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PhD THESIS

**THE SUM OF LOSSES: IMAGES OF MEN IN THE NOVELS OF
GRAHAM SWIFT. A PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACH**

Supervisor: Professor Sławomir Masłoń

Work written in English

SOSNOWIEC 2021

INSTYTUT KULTUR I LITERATUR ANGLOJĘZYCZNYCH

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PRACA DOKTORSKA

RACHUNEK STRAT: POSTACI MĘŻCZYŹN W POWIEŚCIACH

GRAHAMA SWIFTA. UJĘCIE PSYCHOANALITYCZNE

Promotor: prof. dr hab. Sławomir Masłoń

Praca w języku angielskim

SOSNOWIEC 2021

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Introduction

Why Lacan?

In a recent interview, Graham Swift insistently renounces much of the conscious control over the initial stages of his creative process, repeatedly stressing that the impulse for writing is something that comes to him beyond any decision on his part, something that only later may be elaborated through conscious effort. Commenting on how he did not really choose the topic for his 2021 short story, he calls the process “writing by surprise” and describes it somewhat vaguely: “I can’t emphasize too much the element of surprise. I’ve come to believe that writing by surprise is the best and certainly the most exciting way to write. It’s the opposite of writing by premeditation. How do you write by surprise? I don’t really know, but I’ve developed an instinct for it. It’s not an everyday event, or it wouldn’t be surprising. Once you’re in a state of surprise you can make some extraordinarily quick – and again surprising – connections.”¹ He makes a similar comment concerning the fact that for the majority of his career he has written exclusively novels, and insists that this was not a question of choice either: “I can’t explain my ‘thirty-year break’ – that makes it sound like some conscious decision. I’ve always loved short stories and been open to writing them. They just didn’t happen for a while – quite a long while! Novels happened instead.”² Regardless of the extent to which Swift actually considers the writing process to be something out of his conscious control (unsurprisingly, he has also spoken about the intricate, and doubtless quite deliberate, work he puts into his texts as a novelist),³ he does have a reputation of being rather

¹ Deborah Treisman, “Graham Swift on Ghost Worlds,” *The New Yorker*, January 11, 2021.

² Treisman, “Ghost Worlds.”

³ For example: “It can be dismaying [...] for a novelist to compare the slowness of the writing with the speed of the reading. Novels are read in a matter of days, even hours. A writer may labour for a week, or

dismissive of theory as a writer, one who believes his books are supposed not to require any theoretical apparatus, whether in the process of their construction or during reception. Instead, one gets the impression that they are intended to be self-evident or transparent since they ostentatiously employ naturalised conventions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century realism. Considering Swift's background in the academia, it is difficult not to consider this attitude to be an informed choice.

With such explicit denial of theoretical frameworks – or, indeed, intentionality – in mind, I find it all the more intriguing to explore the arguably rather strong Lacanian overtones of his prose. It must be emphasised that the idea of Swift consciously incorporating psychoanalytic thinking into his prose is not only to a large extent excluded by the above remarks, but more importantly not of much interest to the present thesis. Indeed, the possibility that some reflection of Lacanian conceptions may be traced in the work without the author's intention or even against it, in itself makes for even more thought provoking reading. After all, if traces of Lacan's ideas can be found in texts whose author more or less explicitly rejects any connection with his thought, texts that cannot possibly be claimed to have been written as an exploration or elaboration of his theorizing, it implies that these observations must hit at some truth accessible from other positions as well. Obviously, while Swift's language choices themselves, which at points resonate very clearly with echoes of psychoanalytical terminology (I write about it in some detail in section 2.1.8) may be taken to be incidental, there are more structural, more

weeks, over a particular passage which will have its effect on a reader in an instant – and that effect may be subliminal or barely noticed. The vibrations of thought and feeling that a single sentence in its context may release in a reader may be too rapid for measurement. 'It leapt off the page' is what we say of a happy reading experience" (Graham Swift, "On Swiftness and Slowness," in *A Between Almanach for the Year 2013*, eds. Tomasz Wiśniewski, David Malcolm, Żaneta Nalewajk, Monika Szuba, (Gdańsk: Maski Press, 2013), 15).

profound, systematic parallels that have inspired my exploration. And in any case, when psychoanalysis is involved, the incidental may very well be crucially important.

In simplest terms, the major connection between Jacques Lacan and Graham Swift is arguably the fact that both consistently point to the limitations of language as a means of approaching or indeed forming our reality, and at the same time both insist that handling reality through language is beyond any doubt the only method we have of relating to the world around us and to our others – as well as our own selves. Bruce Fink’s remark about “the dominance and determinant nature of language in human existence”⁴ in Lacan’s theorising can certainly be applied to one of the predominant concerns of Swift’s prose. His narrators/protagonists explicitly search – almost exclusively through language – to achieve the kind of subjective coherence that haunts the Lacanian subject, and ultimately always find that systems of significations through which they forge their identities lead inescapably to aporia and irresolution. Sometimes classified as “trauma fiction,” Swift’s plots overwhelmingly revolve around the aftermath of an event that has torn the protagonist from all sense of security in his identity, and forced him to undertake an attempt to regain some degree of stability and coherence through a narrative. This goal most often proves to be entirely elusive, and I would argue that the most optimistic of Swift’s narratives are those that ultimately allow their central characters to arrive at an embrace of the ambiguity of their condition rather than an achievement of the restoration of the desired perfect unity.

This search for presumed lost wholeness, the impossible wish to return to what one had been before one was deprived of something irreplaceably defining, in itself

⁴ Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis. Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, MA, London, England: Harvard University Press 1997), 88.

clearly invites parallels with Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan's model of subjectivity, grounded in alienation from a presupposed sense of unity in an external framework of signification, is after all marked precisely by a foundational experience of loss and a consequent feeling of inauthenticity. The central role of language is indeed clearly visible in the way that Lacan's conception of subjectivity dismisses any sort of essence of identity and instead situates the subject on the shaky foundation of a system of symbolic exchange that is external to it. There is no signifier in the system that fully corresponds to what we really are and yet our very existence depends precisely on this network of signs, which precedes and exceeds it. This is why the emergence of subjectivity in itself involves the anachronic idea of having lost the perfectly unified existence at the moment of entering the network of signifiers. This is of course an illusion, since the subject's very appearance *as* a subject depends precisely on the idea of absence, incompleteness, ultimate incoherence that are defining features of the symbolic. There is no perfect unity to be lost, since the subject that experiences the sense of loss may only come into being when lack appears, and this foundational lack only appears in the process of subject formation. Signification depends on the possibility of elements to replace one another, since a sign must be able to stand for an object, and this is why the notion of substitution implicates the idea of absence and loss. This is also why only a system of signs allows us to conceptualise absence, since without substitution it is impossible to grasp anything that is not actually there. The notion of lack is crucial to a number of key concepts in Lacanian psychoanalysis (object *a*, desire, phallus, fantasy, the symbolic itself) and the way that the notion of incompleteness is introduced and handled is absolutely central to his conceptualisation of human subjectivity. In Swift's novels, the sense of loss, of being

deprived of something crucial, and the sense of frustration in vainly attempting to restore a sense of completeness and authenticity through language, are of crucial importance, and I will argue that on many levels they correspond to the dynamic of the Lacanian conception of subjectivity, and to the subjective structure associated with obsessional neurosis in particular.

Explicitly Lacanian criticism of Swift is on the scant side, but among the authors that do refer to Lacan in analysing his work, one might find some justification to my proposed reading. Out of the two monographs that consistently make use of the framework of Lacanian criticism, Daniel Lea's *Graham Swift* (2005) is undeniably closer to my own thinking. Pascale Tollance's *La scene de la voix* (2011), as the title suggests, focuses on the voice, and while Lacan is undeniably one of her points of reference (and voice arguably plays a role in Lacan's thinking on obsessional neurosis), there are no clear intersections between her consideration of Swift and mine.

By contrast, in his monograph Lea announces as one of the organising motifs of his approach to Swift what he perceives in his protagonists as "a sense of lack, of being incomplete, or of glimpsing the potential forever outside the grasp of the self, or of the means of expression."⁵ As we have already remarked, this is a fundamental element of Lacan's very notion of subjectivity, but unlike Lea, I will argue more specifically that this frustration is among the features that resonate in Swift's fiction with the obsessional neurotic position in Lacanian typology. Lea adds that Swift's characters are "isolated in matrices of subjectivity that are precariously inscribed and prone to dissolution [and] alienated from others by their inability to empathise with the inner workings of another's

⁵ Daniel Lea, *Graham Swift* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 7.

consciousness.”⁶ His thesis emphasises their status as loners, disenchanted with and unable to process the reality in which they function. This is the kind of emotional detachment and failure of empathy that I will show to be associated by Lacan with obsessional neurosis. Equally importantly, Lea perceives these discourses as representing failed methodologies of knowledge to which Swift’s battered characters turn in search of unity, unable to face their own instability as subjects in a satisfying fashion. This is why they aspire to an arguably excessive level of symbolic coherence, and through constructs such as history, family, community, Englishness, love, or knowledge attempt to achieve “a totalising inclusiveness that offers an antidotal panacea to the chaos of being.”⁷ I would add that the sense of being deprived of access to one’s authentic, original identity is present in Swift’s output both on individual and communal level. His protagonists’ search for a way back to a time before a personal crisis quite frequently happens against a background of or indeed reflects a more universal yearning after a Golden Age before the decline of their community. In this respect, Lea’s perspective undeniably coincides with my focus on the obsessive neurotic features of these figures, although in his analysis such theses are never formulated quite as explicitly. On the whole, while Lea uses the tools of Lacanian thinking quite effectively, he tends to invoke Lacan occasionally and without providing extended theoretical background for his use of psychoanalytic apparatus. Lacanian psychoanalysis is, furthermore, only one among a number of theoretical frameworks he employs. His overall outlook on Swift’s work coincides with mine to a large extent, though is not pursued in exclusively, or even very consistently, Lacanian terms. Nevertheless, many of the observations that he makes about Swift using Lacan’s

⁶ Lea, *Graham Swift*, 7.

⁷ Lea, *Graham Swift*, 7.

terminology are impossible to undermine: “As the Lacanian Real always thwarts total symbolisation by retaining in part a surplus that defies categorisation and comprehension, so the Swiftian subject is continually brought up against the limits of self-knowledge but is uncannily aware that self-definitions do not wholly account for a complete sense of being.”⁸ This is why Lea’s work will remain an important reference throughout my thesis.

Why masculinity?

Swift’s status as an explorer of inadequate masculinity also predisposes him for a Lacanian interpretation, and more specifically one that focuses on obsessional neurosis. It cannot be denied that both Swift and Lacan place enormous emphasis on the figure of the father and its key function in registering an individual identity within the symbolic system. The father is a figure central to psychoanalysis in a very broad understanding, but it undeniably plays a central role in Lacan’s theorising specifically, and in his conceptualisation of obsessional neurosis in particular. I will explore this in more detail in the following section of this introduction, but let me note here briefly that for the obsessional neurotic the father is a paradoxical figure, one to be admired and obeyed at the same time as to be perceived as a threat, an object of envy and rivalry, inspiring murderous instincts. What I find interesting is not only the presence and prominence of the motif of the father in Swift’s prose, but also his actual handling of it. Swift’s fathers are almost always a problem, whether they are overwhelming, perfect patriarchs whose example can never be matched by their frustrated sons, or, on the contrary, disappointing,

⁸ Lea, *Graham Swift*, 199.

weak, absent, dismissed as “truly nobody, truly nowhere.”⁹ Indeed, it seems justified to argue that both types in Swift’s novels more often than not prove to be very Lacanian impostors. The weak fathers never seem to deserve the name in the first place, while the perfect ones are suspicious precisely on account of their perfection.¹⁰ This is why I believe that a close look at a representative selection of Swift’s writing may well be enriched by a Lacanian interpretation of this issue as well. More importantly from the point of view of my thesis, the protagonists’ relationship with their fathers – being subordinated to them, adoring them and following their command entirely, while feeding a resentment, envy and desire to overthrow them; or openly despising them, finding oneself forced to take their place reluctantly – is precisely the kind of framework that justifies reading Swift’s narrative model in terms of obsessional neurosis. A brief introduction of the concept is in place before I say more about the way in which I will explore it in my consideration of Swift’s prose.

Why obsessional neurosis?

Lacan’s diagnostic schema distinguishes three possible structures in the process of subject formation: psychosis, perversion, and neurosis. These are determined by the manner in which subjectification takes place. Before I introduce the basic distinctions between the three structures, let me take a moment to outline the process of subjectification itself, which for Lacan is in its very essence predicated on loss, a transition from the condition of a living being to that of a speaking subject.

⁹ Graham Swift, *Here We Are* (London: Scribner, 2020), 3.

¹⁰ How these suspicions play out varies in Swift’s texts (see section 1.1 on *Shuttlecock*, and section 2.3 on *Ever After*).

While gaining self-awareness, forming a sense of coherent identity, and entering into relations with other subjects that are mediated by the symbolic order, the infant loses – or at least gets the impression of having lost – the condition of unproblematic unity with his or her primary caregiver. The first step of the process is the misrecognition of the mirror stage,¹¹ which introduces the image of one’s self as a coherent entity at the price of alienation, since the self-identification central to the transition is one in which the child equates her- or himself with something that is evidently distinct from it: its image in a mirror. In further developing the concept Lacan stressed the symbolic intervention in this moment of self-recognition, noting that the observation must be reinforced by an adult’s encouraging remark of “Yes, that is you!” This undeniably only adds to the idea that none of this concerns any sort of innermost, authentic core of what we are. Both the ego and the subject are forged by forces external to the person whose personhood they are supposed to constitute, and depend on the recognition of others. Bruce Fink notes: “In human beings, the mirror stage may, as in chimpanzees, be of some interest at a certain age, but it does not become formative of the ego, of a sense of self, unless it is *ratified* by a person of importance to the child.”¹² However, as Philippe Van Haute remarks, at this point in the Oedipal complex “the father is still not seen entirely as a symbolic instance” since he is here believed to be a perfect, complete Other, “a third without a lack,” disrupting the mother-infant dyad. The father is therefore perceived as the authority in

¹¹ A concept undoubtedly among Lacan’s most famous, first developed in 1936, but elaborated and significantly modified in the 1960’s.

¹² Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 88, original emphasis.

control of the mother's desire, and the origin of the law which both the child and the mother must obey, and significantly, he himself is seen as having no lack.¹³

The final stage is achieved when the second Other truly becomes a symbolic father – the figure that sets limits in the infant's relation with the mother, but is himself subject to the symbolic law. The abandoning of the idealised perception of the paternal figure as a complete and perfect Other frees the child from the deadly rivalry with the father, associated with the imaginary order. It also leads to the development of what Freud termed the ego-ideal: adopting what we believe are our others' expectations of us as a standard for our self-assessment. This, in turn, means that the imaginary register of sense perceptions, of fantasy, is restructured/rewritten by the symbolic. The fact that the mother responds to other authorities, has other desires, is not completed or completely satisfied by the child, fully introduces the child to the realities of the symbolic. The father's prohibition is now able to install the infant in the realm of substitution, since his gesture constitutes the foundational metaphor that makes metaphorical exchanges possible for the subject: it replaces – and marks – the inaccessible pleasure of the mother's body, and thus establishes the economy of symbolic exchange: a signifier takes place of an irretrievably lost object. This is castration understood as the price to pay for entering the symbolic, which enables detachment from the m(O)ther, who overwhelms the nascent subject entirely before this moment. This in turn allows the subject to occupy its own place in the symbolic framework and develop its own desire. From this point onwards, the child's desire is no longer entirely subjugated to the mother, but can be directed to other objects. Castration therefore initiates the movement of desire,

¹³ He also adds: "In terms of his pathology, Lacan couples this second moment of the Oedipus complex with the problematic of neurosis." Philippe Van Haute, *Against Adaptation. Lacan's "Subversion" of the Subject*, trans. Paul Crowe and Miranda Vankerck (New York: Other Press, 2002), 235.

fundamental to the speaking subject's functioning within the symbolic. In other words, it is the source of the dynamic defining for all speaking subjects: the endless quest for an object that will remove the gap, that will render the subject and/or the m(O)ther complete.¹⁴

The incompleteness, insufficiency, and inauthenticity that goes with the fact that our subjecthood is founded in language, as well as our dependence on it, are explained very well by Bruce Fink: "We have the sense, at times, that we cannot find the words to say what we mean, and that the words available to us miss the point, saying too much or too little. Yet without those words, the very realm of meaning would not exist for us at all."¹⁵ It is hardly surprising that a system of intersubjective communication must go beyond the individual subject. However, a certain degree of identification with language, or "inhabiting some subset of language," as Fink puts it,¹⁶ is possible, although – crucially – not for everyone. To what extent this achievement is available to a specific subject, how a specific subject deals with this impossible task depends on "structurally different positions that the subject (of the unconscious) can adopt towards (the impossible *jouissance* of) the Other. This implies that the acceptance of the law of the father can take various forms, and therefore cannot be understood as an 'all or nothing' scenario."¹⁷ In other words an individual's subjective structure depends on how he or she has resolved the Oedipal moment in their development, described above. As was mentioned earlier,

¹⁴ Stephanie Swales reminds us, quoting from "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud": "Importantly for Lacan, "desire is a metonymy" (1957/2006a, p. 528) because desire is subject to the same process of perpetual deferral, desire always being "desire for something else" (p. 518)." Stephanie S. Swales, *Perversion. A Lacanian Psychoanalytic Approach to the Subject* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), 21.

¹⁵ Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 86.

¹⁶ Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 87.

¹⁷ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 234.

Lacan sees three broad categories here. Let us introduce each of them briefly, and focus on obsessional neurosis.

Each category employs a different mechanism for addressing the paternal intervention in the process of subject formation: neurosis – repression, perversion – disavowal, psychosis – foreclosure¹⁸; Freud and Lacan agree that these mechanisms are not merely associated with the structures but are constitutive of them.¹⁹ The category of psychosis is characterised by the mechanism that Lacan calls foreclosure, which means that a foundational element of the symbolic order – the Name of the Father, the first metaphor, which makes the very movement of desire possible – is entirely rejected. In the case of psychosis, the father’s prohibition is not registered, and consequently the symbolic does not overwrite the imaginary. As a result, the ego-ideal is absent, making it impossible for one to develop a stable sense of self. This in turn means that the individual is unable to identify with language to any degree at all, to find at least a provisional place in the system, which leaves him or her in the condition of “being subjugated by the phenomenon of discourse as a whole.”²⁰ Consequently, for the psychotic the imaginary continues to organise her or his experience, and the symbolic is not adopted as a radically different order, but rather by means of imitating other people.

In contrast with psychosis, in perversion, as well as in neurosis, the father’s prohibition is actually recognised and opens the way to the overwriting of the imaginary

¹⁸ Van Haute insists that in Lacanian psychoanalysis the difference between subjective positions is based on the first confrontation with the desire of the Other, during which we still have to ask what it wants, and since the Other never replies, it is up to the subject to provide a response to this question, in the form of fantasy, “and this means that the phantasy is the place where the position of the subject is determined; the phantasy articulates the position of the subject with respect to the jouissance of the Other.” (*Against Adaptation*, 249)

¹⁹ Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 77.

²⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III. The Psychoses 1955-1956*, trans. Russell Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1993), 235, quoted in Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 87.

by the symbolic and the ordering of the drives. The difference between perversion and neurosis in this respect, as Van Haute points out, is that the pervert stops at the first stage of the institution of the Name-of-the-Father, when the infant is already beginning to experience the lack in the m(O)ther, but has not yet recognised its relation to the paternal influence. “The infant, in other words, remains locked in a dual relationship with the mother, and it can continue to placidly identify itself with the object that would make possible the Other’s *jouissance*.”²¹ In terms of Lacan’s typology of subjective structures the pervert, unlike the psychotic, recognises the lack, but fails to associate it with the symbolic law sufficiently.

In turn, neurosis normally sees the overwriting of the imaginary by the symbolic during the mirror stage, which involves “the suppression or at least the subordination of imaginary relations characterized by rivalry and aggressivity [...] to symbolic relations dominated by concerns with ideals, authority figures, the law, performance, achievement, guilt, and so on.”²² The neurotic structure implies a fully completed castration, which the subject, however, continues to perceive from an imaginary perspective. The neurotic subject believes that there is still a possibility of overcoming the lack introduced by castration (which is why for the neurotic castration itself is still perceived as violating the subject’s bodily integrity). The important distinction between perversion and neurosis is, however, that the lack, although not entirely recognised, is nevertheless associated with the function of the father. Exactly how the relation is handled, however, also marks the specificity of this structure. Van Haute stresses that the neurotic’s fantasy is one of an ideal father, who is perfectly master of his desire, and who “appears as the possessor of

²¹ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 234-5.

²² Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 89.

the (imaginary) phallus that is lacking in the mother, but at the same time, this father forbids the mother to the child.”²³ In other words, the neurotic has difficulty accepting that the symbolic father is a pure signifier, a position within the structure potentially to be filled by any individual, and instead dreams that the lawgiving, almighty father can have actual presence. This equals the assumption that the Other may be made to exist, and that the neurotic is capable of making the jouissance of the Other possible. In reality, this is out of the question, since this sort of limitless jouissance would bring about the destruction of the subject: it is by definition beyond the symbolic, and the limitations placed on the individual by the symbolic are what make subjectivity possible.²⁴

The belief in the possibility of eliminating lack is a crucial feature of neurosis, common for both major neurotic positions, hysteria and obsession.²⁵ The major distinction between the two subcategories of neurosis is that “the obsessive attempts to overcome or reverse the effects of separation on the *subject*, whereas the hysteric attempts to overcome or reverse the effects of separation on the *Other*.”²⁶ In other words, the hysteric strives to present herself as the perfect object that completes the Other and thus annuls any lack in it, while the obsessive aims at achieving the status of a complete subject without any lack in him by covering over the Other’s desire; the hysteric pretends to *be* the phallus, while the obsessive pretends to *possess* it. In both structures, the fantasy of the ideal father plays a crucial role, and this fantasy is doubtless immediately recognisable to Swift’s readers. This is arguably one of the most significant constant motifs appearing in Swift’s writing: ideal(ised), overwhelming fathers, who are challenged or discovered to be lacking can be found in *Shuttlecock*, *Out of This World*,

²³ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 257.

²⁴ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 267.

²⁵ Bruce Fink includes phobia as the third option (*Clinical Introduction*, 117).

²⁶ Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 120, original emphasis.

Ever After, *Last Orders* or *Wish You Were Here*, but in virtually all of his other novels fatherhood is subject to critical scrutiny. Indeed, in Swift's narratives drama often occurs because the actual humans filling the paternal position are not what they were presumed to be (e.g. *Waterland* or *Ever After*), and it is resolved when the protagonist accepts their inadequacies (e.g. *Shuttlecock* or *Out of This World*).

Van Haute stresses the significance of the fantasy of the ideal father for the obsessive by pointing out that it is precisely through narcissistic identification with this figure that the obsessional neurotic subject is able to try and negate lack in himself, which is meant to allow him to function as a subject which "exists only when he thinks. He cannot tolerate any lack; he is himself lord and master of his fate."²⁷ These remarks on the fantasy of the omnipotent father without lack allow us to link this motif in Swift's writing with another obsessional feature of his prose. One could argue that the frustration at the failure of this identification is precisely the motivation for Swift's narratives: the crisis in his protagonists' lives consists largely in realizing that they are not the ideal father, and the stories they tell attempt in some way to counteract this devastating reality – and in the process to banish lack. This is why the efforts of the narrators consistently involve an attempt to close any gaps in the narrative, to restore a sense of unity and integrity, to forge a stable identity for themselves. With varying degree of success – or with varying degree of willingness to admit that these efforts can ever be entirely successful – the voices speaking in Swift's novels work towards creating a coherent self-image through narrative, and strive to be completely in control of their discourse. As we will see, these enterprises are equally consistently problematized and undermined, and I

²⁷ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 259.

am going to argue that there is an increasing tendency in Swift's output for what may be read as hysterisation of his obsessional narratives.

Colette Soler defines hysterisation as "a change of position in relation to desire, especially the Other's desire."²⁸ The hysteric feature that the obsessive may learn to incorporate is becoming sensitive to the Other's desire, which is a paradigm shift from the position of a subject that *annuls* the Other's desire. Since desire is a question without an answer, a lack that can never be completed, and the Other's desire involves endless uncertainty of what the Other *really* wants from us, this translates to another trademark in Swift's prose, the position of embracing the irresolvable doubt, uncertainty, ambiguity. On close reading, all of his novels reveal a refusal to resolve the dilemmas they present. *The Sweet Shop Owner* builds up towards a culminating scene which ultimately is not revealed to the readers; *Shuttlecock's* narrator insists on closure in his narrative so aggressively that it cannot but be taken as fake; the naturalising gestures of the finale of *Waterland* may only be accepted at face value if the narrator's responsibility for the situation is ignored; the two narrators of *Out of This World* head towards reconciliation, but the story ends before it is achieved, and so on.

The motif of reconciliation between parents and children plays into another side effect of perceiving the Name-of-the-Father from an imaginary perspective: the fact that the admiration and adulation of the omnipotent father is accompanied by a sense of aggressive jealousy and rivalry, a wish to take his position and a fear of ever fulfilling this wish.²⁹ The obsessional neurotic realizes that he cannot usurp the position of the omnipotent father, which is why he is "a follower, a slavish adept [...]. For this subject,

²⁸ Colette Soler, "Hysteria and Obsession," in *Reading Seminars I and II. Lacan's Return to Freud*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jannus (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 253.

²⁹ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 259.

speaking in his own name – or what amounts to the same thing, following his own desire – means putting himself in the place of the ‘ideal father,’ and there can be only one master.”³⁰ This makes obsessional neurotics characteristically hesitant, unable to act in their own name, a feature undoubtedly familiar to any reader of Swift. An obsessional neurotic’s “fixation to a fantasy that plugs up and annuls the desire of the Other [...] inhibits his own articulation of desire,”³¹ which means that the obsessive neurotic will tend to sacrifice himself for a greater cause, or submit to someone else’s influence, as long as he can avoid doing what he actually wants. Starting with *The Sweet Shop Owner*’s Willy Chapman, all too happy to follow his wife’s command, and *Shuttlecock*’s Prentis, identified only by his patronym, so that he literally never acts “in his own name,” Swift’s protagonists consistently display a paralysing degree of indecisiveness and self-scrutiny. Indeed, Jack Luxton, the hero of *Wish You Were Here*, the most recent novel I will consider in my study, is furious when his father leaves a crucial decision to him, and his inability to make decisions is given explicitly as a defining characteristic by the third-person narrator.

Finally, the tendency for irresolution, an essential feature of Swift’s narratives, embodied most famously in the precarious binary of *Waterland*, but present in all of his other texts, also invites parallels with obsessional neurosis, which involves a paradoxical, self-contradictory stance of wanting “to banish every reference to castration from [the subject’s] life, and to conceal it beneath a strong ego,”³² and at the same time of desperately defending it as a protection against the threat of the overwhelming jouissance of the Other. The question of how much discourse can be trusted, whether in the form of

³⁰ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 263.

³¹ Astrid Gessert, “A Brief Outline of Freud’s and Lacan’s Conceptualisation of Obsessional Neurosis” in *Obsessional Neurosis. Lacanian Perspectives*, ed. Astrid Gessert (London: Routledge, 2018), xx.

³² Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 265.

individual account or great narratives, is always at the heart of Swift's work. His narrators repeatedly find themselves in the position of the obsessional neurotic who imagines that the Other offers "wild jouissance that knows no limits, that is not regulated by the father and castration,"³³ an idea that is equally attractive and terrifying. The one alternative to this unbearable possibility is the limited, phallic jouissance, burdened with the requirements of the symbolic, but while the obsessional neurotic needs its protection, he is reluctant to pay the price of castration. This is precisely Swiftian protagonists' ambiguous stance on lack in language – it is terrifying and rejected, but inevitable and desirable at the same time. Swift's narratives repeatedly present their readers with the dilemma of human existence as stretched between the pole of castration and the pole of jouissance, always looking for new objects to fill the lack, and always confronted with the futility of our hopes.

³³ Gessert, "A Brief Outline," xv.

Chapter 1

A blueprint for Graham Swift's later output is in many ways established already in his first two novels, *The Sweet Shop Owner* (1980) and *Shuttlecock* (1981). Both are undeniably emblematic for his writing in their choice of protagonists and setting, both employ closely related themes, narrative methods, and stylistic devices, at the same time displaying the author's propensity for evolution. Each of the texts features a white, middle-class Englishman as its protagonist,³⁴ and each is concerned with issues of failed models of masculinity, self-creation through narratives and great historical processes perceived through personal experience.³⁵ Each of the protagonists is striving to come to terms with a family secret, ultimately never revealed but in both cases affecting the family dynamics over generations. Significantly, Chapman and Prentis are the first examples of Swift's protagonists' tendency for over-analysis, for endless self-scrutiny, and their monologues resonate in silence, even when ostensibly addressed to an audience. The protagonist of *The Sweet Shop Owner* addresses himself to his daughter, but only ever in his thoughts, while Prentis's notes begin with no audience in mind and only gradually acknowledge imagined, potential, future readers.³⁶ It will be my aim to consider

³⁴ This trend would remain in force at least until Swift's 1988 novel, *Out of This World*, where the narrative is divided between a father and a daughter, and the first stand-alone female narrator-protagonist would not appear in a Swift novel until *Tomorrow* in 2007.

³⁵ Actually, *The Sweet Shop Owner* is even more unusual in this respect than *Shuttlecock*. The notion of narrating one's own self only gains momentum in Swift's first novel gradually, with increasingly frequent shifts to first-person narration, and is arguably crowned by the culmination of the novel. I will discuss this further on. Otherwise, however, the ordering of disorderly reality is given the form of action rather than verbalisation: the protagonists struggle to eliminate any unpredictability from their lives, but unlike in Swift's later novels, this struggle is not really reflected at the level of the narrative voice itself. *Shuttlecock* initiates the Swiftian staple of intense introspection not only in using first-person narration throughout, but also overtly presenting the protagonist's notes as a part of his response to his sense of personal crisis.

³⁶ This model continues throughout Swift's output: *Waterland* is essentially a history lesson addressed to the narrator's students, who are mostly absent from his narrative, and predominantly silent; the two narrators of *Out of This World* produce two interlocking monologues rather than a dialogue, each speaking as if to the other but not in one another's presence; *Tomorrow*'s protagonist delivers a silent monologue to her children on a night that is sleepless for her but not for them and so on. As Chapter 3

the structure of these two narratives in terms of Lacan's model of obsessional subjectivity, and I would argue that already in Swift's preference for introvert, overtly scrutinising protagonists, a first hint of the obsessive nature of these speaking voices can be observed. As Colette Soler notes: "The typical obsessive [...] is a man who stays in his study and thinks about his problem all by himself. The obsessive's immediate tendency is not to go out and talk with people. It is rather to put his head in his hand and think without stopping."³⁷ This is a fairly accurate description of Swift's protagonists, who rarely, if ever, turn to someone else for help: their soul-searching does indeed happen in solitude.³⁸

The main characters of Swift's novels also display another obsessive feature: they are blind – perhaps rather deaf – to the implications of their own words. *Waterland's* Tom Crick is a clear example, which I will discuss in section 2.1. Admittedly, the narratives often do explore the implications of their language (this happens with Jack Luxton in *Wish You Were Here*, and I will devote more space to it in chapter 3); indeed, the protagonists on occasion openly express doubt whether the language they are using is actually theirs (like Bill Unwin in *Ever After* (section 2.3)). That said, the language of their narratives consistently appears to remain impenetrable to these characters, the way it does to the neurotic. Colette Soler describes this feature of obsessional neurosis in the following way:

will show, it was only with *Wish You Were Here*, published in 2011, that Swift chose a different narrative structure.

³⁷ Soler, "Hysteria and Obsession," 262-3. There are exceptions in Swift's later novels – in *Last Orders*, Ray seems to go beyond this pattern, as does the narrator of *Light of Day*, whose relationship with his daughter undeniably opens him up (although in terms of narrative structure, there is no attempt at a dialogue between the two). These will be examined in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively.

³⁸ Indeed, the motif of trauma as the motivation for the narrative impulse is in the author's first two novels a good illustration of what will become a permanent feature in his works, although, as I will argue, *The Sweet Shop Owner* and *Shuttlecock* are special cases in this respect.

Freud said that there is something strange in obsession where the repressed is generally enunciated by the subject. Sometimes he says it right at the beginning of analysis, but it is repressed all the same. In what sense is it repressed? In the sense that he does not know he has said it. He does not know that it is what determines his behavior. Thus there are certain things the obsessive does not know. He too is a divided subject. For example, he does not know why he had a particular thought or does not realize how important an event was.³⁹

Swift's protagonists are extremely skilled at hiding significant issues from themselves, from their others, as well as from the readers, and the confessional nature of their accounts certainly testifies to a presence of troubling thoughts which are not recognized openly. As I will attempt to make evident, their language repeatedly says more than they are able to say – or hear. Also, since their stories are always a response to a traumatising event, their purpose is to restore a sense of stability, of lost coherence, to reinforce the ego, so, as if by definition, they tend to overlook anything that goes against this effort. In this, both of Swift's first two novels are highly representative of his oeuvre in general.

However, while making use of these familiar techniques and exploring themes pursued in the author's later texts, *The Sweet Shop Owner* and *Shuttlecock* undeniably have a claim to uniqueness, if only in their treatment of Swift's recurrent motif of narrativisation as a response to trauma. Unlike vast majority of their successors, Willy Chapman and Prentis are not immediately affected by any traumatising event, and perhaps even more significantly, their narratives can hardly be seen as attempting to come to terms with one. Admittedly, trauma is present in both novels, but in *Shuttlecock* it concerns the unverifiable past of the protagonist's catatonic father, or the sudden death of his mother, which is almost entirely passed over in silence. The narrative focuses instead

³⁹ Soler, "Hysteria and Obsession," 263.

on Prentis's frustrating quest for mastery rather than on his overcoming the effects of some profound shock to the structure of his existence. Unlike Swift's later protagonists, Prentis focuses his efforts on constructing rather than reconstructing a stable self-image. In the case of *The Sweet Shop Owner*, the protagonist aims primarily at preserving his already immaculately structured identity. Chapman appears entirely insulated from any drama: even the death of his beloved wife Irene is not shown as a life-shattering tragedy, and the dramatic separation from his embittered daughter does more to reinforce the sense of detachment and inauthenticity that permeates his life than to disturb it.

In fact, I will approach the two characters in their preference for denying the mystery of the Other and for assuming a pretence of an unambiguous, stable identity, through the lens of Lacan's view of the subjective structure associated with obsessional neurosis, in contrast with Swift's later narratives, which I will read as gradually shifting towards a more dialogic relationship with the Other and an embrace of loss fundamental for the functioning of the symbolic. In Lacanian terms, I will therefore attempt to find evidence for the increasing significance of hysterisation as an end goal of Swift's narratives, and the doubts that the novels keep raising about the possibility of achieving it. Colette Soler defines the process thus: "Hysterization designates a change of position in relation to desire, especially the Other's desire, A. [...] It is simple: An hysterical subject is a subject who has a special link with the Other's desire. [...] An hysteric is a subject who wonders what the Other desires or if the Other desires, a subject who questions the Other's desire. Hysterization involves making a subject sensitive to the Other's desire."⁴⁰ Chapman and Prentis ostensibly refuse to do anything of the sort and the structure of Swift's first two narratives does not allow for this process to occur: as I

⁴⁰ Soler, "Hysteria and Obsession," 253.

will demonstrate, Chapman's story, although for the most part narrated in the third person, fundamentally extends the same sort of manipulative influence over the reader that the protagonist imagines to exert over his daughter; Prentis's first-person narration explicitly demands the reader's complicity in establishing his version of events. In other words, the former persistently turns a blind eye to the desire of the Other, while the latter openly declares the protagonist's intention to override it.

In contrast to their successors, these two characters openly insist on possessing full narrative control. However much they depend on their close ones, they persistently arrange their relations with people around them in ways which undermine their others' authority or use those relations to get their own will. In their narratives, the nagging uncertainty about what the Other wants from them is presumed to be no more than an obstacle to be overcome. All of these features imply obsessive neurosis, characterized in Lacanian psychoanalysis as a structure in which after symbolic castration the subject in some sense continues to believe that the lack which marks it can be reversed. This in turn means that the subject continues to perceive castration from an imaginary perspective, which very much allows the kind of completeness that the obsessive craves and which is by definition excluded in the symbolic. Philippe van Haute points out that, unlike in psychosis, in neurosis castration is actually completed and "by contrast to perversion, the lack is in fact connected to the function of the father."⁴¹ The metaphor of the Name-of-the-Father, initiating the movement of signifiers, is therefore installed, but the subject still hopes to remove the absence that this signals, since castration is perceived as violating one's bodily integrity. Van Haute also notes the neurotic's defining fear of the jouissance of the Other and concludes by observing the inherently ambiguous position of the

⁴¹ Philippe Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 248.

neurotic subject: “So seen, the problematic of neurosis circles uneasily about a lack that the neurotic wants to maintain as much as overcome.”⁴² Swift’s protagonists certainly demonstrate this in their tendency to undermine their own efforts at removing lack from their discourse.

As I will later show in more detail, the symbolic is grounded in the assumption that the subject must continue guessing what is expected of him or her. The whole concept of the symbolic subject is based on the idea of the mystery of the desire of the Other, of the impossibility of knowing with any certainty what demands it places on the individual, the impossibility of ever resting easy in the conviction that they have been met. In other words, the Other must always be perceived as lacking something, and this lack must by definition remain impossible to fill. To claim that it is otherwise is to undermine the very foundations of the system. The patterns set by the symbolic are binding, but never explicitly stated, and if their ineffable nature is not embraced, being registered in the system is impossible. Most importantly, lack is an indispensable, foundational feature of the symbolic, and the very conception of a complete Other, freed of its lack, is a contradiction in terms.

In contrast to majority of Swift’s novels, the patterns established in *The Sweet Shop Owner* are never seriously altered, much less violently disrupted, and they are certainly never put into question. The Other is therefore not really seen as lacking anything: the system is – or at least is supposed to be – complete, self-sufficient and perfectly coherent. Even the effect of the departures of his loved ones is to petrify Willy in his ways. Stef Craps points out that this process is represented by literal, physical stiffening of his body, which is to culminate in him turning into a statue through suicide,

⁴² Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 248.

and throughout the novel Willy is more than once likened to inanimate objects.⁴³ This corresponds to the fixity of things, stressed repeatedly by Chapman and his wife as a model to follow. In *Shuttlecock*, the protagonist's discoveries threaten to subvert the image he has created of his father figures, and by implication, the position he is struggling to take up himself. However, his eventual revelation leads him to a conscious decision to embrace the inadequacy necessary in any agent performing the role, and to usurp the desired paternal position with full awareness of his own fundamental insufficiency in this respect. Graham Swift's first two novels appear, therefore, to go against his later tendency to stress the ambiguity, the lack of resolution to the dilemmas which he presents to his readers. *The Sweet Shop Owner* and *Shuttlecock* are seemingly less open-ended, insisting on achieving a sense of closure and control, which, I will argue, justifies considering both narratives in terms of the Lacanian structure of obsessive neurosis. However, as I hope to demonstrate, when read closely in the light of Swift's later output, they do reveal a very similar quality of celebrating inconclusiveness.

1.1 *The Sweet Shop Owner* (1980)

1.1.1 Trapped in the imaginary

Trauma is evidently not absent from *The Sweet Shop Owner*, but is presented at a considerably greater remove than in most other novels by Swift: in a gesture rarely repeated in his prose, the author conceals the actual source of the family's anguish from

⁴³ For example, during a confrontation with his estranged daughter Dorothy, Willy's unsuccessful attempts to communicate with her leave him reduced to a "dumb, helpless statue" (200): "I sat in the armchair, facing the windows, with my back straight, my knees square in front of me and my arms on the arm-rests as if I were made of bronze." (201) Other comparisons include a toy (24), a machine (19, 187), or a life-size model of a human being (14), to name just a few.

Willy and his daughter, only revealing it to the readers in a chapter narrated by the dead Mrs. Chapman. It was not until the double narrative of *Out of This World* (1988), the multiple perspectives of *Last Orders* (1996), and finally the author's return to the third-person narrative in *Wish You Were Here* (2011) that Swift's choice of narrative techniques made it possible for him to select information to be disclosed to the audience which was not available to (all of) his protagonists. In fact, I would posit that *The Sweet Shop Owner* goes even further than this: while Irene's past is revealed as the cause for the family's dysfunctional dynamic, Willy's narrative clearly dates his own disposition to function in his detached manner to times before the first meeting with his future wife and offers no particular factor by way of justification. In Swift's later novels a traumatic kernel of the narrative is always revealed, even if sometimes the revelation is judged by many readers as disappointingly anti-climactic.⁴⁴ In *The Sweet Shop Owner* and *Shuttlecock*, however, the source of the pathological relations is merely indicated, hinted at, but ultimately either not disclosed at all, or at least kept from the main characters. For the most part, Swift's novels are narrated by the single voice of the protagonist, giving no opportunity for introducing such concealments. In the present chapter I will argue that this feature has far-reaching implications for the position of the first two texts in Swift's oeuvre from the point of view of my thesis. In a long line of figures working to incorporate unspeakable experience into frames of discourses organising our functioning as speaking subjects, both Willy Chapman and – as we will see in the following section – Prentis stand visibly apart. While most narratives created by Swift work through uncomfortable truths by means of meandering, reluctant confessions, they do bring the painful realities out into the open, in however convoluted a form. By contrast, in *The Sweet Shop Owner* key

⁴⁴ *Tomorrow* (2007) is the clearest example.

information about the underlying cause of the protagonists' predilection remains undisclosed to Willy and Dorothy, while readers realise the extent of the characters' strategic ignorance and thus are implicitly encouraged to assume the position of full knowledge. I will speculate further in the chapter on the potential significance of – respectively – the absence or denial of any traumatic event in the experience of the protagonists of *The Sweet Shop Owner* and *Shuttlecock*.

In a manner which brings to mind great works of English modernism,⁴⁵ the plot of *The Sweet Shop Owner* revolves around what are to be the final hours in the life of the eponymous protagonist. The minute descriptions of the narrative present, set on a hot June day in 1974, are interwoven with references to the characters' past, reaching as far back as mid-30s, and focusing on Willy's relationship with his now dead wife Irene, and with the couple's daughter Dorothy, who has broken off contact with her parents. The conflict between the generations is motivated by the frigidity dominating their mutual relations, which, in its turn, results from Irene's effort to preserve the pretence of immutable stasis, a sense of security found in the perfect predictability of routine. Irene's very deliberate disconnection from affective investment of any sort is the aftermath of the rape committed on her in her youth by Frank Hancock, a suitor favoured by her family, which remains undisclosed before her husband or daughter, but has profound implications for the emotional economy of the three. Irene's complaint is rejected by her parents and any communication on the subject is categorically excluded, leading to an atrophy of feeling, which in turn arrests all emotional exchange between her and Willy, and later between them and their daughter. Ostentatiously challenging her parents' social

⁴⁵ Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) is the most immediate association, not only due to the complex narrative technique but also with regard to the motif of suicide or the significance of the story's location in London.

ambitions, embodied in the person of her rapist, Irene escapes into the marriage with the unthreatening, socially inferior Willy Chapman, arranging it into a rather specific contract. In exchange for the advancement in his social status (thanks to Irene, Willy becomes the proprietor of a shop, the husband of a beautiful, upper middle class wife, and the father of an equally beautiful, academically gifted daughter), Chapman is expected to provide Irene with an appearance of peace and stability by conforming with her denial of emotional investment. The sense of affective atrophy and suffocating devotion to routine are both challenged by the daughter, who rejects her parents' values and finally leaves them. The narrative present is set several years after Irene's death and focuses on Willy's plan to bring Dorothy back through a peculiar sort of emotional blackmail: on his daughter's birthday, Willy deliberately neglects taking his heart medicine and goes out for a strenuous walk in hot weather, which is calculated to provoke a heart attack.

Exactly how Dorothy is supposed to be aware of any of this, how Willy's actions are meant to influence her behaviour is not specified. Indeed, Chapman appears to be conscious of how unlikely the plan is to succeed, telling Dorothy in his internal monologue: "And the only thing that can dissolve history now is if, *by a miracle*, you come."⁴⁶ This is one of the many indicators of Willy's predominantly monologic, narcissistic stance, which only allows him a pretence of intersubjective exchange and another feature characteristic of the obsessive structure that it displays: Willy's monologue leaves no space for the unpredictability of unconscious discourse, no room for the desire of the Other.⁴⁷ The neurotic fantasy of removing the lack in the Other and

⁴⁶ Graham Swift, *The Sweet Shop Owner* (London: Picador, 1980), 217 (my emphasis). Here and throughout the subsequent sections I will provide full bibliographic information about the text under discussion in the first footnote and later only give page numbers in brackets.

⁴⁷ Significantly, this is the point I indicated in the introduction, where the narrative structure finally settles into first person as Willy moves from the explanation of his position addressed to Dorry to a staging of

making it complete involves the threat of finding oneself in the pervert's position: being reduced to an instrument of the Other's jouissance. This is an inevitable consequence of the obsessive neurotic's wish to neutralise the Other's desire, but it is also a possibility that terrifies him. This is a point where, for Lacan, neurosis and perversion are intimately linked: the neurotic's fantasy is being the object of the Other's desire, a situation that is presumed to make the Other complete and bring it properly into existence. This, however, creates the risk of the subject being reduced to a mere instrument of the Other's jouissance, something that the pervert actually wants and that scares the neurotic. In short, "[t]he perverse position is in the first place a phantasy about the Other; it concerns the neurotic's phantasmatic fear of what the Other has in store for him."⁴⁸ Chapman – as well as his wife – always strives to anticipate his others' desires, so as not to be exposed to the terrifying uncertainty of what might be wanted of them, and thus to neutralise the threat of the Other's desire.

