anonymity" of the motorway which he perceives as dominating over the landscape: "The road was everything and, despite the names that loomed at junctions, might have been anywhere. Chippenham? Malmesbury? Where the hell were they?" At the same time, confirming Rachwał's contention that the post-

modern world remains a profoundly mappable space, Jack “saw himself as a mere moving speck on a map” (214–15). Beyond the coincidence of phrase, the situation of the privatised, mobilised postmodern subject in *Wish You Were Here* actually reflects the complications of the presumably liberating progress of the contemporary world. Rachwał states:

What is opposed to the nomadically uncontrollable feminine mobility is not so much a petrified world of some absolute stability and fixity, but a world which continually moves towards an improvement of things in which well balanced human activities are ideally both productive and advantageous, granting some more or less measurable gains and profits. (38)<sup>9</sup>

This is exactly what the rebranding of the Luxtons is in fact aimed at – freedom from the slavish labour of the farm, no longer being “tethered, all year round, to a herd of Friesians” (Swift 2011, 27). In the end, they aim at social advancement, higher social and financial status, tempted by the promise of an easier life, softer work as well as of disburdening themselves of the modes of being imposed by their family traditions: “Their Isle of Wight life. The beauty of it: a whole separate land, with only a short sea to cross, but happily cut off from the land of their past ... it was a fact, and it had become their purpose, that they were in the business of pleasure” (210–11).

Arguably, the change which Jack and Ellie achieve could to some degree suggest that their displacement is precisely “de-identifying.” In the eyes of their guests, the proprietors of the Lookout Caravan Park are after all described as creating the impression that there is “something a bit misfit and oddball about the two of them. There didn’t seem to be any little Luxtons, you couldn’t even be sure if they were really married. Something just a bit hillbilly” (73). Their blurred new identity, however, proves a surprisingly non-threatening and socially acceptable one after all, neutralised as part of the service being offered: “But that was

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<sup>9</sup> Perhaps equally significantly, the mechanism of tourism controls people’s sense of reality by pointing them towards “finding the real in what has been designed as such in an advertisement or in a guide as worth its price” (Rachwał, 35).

okay, that was fine. There was something just a bit wacky and hillbilly about taking a holiday in a caravan anyway. And when you were on holiday you wanted colour, you didn't want dull and ordinary" (73). Jack makes a similar discovery about himself. Much as the contact with "this shifting temporary population – migrants, vagrants, escapers in their own country" (30) made him see his position in a new way, "brought something out in him," there is also the observation of undeniable similarities between his old and new professions – and identities. The campers in their units are, after all, "certainly a form of livestock," and looking after them means that "[y]ou had to be their smiling host in a joke of a shirt, but there were times when you had to show them who was in charge. Jack had found he was surprisingly good at this. At both things: the smiling and the policing" (72–3). The constant change which in fact changes nothing has its equivalent in the situation in which the feminine subject is placed. Following Freud, Rachwał demonstrates the mobility of the feminine subject to be fundamentally immobilising, grounded in the fact that "women are not fully corrigible, that they freeze in their development to social mobility and exchange, the development towards culture" (38). In this sense, the condition of the feminine subject corresponds to the supposed freedom offered by contemporary reality in which "various social, cultural, economic and political mobilities make the world seem changing and innovative, fully making use of the human invention which guarantees its progress" (38). This apparent progress of postmodern mobility therefore proves to be, like the immobilising mobility of the feminine subject, oriented and teleological, controlled and controlling. The examples set to their children by the two women who shaped Jack and Ellie have interesting implications on how the relation between femininity and freedom is portrayed in *Wish You Were Here*. One might indeed ask whether the figures of women actually correspond to freedom after all or, to be more precise, whether it is specifically women who do.

The most significant female influences on Ellie and Jack – their mothers – arguably work in diametrically opposing directions, in a sense replaying the two facets of the feminine subject: a destabilising, nomadically postmodern one and one that serves to increase the fixity of the subject's position. When Ellie was a teenager, Alice Merrick left her family for

a lover who himself was soon replaced. Her lesson to Ellie, shaping her daughter’s behaviour years after Alice’s death, is straightforward and unremitting:

And as for that advice, that example, did she really need to stoop, cocking an ear, by her mother’s grave? It was stored up, anyway, in her memory, like an emergency formula for some future – rainy – day. She could hear her mother’s forgotten voice. Skedaddle, Ellie. Just skedaddle, like I did. Cut lose. While you’ve got the car and while you can. With just the clothes you’re in and what’s in your handbag. Now or never. Cut loose. (35)