Chapman's intercourse with other people is either regulated by financial dependence or reduced to fantasy. His reaction to the news of Irene's asthmatic attack epitomises this: when speaking to the housekeeper on the phone, "it seemed to him he had already heard the terse message [...] had enacted that scene, many times, before, though never believed it was real – so that the thin, frightened voice of Mrs Pritchard [...] sounded like some voice from inside him." (166) This episode is symptomatic not only because of Willy's dispassionate attitude but also his inclination for reducing reality to a scene of his own making. The blurring of the border between the inside and the outside – the voice of his housekeeper becomes incorporated into Willy's own self – points us in

what is to be their final meeting. This shift further reinforces the consolidation of Willy's obsessive authority over the discourse.

⁴⁸ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 269.

the direction of his penchant for delusions of full narrative control over his realities, which constitutes a central thread of my analysis of *The Sweet Shop Owner*.⁴⁹ Willy's inability to discriminate between himself and his others is also symptomatic of what Philippe van Haute describes as the "strong ego" of the obsessional neurotic, who "has everything under control – in his phantasy, object a is taken to be part of the subject."⁵⁰

Willy's endless internal monologue itself is perhaps the most obvious illustration of his ignoring the rules of symbolic exchange, which encloses him in his own discourse, but at certain points in the narrative, the strategy is employed more directly on the level of diegesis. For example, when Willy surprises Dorothy plundering his house for valuables left by Irene, after a failed attempt to communicate with his enraged daughter, he recedes into his armchair and forms an offer of reconciliation. Characteristically, it not only sounds like an attempt to buy Dorothy's affection, but is never actually presented to her: "When you passed me for the fourth time I said, 'I'll be in there,' and tottered into the living-room. [...] I said *to myself*: I will give *you* the money. And when I give you the money I will give up the shop. But first you must come to me one last time" (201, my emphasis). A revealing nuance of the narrative form uses free indirect discourse in a way which shows the extent to which the father and the daughter are merged: if the words are addressed "to myself," as he puts it, the "you" of the following clause literally refers to Willy rather than to Dorothy. This is only too adequate, since Willy never does speak

⁴⁹ It also plays into the accusations of literary ventriloquism, made by e.g. Stef Craps in his *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift: No Short-Cuts to Salvation* (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), 146-165.

⁵⁰ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 264. *Objet a* is a difficult and extremely important concept in Lacan's thinking, which, in simplest terms, is the absence, the lack in being initiated at the entry into the symbolic, and in turn initializing the movement of desire, an endless search for an object to restore the lost wholeness. This is why *objet a* is not an object of desire itself, but an object *cause* of desire, a sense of lack that makes us pursue the fantasy of an object which will allow us to regaining the sense of unity that never really existed.

these words – ostensibly addressed to Dorothy – except to himself.⁵¹ From the point of view of my thesis, Willy – as well as Irene – in their pattern-making efforts have their place in the ranks of Swiftian protagonists, labouring to impose order on the chaos of their existence. In this sense, their fates are an extreme illustration of the threats involved in placing overtly naïve trust in the redemptive powers of narrativisation: assuming that reality can be subjugated in its entirety to discourse leads inevitably to a destructive delusion of mastery, which I read in terms of the properties of “the modality that Lacan has defined as the ‘imaginary’: a specular domain of images, reflections, simulacra.”⁵² Indeed, the sense of completeness associated with the imaginary may be linked to the disavowal of the lack, producing the obsessional neurotic subjective structure.

Another factor which situates the characters of *The Sweet Shop Owner* and *Shuttlecock* at an extreme of narcissistic, denialist strategies typical for the protagonists of Swift’s prose, implying a propensity for totalising the symbolic which renders the framework of intersubjective relations monologic, is their immaturity, coupled with an inability or unwillingness to mature. Despite the age difference of about half a century between the central characters of the two novels, they share a certain sense of being ill-prepared to fulfil the tasks of husbands and fathers, underlined in both cases by their names. The name of the eponymous sweet shop owner is consistently presented as Willy Chapman – with his first name, always in the diminutive, carrying rather un-serious sexual connotations, and the last name bearing implications of simple-mindedness or

⁵¹ This arrangement will be elaborated by Swift in his later output: *Out Of This World*, for example, has two narrators, who direct their monologues at each other, without either ever receiving the other’s message. Rather than a dialogue, Swift conjures up a double monologue, analogous to Chapman’s in that each side also remains essentially undelivered to its supposed listener.

⁵² Maud Ellmann, *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism* (London and New York: Longman, 1994), 18.

naivety, of someone who is patronised by others.⁵³ As has already been indicated, the difficulties with acquiring an independent position in the symbolic framework give both narratives a sense of disturbed relations between the symbolic and the imaginary. The name of the protagonist of *Shuttlecock* is even more openly telling in this respect: Prentis's first name remains undisclosed – as does his father's, referred to as "Prentis senior" – and leaves the character in the position of an "apprentice," of someone who has yet to graduate, and to gain an identity independent from his paternal figures. Their desire and at the same time inability to take the position of the ideal father is just one of the elements of Chapman's and Prentis's subjective structures which justify my attempt to read their narratives as obsessional in the Lacanian sense.

As was already remarked, for Lacan, neurosis is one of the three possible subjective structures (alongside psychosis and perversion), indicative of a variant of the process of subject formation in which entry into the symbolic is only partially successful. A separation from the primary caregiver takes place, and the imaginary union with the mother is broken up, but castration, understood as being subjected to the Law of the Father, to the limits imposed on one's jouissance by the paternal prohibition, (or indeed, the protection it provides against jouissance) is never sufficiently effective, leaving the neurotic subject constantly threatened by/terrified of the possibility of an invasion of jouissance which would abolish it altogether. It might perhaps even be said that, like perversion, neurotic obsession involves falling for, or striving for the sense of completeness, self-sufficiency, independence from the demands of the Other that the imaginary offers. While the symbolic is grounded in endless deferral, in a lack never to

⁵³ Willy's last name – as well as the first names of his wife and daughter – have been subject to more in-depth analyses, to which I will refer at more length later on. The implications of the protagonist's name and its incompleteness play an equally significant role in *Shuttlecock* and will be discussed in their place.

be removed, in a foundational absence of the primary object, the imaginary is the realm in which things can be – and are – complete. The neurotic treats the system of laws as if it can be made whole by his or her actions.

Inspired by Alexandre Kojève's interpretation of G.W.F. Hegel's account of the emergence of self-consciousness as a transition from nature to culture, Lacan's theory of the process of the formation of the subject is described by Elizabeth Wright as a "traumatic separation from the mother's body and the body of nature," which marks the end of one's purely biological existence as part of the "unrepresentable ground"⁵⁴ of Lacan's real. Upon this rupture, an endless quest is initiated for "a unity that never was," a search for an ideal object which will restore the imagined lost wholeness. This search can only find illusory satisfaction at the level of the imaginary, initiated during the misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) of the mirror stage: it is at this point that the formation of the ego begins, based on the infant's perception of its own image as a unified form and the consequent identification with the perceived whole. In stark opposition to the fragmented experience of its body, over which the infant has relatively little control at the time, the identification invites ascribing to the mirror image the properties of self-mastery and completeness. This means that the imaginary involves both a unifying self-definition and, at the same time, an alienating identification of oneself with the other of the image. The imaginary order is grounded in denying the consequences of the separation from the envisioned pre-symbolic unity with the mother's body, caused by the emerging awareness of one's distinctiveness. Ignoring other emotional investments of its mother,⁵⁵ the infant

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Wright, *Speaking Desires Can Be Dangerous* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 63.

⁵⁵ Colette Soler explains why the inscrutability of the mother's true intentions is crucial to the development of the child: "This subject addresses the Other in order to ask him for something, to find a complement in the Other. What does he encounter in the Other (A)? He encounters signifiers and speech. He finds a plus, a complement, something that compensates for his own lack, the lack produced by the very fact of

believes itself to be once again the only object of her affection and the unity between them to have been re-established.⁵⁶ This denial is abandoned at the final stage in the formation of the subject, the transition from the imaginary to the symbolic, which involves a recognition of lack as constitutive to selfhood: rather than taking her- or himself to be the object satisfying entirely the mother's desire, the subject is faced with the inescapable fact that ultimately the desire of neither can be fulfilled. The object created "to fill the emptiness or void at the core of subjectivity and the symbolic"⁵⁷ comes to stand for its inevitability. The introduction of the human being into the symbolic order of social interaction thus involves a constant tension between the promised fullness and the inadequacy of the means promising its achievement.

Developmental conceptualisations of the imaginary as a mere stage to be completed and left behind are certainly unacceptably reductionist: the order is clearly far more than this. As Maud Ellmann eloquently puts it, "this is not a 'stage' in the developmental sense, which the ego might outgrow and leave behind, but a stage in the spatial sense, a *stade* or stadium, in which the ego constantly identifies itself with new personae in the effort to evade division, distance, difference, deferral, death."⁵⁸ At the same time however, as the space of the first instance of self- or mis-recognition, of the

his being a speaking being. He encounters speech, speech, and more speech. But in the Other he also encounters [...] an enigma – something unknown in the Other. [...] For the first time, perhaps, a question arises for him. Children very often wonder 'What does she (my mother) want?' The child can say to himself: 'She tells me to be quiet, but when my little sister is very bad, my mother is full of admiration toward her.' The child starts asking himself, on account of the contradiction in the mother's discourse, 'What does she really want?' She says to me, 'I adore you my little child,' but when it's nine o'clock she says to me, 'Go to bed' or 'I have other things to do.' So what does she really want? [...] You can see why Lacan criticized Winnicott's notion of the 'good-enough mother,' a mother who is supposedly always present, always sustaining the child with her love. The risk is that the good-enough mother may be too good. What does that mean? She may prevent the encounter with the Other's desire, and that encounter is necessary for the child because it is with the Other's desire that the child tries to answer his own question and situate his own being." ("Hysteria and Obsession," 266)

⁵⁶ Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 64.

⁵⁷ Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge, 2005), 85.

⁵⁸ Ellmann, *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*, 18.

formation of the ego through identification with an external image of oneself, it is understandably linked with notions of narcissism, of pre-Oedipal refusal to confront one's reality, characterised in turn by the fundamental incompleteness embodied by the symbolic. Lacan's evolving conceptualisations on the relations between these two registers lead to the postulates expressed in his seminar on anxiety (*Le Séminaire X, L'angoisse*, 1962-3), where he presents the mirror stage as regulating the dynamics of their interactions, perceived as extratemporal, a permanent feature of the functioning of the symbolic subject rather than an actual stage in the infant's development. In short, where the symbolic is fundamentally incapable of providing completeness and peace, the imaginary promises precisely those, however vainly. The speaking subject, reducible to a function of a specific social structure, founded on a play of a differential system of signifiers, none of which truly corresponds to it, is inescapably haunted by its lack of substance. The role of the imaginary is to counteract this by providing an illusion of unity and coherence, using the construct of fantasy to conceal the fact that the subject can never know what the symbolic wants from him.

Fantasy functions as a veil hiding from the subject the unbearable realization that, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, "the subject of the signifier is constitutively *split*," with an irremovable gap between how she pictures her own situation and how her operations actually register in the symbolic. Žižek further stresses that for Lacan these two will never coincide, since "the subject, by definition, cannot master the effects of his speech, since the big Other is in charge."⁵⁹ In my discussion of the novel I will demonstrate that this is, in fact, what Willy and Irene are after in their social interactions: to master the

⁵⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do. Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London and New York: Verso, 2008), 13.

effects of their relations with people around them completely. As is almost always the case with Swift's novels, this observation extends beyond the individual level. This is hardly surprising: politically, the same mechanism is identified by Althusser in ideology, which for him is "a form of imaginary misrecognition, in which subject and object, or self and world, seem tailor-made for one another. Rather than being stonily indifferent to our ends, the world appears to be on familiar terms with us, conforming obediently to our desires and bending to our motions as obsequiously as one's reflection in the glass."⁶⁰

Stef Craps notes that despite the personal focus of the narrative, threats to symbolic coherence in *The Sweet Shop Owner* affect the entire nation as much as the individual protagonists. The inter-war reality is presented as founded on the narratives of "Trade and Opportunity, Recovery, the Fruits of Peace" (50), and the same repression of unacceptable facts is exercised after World War II – and is approached by Swift with the same suspicion. Considering the depoliticising communal rites of erasing the trauma of war ("What war?" asks cheerily a repeating slogan), Craps emphasizes how "the senseless death of hundreds of thousands of young men in the trenches of World War I revealed that a political system which promises safety, security and meaning can actually produce the worst forms of abuse, control and coercion." His reading rightly identifies Irene's family's fervent suppression of the violence against her as an emanation of "the post-war world of denial."⁶¹ The same applies to 1945, when the Chapmans appear conspicuously reluctant to participate in the feverish celebrations, watching suspiciously the vain attempts of the people around them to "[b]urn away the memories of five years, the 'sacrifice' and 'endeavour.'" (85) The sinister undertones of the situation are brought

⁶⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers. A Study of Ethics* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 10.

⁶¹ Stef Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 202.

out by the fact that the person reprimanding Irene and Willy's reserve is Hancock himself, only too happy to embrace the mood of "[f]orgive and forget" (86). His somewhat indelicate remark is forcefully echoed by the narrator's comment:

'What's the matter with you two?' Hancock said. 'The bloody war's over you know.'
Better rejoice. (87)

Ultimately, the effect of this scene is that of a threat, and strikingly similar to Prentis's blackmailing of his readers "not to peer too hard beneath the surface" (*Shuttlecock*, 214) of the official discourse.

In the light of the above, I am inclined to speculate that for Willy the hidden traumatic kernel may simply be his self-identification in economic terms imposed by the dominant social discourses, announced in the title of the novel and extended to his functioning in all interpersonal relations. Wendy Wheeler proposes that "this pattern, and Willy's unthinking confidence in it signifies the phlegmatic and dogmatic conservatism of 'England' in the 1950s [...]. It represents a kind of wilful and conservative blindness to the forces of history and culture, an attendance to the pattern of an eternal present – a 'forever England' – which seeks to hold off change."⁶² It is indisputable in the novel that the mercantile ideology of the "nation of shop owners" is wreaking havoc on the nation's emotional well-being with all three families – the Harrisons, the Chapmans, and the Hancocks – to illustrate this. Money is indeed the root of all evil, poisoning the lives of practically all the characters of *The Sweet Shop Owner*, more or less directly standing behind Irene's rape, the resulting breakdown of relations in the Chapman household, or

⁶² Wendy Wheeler, "Melancholic Modernity and Contemporary Grief," in *Literature and the Contemporary*, ed. Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks (Harlow: Longman, 1998), 66-7.

the violence and deceit marking both the professional and the private life of Irene's rapist himself.

David Malcolm describes the source of the melancholy permeating *The Sweet Shop Owner* thus: "Theirs is a life of money, of things, and of bargains that take the place of love, of emotional commitments, of gifts of self."⁶³ Willy's own words confirm this observation explicitly. When preparing to pay the final bonus to his assistant, who has been hopelessly infatuated with him for years, he recognises – and one last time rejects – her feeling:

But she didn't look gratitude. Behind her smile her face pleaded, as if she'd expected something else, something more.

But that was all, Mrs Cooper. Take it. The things you want you never get. You only get the money. (38)

In fact, however, Mrs. Cooper herself is not at all uninterested in financial gain; rather, she is after "something more" than a mere individual bonus. The long-standing devotion to her employer is shown to be motivated by a hope of taking the place of his wife, not exclusively – if at all – for romantic reasons. Trying to talk Willy into taking a holiday, and dutifully offering to stand in for him, Mrs Cooper is counting on a specific response: "And what she really meant was: 'We could both have a treat, you and I. We could get the train together. Stroll arm in arm on the pier. You will put the question at last. I will no longer have to work.'" (33) Mrs. Cooper's evaluation of Willy's relationship with Dorothy – her main competition after Irene's death – has a similar orientation: "All that nonsense about literature, poetry, Shakespeare (guess how much *he* knew about the poet

⁶³ David Malcolm, *Understanding Graham Swift* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 35.

Keats) and underneath it was only the money [...]. So she was almost glad when the little bitch ran off like that, taking the things, demanding the money (if only he'd said just *how much* money." (34) Malcolm's statement gains even more pertinence when one considers that Mrs. Cooper's outlook is no more than an echo of the central conflict of the novel.

The economic instrumentalisation of their own daughter by Irene's family will be discussed further on, and she herself is acutely aware of her parents' system of values. In a letter to Willy written during the war, she comments on her father's working himself ill with ferocious directness: "Then again, he says it isn't the money [...] It's a matter of principle. I don't know what he means by principle. I've never known him distinguish principle from money before." (81) Indeed, money appears to acquire a sublime status in the novel, as Lea observes: more than a means of exchange, it is an independent entity, above and beyond individual human existence.⁶⁴ In another move anticipating many of Swift's later plots, inheritance becomes a vehicle transmitting intergenerational trauma and guilt. For all the hard work that Irene's father puts in his laundry company, most of the money with which Irene buys the shop for Willy is passed on to her by her mother, who in turn only received it because her three brothers were killed in World War I. (82) Willy's final words continue this process, when he tells the absent Dorothy: "You got the money. And you didn't have to extort it, for it would have been yours, anyway, in the end. That money was always meant to be passed on. It was never hers; it was only the token of something." (221) The emotional frigidity, the instrumental treatment of family members is in a sense embodied in the constantly accumulated capital, passed on to further generations along with its affective burden.

⁶⁴ Lea, *Graham Swift*, 27-8.

Pecuniary metaphors dominate relations in the family: in the absence of affection on Irene's part, even her smiles are likened to coins. (29, 30) Willy does not escape this perspective and when he attempts to excuse his wife before Dorothy, his language betrays him, as she is quick to observe:

'She always... she always found it hard to be – to give certain things.'

'Things?'

'You know what I mean. You know.'

You frowned.

But I saw you knew. (169)

In fact, as has already been indicated, Dorothy's very existence is due to a bargain between Willy and Irene. Dorothy herself is a means of exchange, her function in the family echoing Willy's remark unspoken to Mrs. Cooper ("things you want you never get, you only get the money"). The child is placed in a strikingly analogous position of a substitute for the affection that Irene is unable to share: "I thought: she gave you to me in place of what she couldn't give herself; now you are taking from me what had been hers." (200-1) Dorothy's status parallels that of the inheritance itself also in the autonomy she claims against her parents' wishes. Irene's will specifies that her money is left to Willy alone, and may only be passed on to Dorothy by means of his own will. Willy obeys his wife's wish since, as is usually the case, it coincides with his own: "And supposing I'd given you the money – with indecent promptness, after the funeral? 'Here – it's mine, but I don't want it.' You'd have gone off with it, for good – to him in Bristol. Don't you see? I kept the money to keep you too." (186) Irene offers Dorothy to Willy in exchange for a safe, loveless life, and the financial status he achieves thanks to her own inheritance from

her estranged family is in turn to be exchanged for Dorothy's affection and devotion to him. His assumption that the system of symbolic exchange operates regardless of affective engagement of individual subjects governed by its rules is characteristic of his overall stance.

Regardless of its connection to the communal discourses, Chapman's belief that his place in the symbolic may explain his existence in its entirety has far-reaching consequences for his functioning. As I have already signalled several times, this persistent claim on being able to meet the requirements of the symbolic – shared by Chapman with the protagonist of *Shuttlecock* – justifies the reading of his figure as an example of the obsessive structure. Arguably – or at least apparently – this is what distinguishes the two from the central figures of Swift's following novels, characterised by a much higher level of critical self-awareness. Chapman and Prentis are also exemplary in demonstrating the violence involved in extreme rejection of the inadequacies of the symbolic: the former's insistence on the completeness of systems of signification, his refusal to recognise the mystery of the desire of the Other, leads him to staging his own death, while the latter explicitly threatens his audience in an effort to impose the only right way of reading his text. At the same time, both novels reward close reading, and reveal Swift's tendency to force his readers into the same positions in which his characters find themselves. The delusions of completeness to which they are prone affect the readers in the same – if not greater – degree as the protagonists, since Swift's prose has a predilection for tempting his audience into drawing simple and definite conclusions, while signalling as subtly as persistently that the actual picture is far more complicated.

1.1.2 Setting patterns

It is only too appropriate that Graham Swift's first novel, setting patterns for the author's later work, should have a protagonist literally obsessed with patterns controlling his life. Willy Chapman therefore functions as a pioneer in a long line of Swift's weak heroes, excessively preoccupied with the reliability of the symbolic order, who appears to go further in creating an illusion of its completeness and sufficiency than any of his successors. While in my consideration of *Shuttlecock* I will approach the protagonist's striving for a sense of completeness through his conceptualisations of nature, with *The Sweet Shop Owner* I wish to start my analysis by examining how the individual's place in history – a prominent theme in most of Swift's texts – is illustrated with numerous references to the function of image, gaze, and image-making. The way the characters perceive their social roles and their identities is filtered through how they see themselves in mirrors, in other people's eyes, and in carefully arranged photographs. This may be related to the obsessive's presuming to be in control, denying the Other's desire by occupying the position of the "ideal father": the omnipotent paternal figure which the child during the Oedipal crisis constructs as the possessor of the imaginary phallus, the ability to satisfy the lack that the child detects in the mother at this point, or, in other words, the capacity to remove the desire of the Other. Philip Van Haute points out that it is precisely narcissistic identification with the "ideal father", allowing the subject to try and banish lack.⁶⁵ While denying the desire of the Other, what the obsessional neurotic is prepared to allow, or in fact welcome, is the Other's (specific) demand, which may be

⁶⁵ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 259.

fulfilled (or denied, or negotiated, as the case may be). What the obsessive absolutely dreads is the irreducible incompleteness, lack that is involved in desire, which cannot be satisfied, as it has no specific object.

Photography, unsurprisingly, is associated on many levels with the completeness implied in the imaginary order. This is why the motif resonates so well with the narrative of the obsessively controlling Chapmans, who want at any price to deny the possibility of any incompleteness in the rules governing their lives. The significance assigned to photography is not as great here as in one of Swift's later novels, *Out of This World* (1988), but the function of visual perception in forming subjectivity may undoubtedly serve as one focal point for the analysis of his *début*. Reliance on performance, on presenting an expected image of oneself, corresponds to the broader theme of fitting into structures one enters within the symbolic framework of social interaction. As Marc Porée observes, "it is quite clear that the taking of a picture, the *posing* for the best possible picture, the question as to who is or is not in the picture, is central to the argument of the novel."⁶⁶ In his careful consideration of Swift's often audacious wordplay, bringing forth etymological depths of the most banal phrases, Porée does not overlook the association of "framing" with potential dishonesty. I believe that such thematic orientation of the novel invites a consideration in terms of the role that one's others play in one's interactions with the symbolic order, which may be read through various facets of the Lacanian concept of obsessive neurosis. The position of Willy and Irene is that of embracing their ideal egos, the image they have selected for themselves with full awareness of the discrepancy between it and reality. Both use these avatars of social identity as armours protecting

⁶⁶ Marc Porée, "Playing with Fire," *Études britanniques contemporaines*, No. 41/2011, <http://ebc.revues.org/1354>, accessed 27 July, 2017.

them against contingency, ensuring a desired stasis and guarding against any form of change. Fixed patterns of behaviour are taken to regulate their social interactions entirely, ensuring that no unpredictable desire on the part of their others is ever recognised, and thus cannot threaten their status as sovereign subjects.

Willy's reliance on pre-existing patterns is introduced in scenes of his first meeting with his future wife, Irene Harrison, who comes on an errand into the printing shop where he works. His position is shown as something almost incidental, and certainly not of his choosing: "He had planned nothing. Not for himself. And yet he knew: plans emerged. You stepped into them." Willy, in fact, appreciates his employment precisely because it focuses on patterns, on creating a certain appearance, and in what might be read as the protagonist's manifesto, the narrator observes why Chapman feels more than justified in his line of work: "The print-works. Setting up the type so that there was correctness of spacing, the letter size graded according to the importance of the words; an overall effect of regularity and order. The content was unimportant. It was the layout that mattered."⁶⁷ Willy thus appears to rely on the Other entirely, happily giving up any pretence of agency in favour of an interplay of symbols.⁶⁸ His position in the print-works allows him to avoid any need for initiative, and to have the system account for his position: "He had planned nothing, though every day had its patterns and was spent in making patterns." (25) In other words, Willy is more than happy to give up his own desire in favour of the Other's demands.

⁶⁷ Admittedly, even in this manifesto, Chapman is capable of seeing beneath the surface, and notes that one must become marked oneself to be involved in forming patterns: "And just to show it was not a mere exercise, a playing with shapes, you had to roll up your sleeves and get your fingers covered in ink or machine grease." (24) Irene's moment of analogous admission during her monologue will be discussed further in my analysis.

⁶⁸ His school reports are quoted, supporting his image of a passive person: "Lacks talent and initiative." (25)

This is the context in which his first contact with Irene is situated, and their acquaintance from the very start continues precisely these undertones. Irene, socially superior, empowered by her status as a client, takes charge of the situation, and Willy eagerly submits. The pattern is confirmed in the scene of their second, accidental meeting outside the shop. The narrator endows the situation with a fatalist tint, stating that the second encounter “was pattern, that [it] had the feel about it of something meant to be.” (26) The fairly conventional interactions of budding courtship transform the participants into performers of a pre-set scenario in which “he must stop (a plan would emerge) and say, ‘Miss Harrison?’ [...] And she, recognizing who he was, recovering that old command, must nod, say, ‘Ah yes,’ and turn her head away.” (26) Even more tellingly, during the walk the future lovers watch playing children and Irene challenges Willy to join them: “Her tone seemed to say: ‘You’re a child yourself.’” Chapman accepts the challenge – or obeys the command – and once again identifies an inescapable pattern in this arrangement: “And looking back at her, very straight, defensive, he knew that was how it would be. She would stay, always, behind the railings, watching his readiness, his simplicity, his taking things at face value. She wouldn’t join in. She would watch; he would do.” (27) Willy expects the system of symbolic interaction to provide a clearly defined and exhaustive position for him, to justify him to himself, to exclude anything that might disturb the full, satisfying picture (although an awareness that the picture can never be complete is mentioned in several contexts).⁶⁹ More specifically, he chooses

⁶⁹ Irene’s behaviour during courtship is presented in terms of a fundamental disparity between the image created to satisfy social expectations and the actual state of things: “Oh, she did the right things. She walked with him down the lane [...] and rested her head in the crook of his neck, so that if one needed to demonstrate (if ever it should be a case of demonstrating) one could say, Look, sweeping one’s palm over the scene, there is the picture. But the picture was incomplete.” (30) On the other hand, as Daniel Lea points out, the Chapmans’ honeymoon, with “the mimicry of devotion they present to the outside world” is an effort at building up a complete picture of their happiness, to be registered in the symbolic: “every

Irene to be a privileged representative of the symbolic, someone to mediate for him and to reveal the Other's desire, to enable him to continue "taking things at face value." Irene, on her part, is enabled by this arrangement to stay out of any emotional involvement with the world around her, operating through her proxy.

The subject is, however, always forced to situate him- or herself in relation to the desire of the Other in some way. As Alenka Zupančič points out, the Other's desire is dependent on the actions of the subject, since "the desire of the Other does not present itself in the form of an answer or a command [...] but – as Lacan points out – in the form of a question or an enigma."⁷⁰ The subject's desire is only established once the subject chooses to respond to the Other's question in a particular way. The mystery, unresponsiveness of the Other is instrumental here: this is what keeps the subject guessing, this is what ensures the subject's involvement in the Law. This is also what, as Zupančič demonstrates, faces the subject with two choices: either to continue the pursuit of the ever-elusive desire of the Other, to keep searching in the hope that it will at one point be revealed, or to embody the Other in the form of one of his others and elicit a definite answer to the question of "what does the Other want." In other words, desire is transformed into demand and thus made manageable.

The protagonists of Swift's first two novels clearly adopt the latter stance: "Here, the subject wants the Other to choose for him. For such a subject, the Other always

day the pieces of the picture fell into place: the boat trips to Weymouth, the little scenes of themselves arm in arm on the beach or at tables for two, about which the nodding onlookers might whisper, 'honeymooners'; their 'Mr and Mrs' in the hotel register." Lea also observes that this image is strictly intended for an external audience, and this claim is supported by the denial of any intimate show of affection, following immediately in the novel: "But if only she would say, 'I love you.' No, not even that, if only she would say – sometimes it seemed to him she used him like an excuse – 'I know that you love me.' But she wouldn't." (30-1)

⁷⁰ Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real. Kant, Lacan* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 164.

appears in the form of some other person.”⁷¹ Willy in particular performs a variation of the “path of passivity,” where the subject chooses a person to stand for the Other and extorts the answer to the mystery from that person, imposing choices on other people or expecting them to choose for him on behalf of the Other. It is difficult not to recognise this model of interaction in the relation of Willy to his wife, who installs him in his position and oversees his performance of his assigned role throughout their relationship.⁷² Another reflection of Willy’s willingness to surrender agency is his stance on the conflict between Irene and Dorothy, where he consistently refuses to participate, arguing: “There aren’t ‘sides.’ It’s not a fight” (144). The same attitude is displayed in his own face-off with Dorothy: “I thought: I’m not going to fight; if there is no fight then no one wins.” (199) After months of fruitlessly expecting a desired reaction from her, Willy still asks: “Were we really at war?” (187) This question captures the problem with Willy’s intentions in this situation: there is a strong sense that he is not so much avoiding involvement in what he believes to be an unfair and destructive strife, but rather refusing to face the truth of the matter, at least until it can be interpreted in accordance with his expectations. Chapman’s avoidance of involvement, his shifting of responsibility onto others is characteristic for the safe situation of inaction that his marriage with Irene is supposed to achieve. The Chapmans undertake to reject the unpredictability inevitable in dealing with the symbolic reality of social interactions, hiding from the explosive “real thing” that the system produces through its ordering operations.

1.1.3 Nothing must be touched, nothing must be changed

⁷¹ Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 166.

⁷² The response of Prentis’s others is fundamentally different, which is why the situations develop in revealingly diverse ways. I will return to this in detail in the section devoted to *Shuttlecock*.

The Chapmans' marriage is one of convenience, carefully avoiding any mention of love or passion, motivated by pragmatic reasons, revolving around escaping from – or into – a specific social role. For Irene, the relationship is a way of freeing herself from the clutches of an oppressive family, forcing her into the position of a perfect daughter, whose beauty is an asset in almost exclusively economic terms.⁷³ Let down by this approach, in which there is no room for recognising her trauma, Irene hides behind asthma attacks and finally uses the opportunity offered by the appearance of Willy to free herself from the undesired position. Her somewhat childlike, unthreatening future husband is chosen precisely because he fails to meet the requirements set by her socially ambitious relatives. More importantly, Chapman is someone reduced entirely to his social function: he is hired to play a role and nothing outside the script is ever expected of him. This is arguably an obsessional arrangement, intended to insulate Willy's subjectivity against incursions of *jouissance*, prevent his (and especially the Other's) unpredictable desire from disturbing the pattern. Willy's compliance is essential here since, as van Haute remarks, the neurotic's rebellion against the Other in fact leads to obeying its demands: the obsessional neurotic "reduces his existence to his conscious existence, so that he is completely independent from the Other and neutralises it." By means of identifying with the "ideal father," the neurotic positions himself as the possessor of the imaginary phallus, the full subject without lack. This, however, means slavishly following the "ideal father," always desiring in his name. Indeed, van Haute observes, the obsessional neurotic "almost finds it annoying that he *has* his own name, because it

⁷³ Craps points to the ideological dimension of the situation: "Irene's beauty is used by her family as evidence vindicating their way of life: 'They set me up into a little emblem, carried me before them like a banner, so they could say, Look, even beauty is on our side.' (50)" (*Trauma and Ethics*, 201)

reminds him that he is summoned to his own desire, which does not dissolve into the desire of his master.”⁷⁴ This is precisely Willy’s status, and the narrator leaves no doubt about his acceptance of the situation⁷⁵:

And the brothers, who had partnerships, investments, interests of their own, smiled too, the same smile, approving, not friendly. Yes, he’d do. He’d do for a bride-groom. To have a wedding you needed a bride-groom.

He felt like someone borrowed for the occasion.

But he didn’t mind. That condescension. (23)

For Willy himself, the marriage creates the possibility of having someone who operates as the ambassador of the Other and oversees all his activity, providing perfect justification for his position in the system. Feeling legitimised before the big Other is crucial for Willy, and marriage to Irene allows him to achieve just this goal. This is why any mention of love is strictly forbidden between Irene and Willy: there is no room for “free choice” in their relation. “The obsessive typically constructs situations in which ‘the object of his desire becomes the signifier of this impossibility [of the Other’s desire].’ For instance, he falls in love with women who are or seem to be completely unapproachable. In response to his fear of the Other’s desire, obsession is characterised by impossible desires.”⁷⁶ Willy desires Irene, knowing well that there is no possibility – no threat – of her ever returning his affection, or otherwise displaying her desire. Irene, on the other

⁷⁴ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 261-263. At the same time, he points out: “This identification inevitably leads to rivalry: love does not nullify hatred, only leads to its repression. This implies that the ‘ideal’ father is the ‘dead’ father, fulfilling the subject’s rivalrous wishes.” (260) We will see illustrations of this in the figures of Prentis in section 1.2, Bill Unwin in 2.3, or Jack Luxton in chapter 3.

⁷⁵ This is arguably also why Willy is first and foremost a sweet shop owner, as the very title of the novel reminds us: his professional and material status defines him more than anything else and in reducing him to this aspect of his person reduces the possibility of unsolicited desire appearing to subvert the setting.

⁷⁶ Swales, *Perversion*, 91. The quotation is from Lacan’s *Desire and Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet* (36).

hand, imposes the “no change” policy on both their lives, effectively banning desire altogether.

I would argue that Willy’s behaviour can in a sense be seen as an attempt to close the gap between the ideal ego and the ego-ideal. The former is the idealised image of oneself that one creates in the imaginary, the latter is as it were a verification of that image through the eyes of others: seeing our actual situation from the point of view of that ideal, which radically alters our self-perception from the perspective of the symbolic, turning our existence into “a vain and repulsive spectacle.”⁷⁷ Willy’s self-identification is designed so as to avoid this disparity. As Žižek points out, this is anything but unusual: “Far more common is the identification with the ego-ideal, with the gaze for which, or the point of view from which I, in my activity depicted in the phantasmatic narrative, appear in a likeable way.”⁷⁸ The outlook of the Other is meant to coincide with the idealised image which Willy has carved out for himself. The dynamics of this strategy are illustrated well by an incident from the early years of his marriage with Irene. An apparently unsuspecting event, the already married couple’s evening out is presented by Willy in his internal monologue through the eyes of the local community, as a tool for building his reputation: “That was the only time the High Street regulars saw Irene. They looked at her, over their drinks, and perhaps they confined to each other later, already spreading my legend: ‘That woman with that new feller, Chapman, in the pub last night. You’ll never believe it – his wife.’” (174-5) Just like in the examples given before, Willy unhesitatingly fills in others’ lines, controlling not only the image he projects but also its reception, which links directly to remarks already made about his propensity for staging

⁷⁷ Žižek, *They Know Not*, 11.

⁷⁸ Slavoj Žižek, “The Seven Veils of Fantasy,” in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed. Dany Nobus (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 193.

his life, experiencing events as if rehearsed, playing them out before himself without being exposed to the danger of verification. Seeing himself through the eyes of others, watching himself being watched becomes internalised into (self-)disciplining gaze that both spouses perform:

He watched himself fold the papers between his thumb and fingers [...] Watched the figures mount in the maroon books. Watched himself drive home at night [...] Watched himself construct his performance, as she watched herself, in the mirror, slowly being dismantled [...] He watched himself at night, listening to her laboured breathing [...] And in the morning as he let Mrs Cooper in, drank the milky tea she brought him and heard her ask, 'Mrs Chapman any better?' he'd watch himself as he said: 'No change.' (133)

For her part, for the sake of the memorable outing Irene for once agrees to reverse the predominant arrangement, becoming the passive side to indulge Willy's striving for a perfect image: "I told her to meet me after work and to wear the blue and white dress she wore on our honeymoon, because I wanted just one perfect evening. She came. She wore the dress. She looked like someone acting under instructions. [...] I still keep that picture, Dorry. A mental photograph." (175) Willy is after an image, as if realising he can never have anything more. Irene's exceptional compliance is in fact little more than a reminder of what Willy can never hope to achieve, since any degree of reciprocity of emotional involvement is out of the question. In this situation, however, Willy's compliance with the rules imposed by Irene is explicitly revealed as fulfilling Willy's expectations. Indeed, in the chapter narrated by Irene, she reminds her sleeping husband that the terms of their unwritten contract mean that she functions exclusively as an image, only to be his on condition that it remains inaccessible: "How peaceful the evening is. Your head in my lap. There, look up now: see what you'll always see if you never claim it. Only an image in a

mirror, remember? What poise, what balance, Willy, this room, this moment. Nothing must be touched, nothing must be changed.” (55) This commitment to stasis is a key feature of the arrangement between the two and literally excludes endless change, lack, movement on which intersubjective exchange fundamental to the symbolic is predicated. Characteristically, while Irene is beyond any doubt the dominant side here, Willy’s own monologue provides ample evidence that her decrees fulfil his wishes.

The spouses are undeniably equal in one regard: both are repeatedly presented as perfectly self-conscious about the limitations of the images of themselves that they play out before their others. Irene’s reflection on her appearance and what it means for the function she performs in the family is at the root of her conflict with her relatives. To her, the perfect beauty is no more than a mirror image, and she knows that her looks are not something she can control. The narrative brings into sharp focus the connection between the Harrisons’ triumphalist narrative of social progress and their treatment of Irene’s appearance. The suffering of World War I is to be obliterated in forgetting, and now “[t]hey wanted to forget history. They wanted new life.” Irene embodies this desired perfect object, this fantasy, and she perceives this in the gazes of people around her: “Life, their eyes said, and I felt their message lap around me like waves.” The effects of these expectations are those of the ego-ideal for Irene: she realises the inadequacy of the idealised image, and feels a gap between her reality and what the community envisions for her: “But they didn’t see how I cowered inside my looks like a captive, how my looks didn’t belong to me, and how, when they thought me haughty and peevish (what else could they think, seeing only what I saw in the mirror?) I was really helpless and afraid.” (50) The front she creates for herself is therefore directly related to combatting a sense of

helplessness and entrapment engendered by the sensation of being placed in a role imposed from the outside.

Irene's attempt to build up a façade which she might control is quite clearly a phantasmatic strategy adopted in response to this situation. Her pact with Willy allows both of them to believe they not only satisfy the demands of the Other, but more importantly to create a fantasy in which they achieve complete control over their existence. Irene opens her chapter with a declaration on being aware that her arrangement with Willy is more than mere show: "Sometimes I see in your face that little hidden smile, far behind it all, as if you don't mind, as if you'll play the part, laugh at the joke. How that pleases me. And yet sometimes, like now, when you're tired, it goes out, that tiny flicker of laughter, as if you'd said, no, it's not a joke, things must happen; I'll have what is mine. How stern you look then, how earnest. How frightened you make me." (49) The other's subjectivity is in reality neither overlooked nor ignored; in a move that fits neatly into their neurotic arrangement, Irene chooses instead to ensure that it will cause her no unexpected complications. She oversees Willy's activity and foresees his slips before they ever take place; her gaze plays a crucial role in the dynamics of the marriage.

Willy's corresponding reflections are situated in a formative moment from his own past, a race he ran in his school years. In his account of the event Willy remains perfectly in control of his performance, freely distributing his resources and finally deciding to let another contestant – Irene's brother – win, even though he would be able to defeat him. The narrative consistently portrays him as possessing greater awareness than other participants of the event, and already when Willy is shown planning his strategy with a teammate, his self-assured remark is described as "the first time [he] heard

his voice sound as if he were playing a part.” (191) The episode of the race prepares ground for Willy’s final moments: the suicidal walk is an analogous exercise in self-control and deceit. Just like he did during the race, the protagonist must carefully measure time and distance, mete out his energy, and convince his audience that there is nothing out of the ordinary about the situation.

Parallels are meticulously constructed between the two events, and in many ways Chapman’s final performance sums up the narrative of *The Sweet Shop Owner* as a whole, echoing its various refrains, putting dominant motifs in perspective. Gaze plays a role as significant as it does throughout the novel: for example, the rivalry between the contestants is signalled before the run begins in a way which brings out the interrelations between the imaginary and the symbolic. The boys use their others as props to build up their own self-image: “They paused, communing with themselves, summoning their strength, glancing down at their bodies and up again, as if looking into mirrors.” (192) Most importantly, questions of agency, of the distance between the experience and the image, between the moment and the account figure centrally in the chapter.

While the narrative stresses that the scene is very much about the urgency of the present (“they were thinking, only this moment matters, only the race counts” (192)), the elusive nature of the moment is emphasised, and the pervasive power of the pattern comes to the fore: “You think, ‘This moment is mine.’ It’s yours, like the silver cup they give you with your name on it [...] but you forget it’s only a performance, and it’s the moment that captures you.” (197) In a manner reminiscent of the telephone conversation which I discussed earlier in the chapter, Willy keeps stressing the performative nature of the competition and especially his privileged position in the performance, at once beyond

the scene and within it. While the narrator explicitly remarks on his detachment (“he felt none of this – not any more [...] as if he, the favourite, were not really a participant, as if the race about to be run were already decided” (192)), he is clearly not as isolated from the reality of the event as Irene is in the corresponding episode described above: “Plenty of time. Time to think as well as to act; time to watch *as well as take part*.” (193, my emphasis) Ultimately, Willy uses his mastery over his own body (also presented as “[a] machine [...] something that wasn’t part of him” (194)) to achieve his goal while self-consciously offering the audience what he believes they expect, at the same time renouncing any real agency in favour of a signifying framework: “The race is decided. It’s over as soon as it starts. They think it’s a battle but it’s only a performance. They think it’s an action but it’s only a pattern.” (197)

As he would throughout his life, Chapman plays by the rules while leaving no doubt that the course of the situation is the result of his arbitrary choice and that he himself is not bound by the presumed reality of the drama. He yields to what he imagines the Other demands of him with a certainty implying that he knows exactly what the demand is, and a pretence of not actually making any choice. The obsessive structure of Chapman’s subjectivity is revealed in his enjoyment of the detachment and control that he exercises in both scenes, in his striving for transcendence and denying embodiment. In both, Willy arguably shows himself to be an obsessive figure, since in both he constructs himself as totally and fully conscious throughout, including the scene of his own death; in both episodes everything his body does is exactly noted and controlled by the ego. Willy indeed displays the features of an obsessional neurotic in this situation, as he “fiercely refuses to see himself as dependent on the Other, attempting to maintain a phantasmatic

relationship with a cause of desire that is dependent on no one” and is certainly presented by his own account as “complete unto himself.”⁷⁹ He clearly needs nobody else, he is in a world of his own with no audience aware of its existence (in the scene of the race) or even present on the scene (when he is preparing to die).

The split between the appearance and reality is undeniably central to the functioning of the protagonist and to the thematic concerns of the novel as a whole. More than once referring to the notion of “the real thing,” Chapman anticipates the epistemological dilemmas concerning most of his successors. The frustrating yearning for authenticity and access to direct experience is perhaps illustrated most clearly by Prentis and Bill Unwin (*Ever After*, 1992). Tom Crick (*Waterland*, 1983), on the other hand, is emblematic of a determinedly ambiguous approach: he notes not only the temptation but also the dangers of the wish to arrest history, to step outside the endless progression of events. Willy Chapman’s attitude is unlike either of those; indeed, he stresses repeatedly, recalling both his years with Irene and his earlier life, that he himself has never been subject to this temptation in the first place. His stance is most forcefully delivered in a confession made silently before his absent daughter, in which he sums up the spatial and social confines of his existence: “We never moved out of these narrow bounds. Born here, schooled here, worked here. And even when I met her I stood here on the common and thought: enough, now everything is in its place and I in mine [...] But I never believed you could have the real thing.” (183-4) The fundamental assumption, shaping the whole of Chapman’s life, even before his meeting with his future wife, is thus the rejection of any notion of authenticity, replaced with fitting into the frames provided by the community. At the same time, the sense of being well grounded in these frames

⁷⁹ Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 122.

(“everything in its place and I in mine”) once again drives home Willy’s sense of imaginary completeness and unity with the Other. The remark therefore fits into the obsessional view of the symbolic, permeating Willy’s narrative, in which the system is presumed to be complete, while the endless deferral, movement of signifiers grounded in irremovable lack, is denied: for Chapman nothing is missing, all the elements of his reality are permanently fixed in their prescribed places.

Therefore, if *The Sweet Shop Owner* plays out the same dichotomy that is found in Swift’s other novels (in *Waterland* formulated as the juxtaposition of the traumatising Here and Now and the pacifying force of storytelling, in *Ever After* of the real thing and the substitute), Willy and Irene emphatically reject “the real thing.” However, as the later works of Swift teach us – and as Lacanian psychoanalysis postulates – the real thing will not be removed so easily, or at all for that matter, and the more set the patterns are, the more inevitable the appearance of unwanted remainder becomes. If one were to succeed in arresting the restlessness of the Symbolic, the only possible result is death, as I will demonstrate in more detail later in the chapter. Marc Porée makes a similar observation in his comment on the ironically counterproductive effect of such efforts: “By sheer dint of playing it safe, Willy and Irene end up more dead than alive – saved from life itself. The promise to save one another was kept and the money is in the ‘safe’ – but it is so air-tight that it leaves no breathing space for their child.”⁸⁰ I would argue that in this sense Dorothy plays the role of the repressed real, returning to upset the patterns meticulously arranged by her parents.

1.1.4 Disturbing patterns

⁸⁰ Porée, “Playing with Fire.”

Several critics of *The Sweet Shop Owner* have devoted considerable attention to the etymologies of the three main characters' names. David Malcolm reads their significance in the context of classical allusions present in the novel,⁸¹ while Daniel Lea brings up the Anglo-Saxon roots of the family name, observing that "Chapman" is derived from "pedlars of books of popular verse and song."⁸² Stef Craps explores the implications of the names in *The Sweet Shop Owner* much more comprehensively, adding comments on Irene's, implying her constant yearning for peace, and Dorothy's, which she significantly interprets herself, and which, according to Craps, "connotes resistance to the hegemony of economic idolatry."⁸³ The name of the Chapmans' only daughter has the implication of an extra-economic gift, disturbing the conditions of exchange on which their marriage is grounded. The fact that she is the one who has to reveal its significance to her parents emphasises her status as remaining outside Irene's or Willy's control despite their efforts to contain her. The issue of the name is appropriately introduced in the context of a christening ceremony, a moment of a very literal entry into the symbolic, a social celebration of establishing the coordinates identifying Dorothy as a member of a community: "'Dorothy': we called you 'Dorothy'. There it was in the church register, on the iced cake, on the silver napkin ring Aunt Madeleine gave you." (112) The event is thus organized and legitimised by the family, and the name is chosen by the parents, but the actual significance of these actions – like the actual meaning of the name – remains hidden from them, escapes their grasp.

⁸¹ Malcolm, *Understanding*, 27-8. In fact, Malcolm goes as far as to include classical literature as one of the main sources of inspiration in Swift's oeuvre (next to Victorian fiction and William Faulkner's novels (11)). As for *The Sweet Shop Owner* specifically, he points to the unity of time, preserved in the narrative frame of Willy's final day, and the "limited milieu" of the characters' lives; the ancient Greek origins of Irene's and Dorothy's first names (27-8); or the "strong echoes of classical and neoclassical *topoi*" found in the assigning to Irene and Willy the archetypal roles of the beauty and the athlete, respectively. (49)

⁸² Lea, *Graham Swift*, 39.

⁸³ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 38.

Craps persuasively demonstrates how the etymology of the name (“Dorothea: God’s gift” (112)) links to the way in which the girl unsettles the all-encompassing drive for profit in all interpersonal relations in the Chapmans’ lives. Both Willy and Irene treat virtually every form of human interaction as a transaction to be regulated by principles of symmetry and reciprocity, and Dorothy herself is actually one of the conditions of the contract between her parents, Irene’s offering to Willy. Craps illuminates her function in the text through reference to Derrida’s notion of God’s gift, which radically disrupts conceptions of justice and responsibility founded in economy of reciprocity. The *mysterium tremendum* of a gift received from an insurmountably great and powerful other allows for no appropriate return, inspiring instead the offering of one’s own life.⁸⁴ The exclusion of any potential benefit to be gained from the transaction allows Derrida to conceptualise ethics as “non-reciprocal generosity which represents a decisive break with the hegemonic system of economic circularity.”⁸⁵

In Lacanian terms, Dorothy is not so much an intrusion from an ineffable other, an unexpected exterior intervention, as the (by-)product of the all-encompassing ideology. In a sense, there could hardly be a more suitable figure to employ in this function than the child of the protagonists: shaped by her parents’ mercantile attitudes, she questions their principles and actions; her rebellion is a direct product of her formation.⁸⁶ Dorothy

⁸⁴ This undeniably adds another dimension to the significance of Willy’s final self-sacrifice: he feels himself bound by the conditions of Irene’s will, so he accepts the fact that the only way he can pay what he believes is Dorothy’s due is by dying.

⁸⁵ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 38-39. Craps refers to Derrida’s *The Gift of Death* (1992).

⁸⁶ Daniel Lea’s comment is instructive here: “Raised within an emotionally damaged family and educated into a network of ingrained financial metaphors, Dorothy radically disrupts the conspiracy of continuity that dictates her parents’ silence.” (28) One might expect some indication of contrast (“Although she is raised...”), but the formulation of the remark instead interprets Dorothy’s rebellion as a direct consequence of her upbringing. In fact, Dorothy’s very presence introduces irreversible alteration into her parents’ lives, demonstrating how constant change is inescapable. During a family holiday, whose destination is carefully chosen precisely because it is familiar (“We might have gone elsewhere [...] but (since we had to go) she was against anywhere new. Nothing new.”) Still – despite Willy’s own

therefore works in the narrative as a manifestation of the real produced by the fantasy of excessive completeness of the symbolic, as the excess of *jouissance* which not only can never be excised, but is in fact brought into being by the very efforts undertaken to remove it. From this perspective, she also constitutes the first instance in Swift's prose of discontinued family transmission. Despite (or perhaps precisely because of) her parents' insistence, she stubbornly refuses to conform with their expectations, undermining above anything else Irene's striving to maintain peace within the household. The culmination of the clash between the interests of the parents and their child comes when, cutting through convention, Dorothy insists on discussing openly the affair between Irene's brother and Hancock's wife. Willy, without knowing the reason for Irene's reaction, interprets it correctly: she is not particularly upset by the news itself, admitting, "with a sort of strange approval: 'Well – there's justice there.'" What is truly unforgivable, what introduces real enmity between the mother and the daughter, is the latter's daring in offering the revelation: "It was that note of adventure in your voice." (152)

The conflict extends to Willy despite his best intentions, and his apology to Dorothy indicates a sense of responsibility for the situation.⁸⁷ Still, in the narrative present, he handles his relationship with Dorothy using the same approach which produced the conflict in the first place. Willy's preparations for parting with life

narrativising framing of the trip ("... and little did you know how that journey of ours was already history"), Dorothy's perceptions show that "everything was eternally new; the old cry of the sea-gulls [...] the old mystery of the rock-pools – how you loved to squat and explore those delicate little worlds." (117)

⁸⁷ This scene is unique in being an instance of the father and the daughter actually overcoming mutual reserve and openly confronting the tensions in the family. Awaiting Irene's return from hospital after a serious attack, Willy endeavours to explain her behaviour to Dorothy: "'What I want to say is that she was always like that. It was the same for me too.'" His strategy backfires when the girl extends the responsibility to him as well: "'So you knew what you were doing?' You looked at me like a woman who means to get her way. / 'No, Dorry. No, I never did.'" Significantly, Willy does not use his ignorance as a reason for denying his responsibility for the situation and ends the conversation by imploring: "'Forgive me too.'" (169-70)

unsurprisingly encapsulate the principles that have governed it. Paying off his employees, Willy takes care to maintain the sense of order and control characteristic for these relations. The unexpected bonuses handed out secretly to everyone around him allow him to anticipate, meet, and in effect neutralise any demands his others might make on him.⁸⁸ The largest sum is reserved for Dorothy and, suitably, the effect of this payment is the least predictable. In his final letter to Dorothy Willy argues that his daughter's escape is superficial, and that her actions suggest she has after all been modelled on her parents, that she is "encumbered with all those things of [Irene's], encumbered with the money I sent you (that money, which was only converted history). Don't you see, you're no freer than before, no freer than I am?" (217) All the same, Dorothy remains inscrutable to her father, refusing to be predictable, challenging his expectations as much as she once did her mother's. While she accepts her share of money left by Irene, she will not be bound by the money into a sense of obligation, as her own written reply makes clear: "I think we can call everything settled now. [...] You said I should come – do you really think that's a good idea? After all that you say I've put you through, I should have thought you'd be glad to be finished with me at last." (9)⁸⁹

Attempts to incorporate her into the family narrative situate Dorothy as a paragon of the idealised lost past. Her relationship with uncle Paul, Irene's brother, shows both sides to the story: "Did he welcome you, Dorry? Because you had questions to ask, things to tell; and because you reminded him of a time when the picture was still complete?"

⁸⁸ As well as to eliminate their desire in a typically neurotic gesture. As Stephanie Swales puts it: "The obsessive attempts to neutralise the Other's desire by meeting all of the Other's demands. He hopes that his abundant gifts will leave the Other with nothing left to desire." (*Perversion*, 90)

⁸⁹ Undeniably, the same letter demonstrates the extent to which she has been formed after her parents. Dorothy is equally concerned not only with "settling everything" but also with imposing her own vision of events: "I'm sure this is for the best and how Mother would have wanted it. You will see in the end." (9)

(151) On the one hand, Dorothy therefore activates the movement of desire, provides spaces to fill, lays bare gaps in the family narrative; on the other, she is the image of the lost completeness; in short, she functions as a phantasmatic supplement, at the same time promising to fill the gaps and revealing their existence. Willy's own perception of his daughter ascribes to her this phantasmatic role. Endowing her with innocence and authenticity, contrasted with the "awkward" or "grotesque" adults playing to be someone they really are not, he concludes: "But *you* had no pretensions, you were wholly yourself." (110) Willy also speculates about the moment when his daughter lost this perfect self-identity, entering the pre-set coordinates of the symbolic and envisions her fear of being controlled by her mother in this context:

Was it her face then? Was that how you first discerned the patterns forming? [...] You had her looks. [...] Only the mouth they said, was like mine, a little loose, a little heavy, as if the things it said would bear a tone of resentment. Was that it? Did you feel that face read your own? And did you feel: whatever I do, she will have predicted it; whatever I do, it will not be my own? (116)

Significantly, childcare is shown to be performed primarily – if not exclusively – by Willy from Dorothy's earliest age (114). It is the relation with Irene that is actually more evocative of the entry into the symbolic, as the association of her face with pattern recognition indicates. Her sternness and attachment to following established rules certainly justify reading her figure in terms of the "No of the Mother." Irene is not only the figure setting limits, whose controlling gaze organises the family; the frail façade behind which her sense of insufficiency is concealed is also suitable for someone usurping the position of the father figure:

Even on holiday she read the papers. And when she wasn't reading [...] she'd watch you and me digging holes and making walls to stop the sea, in the same way as she watched you playing on the carpet. [...] When she did so (did you notice?) it was like a kind of concession: 'Yes, I allow you this – just so much.' And when you watched her closely there was a look of panic in her eyes. (117-8)

It is her mother that installs Dorry in the economy of exchange assigning a subjectivity to her and ensuring she will indeed never be “her own,” her identity depending fundamentally on the pre-existing system of social interaction and on its other participants, while her father is associated with the perfect pre-symbolic unity and completeness.

The Shakespearean intertext of the novel is equally telling in this regard: in a school performance of *The Merchant of Venice*, Dorothy refuses “the bigger role” of Portia and chooses instead to play Jessica, sending out a signal as clear as it is unintelligible to Willy. In fact, when she confronts him about his reception, not just of her performance but of the play itself, Willy's response is typically evasive: “I muttered something feebly in reply. What did I know about Shakespeare, Dorry? I'd sat in an uncomfortable wooden chair after a hard day at the shop, while on stage schoolchildren in costume played the parts of grown-ups and spoke lines I did not understand.” (145) Stef Craps observes that Dorothy's rebellion against the parental authority is as questionable as Jessica's, pointing to “the extent to which her thinking is still implicated in her parents' discourse.”⁹⁰ I would agree: while *The Merchant of Venice* is commonly read as postulating the rejection of the ethics of exchange and reciprocity, we must not overlook the fact that what solves the central conflict of the play is in fact obeying the literal rule

⁹⁰ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 220.

of the law, while Jessica's rebellion only serves to escalate it. The elopement of Shylock's daughter with his enemy – and a good portion of his wealth – makes him more vindictive than ever before. On the other hand, Portia's excessively faithful following of the terms of the contract allows her to outmanoeuvre his scheme. In *The Sweet Shop Owner*, Dorothy's own disappearance ultimately does little to alter the dynamics of her relation with her father, with both sides following the patterns established while Irene was still alive.

Very much in the spirit of *The Merchant of Venice*, the pattern is that of paying one's dues, and insisting that all obligations be met. Indeed, even Dorothy's very existence is presented as a form of settling accounts. The pregnant Irene's "face showed only the pinched looks of someone labouring to pay a debt," and Willy feels obliged to "make amends by never showing gladness; taking her hint, leaving the house at six, standing obediently behind his counter: counting, counting the endless change so as to pay his own debt." (101) In line with what has already been said about the dynamics of the relationship and the broader socio-historical context in which the spouses function, Daniel Lea makes an interesting argument about how accumulation of capital serves the purpose of preserving the status quo: "The unwillingness to realise the material value of the legacy stems, in part at least, from the conviction that money is 'converted history' (217) and that its liquidation would traduce the inviolable boundaries of history as an abstractional tangibility and thereby render the present susceptible to the disruptive processes of change."⁹¹ Such an approach entirely overlooks Dorothy's subjectivity, as demonstrated by her exchange with Willy concerning respecting her dead mother's will. In a letter to his estranged daughter Willy writes: "But out of respect for her wishes – out

⁹¹ Lea, *Graham Swift*, 28.

of respect for your dead mother – I think we must do what she wanted,” and in his monologue comments: “I should have added ‘Out of respect for her wishes you ought to stay with me, be with me.’” However, the same episode proves emphatically that Dorothy is not willing to comply with her father’s wish. Her reply is categorically assertive: “‘What about the respect due to me?’” (186) This scene represents a clash with another subjectivity, suitably surprising the obsessive neurotic of a protagonist: Willy would have his wish fulfilled without ever taking responsibility for it (after all, it is Irene’s will), and he just happens to ignore Dorothy’s possible opinion on the issue. In resolving this situation, he also clearly manifests obsessional features. The neurotic cannot handle the desire of the Other, which is never to be known but always to be interpreted. Instead, the neurotic wants to be faced with the Other’s demands, which are possible to know and potentially to satisfy. What Willy wants from Irene – and what he receives from the onset of their relationship – is a set of very clear instructions on how to conduct himself, what to be, how to earn her affection. Indeed, as the present incident demonstrates, the contract still holds years after Irene’s death: Willy continues to hide behind Irene’s “strong ego” and is freed from the duty of facing the Other’s – or his own – desire. Dorothy, on the other hand, remains unsatisfied, lacking, leaving Willy always in debt.

1.1.5 Being history

The other intertext introduced as openly as Shakespeare also comes through Dorothy, ostensibly remaining equally incomprehensible to Willy, despite very clearly underlying the situation of the spouses. While his daughter is working on her “project on Keats,” Willy reads over her shoulder a line from “Ode on the Grecian Urn”: “Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss...” He promptly dismisses these words as “lines of verse [...] which I didn’t understand” (147), but the reference is reinforced by a brief foreshadowing in the first scene of the novel, where Chapman assesses his possessions after Dorry’s visit and notes “china figurines, a shepherd and a shepherdess in eighteenth-century costume for ever on the point of flying into each other’s arms,” (10) replaying the situation depicted on the urn as much as reflecting the Chapmans’ own arrangement. The contrast between the event and its representation, the drive towards arresting the uncontrollable progression of life comes through in the Keatsian references, adding another dimension to the principles guiding Willy and Irene. Marc Porée identifies this connection, pointing to the price that is to be paid for the illusory achievement of stasis: “As in Keats’s poem [...] their immunity from the encroachments of time preserves them, but, more fatally, denies them the delights (together with the ‘disagreeables’) of becoming, of maturing in human time.”⁹² Wendy Wheeler is more categorical, dismissing Chapman’s “unreflective romanticism” as failed, and calling his devotion to the obsolete pattern of historical and cultural transmission inoperative. Wheeler reads him as a figure of the failure of contemporary culture in establishing “proper paternal and symbolic relation to history,”

⁹² Porée, “Playing with Fire.”

initiating Swift's search for form and content suitable for expressing the cultural experience of the postmodern era.⁹³

Willy's conception of history as setting patterns, freeing people from the threats of "action" through pacifying narrativisation also anticipates conceptions appearing in Swift's later fiction. A perfect illustration of this idea is the scene of Irene's family taking a photo together, where her refusal to pose with everyone else becomes a manifestation of her defiance of the family's narrative of a harmonious, happy, communal event, denying the reality of her traumatic experience.⁹⁴ As Swift's other novels amply demonstrate, (*Waterland* being the most famous example here) the value and even the possibility of totalising historical narratives tend to be radically and persistently questioned in his prose. We will see in the following chapter how all efforts to "explain things away" either fail or lead to catastrophic results, subverting their authors' intentions. The possibility of escaping the encroachments of the unpredictable "Here and Now," attacks of chaos dismantling comforting narratives, comes at the price of the erasure of subjectivity, abandoning the symbolic through catatonia. In this sense, Willy's intended suicide follows the same pattern, most glaringly through the narrator's choice of words to introduce the plan: "He would be history." (10)

The conception of double death, proposed by Maurice Blanchot – a critic whose relation to Swift's prose will be demonstrated in more detail in the following chapter – provides an interesting analogy to Swift's two understandings of history. For Blanchot, death exists on two planes: in the form of an inaccessible event never affecting the subject truly (death erases the subject, which means that there is no entity to actually

⁹³ Wheeler, "Melancholic Modernity," 67.

⁹⁴ Lea, *Graham Swift*, 21-22.

experience it), and in the form of various images and conceptualisations of this final event, very much accessible to the (still) living person. Conveniently, Blanchot elaborates this conception with reference to suicide, understood as a final assertion of the omnipotence of the ego. Voluntary death becomes an act, an expression of the subject's sovereignty. Most strikingly, Blanchot sees suicide as a means to "link death to now: yes, now, now. But nothing better indicates the illusion, the madness of this 'I want,' for death is never present." Resonating with Swift's description of Willy's final moments, this remark also corresponds to the Chapmans' overall desire to eliminate all unpredictability from their lives through imposing patterns on reality: "There is in suicide a remarkable intention to abolish the future as the mystery of death: one wants in a sense to kill oneself so that the future might hold no secrets, but might become clear and readable, no longer the obscure reserve of indecipherable death."⁹⁵ Needless to say, Blanchot also stresses the futility of this illusory sense of mastery.

Inevitably, of course, *The Sweet Shop Owner* includes both complementary conceptions: the first being that of history as a series of dramatic events underlying the protagonists' reality but in themselves inaccessible to them – literally embodied by Willy and Irene. His (non-)participation in World War II is the most obvious illustration here: because of a pre-war injury, Willy is relegated to administrative work in the army, so for him the conflict takes a strictly symbolic form, since "others would see action [...] but his duty would be Issue of Equipment – packs, blankets, pouches, helmets, all numbered, allocated, entered up in the record sheet, stamped, checked. What was the connection?" (57) Juxtaposed to the conception of history as the real, there is also history as the

⁹⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 104.

account of these inaccessible events, which is very much present in the form of comforting patterns. While Willy struggles with a sense of frustration – or at least puzzlement – at being thus separated from the first-hand experience of the war, Irene is quite content to observe in them the embodiment of reliable rules of great history: “She sat in the chintz chair listening to the wireless bulletins, scanning the papers which spoke of the war in Finland, the threat of air raids, taking note of the facts, as if the course of things was predictable and she had only to observe its fulfilment.” (60) Willy’s own metonymic relation to “the fighting,” is reduced to the numbers of items issued by him in the army stores, representing the actual events taking place somewhere else and involving someone else.

This insistence on the pacifying force of historical narratives fits into the portrayal of Chapman as an embodiment of obsolete cultural models. Wendy Wheeler posits that Swift’s trademark figures of “weak” or “failed fathers” function as representations of “the failure of cultural and historical continuity, the failure, in psychoanalytic terms, of the ‘paternal’ function of bearing and transmitting the cultural ‘law,’ but also as figures of a divine Father who no longer ‘works.’”⁹⁶ Read along these lines, Willy’s plan stands for the complete failure of an obsolete model of conceptualising the individual’s position in history. Wheeler sees this in the context of the ideology of bourgeois Romantic individualism, claiming to unify the subjective with the objective and thus to overcome alienation, criticised in Swift’s protagonists “from the point of view of the post-romantic, who clings to the pattern of an idea long after its content has proved to be insubstantial.”⁹⁷ In the context of Swift’s oeuvre as a whole, this novel mostly serves to

⁹⁶ Wheeler, “Melancholic Modernity,” 66.

⁹⁷ Wheeler, “Melancholic Modernity,” 67.

mark this problem, which will be pursued in the following texts, with their search for alternative modes of functioning, of embracing “loss and uncertainty as a permanent condition [and finding] ways of being in the world which move beyond the harsh individualism of utilitarian modernity.”⁹⁸

1.1.6 Conclusion

The totalising gesture of Willy’s carefully staged suicide is repeated with reference to the reader in the finale of the novel, also blazing a trail for Swift’s later output. The build-up of the plot very strongly suggests that Willy’s walk on a hot June day, after he intentionally neglects taking his heart medicine, will lead to a fatal heart attack, and that this radical strategy will not yield the desired result of blackmailing his estranged daughter into returning to him. The novel, however, ends with a very clear reference back to the deceitful performance Willy executes during his run (other signals of links between the two situations abound). The third person narration might potentially allow Swift to present the ultimate result of Willy’s activity, so the ambiguity is evidently not a result of any limitation in the narrative technique itself but the author’s very deliberate choice. Indeed, as Daniel Lea maintains, “[t]he mechanics of narrative offer the possibility of imaginatively bridging the absence of correlation through the construction of a teleological linearity, but Swift interestingly denies Willy the satisfaction of a compensating fiction.” Lea sees the final scenes of the novel as Willy’s final attempt to force some sort of coherence on his subjectivity, to connect the various “performances he considers himself to embody.”⁹⁹ However, the different temporal planes of his fragmented

⁹⁸ Wheeler, “Melancholic Modernity,” 65.

⁹⁹ Lea, *Graham Swift*, 34.

narrative remain resolutely disparate, refusing to cohere into a comforting whole. Perhaps even more interestingly, Porée argues that Willy's stepping out of his social roles in the final scenes of the novel reveals the illusory nature of his reality in a broader sense, inevitably arousing the reader's suspicion about the reliability of the narrative (otherwise not presented as unreliable). He makes explicit links between Willy and Swift in his consideration of the final scenes: "The character's deliberate handling of pain matches – virtually coincides with – the novelist's cool handling of time."¹⁰⁰ They both stage an event for an audience, and this, I believe, brings into ever sharper focus the distrust towards the sense of closure ostensibly offered by Willy's suicide attempt. Lea concludes that the novel's "final 'now' is a dramatic assertion of [Willy's] subjective being in the very moment of its extinction,"¹⁰¹ but in fact we never know whether it truly *is* the moment of extinction. As *Ever After* demonstrates, there is a possibility of an afterwards, embodied in the only other protagonist in Swift's oeuvre whose first name is William (just like Willy's, mostly presented in diminutive, in this case reduced to Bill). Indeed, one could consider the latter novel as a sequel of sorts, in which the assertion of agency through suicide is questioned: Bill Unwin is left to pick up the pieces, and the conclusion of that novel is – superficially, at least – radically different from that suggested by *The Sweet Shop Owner*, emphasising ultimate indeterminacy and ambiguity instead of attempting to impose some sort of coherence and completion.

¹⁰⁰ Porée, "Playing with Fire."

¹⁰¹ Lea, *Graham Swift*, 35-6.

1.2 *Shuttlecock* (1981)

1.2.1 Introduction

“Today I remembered my hamster: my pet hamster Sammy, a gift for my tenth birthday.”¹⁰² The inconspicuous opening sentence of Graham Swift’s sophomore novel, *Shuttlecock* (1981), introduces the tensions on which the text is built. While Willy Chapman obsessed about pattern-making, financial obligation, and arriving at a “complete picture” of historical stasis, in *Shuttlecock* it is nature that functions as the concept used to achieve the sense of fullness for which all of Swift’s protagonists strive. The idealised image of nature corresponds in the novel to the speaking subject’s impossible search for completeness presumably lost upon entering the symbolic. On the one hand associated by the protagonist, Prentis, with the idealised time of childhood stability, the memory of the animal is in the narrative related to his obsessive longing for a natural wholeness, nostalgia for a state of being at one with an infallible, self-justifying system. In turn, this yearning is undeniably the character’s response to his present sense of inadequacy, unable as he is to interact with his family and work environment, to cope with what he sees as the frustrations of adult life. Both attitudes correspond to Prentis’s relation with his father, the desire for unity with nature arguably modelled on the pathetic fallacy of the latter’s journal and Prentis’s perception of himself as a failure aggravated by the overwhelming figure of Prentis senior, a wartime hero.

At the same time, like other “pieces of nature” present in the novel, the image of the hamster is profoundly de-naturalised by its context. The animal is evidently entwined in Prentis’s social interactions, being the object of both affection and torment, connected to the pride he associates with the responsibility of looking after it, and eventually

¹⁰² Graham Swift, *Shuttlecock* (London: Picador, 1992), 5.

becoming an incentive for its owner to change his antisocial behaviour. This childhood memory may thus be seen as representative of Prentis's tendency for establishing nature as an all-encompassing ideal, perfection to be achieved at any price, an impossible goal functioning as a crucial part of his self-image and inspiring a feeling of failure and frustration by its ever-elusive promise of ultimate plenitude.

The aim of this section is to consider Prentis's notion of nature in Lacanian terms precisely as this kind of phantasmatic supplement, at once being one of the sources of his permanent dissatisfaction with his symbolic reality and one of the objects he uses to create the impression of coherence and fulfilment. Prentis's insistence on obtaining binding answers from the Other, his obsession with achieving a sense of completeness and self-sufficiency, as well as his tendency for using his others as props to help him complete his project arguably justify the reading of the narrative in the light of Lacan's obsessional neurosis. The fact that Prentis's functioning revolves around two paternal figures which he idolizes and slavishly obeys on the one hand, while seeking to undermine them on the other, also fits the pattern, but I would like to begin my consideration of *Shuttlecock* with a look at the ways in which the novel displays the protagonist's yearning after full (narrative) control, and his refusal to recognize any lack in the Symbolic.

1.2.2 Striving for complete symbolic

Throughout *Shuttlecock*, images of nature (and childhood) are associated with simplicity, spontaneity and honesty, while adulthood stands for uncertainty, power

struggle, manipulation, and inadequacy. Such juxtaposition of an idyllic, natural past with a troubled, artificial present bears a considerable degree of similarity to Lacan's notions on the functioning of the human subject in language as a result of its introduction into the symbolic order. As I already hinted in the previous section, Prentis is arguably among those of Swift's narrators whose stories appear to yield to the promises of the imaginary. Admittedly, Prentis starts out from a considerably less radical position than Chapman. Pestered with a sense of doubt and inadequacy, his narrative is fundamentally a response to an increasingly unbearable situation, facing parallel crises in his professional and private life. His response to these challenges arguably parallels Chapman's obsessive strategies, and like with *The Sweet Shop Owner*, the narrative of *Shuttlecock* offers a temptation of a convenient closure to its readers, at the same time signalling its fundamental insufficiency. It also complements *Sweet Shop Owner*'s central figure of a failed father with its flipside: Prentis is not only a father struggling to exert his authority over a rebellious child, he is also a son overwhelmed by an ideal father of his own.

Prentis actually faces two father figures and the events he narrates constitute a maturation ritual of sorts, with the resolution of the plot arguably justifying even more powerfully my reading in Prentis the structure of obsessional neurosis. With the figure of paternal authority not only brought out to the fore, but actually doubled, *Shuttlecock* is an interesting development from the perspective of my consideration of the neurotic nature of the two narratives. Where Willy Chapman chose his wife to represent the authority of the Other to him in an embodied, unambiguous fashion, which allowed him to avoid the anxiety of facing the desire of the Other and to replace it with demand, Prentis achieves at least limited success in this respect in his authoritarian relationship with his wife and

children. However, his attempts to do the same with his father figures fail: Prentis senior remains inarticulate and Quinn leaves the responsibility for solving the riddle with Prentis, providing only potential solutions, so that ultimately everything depends on the protagonist's decision. Indeed, one could argue that this failure is Prentis's success in actually overcoming the strong egos of his father figures and learning to desire for himself, embracing the inadequacy of his own position as a father. By the end of the novel, Prentis seems to acknowledge openly that the ideal father cannot possibly be ideal, and that this state of things is to be embraced.

Prentis begins to write his notes on a sudden urge, prompted by a childhood memory to confess having tormented his hamster. This unexpected recollection leads to a broader enquiry, oriented at his present situation. A clerk at a "dead crimes" division of police archives, Prentis feels oppressed and frustrated because of his inaccessible superior, Quinn, who appears to enjoy assigning impossible tasks to his subordinates. One of Prentis's assignments relates to the heroic deeds of his father during World War II. Prentis senior cannot – or will not – verify his son's suspicions, having fairly recently suffered an unspecified attack, which has left him in a "language coma." Prentis is reduced to re-reading his father's memoirs obsessively and tormenting his own family in an attempt to create any pretence of authority over his circumstances. Finally, however, he chooses to confront Quinn, who reveals that his veneer of an all-powerful paternal figure is no more than that, and offers Prentis the choice of studying or destroying the file which contains the details of his father's past. The protagonist's decision to remain ignorant apparently resolves his situation: Prentis is promoted, replacing Quinn, and the atmosphere in his family changes to the point of becoming almost idyllic.

Prentis's struggle against uncertainty bears strong resemblance to the neurotic position. His obsessive wish "to be in a position where I would *know*; where I would no longer be the victim, the dupe, no longer be in the dark," (71, original emphasis) his repeated demands for explanation directed at (and rejected by) his utterly uncommunicative, institutionalised father and at the father-like figure of his manipulative boss, culminate in a decision to turn his confessional narrative into a totalising fantasy of unity with the Other and denying the deficiencies of the imaginary-symbolic reality in which he functions. This is achieved, although not exclusively, through his use of images of nature as a way of masking "the failure of the symbolic to render us complete: the fantasy [which] arises where the subject deludes itself that the symbolic knows what it is supposed to be."¹⁰³ The narrator of *Shuttlecock* takes his cue from both of his "fathers" to "drive on with the impossible task of getting language to fit the world"¹⁰⁴ through an obsessive neurotic's refusal to recognise the dialogic nature of language, neglecting the expectations of people in his life and stifling their as well as his own doubts about the validity of his discourse. This is certainly a feature he shares with his predecessor, and one which in his case is extended to the novel's audience in a much more overt fashion.

Prentis imposes on his readers an image of mastery which he does not submit to verification by those around him and expresses its final fulfilment through a scene of an idyllic family trip to what he insists on presenting as an immaculate natural landscape despite observing that it has been "invaded and littered [...] by caravan-sites and chalets, beach-side cafés and amusement arcades." (217) In fact, with this invasion, the place is at a second degree remove from the supposed condition of naturalness, since what Prentis

¹⁰³ Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 5. This kind of ideological treatment of nature corresponds to what has already been signalled in the previous section, where I discussed the willed historical amnesia in the Chapmans' community.

¹⁰⁴ Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 39.

considers the original state of Camber Sands has in his childhood memory the following focus:

[W]hat attracted me then about Camber was less its whispering billows of sand and wheeling black-headed gulls (for this was before Mr Forster and his Nature Study classes) but the relics of the war that still littered the region. [...] All this was scenery from that awesome drama in which Dad had only recently been an actor. [...] And looking out at the grey, flat English Channel [...] I would have a vision of the war as a simple, romantic affair of opposing powers. [...] The tide would come in, slick, shallow and frothy – and the incoming tide, as every child knows, is an enemy invader. (216)

The alleged pre-symbolic Eden thus proves to be an imaginary-symbolic space of simple solutions (and hostility, indicated by the “invading army” of the tide). Nature, after all, is here something that one needs to be taught to appreciate in its own right and something that functions as part of various ideological strategies. Within his discourse, Prentis’s perception of nature performs the role of the fantasy that the gap between the subject and the symbolic order can be filled, embodied by an object perceived as lost but never really possessed in the first place.

The hope to get rid of the gap opened as a result of the child’s realisation of the disparity between its desire and the desire of the mother creates the fantasy of an object able to fill it. “Through fantasy, the subject attempts to sustain the illusion of unity with the Other and ignore his or her own division.”¹⁰⁵ Fantasy constitutes both a method of functioning in the unsatisfactory condition of the symbolic subject and a promise of a pleasure which goes beyond anything the subject is in fact able to experience. This is why “if it were not for this fantasy, we might be more content with the jouissance we do

¹⁰⁵ Homer, *Lacan*, 87.

actually obtain [...] We might say that *it never fails to make matters worse.*"¹⁰⁶ In this sense, Prentis's obsessive wish to return to a natural state at once gives rise to his frustration with his actual condition and allows him to live with it: "Fantasy is one of the ways through which we reconcile ourselves to our dissatisfaction with our own jouissance and the impossibility of the real. Through fantasy we construct our social reality as an answer to the intractability of the real."¹⁰⁷ Prentis's diary testifies to the significance of his fantasy of achieving the impossible unfailing jouissance associated with the Other, in whose position he persistently situates nature. In a manner typical of obsessive neurosis, he also strives to control this Other and neutralise its desire in any way he can, as will be shown further on.

The fantasy of pre-symbolic wholeness in turn invites a potent analogy with the gap left by the death of his mother, who, tellingly, is almost entirely left out of his narrative. The most portentous – and strikingly restrained – reference to his mother is made by Prentis in his consideration of his father's breakdown: "A year before his own trouble, it's true, my mother died quite suddenly and apparently in perfect health (she simply collapsed one day on the kitchen floor – it's a day, to be honest, I don't like to remember in detail), and if any event might have led to my father's breakdown, this was it." (41) Considering the narrator's later discoveries, prompting him to suppose that there might indeed have been other factors involved in Prentis senior's own collapse, this passage is revealing of the desperate urge to find clear-cut explanations of traumas while hiding their actual causes. Another mention of Prentis's mother, in the context of his ultimate reformation into "the man I was, years ago, before Mum's death and Dad's

¹⁰⁶ Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 157, original emphasis.

¹⁰⁷ Homer, *Lacan*, 90.

breakdown, before the kids grew up” (210), stresses the significance of her absence – from his life and his narrative – situating her death as one of the points separating him from the state of unity and security which constitutes the core of the fantasy of nature organising his text. This is an example of the parallels – but also differences – between Swift’s first two novels. In both, the source of the pathological relations is merely indicated, hinted at, but ultimately either not disclosed at all, or at least kept from the main characters. In *Shuttlecock*, however, it is Prentis who appears to have the upper hand over the reader. While he remains ignorant of many issues he is desperate to know, as for his mother’s death, he certainly has more knowledge than he is willing to reveal to the readers. In *The Sweet Shop Owner* we knew what Willy and Dorothy did not know, in *Shuttlecock* we may only suspect that Prentis knows something that he is hiding from us; in neither is there a moment of revelation comparable to practically any of Swift’s subsequent novels.

Prentis’s portrayal of his evolving relation to his pet is illustrative of his fantasy, as marked by his own comment: “How jealously I longed to possess a part of nature.” Even more tellingly, Prentis blatantly idealises his relation with the natural as equivalent to another ideal Other, love, in a rather surprising view of the presumed benefits from the possession of his pet: “What became of my love? For what else is love - don’t tell me it is anything less simple, less obvious – than being close to nature?” (35) The gradual transformation of this perfect relationship into sadistic power play is for Prentis evidence of inevitable deterioration inherent to civilised human condition, the corruption of the social, clearly evocative of Rousseau’s thought and Romantic conceptions of nature more broadly speaking. Seeing himself as no longer unified with nature, Prentis abhors the

alienation of intersubjective economy. The dream of regaining paradise lingers throughout the narrative. Caught in the frustrating relationship with his catatonic father, his urge “to shout at Marian and the kids,” and the unease about his professional future, Prentis repeatedly finds refuge in idyllic visions of the natural, frequently associated with memories of childhood security. Before visiting a golf club which reminds him of the time when he was a caddy for his father, the narrator remarks: “You know those surprisingly long, light evenings in early summer, when lilacs bloom in gardens and even in such mundane and humdrum places as Sutton and Morden a breath of peace seems to hang in the air as if it were really hanging over some wide, virgin landscape.” Characteristically, in spite of all the denaturalising touches contained in his description, as well as his present radical separation from his father, he insists on a possibility of reconnecting with the idealised past image: “It didn’t seem that their plummy, somewhat hollow voices were the equivalent of the voices I had heard when I was a boy, *but perhaps they were.*” (109-10, my emphasis) The same insistence is visible, perhaps most clearly, in the narrator’s discussion of his sex life.

Prentis accounts for what he sees as unusual intensity of his sexuality referring not to passion between himself and his wife or his excessive appetite, but precisely to his “constant dissatisfaction,” adding that “it’s a long time since I’ve experienced with Marian that thing called ‘ecstasy’ or ‘fulfilment.’” (72) The increasing sophistication – or indeed perversity¹⁰⁸ – of their erotic practices “wasn’t an end in itself, believe me, it was all in the hope of achieving some ultimate thing that always seems elusive.” (73) Prentis therefore eagerly sacrifices his own immediate satisfaction in the name of the jouissance

¹⁰⁸ In the conventional sense of the word, but also in the psychoanalytic sense, if one considers Prentis’s aims and his treatment of Marian as no more than a prop useful in achieving them. The pervert tends to instrumentalise his others, to assume he knows their desire better than they do themselves or to disregard it entirely.

of the Other, which is another neurotic feature in his behaviour. In this he enacts the irony of the neurotic position pointed out by Bruce Fink: whereas the driving thought of the neurotic is “No jouissance for the Other!”¹⁰⁹ the subject’s refusal ultimately leads to obtaining jouissance for the Other as well as for oneself. Fink describes the neurotic as someone prone to “sacrificing everything (all satisfaction in the here and now) for the sake of his name”¹¹⁰ – i.e. for the sake of some greater, abstract cause beyond oneself, “some ultimate thing” with which one identifies, whose jouissance stands above one’s own, and which one realises despite oneself, without knowing. In his quest for all-encompassing, spontaneous, natural sexual pleasure, Prentis constantly controls the situation, never allowing himself a moment of actual rapture, constituting a handbook example of a neurotic, terrified to abandon conscious thought even for a second. His tendency to neutralise the Other’s desire in sexual relations, displayed in his instrumental treatment of his wife (“being caught up in the perpetual whirlwind of destroying the other”)¹¹¹ is another feature characteristic of obsessional neurosis.

At the same time, the use of various paraphernalia takes Prentis and his wife further from his image of sex that is supposed to be natural: predictably, watching copulating animals, Prentis perceives them as nature’s puppets who

don’t need any fetishist tricks to urge them on or any shame to restrain them. And sometimes that is just how I see it with Marian and me: a little careless, unadorned instant, like the sparrows, a little flutter of wings and hearts: at one with nature. Perhaps it was like that once, long ago. For Marian and me. For all of us. But now we have to go through the most elaborate charades, the most strenuous performances to receive enlightenment. Because that is the goal, don’t mistake me – enlightenment. All nature’s creatures join to express nature’s

¹⁰⁹ Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 128.

¹¹⁰ Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 129.

¹¹¹ Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 142.

purpose. Somewhere in their mounting and mating, rutting and butting is the very secret of nature itself. And when, night after night, I conduct my sexual experiments with Marian, for ever modifying the formula, it's with the yearning that one day it won't just be sex, but enlightenment. (73)

The obvious idealisation of the state of nature as escaping the control of the big Other is carefully overlooked by Prentis. The memory of spontaneous sexual intercourse “in fields, amid ferns, in secluded parts of beaches” (76) is part of the dream of the enlightening return to nature which Prentis ultimately decides to enact in his narrative. The final scene of the novel, in which Prentis and Marian, “quick as sparrows,” (219) make love on a Camber Sands beach, thus marks the supposed achievement of the dreamed-of state in which the separation of the human from the natural is finally abolished. Prentis comments tellingly: “I thought, it is the landscape of the desert, bleached and smooth-contoured, that most approximates to human flesh. If any landscape can be called naked, it is a landscape of dunes.” (220) Not only has he finally reached the sought-for state of naturalness, but it has proven to require no sacrifice of his authority as a symbolic subject: natural perfection is no more and no less than what Prentis has conjured up in his fantasy.

Indeed, nature itself is no more than Prentis's toy, a construct which he controls entirely, and by no means an awe-inspiring force capable of producing a sublime reaction. In this sense Prentis remains a Cartesian subject, external to the reality which he observes – and oversees – from a vantage point beyond it. This is not far removed from Kant's theory of the sublime as an experience which depends on the subject's distance and external position: watching a hurricane from a safe house, we experience the sublime; if the house is being torn apart by the hurricane, there is only horror. Zupančič links this

conception to Lacan's "window of fantasy," which is precisely observing oneself as if "from a safe distance," as a toy in the hands of an infinitely powerful force. This in turn is emblematic of "Kant's 'fundamental fantasy' – the *pathos of apathy*, which is the reverse side of the autonomous and active subject, and in which the subject is entirely passive, an inert matter given over to the enjoyment of the Law."¹¹² The final remark brings to mind the neurotically paradoxical position in which Prentis's narrative places him: his dream of nature as a complete and perfect system, a meaning-making machine, an unquestionable force situating him in a finally, unquestionably justified position, is a nightmare of an irresistible, overwhelming Other, which he can never allow to come true. This is why Prentis can never "let himself go" and be anywhere near as "natural" as he claims he wants to be.

Significantly, like in his father's autobiography, this sense of separation from nature is present throughout Prentis's narrative. Even in referring to his childhood, he makes a telling observation about his relation to the natural world at the time: "There is quite a lot of Nature in Wimbledon, as London suburbs go; but I never really thought of Nature as something ordinary and familiar. [...] I saw it as a stuff, which could be gathered, or mined like gold, if only you knew where to find it. Above all, it was something quite separate and distinct from me." (33-34) In spite of, or perhaps rather as a consequence of this sense of separateness, Prentis obstinately emphasises the significance of staying in touch with nature, as demonstrated in his argument with Martin, his older son, about the value of zoos. While the father defends them as not only educational institutions, stressing the sense of there being "something gratifying – something calming and reassuring about being amongst animals," the son questions the experience as

¹¹² Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 157-8.

artificial and in fact less real than a nature documentary on television. Characteristically, whereas Prentis recognises “a falseness, a contradiction about the very concept of these animal playgrounds [...] natural and artificial at the same time, wild-but-tame,” he reconciles the inconsistency easily, concluding that “perhaps this is the way things must be now.” (152) Interestingly, this is a contrast very similar to the one that may be drawn between the narrative of Prentis and his father.

1.2.3 Learning from Prentis senior (the Name-of-the-Father)

The special status of the relation between Prentis and his father is signalled by Swift already with the absence of first names: the father is only distinguished by the addition of “senior” to his name (or the son is distinguished by its absence). The name of the protagonist(s) of *Shuttlecock* is thus in a sense even more openly telling than the names of Willy Chapman, his wife and daughter: as has already been remarked in the previous section, Prentis’s first name remains undisclosed and leaves the character in the obsessional neurotic’s position of an “apprentice,” of someone who has yet to graduate, and to gain an identity independent from his paternal figures. This is very clearly a position typical for the obsessive neurotic. Philippe Van Haute comments on the neurotic subject’s unwillingness to desire “in his own name” by observing that he “finds it almost annoying that he *has* his own name, because it reminds him that he is summoned to his own desire, which does not dissolve into the desire of his master.”¹¹³ As we will see, Prentis aspires to matching the overwhelming standard set by the idealised figure of his father. The formative role of the father’s wartime past is manifested through his memoir

¹¹³ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 263.

being a bone of contention between successive generations of Prentises: Prentis himself is less than enthusiastic about the gift of a signed copy and only becomes engrossed in the narrative after his father's collapse into silence. With no apparent self-awareness, however, he replicates the power struggle over the book, disciplining his older son Martin into reading it. Suggestively, the father's and the son's books also share the same title, further blurring Prentis's sense of self-identification.

During one of the visits to the institutionalised Prentis senior, his son ponders on the impression of inviolable idyll invoked by the greenery surrounding the hospital. Echoing a self-conscious passage from his father's memoir, in which the dreamlike quality of the view of a beautiful garden seen by the inmates of a Nazi prison is registered, Prentis also seems suspicious of the view before his eyes, perceiving the ideological entanglements of the natural: "All this gentle liberalism ('no doors are locked – patients are free to come and go'), all this atmosphere, on the terrace of 'Eucalyptus', of tranquillity and strange immunity, even the country-garden rose beds and lawns and rhododendron clumps, which now and then infuse you with a sense of inviolable idyll – all of it is perhaps a lie." Typically, however, where Prentis senior focuses precisely on the unreliably artificial quality of the image, his son insists on nature's boundless truthfulness, concluding the passage with the rhetorical question: "But then, can the flowers and the trees lie?" (126) Prentis shares this persistent claim on being able to meet the requirements of the symbolic with Willy Chapman to a degree which arguably – or at least apparently – distinguishes them both from the protagonists of Swift's following novels, characterised by a much higher level of critical self-awareness. The idealisation of the natural state as ultimately moral, true, beyond the frustrating uncertainty of socialised

human existence, is in itself inevitably involved with the symbolic and any perspective of freeing the subject from it can only be seen as a dangerous fantasy not only from the point of view of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Prentis's desire to be reunited with nature is paralleled (and possibly inspired) by his father's journal, although the other narrative openly emphasises its own conventionality. Prentis senior is much more inclined to distance himself from his own naturalising tendencies, bringing to his reader's attention their status as fiction. A British spy captured during World War II in France, in the story of his escape from a German prison he repeatedly makes self-referential remarks about his narrative process and hints at the possible manipulations of his material. The view of a garden at the Chateau where he is kept, contrasted with the atrocities of the dungeon prison, is described as something "[a]s unreal as some painting by Watteau or Claude," (136) with a significant comment that his "recollections compress into a series of dream-like, constantly recurring impressions." (138-9) Much like in the narrative of his son, the presumably inviolable natural world is contrasted in his autobiography with the horrors of human conflict. Even while expressing his sympathy and admiration for the natural environment, Prentis senior categorically separates the two realms, so that when his narrative describes nature as affected by the war, seeing this as a greater shock than the suffering of humans, the distinction between the two remains crucial in the passage: "I felt the loss of that wood like few human losses. The thing that most embodies the evil of war, is not, it seems to me, its human violence (for humans cause wars), but its wilful disregard for nature..." (108) This account is part of a consistent juxtaposition of the human and the natural as fundamentally disparate. Significantly, while he repeatedly creates the impression that he

himself might be expecting sympathy from, or assuming unity with, nature, he is – unlike his son – prepared to renounce such views categorically. His relation of the escape from the prison in the nude through night woods is probably the clearest example: despite being hurt during his run through the forest, he speaks of feeling “a strange rush of gratitude for these branches and thick tangles of foliage which, even as I pushed on, scratched and snared me.” However, his conviction “that the woods and the trees are always on the side of the fugitive and the victim” is promptly dismissed as “a blatant case of the pathetic fallacy, no doubt.” (164) This appears to repudiate any totalising effect of all his other assertions about his desire to merge with nature.