Ellie’s first attempt at following this exhortation fails because of the sense of obligation she feels towards her father. She finds herself unable to become the other significant woman in his life to abandon him. This is why “[s]he drives back into Westcott Farm, to her mother’s absence, to her sleeping father” (40). Later on, if Jack’s sentiments are to be believed, Ellie is actually merely waiting for Jimmy Merrick to die and allow her to take charge of her (and Jack’s) life. Once the news of an unexpected inheritance from her late mother’s partner gives her the freedom to do this, Jack

understood ... that he was now in Ellie’s thrall. (But hadn’t he always been?) He felt the letter taking away from him any last argument, any last crumb of Luxton pride and delusion. Mastery? He was in Ellie’s hands now. “They” not “he.” He knew that keeping the farm, for all its summer glory, was only a picture. Ellie had stuck her finger through it. Now she was pointing to their future. (283)

Finding herself in the position of Bauman’s postmodern subject, Ellie throws away any pretence at the stability of identity offered by rootedness. She becomes an eager player of the game in which rules – and roles – change constantly:

The sensible strategy is therefore to keep each game short – so that a sensibly played game of life calls for splitting one big all-embracing game with huge stakes into a series of brief and narrow games with small

ones. "Determination to live one day at a time," "depicting daily life as a succession of minor emergencies" become the guiding principles of all rational conduct. (Bauman, 24)

The novel opens with images of piles of burning cattle and it is the disaster of mad cow disease that introduces Ellie and Jack to experience the world where "[j]obs are no longer protected, and most certainly no better than the stability of places where they are practised" (Bauman, 24). Indeed, both farms – like many others in England at the time – are affected by this instability to a sufficient extent to be turned into "a ghost farm" with "[n]o milk flow, no cash flow, and precious little in the bank" (Swift 2011, 42). As was already noted, Ellie embraces the rules of the postmodern game of life much more readily than Jack and is determined to increase the chance of achieving the short-lived gratifications it has to offer. She sees the crisis very much as an opportunity. Her unsentimental insistence not to be bound by the past finds expression, among others, in her constant injunction to Jack to "forget Tom," indicative of her willingness to endorse – and in fact initiate – constant change. "She even said (and it was an oddly appealing idea), 'Pretend you don't know me. Pretend I've never been here before'" (277). Big, burly, bovine Jack is not, however, all that easy to move.

Alice Merrick has been gone for so long – and has left in such a way – that for Ellie "to think of her at all is like seeing distant glimmers through a blur" (32). Vera Luxton, on the other hand, remains an essential element of her family long after she has died of ovarian cancer. Vera is an anchor, the heart of the farm, "more of a Luxton ... than the Luxtons themselves" (23), the one who passes on family traditions, and, especially in Jack's life, an undeniable presence, setting a constant standard for his self-evaluation. In fact, Ellie's original failure to follow her own mother's example has a lot to do with the influence of Jack's mother: wondering whether she might actually be capable of running away, Ellie imagines herself driving to Jebb Farm to take Jack with her and "sees the family turning out to confront her amazing arrival. Michael. Vera. There's a difficulty there, she knows it – to tear Jack from his mum" (39). This can hardly be an easy task, considering how well installed in his

identity Jack is – by his mother: it is, after all, through “grown-up conversations” with Vera that he has come into

his future and his responsibilities. Or, to put it another way, his name. Since it meant something if you were born, as he was, on a farm: the name. The generations going back and forwards, like the hills, whichever way you looked, around them. And what else had his mother borne him for than to give him and show him his birthright? Something his father, for whatever reason – and though it was *his* name – could never do. (22)

In his disinclination to change, Jack is juxtaposed not only to Ellie but also, perhaps even more tellingly, to Tom. In the younger Luxton, the line of maternal transfer is twisted in a way which subverts simple analogies between parents and their children, which is not the first time in Swift that the straightforward transition of socially prescribed gender roles is ever so subtly problematised.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of what Vera tried to teach her sons about their place in the world, the question of mobility is certainly one point where the brothers, otherwise apparently very close, differ diametrically: “Generally speaking, Jack was a sticker, a settler. He didn’t have the moving-on instinct, or he never really thought he *could* move on. Whereas Tom, clearly was a mover-on, in more ways than one. By the time he was eighteen, very clearly. A mover-on and a leaver-behind” (102). This is why Ellie, despite her problematic attitude to him, appears to feel a certain affinity with Tom, which allows her to understand his decision, to see that joining the army “was a simple, all-in solution for a man of Tom’s age ... The main thing was he’d got out. He’d shown it could be done. Tom was not unlike her mother” (111). The cross-gender analogies go deeper: Tom is described not only as being “good with a gun” but “even better, after Vera died, at taking