At the same time, however, in its recognition of the demands of social interaction, the narrative of Prentis senior is focused on creating and maintaining a social role, that of a wartime hero and in that, meeting the demands of the symbolic as “a subjective presupposition”¹¹⁴ to follow the assumed social convention which for him clearly has priority over any concern about how the resulting construct corresponds to his actual experience. Prentis senior’s relation to the big Other is problematic: after all, the self-creation he performs before his readers and the recognition he gains as a hero through the language of his autobiography are both contrasted with his ultimate complete withdrawal from language, a form of willed autism. As Bruce Fink notes, this refusal to yield to “the Other’s demand that we speak”¹¹⁵ can only happen precisely to the autistic. The condition of Prentis senior puts him altogether outside the social interactions of the symbolic, effectively questioning his status as a subject. Prentis senior is therefore virtually replaced

¹¹⁴ Žižek uses this phrase to mark the peculiar status of the big Other, existing only on condition that the subject chooses to recognize – or indeed presuppose – its existence. (Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 10.)

¹¹⁵ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject. Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 100.

by language: himself inaccessible, only present in his son's life through his autobiography. In fact, he could be said to function precisely as an embodiment of the paternal metaphor, pointing to the demands of the symbolic law and to the impossibility of the imaginary unity, warning his son against the wish to restore it. The function of Name-of-the-Father is to become the first metaphor which initiates the whole symbolic exchange of language,¹¹⁶ one whose role is to prevent the fulfilment of the child's wish to be reabsorbed by the mother or the mother's wish to find in the child the kind of satisfaction not available through any other object. Prentis senior, despite his withdrawal from symbolic interaction, reinforces the hints offered by his narrative through his own example: the memoir itself, imposing an imaginary construct of himself as a hero, leads – upon the threat of exposure – to the language coma. The message to his son, obsessively rereading the book, should be clear: trying to achieve any final certainty within the symbolic takes its toll.

1.2.4 Lacan's imperfect nature

The striving of the narrator of *Shuttlecock* to return to a perfect natural state can be treated as an attempt to resolve (or, in the face of the dubious ethics of the move, “dissolve,” to quote Stef Craps¹¹⁷) precisely the struggle of the desiring symbolic subject to negotiate its place in the system. The effectiveness of the strategy is, however, highly questionable. In his discussion of the notion of nature in psychoanalysis, Adrian Johnston

¹¹⁶ The paternal metaphor (or function) is the third term introduced into the mother-child unity, disrupting it. Not necessarily associated with the actual father, it stands for whatever interest the mother has other than the child: it forces the infant to acknowledge that it does not complete the mother, that she is a desiring subject, lacking something else. The paternal metaphor is a metaphor in the sense that it represents the very concept of lack in the mOther (the Name-of-the-Father replaces the desire of the mother), introducing the child into the circuit of symbolic exchange, and making all other signification possible.

¹¹⁷ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 44.

argues that these “cerebral” tensions of the symbolic and the imaginary are grounded in the “biological” real, quoting the seminal text “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” (1949) in which Lacan concludes: “These reflections lead me to recognize in the spatial capture manifested by the mirror stage, the effect in man, even prior to this social dialectic, of an organic inadequacy of his natural reality – assuming we can give some meaning to the word ‘nature.’” Among other examples from Lacan’s work, Johnston refers to his 1951 address to the British Psycho-Analytical Society, “Some Reflections on the Ego,” which goes back to the close interrelation of the somatic body and its “ethereal double,” introduced early in Freud’s work¹¹⁸ and in doing so “flatly repudiates the notion that the trans-biological body of images and signifiers can be conceived of as a socio-cultural construct entirely separate from and independent of biological factors.”¹¹⁹

Dismissing as misguided the critical voices which object to Freud’s naturalisation of the disharmonies inherent in libidinal economy, as well as those arguing for a perception of Lacan’s thought as “killing off” materiality in favour of the social, Johnston draws the reverse conclusions from the repeated occurrences of the biological in Freud-Lacanian psychoanalysis. To him, the grounding of the conflicts of the human psyche in biological reality does not imply a determinism threatening the notion of subjecthood; instead, it must – and does – result in a changed perception of metaphors organising our understanding of nature, with the implication that the notion of experiencing it as perfect and all-encompassing is an illusion. In the light of Lacan’s writing on the subject, nature

¹¹⁸ Johnston refers to Freud’s paper “Some Points for a Comparative Study of Organic and Hysterical Motor Paralysis,” published in 1893.

¹¹⁹ Adrian Johnston, “The Weakness of Nature: Hegel, Freud, Lacan, and Negativity Materialized,” in *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic*, eds. Clayton Crockett, Creston Davis, and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 166.

should rather be perceived as a highly under-determined system, conflict-ridden and imperfect,

pointing to a somewhat counter-intuitive notion [that] Nature itself is weak, vulnerable to break-downs and failures in its functions [...] a nature permitting and giving rise to, for example, beings guided by dysfunctional operating programs not up to the task of providing constant, steady guidance [which] doesn't correspond to the fantasy of a quasi-divine cosmic substance as a puppet-master.¹²⁰

Indeed, taking into account recent developments in neuroscience, Johnston argues that “[h]uman subjectivities are glitches and loopholes internal to an auto-denaturalizing nature, Frankenstein-like creatures of material discrepancies and temporal torsions whose negativities pervade the very ‘stuff’ of substance itself.”¹²¹ Taking into consideration the notion of plasticity of the human brain, this might be seen as a literal embodiment of Lacan’s contention that “the cerebral cortex functions like a mirror,”¹²² formed by as well as forming its surroundings perceived in the shape of signs or images. Combined with claims of evolutionary underdetermination, this leads Johnston to conclude that humans are characterised by a “determined lack of determination.” Strictly physiological factors are translated into Lacanian terms: according to Johnston, human beings’ premature birth and consequent need for the symbolic-imaginary support may not point to their maladaptation to nature but rather to nature’s itself being, after Lacan, a “disharmonious, self-sundering Real.”¹²³

¹²⁰ Johnston, “Weakness of Nature,” 162.

¹²¹ Johnston, “Weakness of Nature,” 170.

¹²² Jacques Lacan, “Some Reflections on the Ego,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, no. 34 (1953), 13.

¹²³ Johnston, “Weakness of Nature,” 167.

In “Some Reflections on the Ego,” Lacan emphasises that the structures of symbolic and imaginary orders are foreshadowed by aspects of the real. Therefore, in what Johnston terms a “Hegelian-Lacanian move,” the opposition of the natural and the non-natural is revealed to be an opposition internal to the notion of nature itself.¹²⁴ Johnston then turns to Lacan’s criticism of other schools of psychoanalysis as relying on the assumption of a naturalist basis of psychological phenomena and his claim that “material reality” as detached entirely from any form of abstraction must necessarily be an abstract notion in itself. In Lacanian epistemology, this means that the real cannot be known otherwise than through symbolic-imaginary structures. From this epistemological consideration, conclusions are drawn about the ontology of the real: “what Lacan initially appears to depict as obstacles blocking epistemological access to a natural Real in itself actually are ontological facets of this very Real.”¹²⁵ This is why nature can hardly be conceived of as an ultimate haven from the torments of symbolic desire, since for Lacan the “flawed and conflicted bio-materiality constitutive of the human organism (as a first body) both ontogenetically precedes as well as catalyzes the embracing of what come to be the Imaginary-Symbolic avatars of ego-level subjectifying identifications.”¹²⁶ In other words, the struggle faced by Prentis as a desiring subject cannot possibly be avoided through a return to natural balance since the struggle itself is natural in the most basic sense. The very idealisation of nature by Prentis is made possible by its imperfections. Prentis senior, in his distrust of the flawless image of nature as a creation of culture, is in fact closer to these psychoanalytically informed views than his incorrigibly Romantic son.

¹²⁴ Johnston, “Weakness of Nature,” 172.

¹²⁵ Johnston, “Weakness of Nature,” 174.

¹²⁶ Johnston, “Weakness of Nature,” 166.

Indeed, Swift's interest in the heritage of Romantic ideology, which has already been signalled in *The Sweet Shop Owner* by means of the novel's Keatsian references, reappears throughout his writing, and constitutes a crucial element of *Shuttlecock* both in terms of Prentis's conceptualisations of nature as well as his own (and Swift's) invoking of the conventions of bildungsroman. I will refer to Stef Craps's perspicuous analysis of the aesthetic politics of *Shuttlecock* to shed some light on the issue. Taking the notion of pathetic fallacy as his point of departure,¹²⁷ Craps describes the Romantic project of regaining the lost unity of human beings with the world around us. Going against "the Kantian bargain with scepticism,"¹²⁸ the Romantics set out to re-establish the possibility of directly accessing noumenon through adopting an animist stance. Craps points out that Kant himself strove to restore the unity of the subject, bringing together its heteronomous faculties, precisely by force of the aesthetic experience, but notes that the project was only fully realised in the thought of Friedrich Schiller. For Schiller, the aesthetic experience is the space of ultimate synthesis of the empirical and the ideal, giving the subject insight into the very essence of its human nature, removing its constitutive division. The conception has been severely criticised for its dangerous political implications by Paul de Man, but also by Slavoj Žižek, who argues that the idea of overcoming human separation from nature is a potentially destructive fantasy, which

¹²⁷ I have already indicated one explicit mention of the term in Prentis senior's book; Craps quotes another, even more telling instance from the penultimate chapter of the novel, the shortest one, containing only two sentences. It would be difficult to disagree that Prentis's question addressed to his wife ("[D]o you believe in the pathetic fallacy? That it's really a fallacy, I mean?" (215)) is a key moment in which Prentis makes a strategic decision, especially if one considers other instances of the phrase in the text (e.g. "Perhaps the people were happy because of the warm summer twilight wrapping round them and making the world grow soft and dim. Perhaps it was all a case of pathetic fallacy. Then I thought: these people are happy because of what they don't know." (203)). The term may clearly be read to signal the conscious embrace of the obsessive stance of ignoring the Other's desire, or Prentis's complete control once again: after all, he is unlike "these people" in consciously choosing ignorance. As one might expect from an obsessive neurotic, Prentis claims only not to know what he decides not to know.

¹²⁸ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 50.

would inevitably lead to totalitarianism if it were to be embraced.¹²⁹ Seen in this context, Prentis's striving for regaining the supposed oneness with an idealized nature corresponds disconcertingly close with the descriptions of psychological violence he directs at his family. The Romantic influence also operates on the level of the novel's self-consciousness: Craps notes parallels between *Shuttlecock* as a bildungsroman and a prototypical work of the genre, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*,¹³⁰ in that both follow the precepts of Schiller's aesthetic conceptions, but at the same time undermine them through self-conscious irony.

1.2.5 Learning from Quinn (the primal father)

The young Prentis's suspicions concerning the truthfulness of his father's narrative as laboriously creating a mere impression of authenticity testify to the obsessive character of his narrative: the father figure is idealised and supposed to be obeyed unquestioningly, while at the same time, the desire to identify with the "ideal father" produces a sense of rivalry and even hatred. What is more, his obsession with his father's story reveals the narrator's own relentless striving to find a short-cut to what is veiled by the symbolic. Unlike Prentis senior, consistently distrustful of the conventions shaping the account of his experience with the natural world, the protagonist even more intentionally overlooks the inherent instability of nature,¹³¹ embracing without any reservations the bildungsroman convention with its postulate of the unity of its

¹²⁹ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 48-53.

¹³⁰ The implications of Prentis's name create undeniable resonances here as well.

¹³¹ Implied in the closing episode of *Shuttlecock* even by the liminal space in which it is set – the constantly eroded beach as an unstable borderline between land and sea (Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 62).

protagonist with the image that he has of it.¹³² Throughout the frame narrative of *Shuttlecock*, Prentis evidently displays a longing to take the obsessional's detached, controlling position that he associates with his childhood, where "I registered other people not by their names and all the other identity tags but by smells and indefinable peculiarities [...] As for myself, I believed I was odourless and nondescript – as if I were made from something that didn't exist." (34) Prentis's longed-for lost status is thus that of the Cartesian subject, with his ego perfectly in control of his own thought process, which is equalised with the outside world and in both senses situated as if outside Prentis. His self-perception at this point corresponds closely to what was said about Willy Chapman in part 1 of the chapter in his neurotic refusal to admit any dependence on the Other. There is no room for the mystery of the Other here – Prentis is in charge, assigning identities to those around him, and himself remaining unaffected by any involvement with the symbolic; indeed, he appears to occupy no specific position within it, free of precisely those features which allow *him* to identify people around him. As we will see, denying any dependence on an Other is to a large extent Prentis's achievement, challenging – and successfully neutralising – both of his authority figures, both functioning in the capacity of the analyst in the sense that the protagonist expects answers from them/their text.

This is in stark contrast to his present situation, where he is identified as an employee, a son, husband, father, and finds himself inadequate in all of these roles. As an adult, he constantly declares the need to get away from the demands of the symbolic, "this urge to take off my tie, my socks and shoes [...] and simply to walk away; as if Clapham Common were some endless, enveloping savannah," (93) claiming that the

¹³² Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 55.

proximity of nature makes him feel most truly himself. In his journal, the younger Prentis finally decides to embrace fully what Freud saw as the symbolic function of fantasy, “the belief that our wishes can coincide perfectly with the social, so that the ego-ideal looks upon us benignly.”¹³³ This is exactly the type of position which Irene and Willy Chapman were shown to strive for in the previous section.

Admittedly, Prentis’s account contains self-conscious remarks matching those of his father’s. As was already observed, the difference lies in his renewed speculation – and the ultimate conclusion – that the truth of the narrative must be taken for granted. In fact, some of the self-referential fragments of Prentis’s text serve to support his honesty and reliability as a narrator, as in the opening paragraphs of the novel, where he wonders at the memory motivating the whole narrative: “Why should I have thought of these things? They say that you only recall what is pleasant and you only forget what you choose not to remember.” (5) Renouncing his control over the selection of the material – a memory showing him in a light that is at least problematic – arguably serves to build up the credibility of the narrator, ostensibly placing the impulse that shapes the text outside his manipulative influence. At the same time, it allows him to perform the investigation which leads to finding an answer to the question posed here, and arguably restores his sense of control. The unconscious is banished, no inexplicable motifs are left as everything comes to the light – and is subject to Prentis’s unquestionable authority.

After all, his comments ultimately mutate into excuses: “And isn’t it possible that this whole voluntary confession [...] is inspired by some upsurge of guilt where guilt should not apply, and that I over-sensitively exaggerate what I suppose to be the shameful of my proclivities? What is healthy and normal in this sphere, after all?”

¹³³ Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 29.

(75) In this, he undeniably adheres to the archetype of modern autobiographical writing set in Rousseau's *The Confessions* and its methods of handling the reliability of the speaker. In fact, if we follow Paul de Man's reading of Rousseau,¹³⁴ Prentis fulfils his politics to the letter, since his narrative also wears the disguise of a confession to perform the function of an excuse, a rationalisation, and an explanation. De Man notes that the epistemological structure of a confession requires exposing one's very private feelings before an objective, public forum capable of judging them. It is crucial that the authority of making the judgement must rest outside the speaker: if one confesses with the conscious purpose of receiving positive judgement, the structure of the confession is disturbed, shifting towards an excuse. The difference lies not so much in the sincerity of the speaker as in the level of objectivity of the statement. De Man postulates that a confession refers to the actual state of objectively verifiable facts, and since "vices [...] are vices primarily because they compel one to lie," it is precisely because a confessor overcomes the incentive to lie, and "stat[es] things as they are [that] the economy of ethical balance is restored and redemption can start."¹³⁵ A confession offers facts of external events, making judgement possible for an external authority, while an excuse focuses on facts concerning unverifiable internal thoughts and feelings, and uses those to persuade the listener. This is why the threat to the usefulness of the confession posed by the excuse is the possibility "that it will indeed exculpate the confessor, thus making the confession (and the confessional text) redundant as it originates."¹³⁶

Rousseau's – and Prentis's – narratives therefore both fall into the category of the excuse rather than the confession. Instead of inviting their readers to form their own

¹³⁴ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 278-301.

¹³⁵ Paul de Man, *Allegories*, 279.

¹³⁶ Paul de Man, *Allegories*, 280.

judgement of the speakers' situations, both *Confessions* and *Shuttlecock* offer their own moral evaluations, and present their facts so as to convince the readers of their truth. Ben Roth argues that for De Man this indicates a shift from the pre-modern realm of empirically, publicly available facts into the modern realm of storytelling, where judgement carries more weight – and offers more certainty – than fact: “At least implicitly, Rousseau’s autobiography is already essentially modern, abandoning as it does the epistemological structure of the confession for the performative one of the excuse.”¹³⁷ This is beyond any doubt also the task of Swift’s postmodern narrators, Prentis included: their stories not so much reveal some pre-existing facts about them, but rather create their selves through the act of narration. The agenda of excusing one’s behaviour, imposing one’s own interpretation is arguably more prominent in *The Sweet Shop Owner* and *Shuttlecock* than in the author’s later writing, where the narrators more openly problematise such approach.

Prentis as an obsessive narrator wants the Other to confirm what he already knows; he only invokes the authority in order to question it. He himself becomes more and more willing to enforce his vision without any reservations. At the climactic point of the novel, he does not hesitate to threaten his own potential readers, blackmailing them into trusting him entirely:

Perhaps it is best not to probe too deeply into those invisible regions, but to accept on trust what is there on the page as the best showing the author could make. And the same is true perhaps of this book (for it has grown into a book) which I have resumed now after a six months’ lapse, only to bring to its conclusion. Once you have read it, it may be better not to peer too hard beneath the surface of what it says – or (who knows if you may not be one of

¹³⁷ Ben Roth, “Confessions, Excuses, and the Storytelling Self: Rereading Rousseau with Paul de Man,” in *Re-thinking European Politics and History*, ed. A. Pasieka, D. Petruccelli, B. Roth (Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows’ Conferences Vol. 32. 2012), 2.

those happily left in peace of mind by my 'work' at the department?) what it doesn't say.
(214)

The decision to culminate his text with a totalising fantasy is taken to a large extent under the influence of Prentis's other paternal figure, that of his boss, Quinn. In fact, where Prentis senior may be argued to function as the Name-of-the-Father, aiming to prevent the restoration of the imaginary unity with the body of the mother/nature, it is equally justified to perceive Quinn as a rather literal representation of the primal father, placing himself above the law and promising Prentis the fulfilment of his wish to reverse the trauma of symbolic castration. As his superior in a police archive, Quinn has the habit of leading Prentis on with incomplete hints about the cases he is working on, setting before him impossible or self-contradictory tasks. The hints increasingly concern the acquaintances of Prentis senior as well as himself, finally suggesting that his account of the escape from the Château is not true. The power he exercises over Prentis puts Quinn ostensibly in the position of the superego: he is a figure of authority, tormenting Prentis, apparently enjoying the frustration of his subordinate as he attempts to meet the impossible demands.

The authority of the superego is initiated during the transition from the imaginary to the symbolic as a consequence of the intervention of the Name-of-the-Father: the longing for the regaining of the imaginary union with the mother is denied; the desire for the mother is substituted by the law of the father and incest taboo is instigated, which is then internalised by the subject. The paradoxical relationship between the law and the superego is that the law can only be grounded in presuming and preventing transgression: "The law, in other words, is founded upon that which it seeks to exclude, or, to put it

another way, the desire to break and transgress the law is the very precondition for the existence of the law itself.”¹³⁸ This is why, as Lacan presents it, the superego both strives to subjugate the subject’s desire to the control of symbolic structures and at the same time urges it on, tempting the subject into subverting them. As a result, from the point of view of the superego, the subject’s efforts are always insufficient: “[F]or psychoanalysis, we are not simply guilty if we break the law and commit incest, but rather we are always-already guilty of the *desire* to commit incest.” This is what Homer calls, after Žižek, “the ultimate paradox of the superego”: the pressure of the superego’s insistence grows with the subject’s efforts to meet its demands, as does the guilt at the inability to achieve this.¹³⁹ The paradoxical relation of the law and its dark underside is reflected in the duality of the father figures in psychoanalysis. The Oedipal father, installing the incest prohibition – and himself subject to the restrictions of this law – is inevitably accompanied by his obscene equivalent in the form of the primal father, presumed to be situated beyond it. This figure was first conceptualised by Freud in his *Totem and Taboo* (1912-13) as one who is in charge of all the women in a horde and therefore standing outside the incest prohibition. For Lacan, men are defined both by the symbolic and the primal father, which means that “incestuous wishes live on indefinitely in the unconscious. Every man, despite castration, continues to have incestuous dreams in which he grants himself the privileges of the imagined pleasure-finding father who knows no bounds.”¹⁴⁰ A character feeling as constricted by his circumstances as Prentis is particularly prone both to the disciplining influence of this agency and to its offer of escaping the discipline.

¹³⁸ Homer, *Lacan*, 58.

¹³⁹ Homer, *Lacan*, 59, original emphasis.

¹⁴⁰ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 111.

Prentis may be argued to cast Quinn in the role of the primal father first of all because of the privileges situating him beyond the limits imposed on everyone else. At work, Quinn possesses seemingly unlimited access to information which he only teasingly reveals to Prentis in an incomplete form. In fact, for a time, the dilemma of whether to expose the suspected machinations preoccupies the protagonist. Prentis expresses a longing for taking both positions – that of the symbolic father, the legislator, modelled on the ego-ideal of his now-absent father and, at the same time, that of the ruthless and amoral figure that he presumes Quinn to be:

And then it would strike me that there were really two promotions I wanted. For, quite apart from prospects at work, I wanted to step into Dad's shoes. Now his mind was gone, now Dad was no more: I wanted what he had had. To be even with him. And then there was Quinn. Now and then in the office, when I came into contact with him, I would seethe inwardly with a mixture of hatred, envy and a desire for certainty. (71)

Prentis's description embodies the conflicted stance of the obsessive towards an authority with a striking exactness. What is more, just like the figure of military authority who installs the vision of the rat torture in the mind of Freud's Rat Man, the model example of the obsessional neurotic, Quinn in many ways really has power to hurt Prentis's father. In other words, Prentis's narrative appears to be struggling against "the suppression or at least the subordination of imaginary relations characterized by rivalry and aggressivity [...] to symbolic relations dominated by concerns with ideals, authority figures, the law, performance, achievement, guilt, and so on,"¹⁴¹ that is, towards the reversing of the consequences of symbolic castration. Resentful of Quinn's social privilege, perceived by Prentis in the former's house in an area which appears to "appropriate [...] an air of the

¹⁴¹ Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 89.

countryside as if [it] alone had a right to it,” he at the same time desires this presumed privileged relation to nature.

Finally, Quinn himself undermines his own position as the imaginary father, disclosing before Prentis his vulnerability. In many ways this is inevitable, since – as Maud Ellmann succinctly demonstrates – the actual father can never be equal to the symbolic *role* of the father, which is why Lacan’s pun on Nom-du-Père – “*non du père*,” normally referring to the father’s no, the paternal prohibition establishing the law – may also signify that “the Name-of-the-Father is *not*-of-the-father, not intrinsic to the man as such but donned upon him like a giant’s robe upon a dwarfish thief.”¹⁴² Drawing his subordinate’s attention to his artificial foot, Quinn confesses that he lost the limb in battlefield, in an act of cowardice: “I didn’t perform any of my much-rehearsed functions as a leader. I obeyed my instinct. I ran like bloody hell.” (192) During the a panicked escape, Quinn stepped on the face of a wounded soldier lying in a ditch. He himself considers the mutilation a punishment for this, and in the light of his renunciation of skills as a leader – not to mention the loss of a “piece of flesh” – it is difficult not to read his words as testimony of being subject to symbolic castration. After this introduction, Quinn invites Prentis to voice his suspicions and confirms them: “Precisely. I knew you would arrive at it. Do you know, I *wanted* you to arrive at it. To help me.” (176, original emphasis) In both cases, Quinn puts himself at Prentis’s mercy, creating the impression of the Law being restored: with his boss no longer a threatening figure standing above the social rules, Prentis, hoping to be treated as an equal, “had the feeling a child has when it

¹⁴² Not at all incidentally, Ellmann also makes a Shakespearean reference at this point, invoking his contribution to our understanding of the formation of the speaking subject that I announced in the previous section, and which will be developed in the section devoted to *Ever After*: “*Macbeth* [...] like *Hamlet*, exposes the absurdity of the attempt to *be* the father, and insinuates that those who take his role are always dwarfish thieves or player kings.” (18)

knows its parents are happy and everything in the household is harmonious and secure.” (91) Indeed, by choosing to destroy the file potentially proving Prentis senior’s treason, his son actively participates in defending the public image of the symbolic father, preserving his heroic demeanour for the Other, while undercutting him in his own perspective. Admitting the possibility of Prentis senior’s dishonourable conduct effectively allows his son to step into both of his fathers’ shoes. Anointed to be Quinn’s successor, Prentis takes over his position at the office and begins to build his own façade of the pleasure-finding father speaking for the symbolic.

1.2.6 Conclusion

In terms of Lacan’s model of obsessional neurosis, Prentis and especially Chapman undeniably illustrate the difficulty with completing the entry into the symbolic: castration has evidently happened for both, but its consequences are handled in an way that arguably brings up associations with the imaginary. The protagonists of Swift’s first two novels agree to face the Other’s demand as a system of symbolic exchange, but not as desire. Both Chapman and Prentis struggle to accept that their others are indeed a mystery, never to be fully known, or, to put it simply, that people around them might want something else than what they expect, that they are not the sole focus of their loved ones’ attention.

In other words, Chapman and Prentis are incapable of accepting the desire – or the incompleteness, the imperfection – of the mOther, which is a necessary condition for the constituting of their own position in the symbolic, or in other words, their own desire. For

Willy, the rules of the Other organise everything, prevent any unpredictability, and enable him to know what people around him think and want. Convention reigns supreme, which makes all social interactions predictable – right down to his own death, envisaged by him as inevitable and inevitably producing a reconciliation with Dorothy. Until the very last moment of the narrative, these assumptions are never questioned. Prentis, on the other hand, is forced to face an actual lack in Quinn and – as a consequence – chooses to embrace the potential lack in Prentis senior. The enforced completeness of the novel's conclusion is repeatedly marked as suspicious and unreliable, and presented as inevitable in spite of, or perhaps actually precisely because of this.

Unlike in *The Sweet Shop Owner*, in his second novel, Swift leaves rather less to the reader's imagination. While Chapman wills Dorothy's return until the final scene of the novel without any visible results, and works towards a heart attack which also ultimately remains the subject of speculation, Prentis quite directly insists on having achieved closure in his self-narration. The author's gestures undermining this claim are subtle but at the same time undeniably present in these descriptions. A number of details in Prentis's own presentation of the scene problematize the message it overtly communicates. Chapman's words are arguably more persuasive; Prentis's appear to be working against themselves, conveying meanings unintended by the speaker. This can be read as evidence of a shift towards a more neurotic stance: for all the explicitness of his remarks, their effect is rather to question the possibility of closure and introduce the notion of language as an unreliable technology, producing its own unexpected senses, regardless of the subject's intention.

Prentis arguably comes further in embracing the rules of the symbolic, and in this paves the way for more properly neurotic protagonists of Swift's later novels. The split that his narrative undergoes in the final scenes corresponds very closely to the position of the symbolic subject: the more categorically he affirms closure, the more evidently the operations of language in his text betray him, making him oscillate between the false control offered by the construct of the strong ego, associated with the obsessional neurotic subject, and the automatic operations of language, relentlessly working to undermine it.

Chapter 2

Graham Swift's following novels, from *Waterland* (1983), through *Out of This World* (1988) to *Ever After* (1992), offer decidedly less obsessive narratives, whose speakers announce the insufficiencies of the symbolic much more openly, positing their protagonists' relation to the Other in a considerably modified manner. The narrators of these three are admittedly not free from familiar obsessive neurotic leanings, as they all in some way undertake repeated attempts at producing coherent narratives of their selves, but even if they exhibit a tendency for imposing totalising interpretations or concealing inconvenient details, their texts – as well as the voices uttering them – problematize the efficiency of those efforts in a considerably more explicit manner than the first two narratives did.

All three novels selected for this chapter point to the exhaustion or the inherent shortcomings of conventions used to tame traumatic experience (a motif already present in *Shuttlecock* and, less directly, in *The Sweet Shop Owner*), subverting them by means of underlining their artificiality. Each of the narratives sets out in pursuit of imaginary fullness, and while they all step away from the sort of closure claimed by the narrators of the first two novels, their conclusions are arguably divergent. The narrator of *Waterland* struggles to sabotage this quest, while admitting more or less openly that undertaking it is in fact inevitable and that we rely on the – however illusory – constructs of coherence and completeness. In a way which allows us to relate it to *Shuttlecock* especially, as has already been indicated, *Out of This World* taunts the reader with the implication that some degree of closure has in fact been (or at least is possible to be) achieved, while hinting at the precariousness of the achievement. *Ever After* culminates in suspension, renouncing

both a melancholic attachment to the presumed lost completeness and the possibility of traditionally understood, complete mourning, instead advocating ambiguity as the only possible resolution. What the three undeniably have in common is thus taking a step towards some form of recognition of the desire of the Other, a stance which was all but absent in their predecessors.

2.1 *Waterland* (1983)

2.1.1 Narrativisation as a means of overcoming the chaos of reality

Waterland (1983), undeniably still Graham Swift's most recognisable and most critically acclaimed novel, can hardly but take a special place in this analysis due both to its status of a landmark in the writer's oeuvre and to its markedly explicit self-reflexivity: a novel narrated by a historian, it is a meditation on the interplay of historiography and storytelling. At the same time, the text is typical for Swift, consistently pursuing concerns predominant in the writer's work as a whole; motifs of loss and crisis loom here as large as in any of his other novels. Fragmented and repetitive, the structure of *Waterland* represents the characters' sense of alienation from the world and entrapment in traumatic temporality which refuses linear development. On the other hand, as for many others of Swift's scarred protagonists, great and personal narratives are in *Waterland* a method of dealing with the trauma of experience and the overwhelming meaninglessness of unmediated reality. *Waterland* is arguably the first case in Swift's oeuvre of an open confrontation with the trauma motivating the narrative. Faced with its ever elusive nature, the novel's characters learn that their efforts at overcoming fear can only be temporary and tentative. While celebrating the contingency of the human condition and questioning

the value of absolutist epistemologies which aim at eradicating the uncertainty of their subjects, the narrator of *Waterland* undeniably mourns the impossibility of regaining any sense of original wholeness. The following section of my thesis will analyse these issues, central to *Waterland*, as a shift away from the obsessive neurotic features of the author's previous novels, presenting the narrator's inconsistent critique of all-embracing narratives as problematising the striving for total coherence within the symbolic order, while at the same time demonstrating – even against the intentions of the speaker – the inevitability of making such attempts.

The text is a confession of Tom Crick, a history teacher facing early retirement and a family scandal. In the narrative, presented as a rambling lecture to his students, Crick attempts to come to terms with the present state of affairs by explaining the tumultuous past that has led to it. In a sense, the current crisis itself is a result of a similar attempt by Tom's wife, Mary, who kidnapped an infant left in front of a supermarket in order to restore a sense of balance to her life, disturbed many years earlier by a crude illegal abortion performed on her when she and Tom were both teenagers. Mary's increasingly delusional religious beliefs provide her with precisely the kind of consolation and order that her husband's narrative strives for – but constantly undermines. To achieve both critical insight into the workings of history and historiography and to restore coherence to his own sense of self, Crick uses material from the past of his own and Mary's families, which he treats as representative of broader processes affecting their region and – by default – the western world. Being a historian, Crick is highly self-reflexive about his treatment of his own past, as well as its broader background, whether in the form of family history or a consideration of universal

processes of great historical changes. Juxtaposing the rise and the decline of his maternal ancestors, the Atkinsons, associated with the rise and the decline of the British Empire, with the inconspicuous presence of his paternal ancestors, the Cricks, who constitute the rough material out of which the empire is built, Crick's narrative is seen by most historiography-oriented critics as representing the traditional, Enlightenment, positivist, teleological view of history as a grand narrative of progress on the one hand, and a more decentralised, postmodern, privatised view of multiplicity of stories on the other. This critical consideration of historiography is in itself motivated by the crisis Crick faces: in view of his unsupportive headmaster and uninterested students, he feels excused in abandoning the traditional curriculum and focusing on the aspects of history most relevant from a more personal point of view. The central concern of his unconventional history lesson is a murder mystery: the story of Tom's sexual maturation and the beginnings of his relationship with Mary includes the tension and the jealousy caused by the fact that she is also the object of fascination for Tom's half-brother, Dick and their friend, Freddie Parr. Led to believe that Freddie is the father of Mary's never-to-be-born child, Dick is driven to murdering him and eventually committing suicide. The repercussions of this situation constitute the narrative present, while the broad framework against which the story is set includes three hundred years of – equally turbulent – history of Atkinsons, local brewing potentates, and Cricks, who are employed by Atkinsons in their land reclamation efforts.

2.1.2 Water/land binary and beyond: the event vs the account

The divergence of their occupations fits well into a series of dualities driving the novel, since the Atkinsons' propensity for action – making history – shown as a method of overcoming the numbing emptiness of the Fens, leads to constant change, while the Cricks' labour, striving to keep the region dry through management of the canal system, is presented as endless, and just like their preference for narrativising reality – making stories – suggests homeostasis rather than development. Daniel Lea considers this disparity along the lines of two discourses introduced by Crick's analysis of historiography: 'natural history,' dealing with natural processes, aiming towards stability of inertia, and 'artificial history,' concerned with the urge to mark the landscape, concluding that the forces described by the two counteract each other, effectively making any final resolution impossible.¹⁴³ As this juxtaposition implies, the novel's agenda is distinctly grounded in the tension between the event and its account, between the raw reality and the narrative. Deserving, perhaps with certain reservations, the name of a historical novel, famously interweaving various methods of recording the past, it has appropriately been quoted as a textbook example of "historiographic metafiction."¹⁴⁴ Private and public histories, scientific and political accounts, fairy tales and chronicles, all ultimately circle around the indescribable trauma of "the Here and Now," the immediate reality which in the end always eludes verbalisation.

Self-referential to a high degree, *Waterland* is also a narrative of narrativisation, of overcoming the traumatic moment by incorporating it into the framework of language, which provides a shelter from the life-threatening intensity of experience. Indeed, the binary opposition which tends to predominate in *Waterland* criticism is invited by the

¹⁴³ Lea, *Graham Swift*, 95.

¹⁴⁴ The term was coined by Linda Hutcheon. In her *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988), she refers to *Waterland* directly at several points (e.g. 15, 55, 108, 117).

novel's very title: stability and dissolution, implied by the water-land dichotomy, are translated into order and chaos,¹⁴⁵ traditional historiography and personalised account,¹⁴⁶ or history and fiction.¹⁴⁷ It has not, however, gone unnoticed that these sets of binaries are far from exhausting the epistemological intricacy of *Waterland*. Del Ivan Janik, for example, while considering in his study the indescribable category of the Here and Now in opposition to different versions of history-making, remarks how its use of generic conventionality serves to undermine any categorical judgement in the narrative: "But *Waterland* takes place in a shifting fairy-tale country, and the contrasts turn out not to be so simple."¹⁴⁸ This ambiguity undeniably also affects the distinction between the Cricks and the Atkinsons outlined earlier: the narrativising efforts of the latter may be perceived to tame the chaos provoked by the activity of the former but the grand narrative of progress written by the Atkinsons may be equally well seen as imposing a form on the shapeless, "natural" existence of the Cricks. In my own exploration of the novel, I will follow the line of thought subverting simple binaries in scrutinising the terms setting the limits of *Waterland*'s territory. The insistence of all too convenient dichotomies follows the strategy of the writer's two previous novels and my argument in the present chapter will be that *Waterland*, as well as its successors, is far more resolute in its emphasis of irresolution. I will endeavour to demonstrate how this novel and its two immediate successors problematise the obsessive strategies discussed in the previous chapter. We have seen in Willy Chapman and Prentis the obsessional tendency to constitute their

¹⁴⁵ As in the article "The Many Facets of Chaos-vs-Order Dichotomy in Graham Swift's *Waterland*", by Stephan Schaffrath (*Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Spring 2003), 84-93).

¹⁴⁶ Or, for that matter, regionalist discourse, as in Hanne Tange's "Regional Redemption: Graham Swift's *Waterland* and the End of History" (*Orbis Litterarium*, 59, 2004, 75-89).

¹⁴⁷ For example, in Stef Craps's *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift: No Short-Cuts to Salvation*.

¹⁴⁸ Del Ivan Janik, "History and the 'Here and Now': the Novels of Graham Swift." *Twentieth Century Literature* Vol. 35. No. 1 (1989), 83. This point is taken up with even more force by Stef Craps.

subjecthoods as non-lacking subjects by appropriating the objects of their desire without recognising that they are in any way related to an entity beyond them – the Other. Bruce Fink argues that this kind of strategy is typical for “the obsessive [who] takes the object for himself and refuses to recognize the Other’s existence, much less the Other’s desire.”¹⁴⁹ Fink attributes the sense of inauthenticity or emptiness experienced by neurotics – be they obsessives or hysterics – to their tendency to take the Other’s desire to replace their own entirely. This is why the aim of analysis must be “the analysand’s separation from the Other’s desire.” (128) Arguably, Crick is the first of Swift’s protagonists who even attempts to achieve anything of the sort.

The uneasy interplay of narrative order and the chaos of reality is a crucial one in any analysis of Swift in general and of *Waterland* in particular. In discussing the formal features of the writer's first novel, *The Sweet-Shop Owner*, Tamas Benyei notes how the “essentially wounded, dislocated nature of the time of the family” is represented in the structure of the text by interruptions of the protagonist's internal monologue.¹⁵⁰ Similar stylistic devices, including disturbances of chronology, reappear throughout most other works of the author. Richard Russell offers the example of the digressive style of *Waterland* as illustrating the difficulty of coming to terms with trauma through its interweaving of personal experience with historical events both local and global, shifting between times and perspectives, or employing a variety of genres to indicate the difficulty of the task of imposing order on its material. Russell classifies *Waterland* as “a trauma fiction” and quotes the dilemma posed by the author of the term, Anne Whitehead: “if trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the

¹⁴⁹ Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 119.

¹⁵⁰ Tamas Benyei, “Narrative and Repetition in *Waterland*,” *British and American Studies* 1.1 (1996): 45-46.

individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativised in fiction?" The suggested solution is "that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection."¹⁵¹

Consequently, much as most other texts by Swift, *Waterland* oscillates between an embrace and a distrust of narrativisation as a technique of endowing traumatic reality with meaning. The effort, as Whitehead indicates, is self-contradictory, if not self-defeating. This is why it is difficult not to be suspicious of the totalising gesture performed early on in the novel by Tom Crick, its protagonist and narrator, who announces provocatively to his listeners: "Your history teacher wishes to give you the complete and final version."¹⁵² As Daniel Lea points out, this ambition is supported by Crick's choice of autobiography as the convention which assumes a possibility of a detached, panoramic view on one's own life, evidently indicative of the nostalgic nature of this endeavour. Predictably, however, his story proves to be far from achieving anything like this goal, if only because Crick's position – still very much in the midst of events which have triggered his confession – denies any such possibility, situating him rather as an uncertain, destabilised, postmodern narrator than the self-secure Victorian model to which he appears to aspire.¹⁵³

Indeed, the achronological, meandering text, a collage of various genres and perspectives, constantly changing time planes and locations, reflects the impossibility of

¹⁵¹ Quoted in Richard Russell, "Embodiments of History and Delayed Confessions: Graham Swift's *Waterland* as Trauma Fiction." *Papers on Language & Literature* Volume: 45. Issue: 2. 2009. <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Embodiments+of+history+and+delayed+confessions%3A+Graham+Swift%27s...-a0200907752>, accessed 27 July 2021.

¹⁵² Graham Swift, *Waterland* (London: Picador, 1983), 6.

¹⁵³ Lea, *Graham Swift*, 93; The hope of completion is further compromised by the inconsistencies in the nineteenth-century triumphalism, pointed out by Crick himself. Subversion of Victorian certainty is also a prominent theme in Swift's *Ever After*.

containing reality within an authoritative account, regardless of the speaker's intention. The narrator's striving for a complete and final meaning can certainly be associated with the notion of phallic *jouissance*: the attempt to make the symbolic order, despite its inherent inefficiencies and contradictions, coherent and full. This requires – as testified by Lacan's description of phallic *jouissance* as “masturbatory” – the obsessive neurotic's gesture of neutralising the Other, denying its inaccessible enigma. The nature of language itself does not allow the achievement of the goal: as was already demonstrated in the previous chapter, whatever inconsistencies are removed from the symbolic, they inevitably return to disturb its supposedly ideal coherence. In analogy to Crick's own claims about the ambiguous – or ambiguity-inducing – role of storytelling, Craps invokes Maurice Blanchot's remarks on the ethical significance of literature. The role of the artist is in his perspective to testify to the traumatic core of reality, denying sense, to question our mastery of our reality. Craps concludes: “It falls on literature, then, to deliver us from fatal fantasies of full meaning by calling us back to the literal non-sense upon which all meaning is precariously founded.”¹⁵⁴ The lure – and the danger – of the quest for complete meaning are certainly crucial to *Waterland* on every level of the novel, and – in line with Craps's observation – the emphasis is moved towards an endless deferral of meaning, with the subject properly established within the symbolic with all of its deficiencies, offering an arguably less obsessive neurotic stance than that of Swift's previous narratives.

¹⁵⁴ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 87.

2.1.3 Criticism of historiography

The narrative delivered by Tom Crick is centred around a traumatising series of events which it repeatedly tries to domesticate through storytelling, at the same time pondering on the value of this strategy. In this context, the issues of the narrator's reliability or integrity and of his ethical investments figure in a manner much more explicit than in *The Sweet Shop Owner* but certainly more nuanced than in *Shuttlecock*. As a history teacher, Crick persistently and rather forcibly expresses his reservations about totalising constructs of grand history, arguing for the more truthful alternative of personal histories. As a narrator, however, he constantly finds himself at odds with his own theses. Lea describes persuasively the discrepancy between Crick's repeatedly declared belief in antiteleological conception of the past and the fact that his interpretation of his own troubled life experience depends on a nostalgic view of history as a linear progression of cause and effect.¹⁵⁵ This lack of consistence unsurprisingly extends to the protagonist's notions of subjectivity: after all, determining one's present predicament in fact boils down to (re)creating one's personal history, which in turn may be employed for therapeutic purposes, if we have any confidence in Freud's concept of the talking cure. The narrative unfolded by Crick, undeniably representative of Swift's loquacious speakers and their attempts to "talk over" the atrocities haunting them, on one level evidently affirms the power of storytelling as a response to trauma, both in its therapeutic and ethical dimension. Famously defining the human being as "the storytelling animal," (53) Crick's story abounds in examples of people whose sense of self was restored through telling stories and he arguably treats his own lengthy lecture in these terms. However, both the rhetoric of his discourse and the incidents that make up its

¹⁵⁵ Lea, *Graham Swift*, 74-5.

plot at the same time amply demonstrate that the salutary potential of language is severely limited, and that it in fact tends to produce its own traumas. This is why *Waterland* may be perceived in equal measure as asserting the redemptive force of language and lamenting the presumed innocence lost on the entry into the structures of symbolic exchange, seen as a banishment from Eden. These two approaches, in fact, arguably constitute the axes of the irresolvable tension on which the text's epistemology is based.

2.1.4 Criticism of autobiography

The latter stance, emphasising a dissatisfaction with the realm of signs, finds expression in images invoked by the narrator of his idyllic pre-symbolic existence, of "prehistorical, pubescent times, when we drifted instinctively without the need for prior arrangement, to our meeting place," (44) of times before sexuality and the imaginary-symbolic reality of adulthood, of times of a conjectured unity with the circular, timeless natural history. Crick's endeavour is grounded in a foundational assumption of autobiography as a genre: through telling his story, through going back to his origins, he hopes to reintroduce a sense of order and coherence into his life. The potential for autobiography to function as an excuse, imposing a moral interpretation of the events described on its reader, is certainly as important to Crick as it has been shown to be to Prentis, and by proxy to Rousseau (and both characters are equally unwilling to admit these features of their chosen genre). This longing for a return to an idealised past, which in *Waterland* happens at the intersection of historiography and the individual psyche, is not unfamiliar to psychoanalysis. Based on a presumption that a coherent state before the

trauma existed and can be restored, it is possible to relate – although only by negation – to the notion of trauma as a retrospective phenomenon, not just ungraspable in its violent intensity, but in fact produced only through the process of repetition, striving at integrating the event into the structures of the symbolic. Clearly, the possibility of “going back” is categorically excluded in this conception: subjecthood is in fact only constituted in the symbolic network on condition of a traumatic loss of any claim at “authentic” individual being and the sense of a lost wholeness actually only appears at the point where a subject able to realise the loss is constituted. In this context, narratives – or in fact language itself – may certainly be conceptualised retrospectively as a form of trickery by means of which the individual is tempted out of the safe confines of an imagined wholeness, only to be trapped in the irreducible sense of insufficiency.

This perception in turn relates to Lacan’s notion of mirror stage as a permanent element of the structure of the human psyche, which was already mentioned in the previous chapter: the shock of the fracturing of primary narcissism, the moment of infant’s realisation of its separateness from m(O)ther induces an ongoing series of identifications, intended to reinforce the individual’s sense of identity and as such cannot be considered exclusively in developmental, diachronic terms. Described by Malcolm Bowie as the realm of “desperate delusional attempt to be and to remain ‘what one is’,”¹⁵⁶ the imaginary is precisely the order in Lacanian psychoanalysis associated with an impossible search for wholeness and coherence. The sense of loss generated by this process motivates endless production of signs, meant to fill the void, which they can never possibly do. In fact, absence operates as the organising principle of the symbolic order to such a degree that the function of the signifying chain is ultimately that of

¹⁵⁶ Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 92.