<sup>10</sup> Emma Parker, in her “No Man’s Land: Masculinity and Englishness in Graham Swift’s *Last Orders*,” demonstrates persuasively that the two of the protagonists who are most successful in embracing the crisis in masculinity models as an opportunity to disrupt the limiting binary oppositions of gender roles are the ones who can be considered most optimistic, hopeful and successful in the ethical sense. Parker also makes a well illustrated observation that “[i]nitially, the novel associates women with movement and men with stasis” (96).

her place, at being, for them all, a bit of a mum himself" (205). While the former qualification is presumed to predestine Tom for a military career, the usefulness of the latter is offered more as a hypothesis: "Was that something the army required of a man too?" (205). Significantly, however, in the later portrayal of Tom's life as a soldier on a mission, this presumption is confirmed in a rather matter-of-fact manner: "By the time they were out here, most of them had that hard and soft stuff sorted out. They knew they didn't have their mums around any more. They'd better be their own mums to themselves, and that wasn't a joke" (205). Perhaps because of the absence of this sort of mobilising experience, Jack proves profoundly restrained in making any comparable discoveries. He is prevented by his father's profound influence from replacing Vera, even if he "should have been the one, by rights, to step into her space" (43). Jack is too fixed in his unrelenting masculine identity of "a big, outdoor man with mud on his boots. If he'd tried to take his mum's place, Dad would have mocked him" (43).

In a sense, both Vera Luxton and Alice Merrick are typical Swift's mothers precisely because they are significantly absent from their children's life: Irene Chapman in *Sweet Shop Owner* abandons her daughter emotionally, ceding all responsibility – including any affective engagement – to her husband; the protagonist of *Shuttlecock* is so preoccupied by his father figures as to make no more than a few strained remarks about the sudden death of his mother as "a day, to be honest, I don't like to remember in detail" (41); the final conversation with the dying Helen Crick is a watershed experience for the narrator of *Waterland*. Thus, if Jack Luxton feels abandoned by Tom as much as by Ellie, it seems appropriate that also in this his younger brother should be associated not only with feminine mobility but with Vera Luxton specifically. Regardless of her embeddedness in the family lineage, the boys' mother realises the fundamental and inescapable impermanence of human beings and – again in analogy with *Waterland* – it is Vera who sets out to prepare Jack for her absence: "And it was only later, when she was gone, that it occurred to him that another gist, and perhaps the real gist, of those conversations was precisely that. That she was telling him that she wouldn't always be there" (23). Seen from this perspective, it seems appropriate that Tom's final departure should again con-

nect him with Vera in Jack’s mind: “But Tom’s with her right now, Jack thinks, he could scarcely be closer. He was walking right back to her, that night, without knowing it” (28–9).

Jack’s resistance to the agents of mobilising feminine subjectivity is accompanied by his perception of both of them as alien and potentially dangerous. At the height of the profoundly disturbing experience of organising his brother’s funeral, Jack asks himself if he knows Ellie at all almost at the same moment that he notices how strangely unfamiliar Tom looks in a recent photo:

Jack had looked at the photograph and recognised, of course, the man he was looking at. Yet at the same time it had seemed appropriate for him to ask, deep inside: Do I know this man? Can this man really be my brother? ... But then he’d felt just the same about Ellie, he realised, when she’d demanded to be counted out. Do I know this woman? This unwavering woman. There’d been an odd touch about Ellie, in fact, of the man in the photograph. You wouldn’t want to mess with that man. He might even shoot you, no questions asked. Similarly, if Ellie could be so unbudging about a thing like this, then there was no saying what else she might do. (127)

The presumed ruthlessness of both representatives of the mobilising feminine subjectivity is particularly striking: whether or not actually associated with a figure of a woman, it is seen as threatening from the point of view of the stability of the patriarchal structures of identity. Braidotti draws an analogy between femininity and monstrosity, which she ascribes to the “phallogocentric perversion” of the conceptualisations of difference dominant in Western culture. The results are closely related to the pathological mobility of the feminine subject:

Woman/mother is monstrous by excess; she transcends established norms and transgresses boundaries. She is monstrous by lack: woman/mother does not possess the substantive unity of the masculine subject. Most important, through her identification with the feminine she is monstrous by displacement: as sign of the in between areas, of the indefinite, the ambiguous, the mixed. (83)

The monstrosity of in-betweenness appears to affect the remodelled condition of the Luxtons. Changes have, after all, taken place in Jack, however reluctantly: Ellie insists that during the life-altering ten years of their marriage, Jack had in fact been coming out of mourning for the farm, “and not so slowly, and actually started to look happy” (211). Jack himself recognises the influence of the new lifestyle and in particular the change of locality, emphasising the effect of its inherent mobility: “It was only ever an encampment down there, that was the feel of it, like the halt of some expeditionary, ragtag army. It might all be gone in the morning – any morning – leaving nothing but the tyre marks in the grass. That was the tug. Not cattle, not even caravans, but people” (30). Also, when travelling to Tom’s funeral, Jack, “a landsman, by experience and disposition [who] liked his feet anchored to solid ground,” at the same time feels himself to have become an islander, now affected by “a queasy distrust of the looming mainland – that yet contained his roots and his past” (135). This “remarkable rebirth” is in fact part of his deal with Ellie, who is prepared in return to accept remaining childless. It is for her sake that Jack is trying “to demonstrate ... that he had indeed become a new, lighter, gladder, luckier man, and it was thanks not jut to luck but to Ellie’s really rather amazing sticking by him” (57). He is characteristically passive about the transformation, as illustrated by an incident during their holiday in the Caribbean, when, flying on a parachute, he is neither excited nor triumphant: despite Ellie’s calling him a hero, his impression is that “he’d just hung there, Jack Luxton, like some big baby being dandled, or rather – with that thing above – like some big baby being delivered by a stork” (58). What is more, his metamorphosis proves to be always insufficient: years after Jack supposedly came out of his shell, Tom remains an irremovable impediment, “still in the picture though out of it” (115). His death raises Ellie’s hopes of resolving the issue permanently, but she soon realises that actually it is precisely through his death that Tom really comes back, “to bloody haunt them” (117). Ellie is also forced to acknowledge the catastrophic consequences of her refusal to become involved in the mourning rituals. Seeing that Jack comes back from the funeral shattered, she admits to herself that she should have gone with her husband “back into the wretched past” (211): she considered the possibility of his not returning

but did not expect him to return so gravely changed. The conflict between the spouses, concerning their obligations towards the dead and towards each other, reaches a dramatic climax after the return and apparently produces in Jack a level of self-doubt worthy of Conrad's protagonists. Hoping to reverse the damaging effects of mutual accusations concerning their fathers' deaths, Ellie attempts to summon up the old Jack and asserts that she knows him well enough to dismiss his provocative claim of being directly responsible for Michael's death. "But she was looking at him as though she was no longer certain on that last point. And whatever Ellie knew, she didn't know and couldn't know what had only ever been in his head. Even Jack himself couldn't be sure of how it really was" (302–3).

Typically for Swift, the issues of symbolic debt, insufficient mourning, the costs of freeing oneself from entanglements with the past, are all presented not only on a strictly personal plane, but are given a more distinctly public, political, global dimension. Questions of the private and the public figure heavily in the context of the younger Luxton's funeral: the ritual is described as a "communal effort" of the village to depoliticize Tom's death,<sup>11</sup> to which Jack himself contributes in his strain "to get away with as little as possible: time, involvement, talk," by demanding a non-military funeral with an insistence which leaves him "surprised at his own firmness" (261). More interestingly from the point of view of this text, the issues of mobility – and the mobilising influence – of capital are overtly discussed. Jack is admittedly initially shocked at the very thought of someone buying a place with generations of history "in the same way that they might buy a picture to hang on their wall" (326), but the farm is eventually sold. What is more, to increase its attractiveness Ellie and Jack actually detach their property from its history and put it up for sale not as a farm but as a country

<sup>11</sup> "It seemed now that the coffin before him was the same coffin that he'd watched yesterday being carried off a plane and that had been flown all the way from Iraq ... There was no sign of the connection (he hadn't noticed – in his not-looking – any Union Jacks) and no one so far had made any mention of it, so that it seemed there might be some silent communal effort around him to make it not exist. As if Tom had died, at a tragically early age, just a little distance away. A tractor accident, perhaps" (271).

house and land to go with it. The oak under which Michael Luxton shot himself, presumed to be twice as old as the farm itself, becomes a commodity, merely making the view more attractive and thus gaining a better price. The new owners, appropriately called Robinson, in their turn effectively colonise the place, transforming both the farm and the house, mixing with locals no more than necessary, and experiencing the privilege described by Bauman as characteristic for investors, endowed with power without obligations, "freedom from the duty to contribute to daily life and the perpetuation of the community" (qtd. in Rachwał, 34). The wealthy Londoners, whose "Jebb life" is limited almost exclusively to summers, strive for the local security of a controllable environment in a world increasingly affected by the "unlocal malaise of insecurity" (Swift 2011, 313). Their specific understanding of the term is also explicitly stated: what the Robinsons are really after is "the kind of security that might prevent the possession and enjoyment of their new property from ever being impaired or violated" (314).