“deferring any presence of meaning as content, in order to forestall the terrifying confrontation with this originary and constitutive absence.”¹⁵⁷ The lack which lies at the core of the Lacanian subject is hidden in self-creation achieved through the coherence of a narrative, and language serves to tame the trauma of that separation by producing a unified self-image associated precisely with the mirror stage and creating an illusion of the ideal self through repression of the real. In Lacan’s view, it is extremely difficult to separate an adequately functioning subject from a pathological one, and the blurry nature of this division is well illustrated by this tendency, which is only pushed to the extreme in the obsessive neurotic.

On the other hand, however, with its inherent gaps and inconsistencies, storytelling also reflects the inadequacies and dissatisfaction associated with the symbolic order, the incessant substitution condemning the subject to an endless search for what can never possibly be found. Much as the rules of social interaction determined in the symbolic order protect the subject from the unbearable pressure of the real, they alienate him or her from anything that might be experienced as an “authentic self,” initiating a counterproductive striving to regain the presumed pre-Oedipal fullness. In the words of Paul Verhaeghe: “The interaction between the two levels consists in the never ending attempt of the chain of signifiers to produce an answer to the real. This attempt fails and results in the exact opposite: the more signifiers produced, the further one moves away from this real [...] The subject chooses the (m)Other in order to regain the lost paradise of the primary experience of satisfaction, and the net result will be an ever more clear

¹⁵⁷ Stephen Ross, “A Very Brief Introduction to Lacan,” <http://web.uvic.ca/~saross/lacan.html>, accessed 15 February, 2013.

delineation of this loss.”¹⁵⁸ This is why Crick’s autobiographic project is inescapably flawed, as he perfectly realises. Its conceptions are as Rousseauian as those of Prentis’s diary with its enforced closures. The assumption that the subject speaks from a vantage point beyond the tribulations of the story, with calm control, also brings up associations with the obsessive neurotic position, with its delusions of complete control. Arguably, Crick is closer to Prentis senior in his openly voiced suspicion of Romantic fallacies plaguing his own account. However, as we have seen in the previous chapter, self-awareness by no mean insulates a narrative against the lure of the delusion of self-sufficiency. In many ways, Crick’s confession does serve as an excuse, after all.

2.1.5 The narrator’s inconsistency on both levels

Fittingly, Crick is characteristically inconsistent in his theorising: only a couple of pages after an observation about the overwhelming intensity of events destroying an implied stasis, motivating the impossible desire to go back to the state before the trauma,¹⁵⁹ he offers to his students, as one of the possible alternatives of conceptualising history, the constructivist view that reality is essentially devoid of any positive content and that history’s recounting of a series of significant events is merely designed to divert our attention from this realisation:

Reality’s not strange, not unexpected. Reality doesn’t reside in the sudden hallucination of events. Reality is uneventfulness, vacancy, flatness. Reality is that nothing happens. How many of the events of history have occurred, ask yourselves, for this and for that reason but

¹⁵⁸ Paul Verhaeghe, “Causation and Destitution of a Pre-ontological Non-entity: On the Lacanian Subject,” in Nobus, *Key Concepts*, 176.

¹⁵⁹ Crick states, while relating conversation with the headmaster, who avoids facing the heart of the matter: “He’d rather pretend it isn’t real. Reality’s so strange and unexpected. He doesn’t want to discuss it.” (21)

for no other reason, fundamentally, than the desire to make things happen? I present to you History, the fabrication, the diversion, the reality-obscuring drama. History, and its near relative, Histrionics... (34)

This train of thought leads Crick to the observation – predictably questioned by his most rebellious student – categorically denying existence to consequential historical events¹⁶⁰ such as the French Revolution, their inaccessibility only masked – or perhaps replaced – by the construct of historical narrative: “Where then does the revolution lie? [...] Does it lie in some impenetrable amalgam of countless individual circumstances too complex to be analysed? It’s a curious thing [...] but the more you try to dissect events, the more you lose hold of what you took for granted in the first place – the more it seems it never actually occurred, but occurs, somehow, only in the imagination...” (121) This conception bears close resemblance to Slavoj Žižek’s notions on the retroactive creation of the past in his analysis of Lacan’s theorisation of the paradoxical temporality of the symptom. Žižek translates the puzzling Lacanian elaborations into a surprisingly straightforward formulation approximating the plain language of historiography:

As soon as we enter the symbolic order, the past is always present in the form of historical tradition and the meaning of these traces is not given; it changes continually with the transformations of the signifier’s network. Every historical rupture, every advent of a new master-signifier, changes retroactively the meaning of all tradition, restructures the narration of the past, makes it readable in another, new way.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ This clearly repeats the position of both the Chapmans and Prentis in relation to the mythical events of World War II.

¹⁶¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (London, New York: Verso, 2008), 58.

This leads Žižek to a conclusion extremely close to Crick's thesis: if “[t]he past exists as it is included, as it enters into the synchronous net of the signifier,”¹⁶² historical events indeed do not exist until they are narrated – existence is, after all, the domain of the symbolic.

2.1.6 The impossibility of “going back”

This understanding of the past – and trauma – assuming that it actually only comes into existence once registered by the symbolic, leads us back to the conviction of recuperative powers of language in Crick's narrative. The optimistic position is perhaps most explicitly represented in an exceptional instance among the “allegorical figure[s] of silence,” which Benyei points out as one extreme of linguistic responses to trauma in Swift, whose

every novel contains [...] a catatonic character [...] living in a home and embodying some mystifying secret that another character is obsessively trying to excavate [...] also embodying the element beyond language that all the novels contain within themselves like a secret centre.¹⁶³

In *Waterland*, these uncommunicative characters include Sarah Atkinson, the narrator's great-grandmother, Dick Crick, his half-brother, or his wife, Mary Crick, whose madness is displayed precisely in her inability to tell the trauma of her life. The experience of a crude abortion in her adolescence, repressed for a long time, finally disturbs the normal mental process of memory in a manner symptomatic for other trauma victims in Swift's prose:

¹⁶² Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 59.

¹⁶³ Tamas Benyei, “The Novels of Graham Swift: Family Photos,” in *Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. Richard J. Lane, Rod Mengham and Philip Tew (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 52-53.

First there is nothing; then there is happening; a state of emergency. And after the happening, only the telling of it. But sometimes the happening won't stop and let itself be turned into memory. So she's still in the midst of events... which have not ceased. Which is why it's impossible to get through. Which is why she cannot cross into the safe, sane realm of hindsight and answer the questions of the white-coated doctors: 'Now tell us, Mrs Crick, you can tell us everything, you can tell...' (284)

While in the narrative present Mary remains in her uncommunicative condition, much like the mute characters from this and other novels,¹⁶⁴ a real possibility of being actually delivered from the trauma of reality-shattering experience is offered. Mary's father in law, Henry Crick, a shell-shocked soldier who comes back from World War I as "a hospital case [who] limps and blinks and falls flat on his face at sudden noises," feels helpless in the face of the atrocities he witnessed and unable to process them, to give them coherence in language: "For a long time he finds it hard to separate in his mind the familiar-but-foreign fields of the Fens and the foreign-but-familiar mudscapes he has come from [...]. He thinks: there is only reality, there are no stories left. About his war experience he says: 'I remember nothing.'" (17) However, thanks to a "story-book romance" (130) with his nurse, he "learns, also, to tell those stories of old Flanders... which will lead on to other stories, till the pain, save for sporadic twinges in the knee, is almost gone." (194-5) It is Helen Atkinson's story-telling which is used to reintroduce Henry into language and work through the traumatic event enabling him to overcome "the paradoxical temporality of the trauma,"¹⁶⁵ in which the momentous past event continues to be repeated endlessly in the victim's mind. An absence of meaning is at the centre of the repetition, since Henry is not

¹⁶⁴ Examples include Willy's wife in *The Sweet Shop Owner*, Prentis senior in *Shuttlecock*, Sarah and Mary in *Waterland*, June in *Last Orders*, or Tom in *Wish You Were Here*.

¹⁶⁵ Benyei, "Family Photos," 48.

actually haunted by the horrifying details of his experience; instead “it’s oblivion he’d like to forget, it’s that sense of the dizzy void he can’t get away from.” (193)

Significantly, Helen’s therapy exposes the dangers of the overvaluation of narrativisation, an obsessive approach in which the conclusive conquering of the haunting loss is believed possible, at the same time as she advocates her therapy. Tom’s commentary contributes to this effect with his remark about “a storybook romance,” underlining the suspicious conventionality of the saving influence and indirectly denying any final, clear-cut solution. Helen is further described as a “white-aproned goddess,” a nurse in whose handling of her patients “there lurks a mother [who] has come to regard these poor, deranged inmates as children.” Her faith in telling stories as a way of soothing their suffering leads her to formulate the following advice for them: “No, don’t forget. Don’t erase it. You can’t erase it. But make it into a story. Just a story. Yes, everything’s crazy. What is real? All a story. Only a story...” (194) In his ethics-oriented reading of the novel, Stef Craps emphasises its insistence on the necessity to witness the real (given the form of trauma)¹⁶⁶ and I will discuss the dangers of stories detached from or ignoring the elements resisting narrativisation further. For now, let me observe that this maternal figure (bordering on the divine) offering comfort of language to the traumatised appears to stand between the Desire of the Mother and the No-of-the-Father, a point of transition from the imaginary dream of completeness to the symbolic absence: the assurance of soothing the pain is located in the illusory reality of “just a story.” As Elizabeth Wright puts it: “Where the Desire of the Mother was a lure, the Father’s word becomes a trick, playing with the interanimation of the old desire with a promised, forever deferred

¹⁶⁶ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 71.

satisfaction of that desire.”¹⁶⁷ Therefore, while Helen’s claim about the therapeutic value of narrativisation is evidently exaggerated (the very condition in which she finds Henry demonstrates that there are elements of experience refusing to be contained within the bounds of the imaginary-symbolic reality), her promise of deliverance in itself allows the production of desire, whose very insufficiency defends the subject from the oppressive completeness of the Symbolic that the obsessive neurotic longs for and dreads at the same time.

¹⁶⁷ Elizabeth Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reappraisal* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 103.

2.1.7 Symbolising trauma: the aporias of language

The other catatonic characters – Sarah, Mary, and Dick – refuse anything like this reintroduction into the symbolic. The difficulty of making things into stories, far greater than the calming assurances of Mary’s doctors might want to have it, is demonstrated by Stef Craps on the level of the language of Crick’s narrative itself in an insightful analysis of the scene of the abortion which motivates Mary’s eventual breakdown. Disguised in the fairy tale convention, the narrative of the incident is presented through a taming framework, which, however, immediately proves to be inadequate. The operation is performed by a local woman, Martha Clay, introduced in the title of the chapter as a witch. The character is, however, stripped of much of her mystery by a perhaps somewhat disturbingly matter-of-fact description of her position in the local community: “‘About the Witch.’ Who was called Martha Clay. Who was Bill Clay’s wife (or so it was said). Who lived in Bill Clay’s cottage on the far side of Wash Fen Mere. Who made potions and predictions (or so it was claimed). And who also got rid of love-children...” (258) The scene of the adolescents’ meeting Martha in person negates the literary convention even more explicitly, since they observe “[n]o pointed hat, no broomstick, no grinning black cat on shoulder (only a yapping, slavering, grizzled brute of a dog).” (260) Craps further argues that the scrupulous enumeration of items which Tom Crick saw in Martha’s hut is aimed as containing the traumatic experience, and points to the collapse of the attempt: “Martha’s dwelling-place is littered with uncanny things [...] which resist Tom’s classificatory impulse. [...] The precision of the catalogue gives way as Tom is overcome by the horror of unnameable things and of things about whose exact nature he would

rather remain in the dark.”¹⁶⁸ A similar failure occurs when Crick stops in his description of the appearance of Martha herself: indeed, one might get the impression that the words proliferating uncontrollably point merely to the impotence of language, contained between repeated aposiopeses when the speaker mentions the woman’s smell:

And as we meet Martha, we meet Martha’s smell...

But enough of Martha’s costume. (And enough of that smell!) [...] Nose: bony (but in no way hooked). Forehead: bumpy-shiny, tobacco-hued. Hair: waxy-grey, pulled tight down to her scalp [...] And those cheeks! Those cheeks! They’re not just red. They don’t merely suggest alternate and continual exposure over several decades, without any intermediate stages, to winter gales and scorching sun. They’re bladders of fire. They’re fleshy pimentos. They’re over-ripe tomatoes.

And, speaking of over-ripeness, this smell...

“Well now, well now.” She holds up the oil lamp. “What brings you to owd Martha?” (260)

In a manner characteristic for the entire novel, storytelling emerges in this episode as both endowed with a potential for subduing disorderly reality and crumbling under its own weight: the excessive wealth of language serves ultimately to demonstrate its powerlessness in containing experience, since the overabundance of increasingly apophatic descriptive phrases culminates in admitting that description can never measure up to sensation. In effect, words cloud over rather than reveal experience. Following Catherine Bernard’s argument on the fundamental limitation of the effectiveness of realistic narrative in containing the truth of experience, Craps describes the counterproductive effect of Crick’s circuitous style by pointing to its self-defeating nature: “Each diversion seems to erect a narrative screen before the referent, hides the facts however much it wants to get closer to them. While the narrative departures are

¹⁶⁸ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 75.

introduced to clarify the action, to illuminate the backdrop, they render the representation more opaque, more contradictory.”¹⁶⁹ He adds that the defect lies in the nature of language itself, which is why no objective, complete description is ever possible, especially since the conventions of realism are perhaps best fitted to expose this shortcoming in their claim of faithful, direct representation: “If carried through to its ultimate conclusion, realist representation comes up against the materiality of language. Becoming opaque, it loses its capacity to communicate, and instead offers intimations of an incommunicable reality which precedes and exceeds language.”¹⁷⁰ Stendhal’s mirror walking along the highway does not even need to be veiled by anything external to itself, since it is already obscured by irregularities of its own structure. In Lacanian terms, the excessive effort of mimetic art to conceal the trauma created by the unbridgeable gap between the real and the structures of the symbolic may only ever be counterproductive: its result will inevitably be an illusion of coherence, which cannot but evoke anxiety and thus point to that which it is supposed to hide.

This, according to Lena Magnone,¹⁷¹ is effectively the only ethical approach to representation: in her psychoanalytic consideration of realist practice in literature and visual arts, it is revealed as only apparently false or misleading; after all, trying to hide trauma discloses it anyway, while staging it conceals it behind the surface of the representation. Realist defence against trauma testifies to its presence, which is why in *Seminar XI* Lacan sides with Parrhasius in the account of the painters’ contest given by

¹⁶⁹ In Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 80.

¹⁷⁰ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 81.

¹⁷¹ Lena Magnone, “Traumatyczny Realizm,” in *Rewolucja pod spodem*, ed. Przemysław Czapliński (Poznań: Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne, 2008), 22-44.

Pliny.¹⁷² Parrhasius's painting essentially depicts absence rather than the illusion of presence, successfully convincing Zeuxis of a presence hidden behind the tempting veil. Indeed, the views on storytelling – as well as history making – expressed by Crick relate well to Lacan's anti-mimetic thinking about art. The uniqueness of the traumatising event is in *Waterland* perceived as an exception to the overwhelming awareness of the numbing nothingness of reality, its nauseating emptiness: storytelling is for Swift's characters a means of escape not only from the unexpectedly drastic encroachments of the chaos of the world on their fantasies but, primarily, from the dread of living in the liquid landscape of the Fens: "And what are the Fens, which so imitate in their levelness the natural disposition of water, but a landscape which, of all landscapes, most approximates to Nothing?" (11) This is the reality of nothingness that Henry is unable to get away from, the real supposedly contained in the neutralising confines of the construct of reality, the terrifying realisation that the symbolic is based on absence and lack, the unsymbolisable, reflected in Stef Craps' distinction between not remembering an event and remembering a non-event:

Remembering nothing, it turns out, is not a matter of simply forgetting something that happened in the past and that one fully experienced at the time, but rather of remembering the occasion of nothing happening: one's obliviousness to events which one could not grasp or make sense of as they occurred. (72)

¹⁷² In the artistic competition, as told by Pliny, Zeuxis produces an image of grapes so realistically that birds attempt to eat them. Parrhasius responds with a picture of a veil, which leads Zeuxis to demand that it be drawn, so that he can see the picture. Being made aware of his error, Zeuxis admits his rival's superiority in deceiving him, an artist. Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, ed. John Bostock (2005), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:abo:phi,0978,001:35:36>, accessed 4 March, 2019.

Treating trauma therefore means, in Fink's terms, that language "has to be brought in ex post facto" in order to "speak those events, weave them into a fabric of meaning, and thus diffuse their impact."¹⁷³ Trauma as a manifestation of the real signals precisely a limit to the process of symbolisation, which is why, as I have already mentioned, it can only be recreated retrospectively rather than recorded in the symbolic.

The struggle of facing of the unbearable real is perhaps nowhere better expressed in the novel than in the scene of young Tom's nightmare. Assigned the distracting task of plucking a duck while Martha performs her operation on Mary,¹⁷⁴ Tom falls asleep and his dream includes a series of motifs associated with fertility: the dead bird in his hand is transformed into a living hen which begins to lay eggs, his dead mother appears to collect them and leads him to the chicken hen, which is transformed into an old windmill where he and Mary used to make love: "And Mary's inside lying naked with her knees up. Mother discreetly retires. And Mary starts to explain about her menstrual cycle and about the wonders inside her hole and how babies get to be born." At the point where Mary screams and proclaims herself to be the mother of God, Tom awakens and an uncannily Lacanian comment follows: "It's not a dream. What you wake up into can't be a dream." (266) Lacan's view on the matter is, of course, exactly opposite, although it may be argued that Crick's "can't be" in a sense testifies that he in fact agrees with this interpretation: the phrase, after all, functions to convince one(self) of the truth of a questionable claim. As Lacan argues in *Seminar XI*, what one wakes up to *is* a dream – the dream of a coherent, predictable, symbolic-imaginary reality, which protects one from the incursions of the real, revealing itself in sleep. An awakening to the underlying real is

¹⁷³ Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, 171-2.

¹⁷⁴ With an inevitable Swiftian pun for commentary: "'No, bor. You take the duck.' She chuckles, draws the curtain. 'You take the duck!'" (265)

only approached when the dreamer is about to encounter the traumatic core of the dream, while the waking reality provides a dreamlike escape from the horror of directly facing the real. In Crick's case, narrativisation further sanitises the dangerous content: this section in his story is presented through the convention of the fairy tale, using third-person narration, distancing him from the horrific events (significantly, the same strategy is adopted when discussing his grandfather's incestuous relationship with his own daughter, equally pivotal to the development of the entire narrative).

What is more, as Craps observes, Crick emphasises his effort to face the traumatic kernel of the events, not only having witnessed them, but – despite Martha's warnings – having looked into the pail containing the dead foetus. However, the trauma once again proves impossible to confront as Crick's description, using clichéd metaphors and phrases, falls prey to its own “deflationary mechanism.”¹⁷⁵ Craps points to the final phrase, a typically Swiftian bad pun, inappropriate both in the light of the dark subject matter of the passage and the overall erudite style of the narrator: “I climbed the river wall, descended to the water's edge. I turned my head away. But then I looked. I howled. A farewell glance. A red spittle, floating, frothy, slowly sinking. A red spittle, floating, frothing, slowly sinking. Borne on the slow Ouse currents. Borne downstream. Borne all the way (but for the Ouse eels...) to the Wash. Where it all comes out.” (247) A similar betrayal by language is noted by Pascale Tollance: referring to the same scene, she describes the subject as excluded from its own discourse, but inscribed in words coming from outside. Tollance's example concerns the insistent use of the verb “borne,” in the sense of “carried away,” about the dead foetus, which brings up obvious additional connotations in the context of the abortion, and works against any effort on the part of the

¹⁷⁵ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 197.

protagonist to look away.¹⁷⁶ Alongside the failure of his categorising efforts in describing the setting of the scene, referred to earlier, these instances demonstrate the collapse of the narrator's taming frameworks. They also confirm my perception of Crick as an obsessive neurotic, since they are instances of his tendency to ignore, overlook the desire of the Other, the unconscious, the uncontrollable nature of language, even though on the surface of things he declares himself to be perfectly aware of the limitations of his tool.

Therefore, as in most of Swift's prose, storytelling is contemplated in its dangerous potency for shaping reality while the costs and limitations of the method are also exposed. Young Tom's hypocritical policy of "[a]ct innocent, you'll be innocent" (48) is – more than once – undermined by horrifying events piercing through symbolic constructs. Perhaps the most prominent instance is the situation which opens the main part of the narrative: the discovery of the body of Tom's friend, murdered by his half-brother Dick, floating in the river. After the corpse is pulled out of the water,

because it is the recommended position for the resuscitation of the not-quite-drowned, Dad had him placed chest-down on the ground. And there [...] he began to press between Freddie's prominent shoulder-blades, to raise and lower his stiffened arms and to continue to do so for a full quarter of an hour. Not because he did not know, any less than Dick and I knew, that Freddie was dead, but because Dad, being superstitious, would never exclude the possibility of a miracle, and because this ritual pretence at resuscitation staved off the moment when we must face the indictment of truth. (26)

The application of the useless routine is an excellent example of a symbolic institution used for protection against the truth the characters do not want to face, a way of shunning the shocking experience, a story they tell themselves and behind which they hope to hide.

¹⁷⁶ Pascale Tollance, *La Scène de la Voix* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires de Septentrion, 2011), 154.

This denial of the nauseating event may be seen as a defence against an intrusion of the real, a reaction not so much to the reality of the corpse itself but of the drastic contingency of human existence which produces such corpses in the first place. *Waterland* is, to a large extent, precisely an account of ceaseless irruptions of *tuché* into the order imposed by the symbolic. Storytelling is the only available means of attempting to live with this terrifying condition which, like the traumatic real in psychoanalysis, is an inaccessible kernel around which language revolves, endlessly striving to contain it within its structures. Indeed, the whole tradition of storytelling in the Crick family is presented as being aimed at achieving a soothing effect in the face of the impossible encounter: confronted with the unbearable, life-threatening trauma of the immediate experience of the meaningless world around them, the Cricks opt for storytelling as a means of coping with it.

To live in the Fens is to receive strong doses of reality. The great, flat monotony of reality; the wide, empty space of reality. Melancholia and self-murder are not unknown in the Fens. Heavy drinking, madness and sudden acts of violence are not uncommon. How do you surmount reality, children? [...] How did the Cricks outwit reality? By telling stories. (15)

In recounting memories from his childhood to his students, Tom Crick admits that “even in the no-nonsense and pragmatic twentieth century, this future schoolmaster quaked in his bed at night for fear of something – something vast and void – and had to be told stories and counter-stories to soothe his provoked imagination.” (15) This memory in itself suggests the paradoxical presence of something threatening in what is described by the narrativising efforts of the family as “not there,” but what still undermines this

description. Monotonous, void reality filled with suicide, madness and acts of violence does, after all, appear to be something of a contradiction in terms.

Significantly, at least one of the factors motivating Crick's narrativising urge is to be found in a scene which emphasises the ultimate impotence of language, the ceaseless productions of signifiers, incapable of representing the elusive – though unbearably persistent – occurrence marking a traumatic absence:

She croaks, after a long pause in which it seems she will never quite find enough breath to speak, "Well this... is a fine... state of things... isn't it?" With an air of almost-levity. But her eyes say something different. They say: Look children, your mother's dying. In a little while she won't be here any more. It's a unique, a momentous event. Unique and momentous, not to say unexpected, for your mother too. It only happens once, it won't be repeated for you. Note it, observe it.

(And I did, children, very carefully. And though, indeed, it only happened once, it's gone on happening, the way unique and momentous things do, for ever and ever, as long as there's a memory for them to happen in...) (237-8)

This paradoxical relationship between the unique event and its endless repetition illustrates the relationship of the Lacanian categories of the real and the symbolic. This is to a large extent the issue that continues to drive Crick's narrative: the question of the possibility of accessing the real, if only in a traumatic form, and undertaking to contain it in the structures of the symbolic, despite the ultimate impossibility of the task, which is juxtaposed with the constructivist conception that all is merely a story: the past, as has been noted, is marked as irretrievably lost by the very symbolic structures that allow us to express its absence and promise to restore it.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the real and the symbolic are interdependent and mutually exclusive.¹⁷⁷ In fact, the introduction into the social reality of the symbolic is achieved through cancelling out the real, alienating the subject's being in an exogenous system of rules. When the speaking subject emerges, perceiving itself as distinct from the incomprehensible magma of the pre-symbolic existence, the supposed unmediated, bodily *jouissance* becomes permanently unavailable, unless in the form of experiences very much like the attacks of the Here and Now. At the same time, the symbolic can never exhaust the material of the real, symbolise it in its entirety. Whatever part of what is called "reality" remains unsymbolised (or, more specifically, impossible to symbolise), is assumed to belong to the real. Trauma is one of its faces: a leftover of the process, which constitutes a blockage in the process of substitution.¹⁷⁸ In turn, the interventions of this traumatising remainder serve to undermine the stability of the imaginary-symbolic construct of reality, repeatedly bringing out its inevitable contingency, in Lacan's later teachings closely associated with the notion of *jouissance*, against which language is perceived to be a form of defence. In fact, according to Bruce Fink, "[t]he subject comes into being as a form of attraction toward and defence against a primordial, overwhelming experience of what the French call *jouissance*: a pleasure that is excessive, leading to a sense of being overwhelmed or disgusted, yet simultaneously providing a source of fascination."¹⁷⁹ The words of Tom Crick on the dangers of immediate experience capture both the dominance of the symbolic-imaginary construct of reality and its vulnerability to invasion by the real:

¹⁷⁷ Indeed, unlike the imaginary and the symbolic, the real is not referred to as "an order" – Lacan calls it "a register" instead.

¹⁷⁸ Homer, *Lacan*, 83.

¹⁷⁹ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, XII.

[T]he Here and Now, which brings both joy and terror, comes but rarely – does not come even when we call it. That’s the way it is: life includes a lot of empty space. We are one-tenth living tissue, nine-tenths water; life is one-tenth Here and Now, nine-tenths a history lesson. For most of the time the Here and Now is neither now nor here. (52)

On the other hand, the inclusion of “both joy and terror” in his description corresponds to the ambiguous status of *jouissance* as that which is at the same time infinitely tempting and repulsive or unbearable because transgressing the prohibitions of the pleasure principle results in pain rather than increased pleasure. *Jouissance*, in opposition to desire, is an unpredictable, overwhelming force, with no aim or purpose, which is ungraspable and threatening to the very existence of the speaking subject. At the same time, the allure of *jouissance* is grounded in the fact that the fulfilment of desire in the symbolic order of language relations is by definition impossible, that the satisfaction offered by substitution will always prove insufficient. This frustration requires the support of fantasy to enable the subject to function within the symbolic:

As we seek to realize our desires we will inevitably be disappointed – the satisfaction we achieve is never quite enough; we always have the sense that there is something more, something we have missed out on, something more we could have had. This something more that would satisfy and fulfil us beyond the meagre pleasure we experience is *jouissance* [...] This belief in the excessive *jouissance* of the Other is sustained through fantasy.¹⁸⁰

Fantasy thus allows the subject to accept the insufficiency of the pleasure which is available as well as the unavailability of the real, conditioning the very existence of the construct of reality but at the same time inspiring an endless quest for the completeness presumed in *jouissance*. The Here and Now is associated by the narrator both with the

¹⁸⁰ Homer, *Lacan*, 89-90.

carnal rapture of his discovery of sexuality and with the nauseating realisation that because of this discovery and a tangled web of jealousy and lies, his childhood friend, Freddie, has been murdered by Tom's half-brother. Therefore, in Tom Crick's life story, the unexpected, menacing immediacy of events stretches literally between the extremes of different conceptions and faces of *jouissance* in the Lacanian psychoanalysis: from the biological dimension of troubling sexual urges and the quest to satisfy them, through the terrifying consequences of overlooking the demands of the pleasure principle (that is, neglecting the costs of gaining one's pleasure),¹⁸¹ the "feeling in the guts," piercing through the protection of symbolic constructs presumed to tame the chaos of the world around us, to the Nothing of unmediated reality, constantly invading on "fragile islands of life." (296) However, the affinity of Crick's Here and Now with the Lacanian real may ultimately appear debatable, if only because the notion of *jouissance* presumes an excess which is difficult to observe in all manifestations quoted by Crick to illustrate the notion. In fact – and more significantly – his own words about the Here and Now "turning out to be the fairy-tale" (52) reveal the idealising manipulation to which he subjects the idea.

2.1.8 The dangers of fixing flawed narratives

This is clear in the sections of the novel in which remaining (or perhaps stepping) beyond the domain of the symbolic is taken to correspond to preserving a lost paradise beyond historical consciousness and the social institutions of adulthood. Like in

¹⁸¹ See Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 93-4. Since the 1960s, Lacan elaborated in his theory the opposition of *jouissance* and pleasure, "an opposition which alludes to the Hegelian/Kojevian distinction between *Genuß* (enjoyment) and *Lust* (pleasure) (cf. Kojève, 1947:46). The pleasure principle functions as a limit to enjoyment; it is a law which commands the subject to 'enjoy as little as possible'. At the same time, the subject constantly attempts to transgress the prohibitions imposed on his enjoyment, to go 'beyond the pleasure principle'. However, the result of transgressing the pleasure principle is not more pleasure, but pain, since there is only a certain amount of pleasure that the subject can bear."

Shuttlecock, the state is distinctly associated with nature, since, as Crick puts it, “only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history.” (53) A basic contrast is postulated between the realm represented by the river Ouse, “a river which possessed as no man did, or still does, the secret capacity to move, yet remain” and “these two-legged intruders who by daring to transmute things into sound were unconsciously forging the phenomenon known as History.” (125) This is another face of history contemplated in Crick’s narrative, *Natural History*, “[w]hich doesn’t go anywhere. Which cleaves to itself. Which perpetually travels back where it came from.” (177) This idealising formulation echoes in a troubling way the design of Crick’s grandfather, Ernest Atkinson,¹⁸² who “beats a headlong retreat, backwards, inwards, to Paradise, and starts to believe that only from out of this beauty will come a Saviour of the World.” (90) The analogy works primarily on the level of the rejection of the teleological, linear development of “artificial” history. The significant difference is that while “natural history” appears to aim at a stasis (a “process” as opposed to “progress,” an endless return that blurs the border between the past and the present), Ernest’s alternative is in fact as teleological as the Victorian imperialism it apparently negates, to the extent that it appears to be its direct emanation. Atkinson’s attempt to achieve closure has disastrous consequences which affect even his rather distant descendants.

Nevertheless, his gesture of renouncing the dominant ideology in favour of an ideal situated outside the discursive realm is, in a sense, repeated in Crick’s own narrative, where the otherwise horrifying Here and Now is approached as a positive force counteracting the world-ordering, history-making efforts of the representatives of the

¹⁸² An analogy with *Shuttlecock*’s idealised image of nature is also evident here.

symbolic, an anarchic tendency associated by Crick with “human nature” and curiosity. Crick detects in his audience the very quality of childlike curiosity which he glorifies as related to naturalness and innocence: “So you’re curious. So you’re curious. You’d skip the fall of kings for a little by-the-way scurrility.” (169) Once again, in a Rousseauian gesture that Prentis would no doubt appreciate, the innocence of Natural History is shown to supersede the corrupt constructs of culture. Crick’s own youthful exploration of sexuality is situated within the context of tearing through the potentially dangerous illusions of the symbolic and the imaginary by means of the working of the same curiosity, which in his perception “[i]s a vital force. Curiosity, which bogs us down in arduous meditations and can lead to the writing of history books, will also, on occasion, as on that afternoon by the Hockwell Lode, reveal to us that which we seldom glimpse unscathed (for it appears more often – dead bodies, boat hooks – dressed in terror): the Here and Now.” (44) As has already been signalled, this description of the Here and Now seems not only inconsistent with Crick’s own presenting it as an unexpected, traumatising intrusion into the human construct of reality, which here becomes equated with a diametrically different image of the harmony and stasis of the idealised natural state. It also proves suspicious in the light of the narrator’s ethical interests in relation to this point.

His claims about the fundamental non-existence of the uneventful reality can easily be read as little more than part of an attempt to conceal its “awkward” aspects. Crick’s willingness to present a vision of nature as embodying the dream of a return to a pre-symbolic paradise goes against his distrust of analogous narratives in the political realm. In this, Crick as a narrator performs exactly the kind of discursive violence that he

claims to repudiate as a historian, which is clearly a feature he shares with his more explicitly obsessive predecessors. In his reflection on revolutionary tendencies recurring throughout political history, Crick remarks their regressive character and points to their roots as lying in the human yearning “to return to that time before history claimed us, before things went wrong [...] How we pine for Paradise. For mother’s milk. To draw back the curtain of events that has fallen between us and the Golden Age.” (118) As we have seen, from the Lacanian perspective, such a return is fundamentally impossible. The constitution of the speaking subject involves an irreversible loss and

when being makes its appearance on the level of language, it must disappear under that language, it loses the reality of its being [...] The element lost in the process of becoming a human being is being itself, the pure being, the real, the thing without a name, leaving us with a basic lack as a condition for our becoming, which Lacan calls *manque à être* (want-to-be, or lack of being). Thus, right from the start, the subject is divided between the necessary loss of its being on the one hand and the ever alienating meaning in the Other on the other hand.¹⁸³

The transgressive wish to return to a paradisiacal state of unity with the mother is rendered literal by Crick’s account of his brother’s unsuccessful struggle to cope with the death of Helen Crick in a way which seems to imply Tom’s embrace of the impossibility of turning back the flow of time. Dick is described as a “numbskull with the dull, vacant stare of a fish,” who “[s]peaks half in baby-prattle, if he speaks at all. Never asks questions. Doesn’t want to know. Forgets tomorrow what he’s told today.” (209) Deprived of the natural curiosity that both motivates the development of civilisation and subverts its achievements, he is likened not only to an animal but also to his prized

¹⁸³ Verhaeghe, “On the Lacanian Subject,” 176.

possession, “a motor-bike, in its brainless efficiency, in its mechanical animation, bearing a pretty close resemblance to Dick himself.” (210) One of the few events that drag him out of this natural inertia is “that time his mother disappeared without explaining and never came back again [...] one day she took suddenly to her own bed and a little while later was seen no more. Now where could she have gone?” (210) Unable as he is to accept that “she’s in that wooden box they lowered into the frost-hardened ground in Hockwell churchyard,” Dick refuses to “believe she can have gone where she can’t be retrieved. Perhaps she’s hiding somewhere else. If they took her away in one box, perhaps she’ll return in another [...] perhaps she’s inside those bottles [...] Or perhaps what’s inside the bottles will make her reappear...” (210-1) The bottles in question, left to Dick by his dying mother, contain an unusually potent beer brewed by his grandfather. Dick’s experimentation with their content corresponds to the strategies undertaken by his father and his younger brother in managing the loss,¹⁸⁴ all three aiming to restore Helen, euphemistically referred to by Henry as “gone.” Dick’s strategy fails in the most spectacular fashion: the beer has a terrifyingly disorienting effect on the teetotaler, who

cutting short his dance, stops hooting and cackling, sinks to his knees, puts a hand to his belly; feels his arms, his legs, his head to see if they are still there. His eyelids have never whirred so fast. A look of disbelief – of guilt, terror – crosses his face. A look not unlike the look he will give on a certain day by the Hockwell Lode, when something inside his woollen bathing trunks starts to stir unsuspectedly. He sits, but can’t stay still, as if he’d never guessed quite what dangerous stuff he was made of, and he has to get away from it. But the only way to get away from it is to leap out of his own skin. (249)

¹⁸⁴ The former’s repeated “rendezvous in the churchyard” (246) and the latter’s attempts to replace her in the kitchen, termed “culinary necromancy.” (247)

Even without the analogy to Dick's unsettling realisation of his own sexual urges, the incident would be recognisable as an eruption of *jouissance*, a cruel caricature of a return to a pre-subjective bliss. Swift's phrasing itself is at this point suspiciously Lacanian: to escape the overwhelming intensity of the pre-symbolic state one would have to "leap out of one's own skin" – that is to become castrated, to lose the integrity of being that is lost at entry into the domain of lack. Dick's naïve understanding of substitution – as literally restoring the lost object – demonstrates the futility of any attempt to totalise the symbolic into a perfectly coherent order, ignoring its internal contradictions and incongruities which return inevitably in the form of incursions of the real. The experiment not only does not bring back Helen, or make Dick whole, but in fact introduces him to the sense of inadequacy inescapably linked with the symbolic. The culmination of the scene again invites psychoanalytic associations: Dick throws the empty bottle away "with a confused and anguished cry – as if, for all his terror, he is throwing away some potential parcel of bliss, some part of his own unconsummated flesh" (250). This is a literal embodiment of castration: upon receiving a message from his father, which explains why he can never become one with his mother, Dick must sever an essential part of himself. In case this is not clear enough, the dreamed-of element that was supposed to give him a perfect identity which would justify his position in the symbolic, is explicitly pointed out as distinctly alienating: "It's not him at all; it's the stuff inside the bottle" (250).

More significantly, the "dangerous stuff" of which Dick is made reveals all the ethical and political investments of the novel's narratives. The magically destructive beer drunk in the incident is only a culmination of the disturbing influence of his grandfather Ernest Atkinson, who is also Dick's biological father. In the narrative, Ernest's

Coronation Ale is a rather clear metaphor for his frustrated political ambitions. His pacifist warnings on the eve of World War I are disdainfully dismissed by the local community and his anti-imperial attitude infuriates the people unwilling to face the fact that a Golden Age is, indeed, coming to a close. The Coronation Ale, supposedly offered to the town in a gesture of reconciliation, in fact proves to have a profoundly upsetting effect on those who drink it, reducing the celebration of another event in the triumphalist discourse of unstoppable progress to utter chaos.

Ernest is, it might be argued, “‘real’ in the strict Lacanian sense: a ‘hitch,’ an impediment which gives rise to ever-new symbolizations by means of which one endeavours to integrate and domesticate it [...] but which simultaneously condemns these endeavours to ultimate failure.”¹⁸⁵ Pushed to the margins of the communal discourse, Ernest keeps returning, ceaselessly exposing its limits. The uncontrolled drunkenness induced by his beer literally dissolves social structures (turning against Atkinson himself when intoxicated firefighters fail to put out a fire at his brewery). Crick poses the rhetorical question of whether Ernest’s anarchy-inducing beer did no more than to disclose the local community’s own “inflammatory folly of their jingoistic ardour,” (272) but the community itself attributes the shocking goings-on to Ernest’s revenge plot. A similar influence is then exerted by his daughter, Helen, whose sublime beauty disorganises a military parade. The latter event is neutralised in the accounts of its participants – including Helen herself – by being turned into a fairy tale and so is the incestuous relationship that Ernest has with Helen. Nevertheless, the disquieting effect of Ernest’s transgressions is felt over the next generations: as a worshipper of beauty,

¹⁸⁵ Slavoj Žižek, “The Spectre of Ideology,” in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London, New York: Verso, 1994), 22.

Atkinson hopes to spawn the Saviour of the World, but his grand/son refuses to close the gap in the symbolic.¹⁸⁶ Indeed, Dick stands very much outside the order, himself real in the sense of causing interpretative efforts that are entirely beyond his comprehension. In his machine or animal-like nature as well as his uncertain grasp of language and inability to take in his mother's absence, he may be seen as a point where the symbolic fails. The stuff Dick is made of does prove dangerous when, thinking himself cuckolded by Freddie Parr, he murders the boy with a bottle of Coronation Ale. Thus, rather than offering an ultimate explanation, Dick in fact causes ever more Here and Now, enforcing the production of discourses which cannot but fail to capture his essence.¹⁸⁷ Therefore, the obscene influence of Ernest Atkinson returns endlessly within and against the narrativising efforts of Tom Crick, whose story abounds in supernatural elements which emphasise the conventionality of the discourses enabling the repressions on which the delicate construct of social reality is founded.

In fact, the inflammatory presence may be said to motivate the entire narrative, since Tom Crick is provoked into his attempt to voice all the unspeakable points of his family history when confronted with the ineffable fears of his student, Price, in whom he identifies a restlessness akin to that of his grandfather.¹⁸⁸ Stef Craps draws an even more

¹⁸⁶ They also find an uncannily close parallel in the family's past: after being hit by her husband Thomas in a fit of jealousy, Sarah Atkinson, Ernest's mother, loses her mind and ability to speak, but remains a significant figure in the local community – in fact, she preserves this status even after her death. Not only is the aftermath of the violent incident presented in terms of transcending the confines of the symbolic ("Horror. Confusion. Plenty of Here and Now" (66) is Crick's laconic comment). Even more significantly, the appearance of Sarah's ghost is associated with floods undermining the constant land reclaiming efforts of the locals much as her own figure remains a communal pang of conscience: "Ah, do not ghosts prove – even rumours, whispers, stories of ghosts – that the past clings, that we are always going back...?" (89) Just like Ernest and Dick after her, she becomes the real disturbing the overly coherent symbolic, the other that will not be erased.

¹⁸⁷ In this, he replicates the function performed by Dorothy in *The Sweet Shop Owner*, though admittedly in a far more drastic fashion.

¹⁸⁸ This link is stressed by Richard Russell's interpretation of the figure of Price as a stand-in for Crick's aborted baby. "Embodiments of History," 115–149.

direct parallel between Ernest Atkinson's and Mary Crick's extreme denial of the insufficiency of the symbolic: both reject the alternatives of domesticating reality, whether in the form of traditional historiography or fictional narratives, which are equally alien to the material on which they are imposed and therefore equally falsifying. Mary's distrust of language leads her to a decision to be absolutely faithful to reality: "she made do ... with nothing. Not believing either in looking back or looking forward, she learnt how to mark time. To withstand ... the empty space of reality." (110)¹⁸⁹ Predictably, this strategy proves equally deceptive as Ernest's and produces an analogous solution: where his way of achieving plenitude was grounded in the idea of beauty and realised through the conception of the Saviour of the World, Mary's belief in miracles leads her to kidnap a baby "who, as everyone knows, was sent by God. Who will save us all." (284) Echoing Ernest's conviction that the Saviour is within his grasp, Mary's words also echo his ill-fated attempt to wrangle a conclusive answer from the Other, to deny its inherent insufficiency, and thus embody the obsessive neurotic's striving to turn the Other's desire into demand.

2.1.9 Conclusion

Crick's own stance remains consistently incoherent, showing stark contrast between his declaration and practice, but avoiding extremes such as those observed in Mary or Ernest. His suspicion of all-encompassing narrative constructs, asserting any kind of closure, is complemented by his reflection on the ethics of such constructs and their inescapably political dimension. Speaking from the position of a representative of a

¹⁸⁹ The motif of a crisis of subjectivity manifested through a rejection of representation will return in my discussion of *Ever After* in section 2.3 and *Wish You Were Here* in section 3.5.

family which has – purposefully or not – renounced any participation in great history,¹⁹⁰ Crick is unsurprisingly critical of the frenetic activity of history-making, stressing the inevitable violence involved in such enterprises: “What every world-builder, what every revolutionary wants a monopoly in: Reality. Reality made plain. Reality with no nonsense. Reality cut down to size. Reality minus a few heads.” He juxtaposes this attitude with the “natural stuff” of curiosity, of what he calls “our love of life [which] is more anarchic, more subversive than any Tennis-Court Oath ever was.” (178) Admittedly, however, at a crucial point of his story, Crick himself is lured by the deceptive strategy of subjugating experience to fantasy when he offers a neutralising explanation of his brother’s suicide in front of his shocked father, unwilling to face its actual reason. The tragic act is reduced to a statement for which Crick feels obliged to apologise:

‘He’s gone barmy.’

(Forgive me, Dick. To malign your final gesture, your last recourse, with the taint of madness, to rob it of reality. I, if anyone, knew there was reason in your plight...) (304)

At the same time, the remarks denying any presence to events which constitute the foundation of great and small histories, Crick’s claims that non-eventfulness forms the traumatising core of the reality of the Fens, may themselves be reconsidered in interesting – and ethically productive – ways in the light of the status of the real in Lacanian psychoanalysis. The real is, after all, what is not registered by the symbolic and, therefore, by definition, what cannot be said to be a positive entity in itself. This is not to say that the real is to be conceptualised as entirely unconnected to the symbolic, since its

¹⁹⁰ “For centuries the Cricks remain untouched by the wide world. No ambition lures them to the cities. No recruiting party or press-gang, foraging up the Ouse from Lynn, whisks them off to fight for King or Queen.” (16)

very incompatibility with the structures of that order situates the real as its limit, a point where the symbolic fails: “It is only because the symbolic cannot address the logic of trauma adequately that trauma is registered at all. While trauma itself may be proper to the real, the failure of its inscription is registered in the symbolic.”¹⁹¹ The category of the real may thus be applied to what is pushed to the margins of narratable reality by discursive mechanisms shaping it, in order to ensure precisely the “monopoly in reality” that Crick scorns. This is not, however, to imply that the unregistered, the overlooked, the indescribable, the traumatic does not in fact take place, if only at the borderline of the paradigm of reality. After all, the narrator of *Waterland* is prepared to recognise the undeniable realness of incidents making up historical accounts or, for that matter, the supposedly consoling symbolic constructs themselves. The abstract structures created within the arbitrary limits of our social conventions do prove to be no less tangible than the real itself, as Crick testifies:

And even as a schoolboy [...] it was still the fabulous aura of history that lured me, and I believed, perhaps like you, that history was a myth. Until a series of encounters with the Here and Now gave a sudden urgency to my studies. Until the Here and Now, gripping me by the arm, slapping my face and telling me to take a good look at the mess I was in, informed me that history was no invention but indeed existed – and I had become part of it. (53)

Quite early in his experience Crick is thus drastically denied the possibility of entertaining the neurotic fantasy of successfully dealing with the inadequacy of the symbolic, which the protagonists of Swift’s both earlier novels present to themselves and/or to their readers. In this context, another level of heavy-handed irony is added to

¹⁹¹ Linda Belau, “Trauma and the Material Signifier,” *Postmodern Culture* 11, no.2 (2011): par. 32, <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.101/11.2belau.txt>, accessed 15 February, 2013.

the question asked by a policeman investigating the kidnapping of the baby by Mary Crick: “Look, sir, shall we go back to the beginning?” (272) Swift’s characters are caught in a precarious balance between the headlong rush of events and their traumatising influence, which arrests the passing of time altogether. Going back to the beginning is no more possible than the permanent drying of the Fenlands, which is why, near the conclusion of the novel, Tom Crick makes an analogy between the constant struggle to prevent water from overtaking the land and the notion of progress itself, which, according to him

doesn’t progress. It doesn’t 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-endingly retrieving what is lost. A dogged and vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business. (291)

The analogy may be extended to the functioning of the Lacanian subject, with the hydraulic metaphors (going back to Freud), and with the equally endless effort that it involves. As Dylan Evans observes in his discussion of *jouissance*,

it can be described as a kind of fluid with which the body is loaded at birth, some of which must be drained away in order to accomplish the ‘work of civilization’ (Freud) and allow entry into the symbolic (Lacan). This operation of drainage is what psychoanalysis designates by the term castration.¹⁹²

Even more significantly, this “drainage” is very much like that in which the inhabitants of the Fenlands are involved in that, as implied by Lacan’s notion of surplus *jouissance*, it

¹⁹² Dylan Evans, “From Kantian Ethics to Mystical Experience: An Exploration of Jouissance” in *Nobus, Key Concepts*, 11.

“indicates that after castration has drained *jouissance* from the body, there is always a certain amount left over.”¹⁹³ Ellie Ragland-Sullivan makes a similar observation, remarking on the paradoxical nature of loss in Lacan’s theory: operating within social relations allows the restoration of some of the lost imaginary unity at the cost of serious concessions to the demands of the symbolic which condition maintaining an illusion of its coherence but by no means protect the subject from the traumatising returns of the repressed real.¹⁹⁴ This is why, just as, in the words of Tom Crick, “you shouldn’t go mistaking the reclamation of land for the building of empires,” (291) neither should it be presumed, in the light of his narrative, that language can ever dispel the trauma of leaving the supposed pre-symbolic paradise. Compared to Swift’s previous two novels, this conclusion is much less determinedly on the side of obsessive neurosis, no longer taunting his audience with a possibility of final closure, and in fact insisting on inconsistency as the only sustainable condition.

2.2 *Out of This World* (1988)

2.2.1 Narrativisation as a means of overcoming the chaos of reality: a shift in emphasis

In many ways, *Out Of This World* (1988) is highly representative of Graham Swift’s primary interests as a novelist. It touches upon most of the motifs which can without any doubt be described as central to the writer's fiction, among which the struggle to cope with a trauma, to recover from a life-shattering crisis, is common to all of Swift’s novels. Faced with tragedies of private and public histories, the protagonists of

¹⁹³ Evans, “Exploration of Jouissance,” 12.

¹⁹⁴ Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, *The Logic of Sexuation. From Aristotle to Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 26.

Out of This World search for ways to mourn their losses and to make sense of their lives, very much like the characters of both the writer's earlier and later works. The major mechanism employed by the two narrators of *Out of This World* in imposing order on the terrifying chaos of reality is unsurprisingly – and typically for a Swift novel – storytelling. It is thus safe to say that his fourth novel retraces and expands on topics immediately recognizable to Swift's readers. The dual first-person narrative of Harry Beech, a retired war photographer, and his estranged daughter Sophie, recounts a history of their troubled family with events of great – and violent – history intruding into their lives repeatedly. In a manner typical for the writer's work, the tales of the protagonists are motivated by a desire to resolve a sense of personal disaster, but in their considerations include much broader implications of the traumatic transition from the safety of familiar – and obsolete – modernist ideologies to the anxiety-ridden promise of new possibilities, both individual and social. Extending the Swiftian range of methods for dealing with these destabilising transformations, photography is added to narrativisation in storytelling and historiography as another facet in Swift's consideration of the twentieth-century crisis of representation, and scrutinized with equal distrust. The intention of the present chapter is to consider the validity of strategies adopted in the narratives of *Out of This World* in terms of the tension between the categories of the real and the symbolic as a model of functioning of the subject in the context of the novel's ostensibly – and therefore suspiciously – traditional realist techniques.¹⁹⁵ The trademark Swiftian investigation of the contradictions involved in self-narration as a means of forming human realities and subjecthood is developed with the use of devices that struck the writer's audience as

¹⁹⁵ In many ways, *Out of this World* reworks a manouvre already employed in *Shuttlecock*, with its teasingly optimistic ending, tying all the loose ends in a manner raising as many doubts as the earlier novel did.

disappointingly unambitious and straightforward (especially in comparison to the kaleidoscopic range of the novel's immediate predecessor), but which upon closer examination reveal a structure as complex and ambiguous as ever in his prose – and equally well suited for the elaboration of his favourite themes.

The narrative framework of the novel is a dual monologue of Harry Beech, a former reportage photographer, and his daughter Sophie, who have discontinued communication for some years now and are only beginning to consider a reconciliation. Their backstory focuses on Sophie's lonely childhood: after her mother's death, her father escapes into war photography, keeping his distance to protect Sophie from the influence of his traumatising work. Sophie is effectively raised by Robert, Harry's father, an arms manufacturer who dies in a terrorist attack. His death, traumatic in itself, proves to be the breaking point for Sophie's relationship with her father: apparently guided by an uncontrolled professional instinct, Harry takes up his camera and documents the carnage, which inspires Sophie to escape from the unhealthy family dynamics to the United States, accompanied by her husband Joe. In the narrative present Harry has found new love and took up aerial photography, while Sophie has gone into therapy and is beginning to realise that her escape has solved none of her problems with her past.

The novel's combination of the familiar with the new is immediately perceptible both in the structure of its plot and in its thematic concerns. The double monologue of the father and the daughter, striving for a possibility of reconciliation after a dramatic rupture in their family expands on the well-established Swiftian trope of a lonely speaker, attempting to make sense of reality after a definitive trauma. The aftermath of the violent death of Harry's father and Sophie's grandfather also pursues Swift's interest in the

influence of grand – and not infrequently military – historical events on individual lives. This influence extends to the lives of the characters before and after the incident: their circumstances are informed by World War II, the military coup in Greece in the 70s or the war in Falklands.¹⁹⁶

The characters' reactions to the tragedy itself are set against the backdrop of their own troubled relations and their relations to the deceased: Harry's estrangement from his father, due to the latter's involvement in the arms industry, leads him to become a photojournalist, both to document the aftermath of his father's activity and to distance himself from the family seat. This, in turn, estranges him from his own daughter, who is left in Robert's care and becomes closer attached to him than to her own father. These intergenerational entanglements set the stage for the drama of Harry's reflex to photograph the scene of the tragedy, which is what drives Sophie away from him for over a decade (moving to America, a place she supposes to be free of the past). This painful deadlock of familial guilt also replays ethical concerns of *The Sweet Shop Owner* or *Waterland*. Even the motif of photography as the means of facing reality, which undeniably receives far more attention here than in any other work by Swift, was first introduced in *The Sweet Shop Owner*, although – as has been observed – in a much more sketchy manner. Admittedly, in *Out of This World* Swift's exploration of links between trauma and photography receives an amount of attention unparalleled in his entire oeuvre, in fact becoming the main vessel for this investigation of the uneasy relation of the event and its account.

¹⁹⁶ Robert's death itself is attributed to an IRA bomb trap, which links it directly with the English colonialist enterprise.

2.2.2 Critical reception of *Out of This World*

Before I move into a consideration of the text itself, I wish to devote some space to its critical reception. I consider this background relevant because of the text's preoccupation with the deceptiveness of conventional representation or the revelatory potential of illusions of coherence. Indeed, it might appear that the subtlety of Swift's irony in handling these issues has escaped many of the commentators, who, despite all the self-referentiality of *Out of This World*, tend to treat the novel's ostensibly easy resolutions as no more than that. It does not help that this was Swift's first effort since his universally acclaimed *Waterland*. Criticism concerning *Out of This World* is marked by accusations of excessive traditionalism of the narrative's form, along with its reliance on cliché in forming its characters. David Malcolm notes that this is mostly attributed to the author's "being overschematic in story material, too interested in ideas, and not sufficiently concerned to give his characters substantial life."¹⁹⁷ Arguably, the manifestly conservative style is characteristic for Swift's prose in general and requires – or at least invites – sceptical readings, as pointed out by Stef Craps in his insightful analysis of the novel and critical responses to it. His discussion focuses on two texts: Susan Mecklenburg's *Martin Amis und Graham Swift: Erfolg durch bodenlosen Moralismus im zeitgenössischen britischen Roman*¹⁹⁸ and Catherine Bernard's *Graham Swift: La parole chronique*.¹⁹⁹ Craps also mentions Adrian Poole's "The Mourning After"²⁰⁰ and Wendy Wheeler's dissertation,²⁰¹ from which he quotes: "As with *Shuttlecock*, there is a sense

¹⁹⁷ Malcolm, *Understanding*, 111.

¹⁹⁸ Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2000.

¹⁹⁹ Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1991.

²⁰⁰ In *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction: International Writing in English since 1970*, ed. Rod Mengham. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 150-67.

²⁰¹ *From the Sublime to the Domestic: Postmodernism and the Novels of Graham Swift and Peter Ackroyd*. (Sussex: University of Sussex, 1994).

that in *Out of This World* of something closed too soon, and of too quick and easy resolution in which quite evident dangers are repressed.”²⁰² One might also consider Sexton’s review with its questionable observation that Sophie Beech, one of the novel’s protagonists, “is characterized without cliché”²⁰³ or Barry Fisherman, who remarks that the happiness of her father Harry is derived from “his photographer’s ability to put distance between himself and his subjects,” and that “Harry applies this distancing technique [borrowed from photography] to his own life so effectively that he is able to view past disasters with a cool and journalistic eye,” but then concludes with surprising firmness that “Harry Beech has accomplished the impossible for a Swift character – has actually achieved happiness.”²⁰⁴

On the other hand, there are critics who undeniably choose ways of reading closer to Craps’s. Peter Widdowson argues that *Out of This World* questions both photography and itself in terms of realism of representation and sees its conclusion as anything but unambiguous:

The irony is that what the novel ‘confers’ is not, of course, ‘reality,’ but a way of perceiving how notions of ‘reality’ are foisted upon us. The notion of ‘a true story’ is a fiction, just as is ‘the camera cannot lie,’ for there is always another image behind the photograph, another story behind the story, another history behind the history—it all depends on who the ‘witness’ is. The bottom line, here, is that there is no bottom line: we construct narratives as narratives construct us. But an historiographic metafiction like *Out of This World* helps us to see how this happens, not least in its self-consciousness of complicity in the fashioning of narratives.²⁰⁵

²⁰² Qtd. in Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 201.

²⁰³ Linda Gray Sexton, “The White Silence of Their Lives,” *The New York Times Review* (September 11, 1988), 14.

²⁰⁴ Barry J. Fisherman, “Why Isn’t Anybody Happy Here?”, <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/uk/gswift/otw/happy.html>, accessed 24 June, 2014.

²⁰⁵ Peter Widdowson, *Literature* (London: Routledge, 1999), 162-3.

David Malcolm's approach represents what I would call a middle ground: for him, among Swift's novels, "*The Sweet-Shop Owner* and *Waterland* lie at the grimmer end of the scale, with *Shuttlecock* ending on a moment of balance, an epiphanic moment of happiness and insight. In this regard, *Out of This World* is closer to *Shuttlecock* than the others." At the same time, Malcolm speaks of a "partly optimistic ending"²⁰⁶ rather than an undeniable achievement of progress. Craps's own interest lies primarily with the ethical dimension of the work. As implied by the very title of his study – "Cathartic Fables, Fabled Catharses"²⁰⁷ – he is clearly distrustful of the effectiveness of the modes of domesticating trauma dominant in the book. At the same time, in stark contrast to certain other commentators, he argues convincingly that the ideas and attitudes presented by the novel's narrators and their discourses should by no means be taken to correspond straightforwardly to those of the author – nor, to a large extent, of the speakers themselves. Critical distance to patterns which Swift employs to structure his text is shared at many points by those who inhabit this structure.

From the point of view of my thesis, the very mention of "distancing techniques" used by Harry opens the possibility of reading him as another link in the chain of obsessive neurotics populating Swift's novels. The shifting of the neurotic position from the protagonist to the audience, on the other hand, invites parallels with the first two novels of the author. Both aspects of *Out of This World* will be explored in detail.

²⁰⁶ Malcolm, *Understanding*, 110-1.

²⁰⁷ In: Stef Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 104-19.

2.2.3 Ambiguous epistemologies of *Out of This World*

Out of This World continues the ambiguity and lack of resolution that characterized *Waterland*'s epistemologies. This is confirmed in Craps' discussion of the parallels between the two discourses organising the text ideologically as well as formally – photojournalism and conventional realistic prose. Initially, it appears that the experience of the narrators demonstrates the invaluable contribution of both photography and narrativisation to their struggle with their past. The photographer, Harry Beech, declares a profoundly ethical motivation for taking up his professional activity. Driven by guilt about his family's arms factory, he felt obliged to show to the world the consequences of using its products, in all the objectiveness presumably offered by his medium. According to Harry's account, his career was for some time based precisely around this achievement and Beech claims that he felt he was indeed fulfilling the functions frequently presumed to be crucial to reportage photography. John Berger sums them up in the following manner: "Many people would argue that such photographs remind us shockingly of the reality, the lived reality, behind the abstractions of political theory, casualty statistics or news bulletins. Such photographs [...] are printed on the black curtain which is drawn across what we choose to forget or refuse to know. [War photography] serves as an eye we cannot shut."²⁰⁸ The psychoanalytic implications of Berger's metaphor of a veil inevitably intimating what is hidden behind it will be developed further; for now, let me observe that Harry's own declarations mirror this formulation: "No art. Just straight photography. Avoid beauty, composition, statements, symbols, eloquence, rhetoric, decorum, taste. All that is painting. But just hold open the shutter when the world wants

²⁰⁸ John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 38.

to close its eyes.”²⁰⁹ Berger distances himself from such conceptualisation of photography and with time Beech also becomes increasingly sceptical about both the ethics and the effectiveness of his work in this respect.

In turn, his daughter Sophie learns to relate to her close ones and overcome her predicament through the narrativisation of even the most disturbing of the novel’s episodes in the course of therapy.²¹⁰ The focal point for Sophie’s trauma is the violent death of her grandfather, who had effectively replaced her parents, but the situation is further aggravated by Harry’s reaction to the event. Sophie’s inability to handle the aftermath of the tragic incident brings to mind Tom Crick’s remarks on his wife’s post-traumatic condition:

Something happens to time. Something happens to normality. A hole gets blasted in it. A hole with no bottom to it. So what is over in an instant just goes on happening. [...] So that afterwards, when I was some place else, here in New York, three thousand miles away, it wasn’t afterwards or some place else, I was still there, on the terrace at Hyfield, strange noise in my ears, the noise of absolute silence. Couldn’t even hear Mrs Keane screaming. [...] Only the voice in my head, like the distant voice down a telephone, which was saying: Something terrible has happened. Is happening. Is happening. (109)

Prejudiced as she is towards photography due to her disgust with her father’s professional habits, Sophie questions the very concept of witnessing in a manner that captures the essence of trauma’s problematic temporality: “You don’t believe that one moment – Then the next – Because you don’t believe it can have happened. So it goes on happening. Till you believe it. How can I tell what I don’t believe? What do you want me to say? I was there. Heard. Saw, on the spot. How does that help?” (109) At the same time – in analogy

²⁰⁹ Graham Swift, *Out of This World* (London: Picador, 1988), 92.

²¹⁰ Harry’s monologue, addressed to Sophie, also helps him come to terms with their past.

with Bill Unwin – Sophie declares a profound faith in the ethical potential of language: “I can still quote you, *in the original*, the first five lines of the *Odyssey* [...] And I still think that no one ever got it better, no one said it better. I mean, all that stuff – Odysseus and Penelope, Orpheus and Euridice – it still gets to you, doesn’t it? It still breaks you up.” (125)²¹¹ In a manner also reminiscent of *Ever After*, Sophie not only uses literature for escapist purposes, but actually finds in it a prospect of reuniting with her idealised lost mother: “When I wasn’t riding around on Hadrian, imagining I was living in the reign of Queen Anne, I was going back a couple of thousand years more, delving into dead languages [...] And all because of her, my mythical Greek mother.” (124) At the same time, she is one of the elements of the novel that have been criticised as the most clichéd and unconvincingly conventional,²¹² as a fictional character problematising the same methods of trauma resolution that her part of the narrative proposes. Sophie appears to be as inconsistent as Crick was in his theorising, and to be using language – whether in the form of literature or therapy – not so much to “break you up” as to close any inconvenient gaps. The insufficiency of her strategies is questioned early on in the text: in what she describes as another attempt to reconnect with her lost mother, she goes to Greece, where the geopolitical realities of the contemporary world catch up with her. Tellingly, Sophie herself identifies her tendency for denial by introducing her reaction to the 1967 military coup with the following analogy: “Do you know what winter is like in Greece? They try

²¹¹ In this, she mirrors another feature of Dorothy Chapman: her interest in literature, which also serves to distinguish her from her father.

²¹² The most blatant illustration of why the character might merit the criticism is the scene of casual sexual encounter with a plumber, used to demonstrate her turmoil, and presented in a clichéd, pornographic manner, at odds with the language of the novel overall: “He got up, put the spanner down, and I can’t remember making up my mind to do it, but I put my hand on his cock, hard as a pistol, and he hitched up my skirt, right here in this kitchen, with his hands greasy, with the twins upstairs sleeping, and I said, ‘C’mon! C’mon fuck me, fuck me good, you great hog!’ And after that I was no longer a new-world virgin.” (18)

to pretend it's not really happening, that there isn't such a thing as winter. [...] I won't forget that April morning when I looked out of the window on the Ippodamou Street and saw the tank in the square below. [...] I thought: This isn't really real, this isn't a real tank." (131) In this sense, the figure of Sophie consistently goes against the clichés that constitute her, and in this demonstrates the tendency of *Out of This World* to problematise the easy solutions it offers to its readers.

2.2.4 Ironic conventionality as a dimension of the Lacanian approach to realism

Unlike the protagonists of *Shuttlecock* or *Ever After*, in their struggle to regain a sense of wholeness, Sophie and Harry do not turn straightforwardly to written language, but their prolonged confessions perform a function analogous to the writings of the former two.²¹³ In both cases, honestly facing the anguish is inevitable – and presumably successful – in dealing with its aftermath and enables the creation of new, healthier discourses. Some reviewers took this triumph of narrativisation at face value, awarding *Out of This World* the title of the most optimistic of Swift's novels to date.²¹⁴ Linda Gray Sexton, for example, quotes an aphoristic formulation by Sophie's psychoanalyst: "Life is a tug of war between memory and forgetting [...] To remember – that can be bad, Sophie. And to forget – that can be bad too. Isn't that the problem? [...] But the answer to the problem is to learn how to tell. It's telling that reconciles memory and forgetting." (74)²¹⁵

²¹³ And the written narratives of Swift's protagonists do tend to come across as rather oral in their character.

²¹⁴ "*Out of This World* is the grimmest of Swift's novels in the images of violence and destruction it invokes. But it is also the most willfully optimistic about the possibilities of healing, reparation and revival for the damaged male figure." (Adrian Poole, "Graham Swift and the Mourning After," in *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction. International Writing in English since 1970*, ed. Rod Mengham, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 160)

²¹⁵ In a thesis exploring obsessive neurotic tendencies in Swift's protagonists, one must observe that the therapy takes place in the United States, so it seems more than likely that the therapist Sophie is seeing might be associated at least to some extent with ego psychology, an approach that Lacan was highly critical of, especially in terms of its usefulness for neurotics.

This reflection leads Sexton to conclude that “[b]y the book’s culmination, both father and daughter have begun to master this art. Mr. Swift’s achievement is that the important story of their self-education has been told with such simple, startling beauty.”²¹⁶

However, as emphasised by Craps, both photography and narrative techniques of traditional realist fiction may be used to propagate narcissistic patterns of confronting the world rather than a search for alternatives to those, making them both perfect vehicles for the all-controlling obsessive ego that may very well be postulated in the protagonists of *Out of This World*.²¹⁷ Craps’s essay indeed points to the capacity of both for neutralising disquieting encounters with trauma, referring, among other sources, to Susan Sontag’s remark on photography as a medium which “celebrates the imperial self,”²¹⁸ by situating the subject in a position of authority in its relation to the world or Roland Barthes’ notion of *studium* as precisely the taming function of photography, serving to subjugate the effect of the image of raw reality to the demands of social conventions. John Berger’s objections to the previously proposed social function of war photography also offer an interesting perspective here. Berger points out that images captured in extreme situations are “doubly violent” since the traumatic experiences presented in them not only in themselves stand outside a normal flow of time but are additionally ripped from their context by being captured on film. The result is that their audience, unable as they have to be in such circumstances to relate to the suffering of those portrayed in the photographs, assume individual responsibility for the failure of the image to move them. In fact, says Berger, “[t]he truth is that any response to that photographed moment is bound to be felt

²¹⁶ Sexton, “White Silence,” 14.

²¹⁷ In the light of an interview with Swift quoted by Craps (104), in which the author states a desire to examine critically utopian visions of the future with the disappointments of the past in mind, one might indeed be considerably more distrustful of the characters’ achievement.

²¹⁸ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 107.

as inadequate.”²¹⁹ This in turn accounts for the failure of the ethical function ascribed by the young Harry Beech to reportage photography, since the sense of morally inappropriate individual response to the photograph overshadows even the shock of the horrifying image and, more significantly, depoliticises the situation: “The picture becomes evidence of the general human condition. It accuses nobody and everybody.”²²⁰

The potential that writing supposedly has for moving its audience is also problematised in *Out of This World*, since narrativisation is shown to have a similar capacity for neutralising the shocks of trauma. The protagonist of *Out of This World* ostensibly and categorically refuses to make use of it: Craps draws a parallel between Hannah Arendt’s refusal as a journalist reporting on the Nuremberg trials to yield to “the temptation to make a shocking, outrageous reality comprehensible in terms of reductive commonplaces”²²¹ and Harry’s own stance as a photographer participating in the same process. Beech insists, much like Arendt, that his task is to “show that monsters do not belong to comfortable tales.” Indeed, Harry remarks both being surprised by the “terrible ordinariness” (102) of the criminals and, at the same time, the unconvincingly stereotypical exception among them: “Only Goering rose – if this is the right phrase – to the occasion, and with a smart line in sarcasm and courtroom repartee, played the part of stage villain. But that too was wrong.” (101) If one considers in addition the increasing doubts of the photographer about his professional mission, it appears that the text is by all means informed when it comes to the risks involved in turning experience into narrative and formulates this awareness explicitly.

²¹⁹ Berger, *About Looking*, 39.

²²⁰ Berger, *About Looking*, 40.

²²¹ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 111.

It is in this context that Craps discusses the paradox of the traditionally realist technique of *Out of This World*, which seems to undermine the pseudo-catharsis of photography, therapy, and historiography or political discourse, while ignoring the applicability of the same reservations to literature. Craps states that a number of the novel's readings overlook the irony of the text, whose excessive reliance on clichés in itself serves to question them. The claim is further validated by examples of the characters' objections to their own perhaps too conveniently conventional lots: "The way in which the novel goes about debunking business is by ironically mimicking the conventional model for dealing with trauma, and by having its characters loudly dispute the theoretical premises of this approach and subsequently express their bemusement at being caught up in its clutches."²²² This strategy arguably corresponds to the psychoanalytic approach to mimetic art in terms of the irresolvable tension of the symbolisation process, constantly interrupted by returns of the repressed real. With this analogy in mind, before I move on to look at the novel itself for illustrations of its treatment of both literary realism and photography in their violent neutralisation of alterity, I would like to complete the theoretical background for my reflection by returning to Lena Magnone's informative text devoted to a psychoanalytic consideration of the two as analogous models of subjecthood and representation.²²³

Magnone's study begins by proposing two ways of understanding realism: either as a referential or as a self-referential style. A work of art may thus be taken to represent the external world or to relate exclusively to other representations, becoming a simulacrum. A third conception is then added, one proposed by Hal Foster based on

²²² Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 115-6.

²²³ Lena Magnone, "Traumatyczny Realizm," 27.

Lacan's juxtaposition of reality as a social construct to the category of the real as that which underlies it but can never be fully incorporated into its symbolic-imaginary structures. In Foster's "traumatic realism," representation is taken to express the wish to return to a state before loss, irreversibly involved with the subject's entry into the symbolic order of language. In this, however, art in fact bears testimony to the loss, the trauma of abandoning the pre-subjective state of unity with the world, from which we emerge in the course of symbolisation. In this sense, realism is an expression of Freud's repetition compulsion, where language circles around the trauma of the real, never able to capture it, but striving to incorporate it into the symbolic order. In Lacan's theory, the renewed attempts to remove the split between the real and the symbolic, and their inevitable failure, expressed in the complementary categories of automaton and tuché, constitute the basis of all human endeavour. The split itself is not seen as a source of pathology; in fact, Lacan's model of constitution and functioning of the subject is built precisely on the irremovable tension between the real and the symbolic.

Magnone argues that in Aristotelian tradition of mimetic art the repetition is not a reproduction of the trauma of the real (which, having been defined by Lacan as a lack, an absence rather than a positive entity, cannot be represented or reproduced) but rather a screen covering it over. Following Foster's assertions about hyperrealistic painting, Magnone applies this understanding of representation to literary realism. The aim of the artist is here to produce an image hiding what cannot be faced. The uncanny effects of both photography, hyperrealism and realist fiction point to the paradoxical nature of this process: the very act of creating a screen to conceal the trauma testifies to its presence, while the repressed real itself returns in disturbances of the suspiciously smooth,

excessively lifelike surface of the work. I would relate this situation to Crick's paradoxical observation about the nothingness of reality coupled with his account of its endless traumas. After all, even though (or precisely because) "[r]eality is that nothing happens,"²²⁴ the soothing narrative frameworks of historiography are indispensable nevertheless.

Consequently, art which chooses to face trauma or indeed to stage it may do so only by representing an absence. This, according to Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, is precisely what photography does.²²⁵ His notion of punctum – the piercing, disturbing effect of photographs, analogous to Lacan's *tuché*²²⁶ – is explained as the consequence of the consciousness of mortality triggered by the images of inevitably lost objects, which, after all, "testify to the reality of that which has died or is going to die [...] a process in which what is lost is found again only to be lost again."²²⁷ One can clearly see here another potential stimulus for Harry Beech's outlook on his profession. In a childhood memory, he reveals the source of his fascination with photography to be uncannily reminiscent of Barthes' own inspiration for writing *Camera Lucida*: as a nine-year-old, Harry discovered a photograph of his mother, who had died giving birth to him, carefully hidden by his

²²⁴ Swift, *Waterland*, 34.

²²⁵ As we have already remarked, this is precisely the function ascribed to photography by Berger: that of the disturbingly believable ornament on the veil hiding the ugly facts of life from our eyes.

²²⁶ "In the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the Photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the *This* (this photograph and not Photography), in short, what Lacan calls the *Tuché*, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression." Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 4.

²²⁷ Graham Allen, *Roland Barthes* (London: Routledge, 2003), 130-1. This observation in turn may serve as another link between the ambiguity of the therapeutic value of photography and of narrativisation: as I argued in the previous section, the reintroduction into the structures of the symbolic only happens at the price of initiating the impossible quest for the supposed lost object, and the disappearance of the subject's own being behind the signifier. This in turn agrees with what Barthes says about photography's association with death in its turning the subject into an object (the same as the entry into the symbolic) (Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 13)

grieving father. The memory of this discovery leads to an arguably very Barthesian reflection:

Fact or phantom? Truth or mirage? I used to believe – to profess, in my professional days – that a photo is truth positive, fact incarnate and incontrovertible. And yet: explain to me that glimpse into unreality.

How can it be? How can it be that an instant which occurs once and once only, remains permanently visible? How could it be that a woman whom I had never known or seen before – though I had no doubt who she was – could be staring up at me from the brown surface of a piece of paper?

From a time before I existed. From a time before, perhaps, she had even thought of me and when she was undoubtedly ignorant of what I would mean to her. (205)

The paradoxical nature of the photograph at the root of Barthes' reflection ties in with Swift's own interest in the divergence of event and representation: producing a permanent trace of what has occurred only once, "the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially."²²⁸ Also, Harry's reading of his own inexistence in his mother's photo resonates with what Barthes notes about the role of the photograph in service of History, excluding the living being.²²⁹ Both bring us back to the limits of representation that were observed in relation to the scene of Helen Crick's death in the previous section: the reproduction of the event in the system of signs and the disappearance of the supposed pre-symbolic fullness of being which this requires.

In another of the chapters which he narrates, Harry recalls his fascination with the possibility of capturing traumatic events and his erstwhile declarations "that photography should be about what you cannot see. What you cannot see because it is far away and only the eye of the camera will take you there. Or what you cannot see because it happens

²²⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 4.

²²⁹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 64.

so suddenly or so cruelly there is no time or even desire to see it, and only the camera can show you what it is like while it is still happening.” (55) As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub observe in their study on witnessing, recording that which cannot be seen is central to the notion. The speaking subject in fact constantly testifies to a truth not available to him or her: the authors see the unconscious or unintentional testimony as a crucial contribution of psychoanalysis to the very concept of testimony: “Psychoanalytic theory [...] is nothing other than a finally available *statement* (or approximation) of a truth that, at the outset, was unknown but that was gradually *accessed* through the practice and the process of the testimony.”²³⁰ In relation to the already discussed notion of trauma as the real – that is, an event beyond the coordinates of the symbolic and beyond sequential temporality – Felman and Laub remark that the sense of entrapment involved in this kind of experience is only possible to break through narrating and re-externalising the event: it must be told to another and then heard from outside.²³¹ It is not difficult to argue that photographic images are often used to do precisely that.

John Berger, in his remarks on Susan Sontag’s *On Photography*, points out that the invention became a replacement of memory, replicating its processes and superseding its function. Like memory, photography is a record of what is lost, implying an exceptionally close link to what it represents, since “a photograph is not a rendering, an imitation or an interpretation of its subject, but actually a trace of it. No painting or drawing, however naturalist, *belongs* to its subject in the way that a photograph does.”²³² This idea is evidently parallel to Barthes’ notion of “That-has-been” as constituting the essence of photography: Barthes emphasises the tangible, physical connection between

²³⁰ Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, *Testimony. Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 16.

²³¹ Felman, Laub, *Testimony*, 68-9.

²³² Berger, *About Looking*, 50.

the object, the photograph and the viewer: “The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here.”²³³ From the point of view of the reliability of the medium in the process of representing the traumatic event, a far more crucial difference between photography and memory is not so much the former’s ability to fix the image (after all, traumatic memory may be presumed to be doing precisely that) but rather its inability to contain meaning, which, as Berger observes, relies on understanding functions of events and as such is grounded in observing the passage of time. Due to its tendency to preserve “a set of appearances from the otherwise inevitable supersession of further appearances,” photography by its very nature is thus unable to narrate or interpret.²³⁴ This may easily lead to misapplication of photographic images, since incorporating them into linear, verbal narratives goes against their nature. What Berger proposes is that the non-linear character of memory should be respected and that, instead of employing it for purposes of strictly teleological narratives, we should “put a photograph back into the context of experience, social experience, social memory.”²³⁵ This avoids presenting – and reading – photographs in a unilinear fashion, as alien to their functioning as to the functioning of memory, and instead allows the inclusion of the countless associations linked to any event simultaneously rather than sequentially. What Berger argues, in effect, is that contextualising the photograph agrees with the hypertext structure of memory.

Once again, Berger’s doubt about the ethics of employing photographs to support pre-written scenarios finds its counterpart in Beech’s questions about the nature of news photography: “People want stories. They don’t want facts. Even journalists say ‘story’

²³³ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 80.

²³⁴ Berger, *About Looking*, 51.

²³⁵ Berger, *About Looking*, 61.

when they mean ‘event’. Of the news photo they say: Every picture tells a story – worth two columns of words. But supposing it doesn’t tell a story?” (92) His own approach to the visual, however, undeniably involves introducing a neutralising distance between himself and the threatening immediacy of experience. In some cases, this is apparently desirable. One example of this tendency for a wilful denial of reality may be found in his account of the discovery that his suspicions of his wife’s infidelity were not groundless. Walking towards a hotel room where the lovers are to be caught *in flagrante*, Harry claims to be driven by a need for open confrontation but finds himself unable to face Anna and her lover. He remarks: “You have to see, but some things you can’t look at.” His response is, not for the first or the last time in his story, to escape into a convention of visual narrative: “Should I have burst in? Action. Drama. Pieces flying everywhere. I thought: This is happening, before your eyes. Afterwards, you won’t believe it. Take the picture.” His “distancing technique” appears to be effective in handling – or at least denying – the traumatic encounter: “And I was thinking all the time: This wasn’t me. I’d left me behind.” (167-8) This is clearly reminiscent of Crick’s obsessive neurotic tendency to resort to the third-person narrative style, fairy-tale conventions or drunkenness to distance himself from the points of his narrative touching upon the most painful moments in his past, which I discussed in the previous section. In contrast to *Waterland*, however, the strategy is not as overtly questioned as insufficient, which contributes to the ambiguous status of narrativisation in the novel, which rather consistently presents it as a form of self-deception necessary for making a claim at total control.

A more central analogy with Crick's narrative strategies may, however, be observed in Harry's hesitation about approaching the past. In fact, I would argue that the protagonist of *Out of This World* questions his methodologies somewhat more consistently than his predecessor does. In the narrative present, Harry is no longer willing to use the neutralising, distancing potential of his medium that we have seen Berger dismiss as unethical. Considering his assertion that "[w]hen you put something on record, when you make a simulacrum of it, you have already partly decided you will lose it," (55) the persistent refusal to take photos of his new-found beloved cannot but be seen as a willing surrender to the illusion of completeness and finality of his unexpected and perhaps questionable happiness. Undeniably this is not a simple task, as his paramour, Jenny, learns when she finds herself arrested in her attempts to perform amateur psychotherapy for him, "[a]s if there were ghosts she thought she would quickly exorcize, but she found them more stubborn than she supposed." (187)²³⁶ This constation echoes the use of the ghost as a figure of resistance to the totalising narrative in the person of Sarah Atkinson and her uncanny returns, which I mentioned in the *Waterland* section.²³⁷ In this context, Beech looks back at his own equally naïve faith in technological progress, which was to allow humanity to shed the obsolete or indeed harmful ideologies, to "say farewell to myths and legends [...] they would fall off us like useless plumage and we would see ourselves clearly only as what we are. I thought the camera was the key to this process. But I think the world cannot bear to be only what it is. The world always wants another world, a shadow, an echo, a model of itself." (187) This questioning of the possibility of functioning without phantasmatic support corresponds to *Waterland's*

²³⁶ I will devote more space to this device in my discussion of *Wish You Were Here*.

²³⁷ And will return again in the following chapter, when I look at Jack Luxton's wife's struggle with the ghost haunting him, and his brother's final encounter with him.

apocalyptic visions of the impossible world without stories and its warning that rejecting the imaginary-symbolic constructs leads not to the discovery of some ultimate truth but rather to psychosis.

Exposing the danger of downright condemning all fabrication, another recognisable element from Swift's repertory, the uncommunicative figure is embodied in *Out of This World* by Sophie's father-in-law. While in *Shuttlecock* or *Waterland* the speechless characters were used to represent the horror of living without the support of storytelling, here the motif has an arguably opposite effect. Joe's father, shown as always having been distant, spends the last days of his life in a setting reminiscent of his counterparts in the other two novels: "The polite phrase used to be 'in an institution.' But he was always in an institution. The institution of virtuous drudgery. The institution of married life, the institution of the Thanet Hotel. The institution of his own prehistoric upbringing." (155) In his case, however, the collapse of verbal communication is not as literal and closer linked to being a father representative of outdated models of masculinity, emphasised by Joe's father himself, who, "when we were getting ready for that televised Coronation [...] announced with a voice like a knell, just in case we should get too festive and too carried away by these modern inventions, that he could remember the funeral of Queen Victoria." (155)²³⁸ Joe adequately describes both his parents as "so far away from me. You could have fitted a whole generation between them and me. She was almost forty when they married, and he was forty-two, and they must never have expected to produce me." (153) Strangers to each other and their son, Joe's parents in many ways replay the model of a loveless, alienating family that was central to *The Sweet*

²³⁸ And in this sense his position is possible to relate to Prentis senior's "language coma."

Shop Owner.²³⁹ Indeed, presenting himself as very much part of the Swinging Sixties, Joe is, if anything, even more at odds with his parents than Dorothy Chapman was with hers. Stuck in increasingly obsolete social institutions, Joe's father is remembered by his son as a failed patriarch, declining in power and significance, a man who has nothing to offer to his child, a classic Swiftian weak father. Institutionalised, objectified, no longer master of his own life – much less the world around him – he stands for the kind of attitude to narratives – which puts complete faith in them, presumes a perfect inclusion of the subject in the symbolic, denying any gaps and contradictions in the order – that is equally critically portrayed in the figure of his son, whom I see as corresponding to the obsessive tendencies captured by the first two Swiftian narrators, Willy Chapman in *The Sweet Shop Owner* and, especially, Prentis in *Shuttlecock*.²⁴⁰

Joe himself is a model of obsessive neurosis, though nowhere near as complicated in his relation to the Other as his father-in-law. A master of denial, described as “good at forgetting,” (42) a travel agent who “sells illusions” (16) for a living, he is clearly incapable of understanding the sense of security that Sophie derives from facing dangers openly, and it is in fact his idea to escape to the USA. Sophie describes him as having “the knack – I don't know what it really is, a sort of generosity or a sort of stupidity – of ignoring what he knows and endorsing only the image.” (77) Even more importantly, she excoriates his desire to wish trauma away, juxtaposing his fake innocence with their

²³⁹ His father, for example, much like Irene, takes his chronic respiratory condition as a defining feature: “He was a big man, as you can see, but with a weak chest since childhood and a dry, grating cough that always used to proclaim: This is my cough, this is my affliction. But I don't complain, no, I never complain, because, though life is no picnic, I have A Secure Job and I will one day reap the reward of A Good Pension.” (153-4) Needless to say, his caricatural reliance on social institution also brings the Chapmans to mind.

²⁴⁰ Prentis senior also disappears behind the heroic figure he has created to stand for him, present only in the form of his official discourse contained in his autobiography, and his son also corresponds in many ways to his counterpart in *Out Of This World*.

children's authentic one. In an internal monologue addressed to her sons she says: "He was like a man who'd opened the wrong door and seen something terrible. But it was okay because you could step out quickly. Quick! Shut the door! [...] if you just kept to your place the world would fall back together again. [...] And that wishful, wilful innocence of his wasn't a patch on yours, which was the real, pure thing." (137-8) Joe in turn refers to himself as "[a] surface person," (149) and explicitly gives as his motivation for raising a family the fact that he "wanted to be this cliché, this jerk: this guy who gets out his wallet with the photos of his smiling wife and smiling kids, and says: There, that's my ticket! That's my little stake in humanity, my little bundle of joy!" (150) In fact, I would argue that he functions as a foil for the pair of protagonists, whose reliance on such denial techniques is much more problematic.

Admittedly, Harry himself does not hesitate to challenge the probability of the "happy ending" which he is at the same time working to establish. Concluding the chapter which opens with the declaration about the simulacrum of photography, he muses on his idyllic refuge in the countryside, where he seeks shelter from the turmoil of his private losses and horrors witnessed in the course of his professional life. His insomnia becomes an indication of the falseness of this escape, despite Harry's determination to keep up the fantasy:

I was trying to sleep, and have sweet dreams. I was trying to piece together my nerves and wondering how people ever contrive that impossible trick called *Where I Live*. I was lying awake haunted by the noise of owls and foxes. I would go for long, determined walks and watch the silver clouds gliding over green hills, rooks flapping over gnarled trees, and say to myself: I don't believe this. I would come back to the cottage, open the front gate, walk through the picture-book façade and crawl into the tent of myself. (60)

The conventional resolution of Harry's plight is thus persistently disturbed by a sense that underneath its shiny exterior there are still unresolved issues. Therefore, it would be unjustified to claim that as a narrator he is the kind of ego-dominated speaker he is accused of being by critics like Wendy Wheeler (or, indeed, praised by the likes of Barry Fisherman), full-heartedly subscribing to the complete imaginary repression of the real in his discourse. More specifically, this might be read as another emanation of Harry as an obsessive neurotic, "an 'adapted' subject [that] always has its affairs in order. It knows what it says. It has everything under control."²⁴¹ Van Haute is quick to point out, however, that despite this fantasy, the neurotic not only denies castration but at the same time is prepared to defend it at any cost. This ambivalence also corresponds quite closely to Harry's position.

According to Magnone, the aim of the technique of realism is not so much to represent faithfully, to achieve identity with the object but rather to create an appearance of the achievement. This situates realism, with its aspiration to impose an impression of coherence on a threateningly chaotic world, at the level of the imaginary. Realism is a fiction camouflaging the disorder, a semblance of consistency analogous to that of Lacan's mirror stage. Realistic prose is thus realistic in the sense of reproducing the functioning of the human psyche, in which necessary illusions of the imaginary are not to be eliminated since the traumatic void at the core of the symbolic-imaginary reality is by its very nature impossible to represent directly. The real is only conceivable through its effects, the impasses it produces in structures of signification, and this is why literary realism, in its striving for a coherent surface, cannot but produce precisely such disturbing effects.

²⁴¹ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 264-5.

Harry's mention of hiding in "the tent of myself" might be perceived as testimony to his trying to accomplish precisely a return to the imaginary stability in his story. As a photographer, he does indeed appear to be particularly prone to the delusion of omnipotence, characteristic of obsessional neurosis. However, how far he himself uncritically falls for the pretence might be questioned when one thinks of some of his self-referential remarks such as his comment on the unexpected idyll of his life with Jenny: "Miracles shouldn't happen. Picture-books aren't real. The fairy-tales all got discredited long ago, didn't they?" (79)²⁴² This comment points precisely to the kind of ambiguous status of the imaginary coherence that I have been describing: Harry appears to be breaking the illusion while subscribing into its necessary consolation.

In this context, it is interesting to observe that, unlike his rather strong-willed late wife Anna, Harry's current partner is possibly the most lifeless character in the novel. Harry introduces her into the narrative cautiously, through formulaic jokes made about his relationship with Jenny by his coworkers: "There were jokes, of the usual kind, I suppose, between Michael and Peter about me and my 'assistant.'" He dutifully denies the truth of the observations, only to describe Jenny through a series of clichés: "She's beautiful. She's incredible. She's out of this world." (36) Jenny remains a creature of the present; the scarce information offered about her background is preceded with a dismissive phrase and reduced to a perfunctory list of facts: "A week of (not so subtle) inquiry. Her parents were divorced. She had a flat in Swindon where the family home had been and where she'd gone to art school." (80) Thus if Harry the character of the

²⁴² Sophie seconds him on this: "Shit, I know this is pure theatre, I know this is like a bad movie, like the way it isn't." Ultimately, however, just like Harry, she apparently chooses to disregard the objections, to go for the pleasure of the illusion. The quoted fragment continues: "But what's the point of life, and what's the point of goddam movies, if now and then you can't discover that the way you thought it isn't, the way you thought it only ever is in movies, really is the way it is?" (145)

story does not go to the same lengths in annihilating the other in his romantic/erotic relationship as Prentis did (or as, arguably, we will see the protagonist of *Ever After* does), he does note his colleagues' attraction to Jenny, as if indirectly justifying his own desire in this way. Harry the narrator, on the other hand, displays an arguably far more obsessive approach to Jenny: she is largely an object, appropriated by him, deprived of virtually any depth, background, or voice, not dependent on any Other. On a level above Harry's choices as a narrator, the contrast between Jenny and Harry's late wife Anna is even more striking in this respect. Like Irene in *The Sweet Shop Owner*, Anna is given a chapter of her own; despite the fact that in the narrative present she has been dead for many years, her voice is still heard. Jenny, on the other hand, is never given this much platform. In the narrative, she is described and defined exclusively through her current involvement with Harry, and thus reduced to the kind of passivity that an obsessive neurotic requires from his partner.

Harry's estranged daughter's escapist strategies similarly combine the wish to hide from the pain of her past and to face it straightforwardly. On the one hand, Sophie claims to feel safer when aware of peril: "There's a sort of comfort, a sort of security, isn't there, in the absence of disguise, in knowing the way things really are?" (17) she tells her therapist. This is why, rejecting the illusory security of her family nest in good old England, she decides to move to the more openly threatening environment of New York. On the other hand, she is willing to take "a rest from memory" (75) for as long as possible, and talks about her pregnancy in terms of being "inside her tummy with [her children], imagining a world where you didn't have to see or know." (139-40) However, as the first character in Swift's oeuvre to undergo therapy, she is forced to face the

consequences of traumas she has been trying to avoid facing. Ultimately, Sophie admits that “away-from-it-all is such a shifting, strange, elusive place. There isn’t a place in the world where you can get away from the world, not any more, is there?” (15) In fact, I would go as far as to say that Sophie responds to the promise of Helen Atkinson in *Waterland*, or perhaps extends her position, claiming not so much that everything is “only a story,” but rather that the safe resolution of the narrative is in itself no more than a tale: useful as a device for handling the trauma of losing all parental presences in her life (as well as the violence that this process involves), but unable to provide a lasting sense of security.

2.2.5 Conclusion

In a parallel to John Berger’s theses on photography, Bruce Fink observes that the aim of psychoanalytic treatment is to allow the patient to verbalise experience which is impossible to express by means of language at the time of its happening, to deal with the residuum of the signifying process which poses a problem to the patient, to connect it with signifiers.²⁴³ Sean Homer adds that “[t]rauma arrests the movement of symbolization and fixes the subject in an earlier phase of development.”²⁴⁴ Sophie’s wish for a return to (her own) womb appears as a grotesquely literal form of just this process, in her search for a reunion with a mother’s body.²⁴⁵ Arguably, Sophie’s evolving attitude to therapy as a means for moving beyond “the cocoon of surrogate amnesia provided by [her] children’s ignorance,” (74) demonstrates the effectiveness of the procedure. She mocks the method

²⁴³ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 25.

²⁴⁴ Homer, *Lacan*, 84.