At the same time, the impossibility of such an idyllic retreat is emphasised by Jack Luxton's surprising discoveries on the matter made during his involvement with "the business of pleasure": "Jack might have said that it was a funny thing, but the caravanners, on their holidays, often wanted to talk about the general state of the world, how it wasn't getting any safer ... And Jack might have put forward the idea that there was no such place really as 'away from it all,' was there?" (316). This remark echoes closely the words Sophie Birch in *Out Of This World*, where they signal in a much more definitive way a break with the illusory havens of denial. In *Wish You Were Here*, it is Claire Robinson who arrives at an analogous conclusion, despite being rather well-versed in renouncing uncomfortable truths (she has a "pact with herself" to repress the awareness of her husband's long-lived affair (320)). Her uncanny unease, a sensation of inexplicable terror which she experiences under the oak where Luxton senior died, is repeated when she reads a newspaper note about Tom's death. The country house purchased by Toby Robinson as "a sort of pay-off" to her and the children is a place built on significant silences: Claire's silence about her husband's lover and about her own "moment" of terror as well as the Luxtons' silence about the suicide staining the attractiveness of the property. Thus, the precarious founda-

tion of the Robinsons’ hideaway is the consistent decision not to mention the troubling aspects of their existence, since “it might be a fatal thing to do. It might cause a catastrophe” (327).

In discussing the conclusions of several case studies, R.W. Connell observes the costs of remodelling individual practices of masculinity through involvement with powerful female figures, seeing in such a solution an attempt at “backtracking on steps by which Oedipal masculinity was formed.” The experience of “a passive-dependent relationship with an admired woman” is described as entailing the threat of self-annihilation, or a sense of losing one’s centre (136). Even if these formulations are not to be taken as clinical terms, they nevertheless give a strong indication of the emotional difficulties of challenging the structures of conventional gendered identity. Regardless of his critical attitude towards patriarchal culture, in *Wish You Were Here*, Swift also proves to be as watchful as ever of the dangers involved in trying to restore the imaginary pre-Oedipal unity, his stress falling on the impossibility of detaching oneself from the past, or, indeed, of returning to its idyllic form. The costs of denial have, after all, been at the centre of his interest throughout the writer’s career. In a sense, Willy Chapman and Jack Luxton form a sort of frame to Swift’s handling of these issues in his entire oeuvre. In a distant echo of Chapman’s final walk, excessive mobility also brings Luxton to the brink of suicide. The significant difference is that unlike Willy, killed by his attempt to blackmail his daughter into a role prescribed for her, Jack is in fact saved by the ghost of his brother, who literally stops him in his self-destructiveness and by Ellie, whose sudden burst of grief for the younger Luxton exorcises the ghost in what might be the riskiest denouement in any Swift novel. When Jack decides that the only way out of the tangle is to shoot Ellie and then himself, he sees “Tom standing with his back pressed against the inside of the front door through which Ellie must enter, in a barring posture that’s vaguely familiar” (346).<sup>12</sup> On the other side of the door, Ellie feels “a tangible sense of his living presence,” which

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<sup>12</sup> The recently buried soldier also addresses Jack (“though it’s hardly necessary”), delivering a signature Swift bad pun: “Shoot me first, Jack, shoot me first. Don’t be a fucking fool. Over my dead fucking body” (346).

disappears immediately after, “to her own surprise ... her eyes and throat thicken and she splutters out as if she might even have been the poor dead man’s wife, lover, mother, sister: ‘O Tom! O poor, poor Tom!’” (349). Despite the increased individualism and mobility of the characters of *Wish You Were Here*, the need for communal mourning ultimately proves as indispensable as it was in *Last Orders* if the spectres of the past, whether horrifying or benevolent, are to find peace. The inevitable consequences of large-scale socio-political processes, admittedly responsible for the personal turmoil of Swift’s characters, also inspire positive change, which is, however, always strenuous and evolutionary. In a heavily symbolic gesture, Jack Luxton finally determines “that he would simply get rid of all this weaponry, he’d get rid at last of the gun and that when he did so, Tom would finally be laid to rest” (352). Consequently, while the task at hand for Swift’s protagonists are indeed much more challenging than a simple “skedaddle” from obsolete forms of subjectivity, *Wish You Were Here* offers some of the most compelling evidence in his prose in favour of the mobility of the feminine subject.

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