²⁴⁵ It also resonates with the perverse dimension of the mother-child relationship, already signalled in section 1.1.1: Sophie indeed attempts to introduce the “masterful and enlightened [maternal] despotism,” allowing her to ignore her children’s desire, but also her own, since she is supposed to be both the mother and the infant in this arrangement.

as well as her handbook relation to the therapist, a father figure whom she half-jokingly tries to seduce, as “a little, brief, therapeutic fling [...] A few intimate secret sessions with you, then back to normality again, all the better for it. Back to the loving wife and mother I used to dream once upon a time that I was.” She does, however, eventually concede that “it’s getting to be serious, you and me. It’s getting to be a regular thing.” (95) Although clearly not the “quick fix” to her self-image that she scorns in her caricature, verbalising her grudges appears to re-shape her relations with her others, and Sophie, to her own surprise, is quite willing to accept Harry’s gesture of reconciliation when it is made.

Like with Sophie’s therapy, the potential for problem-resolving is also put to question in the case of Harry’s new love, who, in the words of Adrian Poole, “comes out of the blue.” The critic dismisses precisely the “emergency treatment from strangers” to the wounded psyches of the father and the daughter, performed by “Sophie’s psychoanalyst and Harry’s dream-girl, unusually conventional figures.”²⁴⁶ Harry’s celebration of Jenny’s influence on his life brings up implications of willingly embraced falseness, contradicting his previous efforts as a reporter: “She makes me feel that the world is never so black with memories, so grey with age, that it cannot be re-coloured with the magic paint box of the heart.” (141) The association of love with a manipulated image is all the more potent in the context of Harry’s meeting of Anna, his first wife, during the Nuremberg trials. The city itself is shown as renouncing its traumatic past in being “a modern reconstruction [...] painstakingly done [...] as if to re-conjure a world before certain irreversible historical events had happened.” (103) It is in this setting that Harry first undertakes to suppress his memories of wartime horror: “To be happy in Nuremberg! To fall in love in Nuremberg! In that city of guilt and grief and retribution, to

²⁴⁶ Poole, “Mourning After,” 161.

think of only one face, one pair of eyes, one body.” (133) Love relation functions as a means of denying memory, providing an imaginary escape from the threatening sense of contingency.

In his discussion of Swift’s next novel, *Ever After* (1992), Craps refers to Luce Irigaray’s views on the position of femininity in phallogentric culture to demonstrate the narrator’s instrumental use of his partner who “serves the purpose of shoring up the male subject’s fragile sense of self.”²⁴⁷ Men’s representations of femininity are here said to take no account of actual women as subjects, since “[w]oman, for Irigaray, is a point of linguistic absence, the impossibility of a grammatically denoted substance. Within a masculinist language based on univocal signification, woman constitutes the unrepresentable, the undesignatable: she is always ‘elsewhere.’”²⁴⁸ These remarks add surprising depth to Harry’s ironic quip – “Vacancy filled” – which he uses to sum up the appearance of Jenny in his life (in reply to his advertisement for an assistant). Similarly, his observation that she is “out of this world” (36) confirms her extreme otherness in a strikingly literal way. The words of his long dead first wife Anna, narrating one chapter of the novel strictly speaking from ‘elsewhere,’ also express a sense that love suppresses trauma both effectively and tentatively: “Happiness is like a fall of snow, it smooths and blanks out all there was before it.” (174)

Significantly, the healing process is not completed in the novel: the reconciliation between Harry and Sophie does not actually take place. After years of neglecting his family, Harry committed the ultimate offence in the eyes of Sophie when she found him photographing the aftermath of the explosion which killed her grandfather. This tragedy

²⁴⁷ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 131.

²⁴⁸ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 132-3.

led to her transatlantic escape and a decade of virtually no contact between her and her father. The concluding chapters show both of them preparing for the first meeting in years – Sophie talks to her children before going with them to England, Harry recalls his own first flight. Both narrators stress a sense of amazement and faith in technical progress, both appear filled with the need to be close to their loved ones. Sophie asks the children not to escape into the illusory worlds of on-board entertainment, Harry remembers his father’s unusual cordiality on the occasion of their own flight.²⁴⁹ But, as Craps notes, the aerial views of Europe without artificial borders which make young Beech think up a utopian future are contradicted by the speaker’s awareness of the barbarous uses to which the new technology was put soon afterwards. The memory of the plane crash in which Sophie’s mother died with her unborn sibling also makes the possibility of a happy ending quite precarious.²⁵⁰ Malcolm further points out that the moment of intimacy between Harry and Robert was the last one for many years, which once again implies a scepticism about progress in terms of interpersonal relations echoing the doubts concerning the technical civilisation: in the light of the history of the family, there is perhaps little reason to expect a significant improvement in the conflict between Sophie and Harry.²⁵¹ Swift’s use of cliché to resolve his characters’ conflicts is thus neither as naïve nor as thoroughgoing as it may appear – indeed, he makes sure to employ it in such a way as to create a sense of unease in both his characters and in a careful reader. Grief is repeatedly faced – and denied – and though it is impossible to abandon our attempts at domesticating it, these attempts can never be fully successful.

²⁴⁹ “And a sense, yes, in spite of myself, that he was pleased with me, and I, in return, was perversely proud of him, that in that strange, ceremonial and rigid atmosphere he was actually unfreezing and making some sort of bid to be like a man I might know.” (207)

²⁵⁰ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 118.

²⁵¹ Malcolm, *Understanding*, 127.

In this, Swift's treatment of realist narration and photography agrees with the internal contradiction central to Barthes' and Lacan's theories. Barthesian *punctum* after all always ends up being appropriated by the *studium*. Lacan's real in turn is defined as that which does not exist: it may only be hypothesised from a position within the symbolic, but for such a position to be possible, the real has to be repressed. Conceptualisation in language involves the division of the real into distinguishable categories of the symbolic and this destroys the real, replacing it with the construct of reality. Magnone's argument follows a parallel line of thought: she maintains that even works staging the trauma of lack in a manner as shocking to their audience as Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* still serve to tame it. Referential art is always at least to some extent self-referential, since a picture of a traumatic absence still offers its own form as a veil for the absence. The trauma, however, serves in turn as a terrifying reminder that not all of the raw matter of the world can ever be organised into predictable structures. The piercing intrusions of the real into the imaginary/symbolic reality ceaselessly bring out its contingency and incompleteness: it always leaves out an uncomfortable excess which cannot be incorporated into it. Arguably, like nearly all of Swift's narrators, Harry and Sophie Beech do eventually come to recognise the limitations – as well as inevitability – of human efforts to impose order on the terror of their chaotic existences. Likewise, Magnone's conclusion, while noting the ultimate futility and falsehood of realist practice grounded precisely in the untameable nature of the real, stresses Lacan's preference of art hiding the real over that which undertakes to reveal it.²⁵² In the light of his theory, "[r]ealist practice appears to be more interesting and

²⁵² This is why, upon purchasing Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde*, he commissioned his brother-in-law, André Masson, to paint a landscape repeating the outline of the nude and hid the original painting underneath.

– above all – more honest, since it is closer to the workings of human psyche.”²⁵³

Representation of trauma, according to Magnone, is counterproductive, since it merely reinforces its own surface and leaves its supposed referent undisclosed. This allows us to justify Graham Swift’s self-conscious use of tired stereotypes, through which the inescapable contingency of the human condition shows all the more clearly.

(Magnone, “Traumatyczny Realizm,” 33)

²⁵³ Magnone, “Traumatyczny Realizm,” 42.

2.3 *Ever After* (1992)

2.3.1 Introduction

Graham Swift's novels are often discussed in terms of searching for appropriate ways of mourning the crisis of traditional patterns of signification in the twentieth century, and as such, they have variously been criticised for "fiercely attack[ing] the old illusions without any idea of what might go in their place"²⁵⁴ and praised for undertaking the task of replacing the obsolete models of functioning inherited from the modern era with "a different way of accounting for and valuing human needs."²⁵⁵ Typically for Swift's prose, both narrators of his fifth novel, *Ever After* (1992), are struggling to recover from a collapse of order in their lives, presented in the context of wider crises in their culture. The figures of the twentieth-century scholar, Bill Unwin, and his Victorian ancestor, Matthew Pearce, may be read as corresponding to two different approaches to the losses of modernity and its melancholias.

The comparison which the apparent similarity of their situations invites reveals significant differences useful in illustrating the evolution of the very notions of melancholia and mourning. Pearce's assumption of an ordered reality, destroyed when he loses his faith is matched by Unwin's realisation and, however reluctant, embrace of the absolute instability of his world. The relation of the two figures is complicated by Unwin's dominance as the main narrator of the text, imposing his own expectations and perceptions on Pearce's account. His position illustrates Adrian Poole's observation that, with its references to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century prose, attempting to "mourn the passing of certain religious and metaphysical justifications for [traumas of personal

²⁵⁴ Michael Levenson, "Sons and Fathers," *New Republic*, 206:25, 22 June 1992, 39.

²⁵⁵ Wheeler, "Melancholic Modernity," 65.

and public history], Swift's fiction is left to mourn the impossibility of this mourning."²⁵⁶ This is perhaps why in *Ever After* it is Matthew Pearce who shows readiness to take responsibility for the consequences of his destabilising worldview and thus successfully mourn his losses while Bill Unwin's acceptance of postmodern contingency is unenthusiastic – to say the least – despite the collapse of all the discourses he uses to resist the principle of substitution and to neutralise the desire of the Other.

While all of Graham Swift's novels are built around traumatised narrators striving to reintroduce order into their lives precisely through the symbolic mourning of what is gone, with varying degree of success, it may be argued that the protagonists' tendency for totalising first person narratives which fail to recognize the lack implied in language gradually diminishes, and their positions shift away from the obsessive neurotic figures we saw in the writer's early output. One might situate Unwin halfway between the rigid, monologic and manipulative narratives of Swift's first two novels, discussed in Chapter 1, and the variety of voices or the ethically "awoken" protagonists of his later output (*Last Orders* or *The Light of Day*). The present section aims to discuss the changing ideas of melancholia and mourning in the light of the experiences of both narrators of *Ever After*, who replace the need for a complete working through grief with the notion of mourning as an endless process which requires the subject's acknowledging of his or her own contingency. The notion of narcissistic incorporation of the object in melancholia, contrasted with that of the embrace of separation, absence and substitution postulated in healthy mourning will allow me to extend these ideas to the Lacanian concept of hysterisation, which enables the obsessive neurotic subject to embrace the lack in the

²⁵⁶ Poole, "Mourning After," 165.

Other and thus to abandon the phantasy of restoring his own wholeness by possessing the lost object.

The primary narrator is – in his own words – “a dead man.”²⁵⁷ Shaken by his father’s suicide, an uneasy relation with his mother and stepfather and finally by the self-slaughter of his wife, Bill Unwin is troubled throughout his life by an arguably neurotic sense of inauthenticity and an obsessive desire to discover patterns of signification which might free him from it. His desperate efforts to find a source of stable identity which would not depend on the Other are repeatedly frustrated, leading ultimately to a suicide attempt, after which Unwin embarks on a quest to understand his new self, the man “born again in plastic.” (9)

His stepfather’s manufacturing of plastic, the loathed financial base of Unwin’s unconvincing academic career, is juxtaposed with the imagery of the supposedly more authentic mining industry, brought into his narrative by the diaries of his Victorian ancestor. Unwin’s obsession with the artificiality of his own life is extended to the whole post-World War II reality, associated by him with the production of synthetics and empty language constructs of the academia. His contempt for these is contrasted with a nostalgia for the well-ordered, “real” reality of the nineteenth century, in turn related in his narrative to the excavation of fossils and ores, advancing tangible, biological discovery and “organic” heavy industry. As Frederick Holmes observes,²⁵⁸ in being connected both to nature and technology, mining implies both the possibility of finding a core of identity, unearthed in its natural state like ore and the necessity to refine, process, manufacture what is discovered.

²⁵⁷ Graham Swift, *Ever After* (London: Picador, 1992), 1.

²⁵⁸ Frederick Holmes, “The Representation of History as Plastic: The Search for the Real Thing in Graham Swift’s *Ever After*,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* vol. 23, no. 7 (1996): 25-43.

Considered in the light of Freud-Lacanian theory of mourning as a process analogous in many ways to the Oedipal resolution and thus crucial to subject formation, Unwin's gradual acceptance of his ambiguous and unresolvable attachment to the mourned and his rethinking of the strict distinction between the scorned substitute and the ever-elusive "real thing" may be seen as a reluctant achievement of a precarious balance between attachment to his lost others and avoiding engulfment in a melancholic self-destructiveness. In Lacan's terms, Unwin's evolving worldview corresponds to the final stage of the process in which personhood is established, that of completing the subject's entry into the symbolic, which necessitates accepting lack as constitutive of selfhood and involves abandoning the fantasy of ever possessing an object conclusively satisfying desire.

The task facing Swift's protagonist, therefore, is that of detaching himself from the longing for the original lost object and instead accepting it as never having been in his possession in order to be able to function within the social reality. Like Hamlet, on whom Unwin models himself, he needs to complete his symbolic castration, which, "for Lacan, involves the process of giving up the identification with this imaginary phallus, and recognizing that it is a signifier and as such was never there in the first place. What Freud called castration, therefore, is a symbolic process that involves the [subjects'] recognition of themselves as 'lacking' something – the phallus."²⁵⁹ The analogy between Unwin and Tom Crick or Harry Beech is equally clear: he must accept the precariousness of subjectivity and surrender the obsessive neurotic illusion of a possibility of going back to a state of original wholeness and stability. The phallus must become for him a sign of lack, not of self-sufficiency.

²⁵⁹ Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, 55.

Mirroring Tom Crick's attempted archaeology of the self, Bill Unwin signals his fantasy of ultimate plenitude beyond the limitations of the symbolic when he remarks early in the novel that in his narrative he strives "to recover my substance." (10) Admittedly, he also expresses doubt about such recovery: in observing the change wrought on him by the suicide attempt, he states, referring to seeing his own face in the mirror: "I recognize that I have never truly recognized it." (3) Not only the possibility of returning to it, but the very existence of an "original" or "real" version of himself is thus put in doubt. Perhaps even more significantly, Unwin questions quite explicitly any notion that his "substance" might fit into the symbolic system: "these *words*, or rather the tone, the pitch, the style of them and consequently of the thoughts that underlie them, are not mine [...] this way in which I write is surely not *me*." (4) In other words, he diagnoses in himself and is disturbed by precisely the dependence on the Other that is so unacceptable to the obsessive neurotic.

However, as his repeated declarations of searching for or indeed having found "the real thing" (94, 149, 218, 251) suggest, Bill Unwin persistently attempts "to ignore loss as a constitutive dimension of the human condition."²⁶⁰ His wish for regaining the sense of self-completion which he ascribes to the time before the deaths of his father and wife might be seen to express the pathological dimension of fantasy, present in many of Swift's narrators, who deny "the failure of the symbolic to render us complete: the fantasy arises where the subject deludes itself that the symbolic knows what it is supposed to be. The subject is thus trying to install the Law without the price that the Law exacts, as if desire and drive were of one mind."²⁶¹ As has already been observed,

²⁶⁰ Stef Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 121.

²⁶¹ Elizabeth Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 5.

the function of fantasy is to hide from the subject the reality of the inconsistencies plaguing the symbolic order, as well as the subject's own division as a speaking being. At the same time, as Elizabeth Wright reminds us, after Freud, "if fantasies become too powerful, they can act as a trigger for neurosis or psychosis."²⁶² Fantasy therefore promises what is no more than the imaginary illusion of complete satisfaction which must be abandoned at the entry into the absolute otherness of the symbolic. The structures of this order enable the articulation of desire, bound with the desires of other subjects to the extent that "we are condemned to speak our desire through the language and desires of others."²⁶³ Bruce Fink stresses that for Lacan "there is no signifier in the Other that can *répondre de* what I am, [meaning] 'answer for,' but [also] 'account for,' 'take responsibility for.' It is not simply a signifier that tells you what you are but one that takes you under its wing, defines you, protects you, and constitutes your *raison d'être*. There is no such signifier, but not every mother allows her children to realize that. Some mothers lead their children to believe that there is such a signifier and that it's called mom."²⁶⁴ When this happens, the subject expects from the symbolic what only imaginary has to offer: a sense of stable, self-contained and self-sufficient identity, as well as a sense of mastery over the surrounding world, seen as corresponding to our demands. As Bruce Fink phrases it, "[the obsessional neurotic's] attempt to come into being or continue to be involves the conscious, thinking subject – the ego – not the divided subject who is unaware of certain of his own thoughts and desires. He believes himself to be master of his own fate."²⁶⁵

²⁶² Elizabeth Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 131.

²⁶³ Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, 70.

²⁶⁴ Bruce Fink, "Reading *Hamlet* with Lacan," in *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, eds. Richard Feldstein, Willy Apollon (Albany: SUNY Press 1996), 190.

²⁶⁵ Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 122.

In fact, Unwin's inability to conclude his mourning, along with the nature of his relations to his parents and his suicide attempt, all bear rather strong implications of just such an approach to systems of signification, which Philippe Van Haute links with a neurotic's being "stuck in an imaginary interpretation of [castration]."²⁶⁶ In other words, the way in which Unwin quite consistently manages his losses and the ways in which he relates to his others indicate an obsessional neurotic's assumption that symbolic constructs are at least potentially capable of offering a completeness characteristic of the imaginary. In order to discuss the possible consequences of such handling of one's objects, I would like to introduce the evolution of traditional psychoanalytic theories of mourning developed by Freud as well as their reflection in Lacan's teaching.

2.3.2 Conventions of mourning

Freud's early theory of mourning, presented in the 1917 paper "Mourning and Melancholia," is based on a model of subjecthood in which the loss of the loved object is seen to disrupt the subject's narcissism since object-love transfers on the other his or her own self-infatuation. Despite clear similarities in the symptoms of both reactions to loss, the differences between them are made quite distinct. The work of mourning, through reality testing, makes it possible for the bereaved to confirm that the object no longer exists and re-cathect the libido previously invested in it. This implies a unified subject, whose integrity must be restored by severing its attachment to the lost object and accepting the consolation of a substitute.²⁶⁷ For melancholia, Freud assumes a narcissistic choice of the love object which creates the possibility of regression into narcissism in

²⁶⁶ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 148.

²⁶⁷ Tammy Clewell, "Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss," *Journal Of The American Psychoanalytic Association* 52.1 (2004), 47-8.

case of a crisis. “The narcissistic identification with the object then becomes a substitute for the erotic cathexis, the result of which is that in spite of the conflict with the loved person the love-relation need not be given up.”²⁶⁸ In melancholia, psychic energy is withdrawn into the ego and used to negate the loss. This is why the mourner’s aggression towards the lost other, blamed for leaving, turns into pathological self-punishment and causes “an extraordinary diminution in [the subject’s] self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale.”²⁶⁹ Tammy Clewell demonstrates that Freud’s rewriting of the theory in 1923 in *The Ego and the Id*, where the identification process was presented as integral also to mourning, opens the path for the later texts to abandon the requirement of a decisive ending in a normal grieving process. Identification thus becomes a process crucial to the constitution of the self and far more common than it had previously been assumed.²⁷⁰ As a result, the strict opposition of pathological melancholia and healthy mourning is undermined.

The changing conceptions of artistic conventions of mourning reflect this reconceptualisation. Clewell juxtaposes traditional elegy, in which the representation of the loss in language allows for a complete substitution, with the modern tradition of “anticonsolatory grieving” or “melancholic mourning,”²⁷¹ in which melancholic refusal to get over the loss is not a failure but a conscious choice of a new way of mourning. Pointing to the limitations of both approaches, Clewell postulates a search for an alternative to both the ethically questionable appropriation of the object in the former and the overt aggression towards it in the latter, “an understanding of mourning beyond

²⁶⁸ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay, 584-589, (New York and London: Norton, 1995 [1917]), 587.

²⁶⁹ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 584.

²⁷⁰ Clewell, “Mourning,” 61.

²⁷¹ Clewell, “Mourning,” 54.

melancholy, a modern practice of mourning that is not only enraged but also loving, not just reactive but affirmative.”²⁷² This search is arguably central to Swift’s writing. Major figures in the strand of Swift criticism which focuses on the theme of mourning, Wendy Wheeler and Adrian Poole, agree that his purpose is to a large extent to find aesthetic conventions “capable of properly symbolising the trauma of loss.”²⁷³ However, Swift’s texts also stress the impossibility of completing the mourning process, recognising both “a residue that can never be recovered because that figure [the lost object] once filled a time and space from which it cannot be separated”²⁷⁴ as well as the limitations of the literary conventions themselves and introducing a postmodernist distance between his works and his nineteenth-century intertexts.

At first glance, both the analogies and contrasts between the responses of the protagonists of *Ever After* to their losses reproduce straightforwardly Freud’s early distinction of mourning and melancholia. The novel is narrated by Bill Unwin, a one-time manager of his wife, a successful actress, now a widower hoping to revive his scholarly career by reconstructing the biography of his maternal great-great-grandfather, Matthew Pearce. The reconstruction is based on notebooks and letters documenting the gradual collapse of Pearce’s religious belief. Passages quoted from these make him the other narrator of the novel. Pearce, in his eventual renunciation of his past, may be seen to stand for unambiguously successful mourning in the understanding of Freud’s early theory. Unwin, on the other hand, struggles with his losses to the point of a suicide attempt, fitting the description of a melancholic not only in this respect. The interplay of the two narratives of deprivation, however, ultimately proves to be far more ambiguous.

²⁷² Clewell, “Mourning,” 55-6.

²⁷³ Wheeler, “Melancholic Modernity,” 74.

²⁷⁴ Poole, “Mourning After,” 164.

From a Lacanian perspective, both of these situations might be presented in terms of a shift from an arguably obsessive, imaginary approach to one's objects, where they are incorporated into the ego, towards a symbolic relation, where signs marking absence are substituted for them, thus acknowledging the influence of the Other on the situation. In this sense I will argue that the speakers of *Ever After* are more hystericized as subjects than any of their predecessors. Like its main intertext, *Ever After* deals with its protagonist's struggle to complete his castration, understood as the emergence of a desiring subject, the initiation of the movement of desire by the constitutive absence embodied by the phallus. As Lacan announces in his 1959 paper "Desire and Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*," "through his relationship to the signifier, the subject is deprived of something of himself, of his very life, which has assumed the value of that which binds him to the signifier. The phallus is our term for the signifier of his alienation in signification. When the subject is deprived of this signifier, a particular object becomes for him an object of desire."²⁷⁵ Apart from being a signifier of what completes the Mother, of plenitude and self-sufficiency, the phallus therefore becomes a sign of the fullness of being lost on entering the symbolic, never to be recovered. The shift from the imaginary to the symbolic phallus is at the centre of Lacan's attention in interpreting *Hamlet* as he moves away from Freud's focus on the protagonist's desire to the desire of Gertrude which traps him. Hamlet's predilection is accounted for by his dependence on his others and his inability to situate himself in the symbolic. It is furthermore connected to inadequate mourning, which prevents him from recognising the loss involved in entering the symbolic and therefore from being fully subjected to the paternal Law. In

²⁷⁵ Jacques Lacan; ed. Jacques-Alain Miller; trans. James Hulbert, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*," *Yale French Studies*, No. 55/56, (1977), 28.

other words, Hamlet finds himself in an explicitly obsessive position, stuck between alienation and separation.

In *Ever After*, each of the narrators has to negotiate two profound, definitive losses in his life. The comparison of the first of these illustrates well the transposition of the consolatory function in Western culture from religion to art: while the young Pearce supposedly manages to make sense of his religious mother's premature demise by resorting to faith, Unwin discovers a model for the understanding of his father's suicide in literature. Both solutions appear to be effective in domesticating the trauma, but ultimately both prove unable to close off the relation to the lost others conclusively. Land surveyor by profession, Pearce is presented by Unwin as believing that reality must have a secure basis, a trust based on the Bible, associated in the narrative with his mother. Even while arguing over the existence of God with his father-in-law, he insists on deriving consolation from the Scripture: "And still I kneel and pray, and my heart is uplifted by the words of the Bible, which I cannot believe, no, no, are mere fancy, mere poetry, like the Rector's Virgil." (138) This distinction concurs with Unwin's reservations about the absence of a metaphysical foundation in his own, literary models for mourning and is representative of a more general tendency in Swift – pointed out by Adrian Poole – to contemplate the double remove at which his prose finds itself from the obsolete explanatory systems of belief: rather than expressing the loss of frameworks to contextualise the traumas of history, postmodern prose is only capable of providing "forms of story-telling correspondingly more shattered and more self-distrustful, within which there may survive a cautious but obstinate little belief, in the need at least to go on

telling stories.”²⁷⁶ The transcendental signifier, ultimately, is no more to be found in the Bible than in Virgil – or Shakespeare, for that matter. Daniel Lea extends this idea of crisis in cultural transmission characteristic for modernity and taken for granted in postmodern times, and associates it with the crisis of masculinity.²⁷⁷ This connection is hardly surprising in the context of Swift’s oeuvre in general as well as of the main plots of *Ever After*, with the Shakespearean model of disturbed paternal authority on the one hand and the collapse of the father figure in the Victorian times on the other.

2.3.3 The first loss – Matthew Pearce

Matthew Pearce, Bill Unwin’s maternal great-great-grandfather, takes a prominent place in his life through a series of stories as well as through notes and letters, passed on to Unwin by his mother on her deathbed, and is installed within the framework of “family failure and disgrace.” (44) In fact, Pearce has been present in Unwin’s life since his childhood, through an heirloom – a clock with an “Amor vincit omnia” inscription, the family’s traditional wedding gift, originally made and presented to Matthew by his father. Adult Unwin sneers that the clock is hardly a token of good luck in marriage since it “seems to have presided over a good many marred marriages,” (47) at the same time acknowledging its important role in preserving the ties that hold the family together and providing a tangible link between Pearce, Unwin’s wife, Ruth (who had made it her duty to wind the clock), and Unwin himself, who has now taken over the ritual. Indeed, the clock functions very explicitly as an extension of the symbolic order, in which the position occupied by individual subjects in a social network is more significant than their

²⁷⁶ Poole, “Mourning After,” 165.

²⁷⁷ Daniel Lea, “Feigning Reason: *Hamlet* and the Dynamics of Desire in Graham Swift’s *Ever After*,” *Critique*, No. 52 (2), 161.

individual features. Unwin observes this in an aphoristic comment: “The people go, the patterns remain.” (47)²⁷⁸ At the same time, as a gift from a clock-making father, the object also seems a rather clear symbol of the prelapsarian world in both private and public terms: it is a sign of good will in an otherwise rather strained father-son relation as well as a memory of a time before the clockmaker God lost his position in Pearce’s view of the world.

The relationship of Pearce and his father is presented as having always been rather cool, compared with how Matthew felt about his mother, and in a final letter to his wife Pearce states bluntly: “In truth, I always loved my mother more than I loved him, and he had always known it, though only in his last days could we freely acknowledge this to each other.” (53)²⁷⁹ Pearce and his father are in fact connected primarily by the definitive role the mother’s death played for both of them as well as by the loss of faith each of them goes through. In fact, during this final period of intimacy and openness, Pearce’s father “confessed, if not in so many words, that he was always jealous of the faith that *I* had kept but which he in his innermost heart had lost. Jealous, furthermore, of the good Rector, in whom he thought I had found a father – since a spiritual father – preferable to him.” (54) This is arguably a moment when Pearce arrives at a truly mature position in the symbolic order, abandoning the struggle to preserve the sense of wholeness and design in reality that religion provided him with, and rather than longing for a legacy of

²⁷⁸ This refrain is another detail connecting Bill to Willy from *The Sweet Shop Owner*, with his attachment to preserving patterns.

²⁷⁹ This is clearly another factor that encourages Unwin’s identification with his ancestor, although in the twentieth-century narrator’s case the final moments of candour happen between him and his mother.

order from his surrogate father, he finally accepts his real father's legacy of faithlessness and insecurity.²⁸⁰

Before reaching this point, however, Pearce struggles to come to terms with his mother's death. Arguably, he finds consolation in her copy of the Bible, an almost literal replacement of the maternal figure as the source of stability: "after three years' exposure to scholarly scepticism and the rigours of science, he would not have relinquished the belief that every word it contained was the literal and immutable truth. The world, too, must have its basis, and the nature of this basis had been indelibly intimated to him long ago on his mother's knee." (92)²⁸¹ In fact, his bereavement only reinforces Pearce's piety, since "her memory became a shrine of all his religious feeling," and "[t]he Bible would remain for him the sole consolation for his mother's inexplicable departure, the only true reply to death." (95) The mourning is managed correctly in the light of Julia Kristeva's claim that "what makes [...] a triumph over sadness possible is the ability of the self to identify no longer with the lost object but with a third party – father, form, schema."²⁸² The schema here takes the form of religious belief, and this choice of the substitute is particularly appropriate since the mother's devotion focuses precisely on the social aspect of religion: "Susan Pearce was perhaps not exceptionally God-fearing: she merely accepted absolutely the traditions in which she had been raised." (94) The pre-Oedipal union with the mother is split by her absence and the intervention of the Other in the form of the religious system through which Pearce is able to overcome the loss and form further attachments.

²⁸⁰ This also invites analogies with *Shuttlecock*: after all, this resolution is very much like Prentis's, who is only able to take his position as a professional, husband and father when he discovers and comes to terms with the fundamental failings in his idealised paternal figures.

²⁸¹ In this, he has clear advantage over Dick Atkinson in *Waterland*, even though his expectations approach those of his predecessor's: he wants literal substitution.

²⁸² Qtd. in Clewell, "Mourning," 51.

In his new emotional attachment – falling in love with his future wife – Pearce “sees himself [...] as ‘saved’ – returned to the sweet, palpable goodness of the world.” (108) Significantly, the young lovers are introduced to each other through Pearce senior’s intervention, and in Unwin’s interpretation,²⁸³ this regained security and completeness is associated with an image of the father in his workshop, where “[t]hings fit, things have a purpose.” (108) For Pearce this is a period of complacency and satisfaction, in which even his father-in-law feels a mixture of disappointment and a “relief to be drawn from watching Matthew mellow before the age-old influences of matrimony and procreation.” (125)²⁸⁴ On his part, for all the reservations about the Rector’s intellectual conservatism, Matthew endows him with the paternal status, and increasingly looks up to him as he becomes estranged from his own father. The precarious achievement of idyllic happiness in marriage (another parallel with Unwin), is best encapsulated by Elizabeth’s reply to Matthew’s attempts at explaining the details of the impressive engineering enterprises he is part of: “Stop it, stop it, please! I would rather admire than know!” (131) The fact that Elizabeth is pregnant when making this remark resonates with *Out of This World* and Sophie’s strategy of hiding in her own womb with her twins.

Indeed, I would insist that a pattern may be observed here, reinforcing the contrast between the imaginary fullness associated with the mother and the father’s declaration of lack – not unlike what we have observed in *Waterland* in the figure of Helen Atkinson and her narrative therapy. The shift in Matthew’s response to his losses also arguably involves a transition from a mode of operation to be associated with obsessive neurosis towards a stance more open to the unpredictability of the Other. This transition is well

²⁸³ He does make a reservation about these parts of the narrative: “I invent all this. I don’t know that this is how it happened. It can’t have been like this simply because I imagine it so.” (109)

²⁸⁴ Pearce’s temporary happiness raises doubts even of Unwin: “An image out of a picturebook of ye olde England, but it still exists.” (132)

illustrated by his differing responses to the sight of an ichthyosaur fossil. Unlike studying remains displayed in a “safe, orderly, artificial” (100) space of a museum, his discovery of a skeleton in the soil of Dorset is a “vertiginous experience of stumbling upon the sublime ‘real’ in all its appalling resistance and nauseating emptiness.”²⁸⁵ This is what happens to Pearce’s perception of reality at large: the social institution of religion is apparently as effective – and as temporary – in neutralising trauma as the framework of science is in the case of the museum. When this safety net is removed Pearce falls into an abyss.

2.3.4 The first loss – Bill Unwin

Unwin in turn manages his first grief – or indeed discovers the duty to grieve – through his love of literature. Bill’s reaction to his father’s suicide as well as his relationship with his mother and stepfather are modelled around an early identification with Hamlet. As Stef Craps notes, the allure of this identification lies precisely in presenting him with the possibility of restoring the order of the world disturbed by the death. The convention of revenge tragedy justifies the protagonist’s “submitting to divine providence and righting the wrong that has been committed against his father.”²⁸⁶ Unwin’s conviction that the suicide was motivated by the disclosure of his mother’s affair also obligates him to undertake a “theoretical vendetta” (6) against his stepfather. Admittedly, Unwin’s consolatory discourse is limited in comparison with Pearce’s because of the absence of a metaphysical framework in the former. Craps points this out when questioning Unwin’s literary identification: “Unlike Hamlet [...] Bill does not find

²⁸⁵ Wheeler, “Melancholic Modernity,” 73.

²⁸⁶ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 127.

himself summoned by the ghost of his father to avenge him; rather, he has to summon this ghost (as) himself.”²⁸⁷ Unwin indeed readily admits that his desire for revenge might not be as genuine as Hamlet’s: “I’d like to think [...] that my first vow of retribution [...] was as authentic and spontaneous as the pang that prompted it. But I’m not so sure. I’m not so sure if our passions seek out models of behaviour or if models of behaviour are the springs of our passions.” (63-4)

However, while proving the inadequacy of Unwin’s notion of a fully autonomous self, these observations in themselves do not necessarily invalidate the process of his mourning for his father. Darian Leader’s discussion of the social dimension of mourning emphasises the surprising absence of this aspect of the process in Freud’s theory.²⁸⁸ Quoting Melanie Klein’s remark that “the mourning process can be aided if our internal objects – meaning one’s unconscious representations of other people – are mourning with us,”²⁸⁹ Leader argues that social rituals of mourning perform a crucial function in individual grief by enabling the initialisation of one’s own mourning process. The requirement of communal recognition is a defining feature of both mourning and melancholia since both are concerned with the ways of relating to the Other, and therefore very explicitly involve the subject’s functioning within social structures.

Thus, if communal rituals initiate individual mourning, neglecting them has the obverse effect. Conveniently, *Hamlet* is employed by Leader as one of the examples demonstrating the principle: much like Sylvia Unwin, Gertrude neglects the required customary mourning period and thus does not allow her son to acknowledge and

²⁸⁷ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 127.

²⁸⁸ Attributed by many to the influence of World War I with its overwhelming losses and the resulting “decline of public mourning rituals in the West.” Darian Leader, *The New Black. Mourning, Melancholia and Depression* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2008), 72.

²⁸⁹ Leader, *New Black*, 75.

symbolise the loss properly.²⁹⁰ Remembering his mother's "fierceness, the frankness of her will to live," Unwin comments: "She had no squeamishness. No pity, no mercy. I think she even despised him for his death, which, for all its drastic convenience, was none the less cowardly, stupid, messy, extreme. She despised this man she had married, exploited, cheated – destroyed." (23) It is only the model of Shakespeare's tragedy that supposedly enables Unwin's access to his own mourning for his father, in transparent analogy to the witnessing of Laertes's grief for Ophelia, which provides a symbolic trigger for Hamlet's mourning. This is something that Unwin fruitlessly expects to receive from his mother's behaviour when he asks her about the motives of the suicide: "It was the moment of course, for her to have broken down, wept, begged my forgiveness, confessed that her shamelessness had driven a man to his death. The things that happen in opera, they happen in life too. But she didn't." (22-3) However, the validity of his own mourning process is questionable, as the quote itself implies: instead of opening Unwin to the unpredictability of the Other's desire, literature serves to subject his others to his melancholic appropriation. Indeed, his obsessive neurotic expectation of direct correspondence between symbolic models and reality is characteristic of Unwin's functioning within the symbolic order in general and closely related to the disturbed mourning process.

Bruce Fink discusses the consequences of such treatment of the symbolic in the context of Hamlet's inability to situate himself in it, caused, in Lacan's view, by Gertrude, who posits herself as the signifier explaining all. This means that while the first stage of Hamlet's symbolic castration, that of alienation, has already taken place, the process has

²⁹⁰ Bill Unwin's reference to the period preceding Sylvia's marriage to Sam leaves no doubt about his evaluation of the mourning as not quite sufficient or convincing: "They got married the following March. There was a decent interval in which she practised being a widow and Sam, to give him his credit, kept his relative distance, turning up only for plainly licentious weekends." (60)

not been completed, with separation failing to properly install him in the symbolic. In a similarly neurotic structure, Unwin “has entered the Other’s world [...] and assimilated the Other’s language and the desire with which it is ridden, but separation has not occurred.”²⁹¹ Sylvia, with her sensuous immersion in the present, and scorn for lack and substitution, certainly situates her in the position of a mother blocking her child’s recognition of the inherent insufficiency on which the functioning of the symbolic is founded. The influence of such maternal figure means that the subject imagines himself to be fully subjected to the demands of the symbolic and capable of meeting these demands. This is why, while Unwin declares a love of literature as “this other world, this second world to fall back on – a more reliable world in so far as it does not hide that its premise is illusion,” (69) in fact, this “other world” as Craps notes, is valuable to him primarily as a stabilising influence on the chaos of reality. In other words, Unwin does fall for the veil, rather than realise that it testifies to something terrifying hidden behind it. This may well be argued to continue the line of thought found in *Out of This World*, where openly staging trauma is shown as arguably the less honest stance.

In Unwin’s narrative, literature, “instead of being a locus for the meditation of one voice against another, turns into a single subject’s fantasy of its full accession of drive, an anarchic conviction that the symbolic guarantees the unalloyed, unrestrained achievement of a blissful union in which the pain of division would be expelled forever.”²⁹² His identifications with literary models appear to neutralise the mystery of the Other’s desire by turning its frustrating ambiguity into the reassuring predictability of demand; both his others and he himself are assumed to be figures in prescribed scenarios even though

²⁹¹ Fink, “Reading *Hamlet*,” 192.

²⁹² Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 39-40. In this sense, literature functions for Unwin the way nature functioned for Prentis.

Unwin is repeatedly surprised by people not behaving the way he imagines they should. True to his Hamlet identification, Bill expects a confession of guilt and shame at contributing to his father's suicide both from his mother and stepfather.

Just like Sylvia Unwin, Sam Ellison refuses to play along with Bill's imagination. In fact, years later, he decides to reveal that the main motive behind Colonel Unwin's suicide might have been the discovery that he was not Bill's father, subverting the framework in which he is being placed: "You see, I think, astonishing as it seems, that he is coming, after all these years, to *apologize*; to make a clean breast of it [...] He is here (Claudius at his prayers) to atone for his part in my father's death." (154) Unwin is symptomatically wrong in his speculation: this is not the despised impostor, whose confession will finally do justice to the idealized memory of the real (legitimate) father; instead, this is the obscene father²⁹³ revealing that any father figure Unwin might choose is as false as Ellison himself. In this, Ellison plays a role akin to Quinn's in *Shuttlecock*: exceeding the limits imposed by social norms, he finally shows himself to be deficient and at the same time abolishes the monument of the legitimate father erected by the son.

Considering Unwin's persistent identification with the model of Hamlet, Lacan's elaboration of the Oedipal resolution, symbolic castration and constitution of the subject in his *Hamlet* paper may be helpful in accounting for the difficulty the protagonist of *Ever After* has in accepting his losses and consequently managing his relations. Colonel Unwin's suicide triggers in his son a re-entry into the symbolic in which he presents himself as haunted by the neglect of mourning rituals and a "ghostly identification" (63)

²⁹³ Ellison is rather persistently presented as the obverse of the Name-of-the-Father: an American impostor trying to become "a Real English Gentleman" (8), a vulgar producer of plastic, "a perpetual 19-year-old," (59) dedicating his skirt-chasing to a younger brother, killed during the war. After being rejected by Bill as a substitute father, he "reverted to his own childish dreams, meaning, now, fooling around with secretaries, taking dubious foreign business trips and generally indulging in part-time good-time" (150) and ultimately died in the arms of a prostitute.

with his dead father, making his turmoil parallel to Shakespeare's "drama of blocked desire [and] the mourning that is required to unblock it."²⁹⁴ Lacan's profound reworking of the Freudian interpretation of the play involves a shift from a focus on Hamlet's Oedipal desire to "his situation of dependence with respect to the desire of the Other, the desire of his mother."²⁹⁵ As was already noted in the previous chapter, this dependence is revealed when the child, wholly at the mother's mercy, discovers that her desire is not directed at it in its entirety. It is her reply to the child's question about its place in the structure of signification that causes the realisation that its desire may never be fulfilled because the mother's is not either. This reply makes the child realise that it is merely a substitute for the mother's missing phallus.²⁹⁶ Gertrude's inappropriately early second marriage is in a sense such a reply to Hamlet's "What do you want from me?" question, one which, according to Bruce Fink, does not explain to Hamlet his position in the structure of the symbolic but rather converts his desire into a demand for attention.²⁹⁷ Hamlet is therefore not introduced to the signifier of lack in the other, which might effectively enable full-fledged desire associated with symbolic castration.²⁹⁸ He is instead left to continue striving "to separate himself from the demand of the (m)other and realize his own desire."²⁹⁹

A suggestive scene of Oedipal seduction between Sylvia and her son illustrates an analogous incompleteness of his introduction into the symbolic. In an idyllic setting of an old-style "little tea-shop [...] now virtually vanished from rural England," (226)

²⁹⁴ Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 81.

²⁹⁵ Lacan, *Interpretation of Desire*, 17.

²⁹⁶ Dylan Evans, *Dictionary*, 117.

²⁹⁷ Fink, "Reading *Hamlet*," 190: "according to Lacan she says she has to be 'getting it' all the time." Her reply to her son's question, focused according to Lacan exclusively on herself: "I am what I am; in my case there's nothing to be done, I'm a true genital personality – I know nothing of mourning."

²⁹⁸ Fink, "Reading *Hamlet*," 191.

²⁹⁹ Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, 78.

suspiciously reminiscent of the picture book setting for Pearce's marital happiness, Sylvia Unwin delivers a mini-lecture on cross-pollination while the two eat Williams pears.

Bill's recollection is filled with sensuous detail:

I remember the blatant fact that as we took our tea [...] the top three buttons of her blouse were undone – there was a little sheen of sweat at the base of her throat – and I remember thinking (the first time, perhaps, I had had such thoughts) that this fact was not only remarkably compelling in itself but also remarkably complex, fraught with unsteady repercussions, such as: did she know that the buttons were undone, and if she did, why didn't she do anything about it? (227)

The topic of the conversation – “fruit propagation” – fits perfectly into the mood, with its focus on sexual reproduction, which, adequately, raises young Unwin's objections (“Perhaps I had protestingly voiced my thoughts – ‘But pears can't be *made!*’” (228))

With Sylvia abandoning her explanations half-way, moving on to the sensual enjoyment of the fruit, the overall effect is that of an unfinished initiation into the topic of sexual difference. The conversation stops on safely pre-symbolic grounds, even though, as the adult Unwin notes, its topic – “the riddle of hybrids and cross-breeds” (228) – has once led Darwin to the creation of theory of evolution, which replaced the order of the clockwork universe with a chaotic play of forces. What inspired the earth-shattering questioning of cultural givens for Sylvia is no more than the source of very bodily enjoyment:

She took a bite, a good, lip-splaying bite, out of the pear. Juice ran – a drop, a splash or two of pearly pear juice in that baffling opening of her blouse. Her tongue made slurpy noises, her eyes wallowed.

‘Mmmm, darling – divine.’ (229-30)

The impression that Sylvia is sheltering Bill from acknowledging the price of functioning in the symbolic is rather strong in the tea-shop scene, which explicitly focuses on complete presence, abandoning language in its impotence in favour of the intensity of carnal pleasure. The effect is reinforced when the narrator reveals that on the same day the atomic bomb was dropped, an event in which his father was most likely involved. Colonel's exclusion from the scene is emphasised by the fact that he was in Washington at the time (existence of foreign countries dismissed by Bill as "a clever adult fiction" (228) in those days, which also implies a negation of full accession into symbolic, making it impossible to conceptualise anything that is not immediately present). His responsibility for the bombing is later disclosed as one of the factors possibly motivating Colonel's suicide and, considering that this death is never accounted for by Sylvia, the scene may be read as a triumph of the devouring pre-Oedipal mother over the order of language and lack, regulated by the symbolic law installed by the father.³⁰⁰

The questions Bill Unwin might want to address to his mother, concerning his identity and origins, remain unanswered until Sylvia is on her deathbed.³⁰¹ This reticence is explained by her distrust of storytelling, contrasted with the raw, immediate experience: "For all her vocal powers, for all her capacity to chatter, squeal, and, sometimes, shriek, my mother was never an eager *raconteuse*. I think she regarded reminiscence and tale-telling as a kind of weakness, an avoidance of the central issue of life, which was to wring the most out of the present." (26) I see these remarks as quite forcefully situating Bill's mother in opposition to the symbolic, once again juxtaposing

³⁰⁰ The final stroke in removing Colonel Unwin from the picture is achieved by the location itself: Aldermaston is where Bill's biological father supposedly came from. (158)

³⁰¹ And even then the reply leaves out crucial information, such as the identity of Bill's father.

the imaginary promise of the maternal body – here taking the form of the physicality of the voice – and the symbolic dimension of speech, the meaning, the signifier, standing on the side of the paternal prohibition.³⁰²

The emphasis on the ineffable mystery of the voice as juxtaposed with the signifying system of language implies the “structural illusion” that Mladen Dolar mentions in his discussion of the voice, claiming that it is presumed to express precisely the plenitude that is lost upon entering language. In terms resonating very closely with Sylvia’s attitude, Dolar speaks about a “contest” between desire and drive, between signification and enjoyment wherever voice is involved. Finally, he points out that voice is seen by both Freud and Lacan as a central feature of the superego, which Dolar describes as “the Other without a lack.”³⁰³

This is the position of Sylvia Unwin, whose role in her son’s Oedipal crisis is suitably analogous to that of Gertrude’s in *Hamlet*. Described by Bill as “a woman given to severing herself from the past,” (45) marked by a sensuous enjoyment of the present and insatiable sexuality, she remains appropriately unmoved by her husband’s desperate deed. When announcing the tragedy to her son, “she is not smiling (or crying). She is composed and authoritative; the hug is like some solemn ceremony.” (20) Like Gertrude’s, her basic inability to mourn also constitutes a message to her son, complicating his quest to understand the desire of the Other and his position in it. Sylvia Unwin corresponds well with Lacan’s interpretation of Gertrude as the (m)Other who aims to satisfy her own lack and prevents her son’s entry into the symbolic by

³⁰² We have already seen the significance of the mother’s voice in *Waterland*, and I will devote even more attention to the motif in section 3.3.1 of the final chapter of my thesis.

³⁰³ Mladen Dolar, “His Master’s Voice,” *The Symptom 13*, Summer 2012, http://www.lacan.com/symptom13/?p=56#_ftnref11, accessed 20 August, 2015.

communicating to him that achieving this does not involve castration.³⁰⁴ Her advising Bill “against the ruinous desire to outwit mortality” (231)³⁰⁵ may be interpreted in this light as a form of taking a stance against entering the symbolic, against lack that this involves, a declaration of living entirely in the present.

The sense of being torn out of language, losing the sense of the meaning of words, described by Leader as one symptom of problems with accepting substitution,³⁰⁶ is signalled at many points in Unwin’s narrative. Self-reflexive comments on his own writing imply a distance to the language of academia, a sense of uncertainty about the functioning of another paradigm of signification which might situate him: “The language that we use! The postures we adopt! A little ingratiating mimicry of those whom (we think) we are dealing with? Or is this stuff *me*? – the professorial blather (the infection well advanced); the palpable signs of fogeneity. No, not the moody Prince all along, but prating Polonius. Three ‘however’s’ and an ‘in so far as’.” (176) It is not difficult to attribute this state to the imaginary influence of Sylvia: Unwin’s expectation that language should be truly his own, that it should express some essence of himself, bears marks of the inability to abandon the idea of a signifier which might provide him with an indisputable position in the symbolic, to abandon the imaginary phallus in favour of the symbolic one, which promises only lack rather than completeness.

The melancholic refusal to embrace his losses observed in Unwin indeed corresponds with his obsessional inability as a subject to abandon the assumption that he can become the only object of the mother’s desire and in consequence to perceive the

³⁰⁴ Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 79.

³⁰⁵ Describing the fates of her grandfather's and her uncle's failed careers, Sylvia claims that in both cases “it was craven fear of oblivion, the desire to cheat death by the vain quest for distinction that was the root of the matter.” (27)

³⁰⁶ Leader, *New Black*, 177.

phallus as representing her lack rather than self-sufficiency and completeness. After Colonel Unwin's suicide, his son is preoccupied with being deprived of the paradisiacal world of his childhood, spent largely with his mother in Paris, a city described by him as a "palpable network of 'scenes,'" (13) where he learns from Sylvia Unwin "to see the world as a scintillating shop window, a confection, a display of tempting frippery." (16) His first reaction to the news of the father's death focuses on not having been able to participate in the Colonel's imagined life as a spy: "For a while the delusion was so strong that it turned into a pang of regret: I had discovered this source of excitement too late – I could never, now, have access to it." (21)

What is interesting from the point of view of his relation to the phallus, Unwin also describes "a mood of redundancy, which it occurred to me my father must have felt too," which appears when he takes the position of the father as "an adjunct, an accessory, a supernumerary" (63) to the mother and her lover. This identification in turn motivates the idealisation of Colonel Unwin: "I began to summon a father I had never really known: noble, virtuous, wronged." (63) According to Elizabeth Wright, an analogous approach to his own father indicates Hamlet's inability to complete the process of castration.³⁰⁷ Unwin thus appears to persist in his attachment to the imaginary phallus (in replacing the father, Unwin quite literally imagines to have embodied it), like Hamlet "unable to mourn the loss of the phallus that will inaugurate the movement of his own desire" and stuck in a narcissism associated by Lacan with the imaginary order.³⁰⁸ The narrator's failure in

³⁰⁷ Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 84.

³⁰⁸ Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, 77.

making this shift will arguably be repeated when he loses his wife – once again, in a parallel to *Hamlet*, in the context of repeated insufficient mourning.³⁰⁹

2.3.5 The second loss – Matthew Pearce

While the completion of the mourning process after the death of Pearce's mother is at least apparently successful, the consequences of the second bereavement are far more disturbing. In the words of Unwin's narrative, "for all his early training, he does not seem to have been able to sustain the same trauma from the opposite end: the death in 1854 of his son Felix [...] heralded the collapse of Matthew's spiritual certainty." (95) Combined with his discovery of an ichthyosaur skeleton on the cliffs of Dorset a decade earlier and the consequently increased interest in Darwin's theory of evolution, the sense of absurdity of this bereavement marks the beginning of a crisis of faith which will lead to Pearce's estrangement from his community and family as well as to a serious identity crisis typical for the nineteenth century. Thus, the sanctuary of re-found religious certainty eventually proves contingent and impossible to sustain.

According to Frederick Holmes, *Ever After* belongs in the ranks of scholarly and popular writing portraying the destabilisation of what Unwin calls the "advancing (if essentially unalterable) world" (98) of the Victorian period. Interesting to Unwin precisely as "a testimony to the effects on a private life of ideas that shook the world," (48) Pearce's turmoil is emblematic of "[t]he latter part of the nineteenth century [as] the very time in which a world of order and meaning was stood on its head."³¹⁰ His second,

³⁰⁹ Lacan refers to Polonius' hasty, secretive inhumation and "the whole business of Ophelia's burial" ("Interpretation of Desire," 40); in *Ever After*, Unwin describes Sylvia's death soon after Ruth's as cruelly "stealing her afterlife" but at the same time perhaps mercifully "shocking him out of the shock." (Swift, *EA*, 30-1)

³¹⁰ Holmes, "History as Plastic," 35.

profoundly intimate bereavement relates closely to the loss of certainty affecting the entire Western culture at the time since, in being deprived by his scepticism of the collectively approved means of consolation employed after the death of his mother, Pearce is cast into a new reality of exciting potentiality and devastating meaninglessness. Rather than an imaginary moment of misrecognition like the one after losing his mother, when Pearce was able to find himself in the communal mirror of religious belief, this time he is faced with a fundamental disruption in the symbolic structure itself. Deprived of a reassuring whole to which he might belong, which might assign a set role to him, he sees his position in the world as threateningly ambiguous, repeatedly wondering what God wants from him. The interpretations of his son's death that he contemplates reflect his uncertainty: the tragedy may either be a punishment for his loss of faith, a punishment for the pretence of being a believer or merely a confirmation of his suspicions, evidence that universe is no more than a chaotic play of blind forces and there is in fact nobody there to punish him.³¹¹

It is this traumatising event that destroys the certainty of Matthew's worldview, becoming "[t]he moment of my unbelief. The beginning of my make-belief..." (101) Frederick Holmes equates Pearce's loss of faith with a loss of identity, since the dethroning of the Christian God implies the crumbling of the foundations on which his notion of the human subject is based. In his notebooks, he considers the impossibility of meeting his wife's expectations caused precisely by this:

What price would I not pay not to lose her? I do believe she would forgive and forget all my strange humour of late, if I would only, as she once, so warily, entreated me, call upon my

³¹¹ "He punishes me with Felix's death, for perpetrating this impossibility. Or: for my false belief, the belief in my own pretence. Or: Felix's death: merely a proof." (102)

better nature and 'be myself again'. 'Better nature'? What, in any of us, is our 'better nature'?
And what does it mean – is this what we love and respect in each other? – to 'be oneself'?
(211)

This dilemma openly problematizes the very notion of an original authentic self that Unwin yearns for, and with which he initially endows Pearce. In the face of the expediency of the individual postulated by the theory of evolution, undermining the prospect of salvation as well as traditional notions of individual identity, Pearce finds himself without a framework to guarantee the stability of his position in the world and split by a "sense of gulf between social existence and utter solitude," which Leader lists among the defining symptoms of melancholia. This sensation is in turn related to another aspect of the process which he sees as central, i.e. the subject's experience of a "symbolic impasse."³¹² Unable to give up the self-image based on the perceptions of the subject by the mourned person, the melancholic finds it impossible to locate herself in the symbolic, since "the symbolic Other is not there to situate him, and so all he is left with is his own image, unanchored and unchained, left at the mercy of not the symbolic but the very real Other."³¹³

Leader suggests that the impossibility of a stable relation to the Other might be responsible for the melancholic's lowered self-esteem or suicidal tendencies. Pearce's identity is indeed made precarious by the loss. The struggle to retain a sense of wholeness in the ten years before Felix's death leaves him with what Unwin reads as an acute feeling of inauthenticity: "No one will even know he is not himself, how far he has fallen through himself, except himself. And the only remedy he has is to pretend. To pretend so hard that one day, perhaps, he will forget he is pretending." (103) Pearce's own words

³¹² Leader, *New Black*, 187.

³¹³ Leader, *New Black*, 186.

repeatedly point to an obligation to protect his family from the dangerous influence of his doubt as a motivation for his behaviour: “What right have I to make hostages to my conscience my wife, my children and all that is dear to me? When I know, truly, I would lay down my life, on the instant, for my daughter and her brothers and their mother, why can I not do the lesser thing and make a sacrifice of my doubts?” (133-4) His inability to let go of a conviction he no longer feels, his “conscience about having a conscience,” (52) undeniably compromises Pearce’s position as Unwin’s ideal ego, the imaginary coherent other on which he wishes to model his own functioning as a subject.

However, while the split between his social and private existence might imply reading Pearce as a melancholic, the ultimate resolution of the process bears clear characteristics of a successfully completed mourning in the understanding of Freud’s early theory. After his father’s death, Pearce decides to leave for America and in a farewell letter to his wife, Elizabeth, confesses “to have struggled to keep doubts under guard while maintaining a sanguine face to the world, like a sick person wishing not to infect others,” but concludes that he “came to believe [...] that though ignorance may be bliss, happiness is not to be purchased by a refusal of knowledge.” (52) Although the process proves long and painful, Pearce is finally forced to come to terms with the loss of faith and personal losses this involves. With little ambiguity, while admitting that “the past is not easily to be dismissed,” he declares in the letter that “[t]here is no justice or logic in our favouring [...] the dead over the living [...] and crediting the flame of remembrance more than the warmth of life.” (53)

His decision to contact Elizabeth only after arranging to leave both the Old World and the “Old Life” behind proves the validity of these declarations and Matthew’s

readiness to reattach his emotional investment to (radically) new objects. Although he expresses doubt as to whether he is “a fit subject for the metamorphosis” (51) associated with the journey, he sheds his previous identity in the form of his notebooks left for his wife to dispose of: “Keep them, burn them – they are evidence of *me*.” (52) The giving up of the notebooks constitutes the kind of symbolic sacrifice which, as Leader argues, is crucial to the work of mourning as a means of constituting the object. Unlike melancholia, where the lost object embodies the dimension of lack itself and thus becomes impossible to give up without experiencing the loss as “an unbearable hole which threatens to engulf [the melancholic] at all times,”³¹⁴ mourning allows for a separation of the object from the space previously occupied by it and thus enables substitution. The separation from the testimony of his troubled transformation is indeed a profound sacrifice on the part of Pearce, since the notes have a significance which is surprising even to him: “I keep company with this notebook [...] What have I become, that I have parted from my wife, but still keep company with this book?” (183) The abandoning of “this book” is thus very much like the rituals mentioned by Leader, where the throwing of a part of the mourner’s body (a lock of hair, a fingernail, a finger) into the grave prevents being encompassed entirely by identification with the dead.³¹⁵ Pearce’s notes are such a substitute, a trace of the subject sacrificed instead of the subject himself.

³¹⁴ Leader, *New Black*, 193.

³¹⁵ Leader, *New Black*, 194.

2.3.6 The second loss – Bill Unwin

Despite any differences concerning their personal situations and the cultural contexts of their traumas, a fundamental analogy between the two narrators of *Ever After* must not be overlooked. Whether or not the resolution of Unwin's attachment to his father may be considered as successful as Pearce's mourning of his mother, the sense of stability he has been able to construct for himself afterwards is disrupted by the subsequent series of bereavements as profoundly as Pearce's is by the death of his son. Also, like with Pearce, the result of this disturbance is an embrace of ambiguity and irresolution, however reluctant and painful, which means both protagonists of *Ever After* move beyond the totalising tendencies that characterise all of their predecessors to a greater or smaller extent.

Admittedly, Bill Unwin's way of negotiating his losses is from the outset far more problematic than Pearce's. His hesitating, verbose narrative, in itself demonstrating his melancholic predisposition, is in fact an attempt to re-evaluate the validity of the resolution of his mourning of Colonel Unwin. Shortly before his own suicide attempt, his life is profoundly unsettled by three losses: the suicide of his terminally ill wife followed closely by the deaths of his mother and stepfather. These departures undermine the coordinates on which Unwin had built the precarious balance of his adult life. Describing the redefining influence of the trauma, Unwin admits: "I feel as though I have moved on, in some critical but indefinable way, from what I was before. I have left my former self, whatever it was, behind. I am changed." (3) Significantly, he indicates an ambivalent attitude towards the process, observing in himself both a calm detachment from his past and a temptation to "meet my former self again." He further claims that it is the latter

desire that motivates his endeavour to explain “what brought me to the pitch of staging my own death in the first place.” (4)³¹⁶ The need to determine his position after the demise of his loved ones inevitably involves the analysis of their function in his negotiation of the first loss, that of his father. Consequently, Unwin is forced to question the models on which he had grounded his relation to his others.

In his renewed struggle to regain a stable sense of self after the failed suicide attempt, Unwin has to recognise the inadequacy of the discourses employed as “redemptive narratives” through which he attempted to negate the desire of the symbolic order. Stef Craps convincingly argues that Unwin’s initial approach to his lost others through literary conventions implies the features of a melancholic subject in him, pointing to the character’s “moral narcissism” and his use of literature for “aesthetically defusing the threat posed to one’s self-conception by a traumatic reality.” Unwin’s “complacent self-enclosure”³¹⁷ is not unlike the avoidance of the dialogic nature of language and the persistence “in an unconscious commitment to suffering as a way of refusing to mourn,” observed by Julia Kristeva in “borderline” patients.³¹⁸ The refusal to mourn the loss in turn involves cannibalistic incorporation of the lost other through identification and in denying substitution blocks the movement of desire. Unwin’s insistence on retaining his lost loved ones also implies a reluctance to abandon the sense of wholeness that they offer as idealised reflections of his own ego. It is therefore not surprising that the suicide of his terminally ill wife Ruth, followed shortly by the deaths

³¹⁶ In a manner characteristic of Swift’s narrators, such as Prentis or Crick, he undertakes his narrative to try and overcome a crisis.

³¹⁷ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 140-1.

³¹⁸ Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 5: “In her clinical material she shows her patients to be wavering between neurosis and psychosis in their attempts to avoid dialogue with the world as it is represented by their analyst and significant figures of their past.”

of his mother and stepfather, shatters the cohesion of Unwin's identity entirely, depriving him of all influences that gave meaning to it.

He displays clear melancholic characteristics in his response to Ruth's death: "But only Ruth will do. She represented life to me. I know that, now that she is dead. She was life to me." (120) Unwin quite explicitly refuses to be consoled by the elegiac conventions of linguistic substitute in an explanation of the reasons behind his consistent rejection of suggestions that he should write a biography of his wife, a famous actress: "Each time, it has come with the tacit, the soft-toned hint that this might be, as it were, a cure for grief. But it seems to me it would be an impossibility, a falsehood, a sham. It's not the life, is it, but the *life?* The *life.*" (253) In an almost literal rendering of the melancholic condition in which the lost object becomes identified with loss itself, Unwin concludes: "And nothing is left but this impossible absence. This space at your side the size of a woman, the size of a life, the size – of the world. Ah, yes, the monstrosity, the iniquity of love – that another person should *be* the world." (256) Unwin's insistence in refusing substitutes is matched by the insistence with which substitution is pressed on him. In fact – as Stef Craps observes – his suicide attempt is triggered precisely by the realisation that a new object could replace his lost other: when a wife of a fellow scholar attempts to seduce him, to his own surprise he does not remain indifferent to her advances and concludes: "It could have been her. It could have been us." (245) Significantly, this incident takes place three days after the stepfather's revelation that Unwin is not the son of the man he had mourned. As we have seen, the rejected substitute father thus also makes Unwin realise that the "genuine article" is never anything but a substitute.

Just like his relationship with his mother and his stepfather, Unwin's love for his wife is also rooted in a literary model, as he remarks when considering his "former, unformed self [...] a creature still in embryo." The relationship which Unwin repeatedly juxtaposes with the second marriage of his mother, based on calculation and circumstance rather than authentic feeling, is in itself an embodiment of literary illusion, fulfilling young Unwin's anticipation of "the days [...] when the poetry will come alive. When the books will turn inside out. When the sighs and raptures and entreaties of all those love-sick bards will no longer seem like wishful thinking." (72) The same overvaluation of the powers of fiction is visible in Bill's admiration of Ruth's acting skill, the ability to master "the terror in her eyes, the hidden absence out of which the presence emerged." (76) Ruth therefore is useful in Unwin's neurotic struggle to negate the lack in the Other.

Unwin's role as his wife's manager ultimately serves his interests more than hers, providing him with a sense of stable identity: "And it's strange that I say I wished to hold her together, since it was she, after all, who held things together for me, who held my world together. I mean the world that had fallen apart (it did, you see) with my own father's death." (114) However, despite the narrator's insistence on having been "for many years, for the best years of my life, a happy man," the ineffectiveness of romantic love as a means of restoring his mental integrity is also proved by his own remark that "perhaps the pensive prince was always there, lurking in some morbid toy box, a foil to the brightness of my days." (5) Unwin has to recognise that it is impossible to use strictly symbolic structures such as the ideal of romantic love – repeatedly demonstrated by the narrator himself to be no more than the product of literary conventions – to recreate the pre-linguistic sense of unity with the world.

The final – and, for the purposes of this analysis, the most significant – of these melancholic “narcissistic fantasies of plenitude and self-completion which effectively deny the fact of loss and preclude any possibility of personal renewal”³¹⁹ is provided by Unwin’s mother, in her cautionary tale of Matthew Pearce, idealised by Unwin as an identity model. Bill takes his great-great-grandfather to prove the possibility of completing the work of mourning which he himself is unable to perform. Early on in the book Unwin admits openly that his interest in Pearce goes beyond the scholarly: “I don’t know at what point the ‘book,’ the scrupulously scholarly exercise, ceased to matter, if it ever mattered. You see, it is the personal thing that matters. The personal thing. It is knowing who Matthew Pearce *was*. And why he should matter so much to me.” (49) The main narrator declares his “prodigious, [...] presumptuous” task to be the recreation of the reality of another’s existence and uses Pearce’s own self-doubt to justify the manipulations that his material may be subjected to: “And if I conjure out of the Notebooks a complete yet hybrid being, part truth, part fiction, is that so false? I only concur, surely, with the mind of the man himself, who must have asked, many a time: So what is real and what is not? And who am I? Am I this, or am I that?” (90) Because of his troubled relation with the desire of the Other, these are precisely the type of questions that the obsessive neurotic ceaselessly asks.³²⁰

Paradoxically, perhaps, the feature that attracts him most about Pearce is his presumed sense of security in his worldview, displayed by the image of Matthew from the early years of marriage, a figure which his wife tries to restore, of someone who is “sanguine, cheerful, dependable, steady in [his] responsibilities and successful in [his]

³¹⁹ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 121.

³²⁰ “The hysteric’s primary question related to being is ‘Am I a man or a woman?’ whereas the obsessive’s is ‘Am I dead or alive?’” (Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 122)

affairs.” (209) These are the features that Unwin stubbornly reads into Pearce despite repeatedly recognising the arbitrariness of his interpretations: “[T]hat is how I like to see it. That is how I wish it to have happened. I give to Matthew’s life that very quality of benign design that he had already glimpsed might be lacking from the universe.” (103) Ignoring doubts, ambiguities, and uncertainties of Pearce’s account, Unwin uses Pearce’s notebooks as an idealised model for explaining his own life to such an extent that Craps describes the latter as the “victim to the imperialism of Bill’s voracious self, which seeks to reduce the outside world to its own solipsistic terms.”³²¹ It is striking that the only significant other in his life has been dead for a century, and yet it appears that Pearce is never quite dead enough for his neurotic great-great-grandson.

Indeed, while analysing the text of his ancestor’s diary, Unwin imagines his task – in analogy to his wife’s job as an actress – to be “to picture the scene [...] To picture how the world might be – how it might fall apart or hold, incredibly, together – in the eyes of other people. Such a simple, unconscionable thing: to be another person.” (101) These premises position his project in imaginary terms: the assumption that he is able to transcend the boundary between himself and his others (“to be another person”), the significance of visual perception (“to picture,” “in the eyes of other people,”) all reinforce the impression of Unwin’s “voracious self,” ignoring the mystery of the other’s desire, which is unmistakably obsessional.

However, the final influence of Pearce’s notes on Unwin is anything but stabilising. What Elizabeth Wright proposes to be the task of the artist in the light of Lacan’s contribution to critical theory is arguably what Unwin is initially unable to achieve in his narrative. Lacan believes that “the artist knows – and shows the spectator

³²¹ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 139.

that he knows – that he himself suffers the same lack.” Therefore, the role of a work of art is not to enable the artist to share with the audience a sense of inner harmony but rather a desire or lack, in order “mutually to sustain a renunciation of a *fantasy*.”³²² This is arguably what the text of Pearce’s notes finally does for Unwin. Stef Craps points out that Unwin’s pre-Oedipal sense of completeness linked with times before the crisis associated with his father’s death is an entirely fictional construct corresponding to Lacan’s mirror self and the protagonist’s task after his own “little bout” with death is not to regain the supposed lost paradise but to find a way “of acknowledging and affirming its radical absence.”³²³ Craps further argues that in the course of his narrative Unwin achieves a change towards a more dialogic understanding of speech and abandons his insistence on “capturing ‘the real thing’, the elusive self-completing object, necessarily replaced by substitutes.”³²⁴ This movement towards accepting the lack inscribed in the symbolic is motivated by his encounter with the radical otherness in the form of his maternal great-grandfather’s diary and letters, effectively opposing his totalising interpretation. I would go so far as to argue that Bill Unwin is the first protagonist in Swift’s prose who is subjected to the process of hysterisation, mentioned in the previous chapter. Whether he wants it or not, the protagonist of *Ever After* is confronted with a desire of the Other that will not be reduced to a series of manageable demands. Unwin is forced to question his interpretation of his father’s behaviour (as well as his very identity as a father), exposed to his misinterpretation of his stepfather’s motivations, and left helpless in the face of the choices made by Pearce.

³²² Wright, *Reappraisal*, 110.

³²³ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 125.

³²⁴ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 121.

Initially, the figure of Matthew Pearce performs for Unwin the same role that Laertes performed for Hamlet as the ideal ego. Treated like a relic of a pre-Oedipal omnipotence associated with infantile narcissism, Pearce becomes for Unwin “an original core of identity,”³²⁵ which he inscribes with “[s]tability, [...] an intuitive sense that all things must have their basis.” (91) Unwin’s original treatment of his ancestor’s testimony is in a way analogous to the operation of the ideal ego, which is satisfied with the illusion of omnipotence, in contrast to the ego ideal, whose self-esteem is based on following the standards set by the superego. As Sophie De Mijolla-Mellor puts it: “The ideal ego [...] appears to be a way of short-circuiting the work that the ego ideal requires by assuming that its goals, or any others that might be still higher, have already been attained.”³²⁶ Openly acknowledging that this is a manipulation, Unwin ignores evidence that Pearce’s wife Elisabeth might have been unfaithful to him and creates an idealised image of their marital life to quiet his suspicions concerning his own wife’s fidelity. The figure of Pearce becomes for Unwin an idealised imagined father by means of an analogy introduced in the diaries themselves which describe Pearce finding a substitute for his own estranged father in the person of his father-in-law. Eventually, Matthew is reconciled with his father, who

confessed, if not in so many words, that he was always jealous of the faith that *I* had kept but which he in his innermost heart had lost. Jealous, furthermore, of the good Rector, in whom he thought I had found a father – since a spiritual father – preferable to him. Yet surely it was my father who, if anyone, found me my father-in-law and steered you and me [...] into wedlock. And if he supposed that I found thereby a sanctuary he could not provide, I did not refuse, in the end, the sad sanctuary of his own neglected hearth. (54)

³²⁵ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 138.

³²⁶ Sophie De Mijolla-Mellor, “Ego Ideal/Ideal Ego,” in *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Alain de Mijolla (2005) <http://www.enotes.com/ego-ideal-ideal-ego-reference>, accessed 28 December, 2011.

The implications of these remarks for Unwin are analogous to the aftermath of Sam's revelation about his mother's infidelities, if expressed somewhat less explicitly. Like in *Shuttlecock*, the completeness and sense of security provided by Pearce's father figures are shown to be no more than an idealising conjecture, never to be achieved, only presumed in others. This situates the relationship within the profile of an obsessive neurotic, with both their competitiveness and tendency for a misperception of the self and others as fulfilled and self-sufficient. Significantly, it is only when the pretence is abandoned and both sides reveal their insufficiencies that Pearce is reconciled with his father. For Unwin, who is searching for precisely the kind of imaginary confirmation of his own wholeness in Pearce's diaries, this relation is entirely opaque: the quote comes from the first chapter narrated by Pearce, preceded by Unwin's declaration of a personal significance the notes carry for him, particularly in establishing "why things mattered so much to him, when (what difference did it make? What difference does it make?) he might have gone on living happily ever after." (49) This section of the text therefore introduces the riddle which will finally force Unwin to abandon any pretence of an obsessive self-control and independence from the other's desire. Furthermore, in looking after his alcoholic father in the latter's final years, Pearce has a chance to face the latter's frailty, which is a possibility that is never offered to Unwin: the deaths of his fathers leave them open to idealising imaginations – in the case of Colonel Unwin, as a glamorous spy, in the case of the biological father, as a "generic, child's-eye caricature: an engine driver, for God's sake!" (200) This contributes to the considerable difficulty that Unwin has in realising and accepting the disparity between the symbolic father position and actual father figure.

2.3.7 Conclusion

The final effect of Pearce's writings is to frustrate Unwin's desire for completeness as much as all other external objects determining his self-image, not only because of "his awareness that the representation of history is itself a substitute for the real thing, the vanished past."³²⁷ Stef Craps points out the analogy between both characters' encounters with the traumatising real arguing that Pearce turns out to be for Unwin what the ichthyosaur skeleton was for him – the insurmountable piece of radical otherness, impossible to domesticate, finally unsettling Unwin's chances of achieving a complete mournful resolution. The resistance of the notebooks against Unwin's appropriation undermines his totalising tendencies, forcing him to "relinquish the wish for a strict identity unencumbered by the claims of the lost other or the past."³²⁸ Despite the significance of the relation with his ancestor, Bill recognises that he is "even dead" than his fathers, both of whom are "[d]ead and beyond recall." (200) Bill Unwin ultimately gives up a melancholic's desire to possess his lost others without expecting a final detachment of his involvement with them.

In a gesture parallel to Pearce's own renunciation of his notebooks, Unwin makes them available to a fellow scholar against whom he had guarded them jealously. Even more significantly, he culminates his own narrative with an interweaving of a recollection of his first night with Ruth and a reflection on his father's suicide. The ambiguous chorus of the section, "He took his life," apart from its obvious melancholic connotations implies a readiness to embrace the contingency of the human condition with its inevitable losses,

³²⁷ Holmes, "History as Plastic," 5.

³²⁸ Clewell, "Mourning," 65.

demonstrating Bill's liberation both from the destructive melancholic wish to retain the lost past and from the obligation of complete mournful decahexis, the struggle against which had brought him to the brink of self-annihilation. Wendy Wheeler notes: "This ambiguity – a sort of agreement not to close off, or possess, the meaning of the object – suggests a desire to tolerate anxiety and ambivalence which is part of the relinquishment of narcissistic melancholia."³²⁹ *Ever After* may thus be read as demonstrating the necessity of abandoning the destructive melancholic tendencies, but also recognising the impossibility of a conclusive mourning and in this restating the recurrent motif in Swift's fiction of narration as an insufficient but irreplaceable means of handling the trauma of loss.

³²⁹ Wheeler, "Melancholic Modernity," 75.

Chapter 3

3.1 *Wish You Were Here* (2011) as an example of Swift's late output

Wish You Were Here (2011) continues the undeniable evolution of Graham Swift's narrative style and thematic scope, and belongs to what I would call his "late" period, beginning after *Last Orders* (1996), which marks a sort of watershed in Graham Swift's writing. Commonly seen as more optimistic than any other novel before it, and indisputably more polyglottic than any other novel before or after it, *Last Orders* was followed by a series of publications which attempt to expand Swift's formula. Even though the thematic scope of this prose remains largely unaltered, and in terms of predominant formal features there is no radical departure from the author's well-established style, some of these explorations have proven too demanding for much of Swift's audience. The clearest example of the risks involved in moving beyond his territory is *Tomorrow* (2007), Swift's first attempt at a narrative told entirely by a female protagonist, where the author's propensity for carefully built up culminations is also put to test by his using an ostensibly much less dramatic plot than ever before. The reasons why I chose not to elaborate on each of the three novels published between *Out of This World* and *Wish You Were Here* merit some explanation. Roughly speaking, it might be said that *Last Orders* and *Light of Day* are somewhat too similar to their predecessors, and *Tomorrow* somewhat too divergent to be of use in this thesis.

Last Orders (1996) still belongs to the "classic period" of Graham Swift's work, and constitutes a logical extension of the blueprint established in his novels starting with *Shuttlecock*; indeed, in this sense it may be perceived as the period's crowning achievement, confirmed by the Booker Prize. In many ways, *Last Orders* is a mélange of

tropes and devices already introduced before, including the absent figure of the grand patriarch (central motif of *Shuttlecock*, *Out of This World*, or *Ever After*, but present in some form in all of Swift's works), or troubled intergenerational relations in familial settings, and even the novel's major innovation of the narrative form – the plurality of first-person monologues replacing the single voice of the introspective protagonist – can be seen as an expansion on the quasi-dialogue framework introduced in *Out of This World*,³³⁰ and the split narratives of *Shuttlecock* and *Ever After* (indeed, *Sweet Shop Owner* also contains a passage narrated from the perspective of the protagonist's wife).

The novel's plot concerns a group of working-class friends travelling to complete the final wish of Jack Dodds, not accompanied by his widow, Amy, who chooses instead to finalise her own journey, a many-years' regular commute to see her severely mentally handicapped, uncommunicative daughter June, never acknowledged by Jack. With enough parallels to Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* to provoke accusations of plagiarism, the journey becomes an opportunity for silent reappraisal of the group's common past – as well as rather rambunctious collective confrontations in the narrative present. In the figure of Ray, who helps Jack's widow pay off his business debts (at least in part in order to alleviate guilt over a brief affair with her in the past), a light at the end of the tunnel is offered. Amy herself also appears to be prepared to renew the relationship, so the couple may be seen to parallel the cautious optimism of the protagonists of *Out of This World*.

The possibility of working through guilt and grief is clearly sketched out for the other characters in various degrees: former boxer Lenny seems utterly unable to fully comprehend his frustrating situation, much less conceive of an alternative; Jack's

³³⁰ Especially that *Out of This World* in fact has four narrators, although Joe and Anna only are given one chapter each.

adoptive son, Vince, replays a somewhat improved version of his father's life; while the rather inconspicuous figure of Victor, the undertaker, is optimistic to an extent unprecedented in Swift's prose. In accordance with the implications of his name, Victor takes a sense of pride and fulfilment in his business (which his sons are as happy to take over as he was in his youth), his marriage is based on love and he himself is relatively open-minded. Victor in a sense closes off the melancholic tendencies of Swift's protagonists (most evident in Bill Unwin), as if demonstrating that one must come to terms with loss to enjoy life. At the other extreme are of course Jack himself, who – like once Willy Chapman – has to die to be transformed, and June, who has been stuck in a stasis for half a century, with no perspective of change other than death (here, the obvious parallel is Prentis senior). As Pascale Tollance points out, the precarious nature of the novel's optimism is evidenced precisely by the figure of June. Mute as her dead father,³³¹ her hidden presence reminds readers of the cost of the "happy ending," (126-129) relying in equal measure on Amy's leaving June behind and on Jack's death. June is another Swiftian catatonic character, stubbornly resisting inclusion in a system of emotional economy and symbolic exchange that functions around her.

As argued by Richard Pedot, *Last Orders* continues Swift's oscillation "between desire to close the speech which became transmissible (again) and resistance against the closure which destabilises the transmission."³³² Indeed, the technique of multiplying the characters' narratives, combined with employing working-class language, has led to accusations of literary ventriloquism. Craps efficiently dissects Swift's disappearing act

³³¹ The only chapter bearing Jack's name for title is in fact narrated by his own dead father. Tollance concludes her brilliant analysis of the character of June by observing that whereas Dick Crick is at least symbolically reunited with the element of water through his suicide, June remains forever outside the world, sacrificed as much by her mother (who has decided to discontinue her visits after Jack's ashes have been scattered) as by the reader. Tollance, *La Scène*, 127.

³³² Qtd. in Tollance, my translation, 124.

in *Last Orders*: the novel is marked by the absence of anything approaching a focalising protagonist, but Swift leaves numerous clues to remind readers he is still hiding behind the kaleidoscope of individual characters' voices. Craps notes that the narratives repeatedly report a sense of being watched or controlled by an external authority, the plot revolves around the looming figure of a dead patriarch, and, perhaps most interestingly, the working-class language, supposedly distancing the characters from the author, is in fact as riddled with echoes, refrains and recycled clichés as to make the individual voices part of one idiolect. As ever, thus, Swift poses an ethical challenge before his audience, offering a vision of suspicious coherence only to undermine it subtly. These observations are close to my conclusion of the section devoted to *The Sweet Shop Owner*, and I will make similar claims concerning *Wish You Were Here* in the present chapter. We will see that this novel's sense of closure and reconciliation, also achieved through a troubled journey to a funeral, likewise depends heavily on leaving significant issues unsaid. In this sense, from my perspective, *Last Orders* only brings more of what Swift's earlier work introduced and what he continues to explore in his later writing.

Light of Day (2001) continues the progress in going beyond the compromised, obsolete model of masculinity displayed in all of its tragic decline in Swift's earlier novels. This time it is the protagonist himself who manages to transcend the destructive patterns burdening his predecessors. In terms of narration, the return to a single first-person monologue model of narration nevertheless brings with it a central figure more adept at listening than obsessed with speaking.³³³

³³³ Pascale Tollance goes as far as to postulate: "The detective becomes avatar of the confessor and the psychoanalyst." (my translation, 132)

In terms of the plot, *Light of Day* is – or at least appears to be – an attempt to endow a well-established narrative mould with new substance. George Webb is admittedly another fallen man, son of a failed father, abandoned by his wife, disgraced professionally. The story again revolves around a painful secret, which involves an institutionalised figure, and the narrative again oscillates between the desire to verbalise trauma (indicated even in the title) and the force of various forms of silence. Other elements of the plot are equally recognisable: like in *Shuttlecock*, the protagonist is involved in detective work, and like Prentis, he makes a significant discovery about his father’s misconduct.³³⁴ Also, like characters of *Shuttlecock*, George decides not to act upon the evidence he gathers. At the same time, Webb is in many ways exceptional, going beyond the limitations of his predecessors or fulfilling the promise of change only looming on their horizons. Unlike Chapman, waiting for his prodigal daughter’s return until his death, Webb is surprised by his own daughter’s taking his side in his darkest moments, thus fulfilling the vision of intergenerational reconciliation only outlined before the protagonists of *Out of This World* or *Last Orders*. Unlike Prentis, accepting the compromised terms of his promotion, or Crick, waiting passively for his position to be reduced, Webb embraces the responsibility for his misconduct and after being discharged from the police finds a new way to fulfil his calling.

The protagonist’s situation in the narrative present is fairly simple: he is preparing to visit the woman he loves, his ex-client, who is serving time for murdering her

³³⁴ Significantly, this happens in his adolescence, therefore also mirroring Prentis’s son, who investigates his own father’s behaviour. Another parallel with Prentis’s situation is found in Webb’s present occupation: as a detective, he specialises in finding evidence of infidelity and always offers his clients the possibility of destroying his findings without revealing them. This strategy inevitably brings to mind the decisive conversation between Quinn and Prentis.

unfaithful husband.³³⁵ The backstory is understandably more complex, and includes Webb's childhood discovery of his father's extramarital affair, which provides the motivation for his future career; the rocky relationship with his wife and daughter; the love affair that led to the murder; and finally, Webb's own post-divorce transformation. This also fits into the evolution of Swift's writing: whereas the earlier novels begin with the aftermath of a crisis and end with no reconciliation in sight (*The Sweet Shop Owner* or *Waterland*), with time, the narratives increasingly look back at dramatic situations whose effects are still felt, but which are very much over in the narrative present (*Out of This World* or *Last Orders*). In *Light of Day*, the focus is on Webb's new life and the predominantly positive outlook on the future.

The single narrative voice of *Light of Day* is stark and economic in comparison to the rather disorderly talkativeness of the protagonists of its immediate predecessor. In one way, however, *Light of Day* continues directly the style of *Last Orders*: using simple, clichéd, ostensibly ineloquent language (distinguishing the novels from *Waterland* or *Ever After*), employed by a recognisably reticent, unreliable narrator, who struggles to put his thoughts into words. David Malcolm argues that the simplification of language serves to increase ambiguity, being potentially useful for the manipulative, unreliable narrator's biased account. It also problematizes his status as a character and narrator: "George is a detective hired to find the truth, a plain man whose narrative is underpinned by dates, times, and documented places, but whose language is at times that of the poet or the verbal prankster, and whose evidence is often pure imagination."³³⁶ Indeed, Malcolm presents a very persuasive argument that Webb's transformation may be another subtle

³³⁵ The novel presents a single day from his life, which is another device common in Swift's texts.

³³⁶ Malcolm, *Understanding*, 213.

mystification reminiscent of Prentis's aggressively happy ending.³³⁷ Catherine Pessa-Miguel also offers examples of how Swift complicates the apparent simplicity of his narrator's language;³³⁸ this is another instance of the ambiguity mentioned in the *Last Orders* section in that the language again offers a possibility of closure and undermines it at the same time. Inevitably, the question of the excess impossible to contain in language, so familiar to Swift's readers, also appears: "In George's case, reticence is then perhaps not so much an attempt to bypass language as a strife to bring out the excess that the simplest words contain, to allow words to mean always more than they seem to mean."³³⁹

For all its innovation, therefore, *Light of Day* ultimately tests the limits of the formula established over majority of Swift's novels. One might say that on many levels *Last Orders* is a return to issues and tropes explored by Swift all the way back in *Shuttlecock*. In this sense, the novel I have chosen to discuss in the present chapter actually breaks new ground: whereas *Last Orders* and *Light of Day* appear to be optimistic in their implication of a potential for a new model of masculinity, *Wish You Were Here* focuses on the not-so-happy ever after, the costs and the limits of any such transformation.

Tomorrow is another important transitional point, signalling perhaps the exhaustion of said model, a liminal moment of the old narrative framework. This is the third time Swift has attempted to craft a female narrator after *Out of This World* and *Last Orders*, and the last time he has used first-person narrative to date. Daniel Lea actually suggests that this is precisely because the author was not happy with the results of this

³³⁷ Malcolm, *Understanding*, 204-208.

³³⁸ Catherine Pessa-Miguel, "Playing with the Ready-Made: Graham Swift's *The Light of Day* - A Response to Andrew James," *Connotations* Vol. 24.1 (2014/15), 130-42.

³³⁹ Pascale Tollance, "Reticence and Excess in Graham Swift's *The Light of Day*," in *Voices and Silence in Contemporary Novel in English*, ed. Vanessa Guignery (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 69.

experiment.³⁴⁰ Isabelle Roblin calls the voice speaking in *Tomorrow* “uncharacteristically hyperbolic, hysterical – unlike subdued, restrained voices of her predecessors” and comes close to accusing Swift of incompetence in writing a feminine speaker: “could it be the author’s idea of a woman’s voice?”³⁴¹ The unprecedented uneventfulness of the plot only brings the exaggerated narrative style into sharper focus.

It would be only too easy to dismiss the novel from inclusion in the present thesis precisely on these grounds: while questions of fatherhood and masculine identity more generally are central to the narrative, the fathers of the novel are very prominently absent, silent, unconscious and/or dead (if they even may be *really* called fathers in the first place). The theme of fatherhood, both in the biological and the literary sense, is at the heart of *Tomorrow*: the drama revolves around the narrator’s husband having to reveal to their children that he is infertile and not their biological father, while Swift apparently sets out to clarify the accusations of plagiarism that he faced after *Last Orders* by providing another rewrite – this time of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* – in which the question of (not) being a father is also of considerable significance.³⁴² Nevertheless, the text leaves all male characters out entirely as speaking subjects – unlike in a number of other novels by Swift, where absent (sometimes dead) characters were occasionally given voice. Here the (female) protagonist’s is the only one heard throughout the novel, perhaps even oppressively so. Catherine Pessa-Miquel calls the narrative “single-voiced, intimate,

³⁴⁰ Lea, *Graham Swift*, 101.

³⁴¹ Isabelle Roblin, “Graham Swift’s *Tomorrow*, or the Devious Art of Procrastination,” in *Voices and Silence in Contemporary Novel in English*, ed. Vanessa Guignery (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 78.

³⁴² Donald Kaczvinsky devoted an article to the details and functions of the intertext. (“Re-Joycing *Tomorrow*: Graham Swift, Artificial Insemination, and the Question of Literary Paternity,” in *Reading Graham Swift*, ed. Tomasz Dobrogoszcz and Marta Goszczyńska (London: Lexington Books, 2020), 81-92).

restricted, enclosed within a womb-like cosy bubble,”³⁴³ a remark that invites associations with Sophie Birch’s wish to hide inside her own womb in *Out of This World*.

Admittedly, *Tomorrow* fits into many patterns immediately recognisable to Swift’s readers and as such has in fact been the object of comparative analyses. The most obvious choice appears to be precisely *Out of This World* and here the evolution of the narrator’s address is striking: whereas Sophie begins by talking ostensibly to her analyst, and moves on to her twins, the entire narration of *Tomorrow* is Paula’s silent monologue to her sleeping children (who also happen to be twins). Her audience’s “cognitive and constitutive absence”³⁴⁴ conditions the (non)revelation of family secrets, which may in turn bring to mind two male narrators from Swift’s earlier novels: Prentis and Tom Crick. The narrator of *Tomorrow* is making a confession which reads more and more like an excuse or an evasion, and while Bożena Kucała very informatively juxtaposes *Tomorrow* with *Waterland* to demonstrate parallel contradictory impulses motivating both narrators (the need to confess and be subjected to judgement versus the fear and avoidance of the confrontation), the protagonist’s blatant refusal to address the more painful part of her confession at all invites comparisons with *Shuttlecock* as well.³⁴⁵

The events of *Tomorrow*’s diegetic present are reduced even more radically than those of *Light of Day* (Kucała goes as far as to say that “*Tomorrow* is a novel in which nothing happens,”³⁴⁶ a remark that echoes almost verbatim Stephen Benson’s “*Tomorrow*

³⁴³ Catherine Pessa-Miquel, “From Historiographic Metafiction to Bedtime Stories: The Changing Contours of Graham Swift’s Novels,” *Études anglaises* Vol. 60 (2007/2), 139.

³⁴⁴ Stephen Benson, “Contemporary Fiction and Narratorial Acoustics: Graham Swift’s *Tomorrow*,” *Textual Practice* 25 (3), (2011), 590.

³⁴⁵ Bożena Kucała, “Unspoken Dialogues and Non-Listening Listeners in Graham Swift’s Fiction,” *Brno Studies in English* vol. 41, no. 1, (2015), 117-129.

³⁴⁶ Kucała, “Unspoken Dialogues,” 120.

is in one sense a silent novel in which nothing happens”).³⁴⁷ The narrative consists of the thoughts of Paula Hook, lying awake late into the night, thinking about the conversation her husband will have with their children in the morning (and reminiscing about their lives together). The conversation is to concern the fact that Mike is not the twins’ biological father, which many readers and critics considered a disappointingly anticlimactic revelation compared to the secrets disclosed in Swift’s other novels. Significantly, Paula also contemplates her own brief affair, so Mike’s confession to their children should conceivably be accompanied by her own made to him.

One may insist that *Tomorrow* continues the shift towards more optimistic plots already signalled in my discussion of *Ever After* or *Last Orders*. *Tomorrow*’s protagonists are by no means stuck in a loveless marriage or careers they detest: Paula and her husband are comfortably off, successful and fulfilled professionally, and while their relationship may not have always been perfect, they are a loving couple who understand and support each other. Admittedly, their life is not free of its share of misery: in her youth, Paula went through her father’s three failed marriages and financial decline, her own marriage is marred by Mike’s infertility and her own infidelity, an incident of the children’s near-drowning is also recalled. Arguably none of this is anything like the standards of suffering to which Swift’s earlier protagonists were exposed. Krystyna Stamirowska observes: “What Paula imagines and fears is the children’s possible reaction once they are told that they had been conceived through artificial insemination, and a consequent break-up of the almost too perfect family existence in their beautiful house in

³⁴⁷ Benson, “Narratorial Acoustics,” 589.

Putney.”³⁴⁸ More significantly, however, Paula is terrified of the prospect of being judged for her unfaithfulness, and chooses not to reveal this particular secret. Catherine Pessoa-Miquel’s observation in fact allows us to see *Tomorrow* as an inverted version of Swift’s normal trauma fiction: whereas all of his other protagonists are haunted by a past that has put them in their present predicament, Paula’s narrative is an anticipation of a catastrophe that will wreck her present happiness, “a celebration of the strength of human optimism and resilience, but also to a poignant paean to happiness and its vulnerability.”³⁴⁹

The author’s next book, *Wish You Were Here* (2011), did not prove quite so divisive but clearly continued Swift’s reinvention. The most striking change in Swift’s approach in *Wish You Were Here* is the return to third-person narration, for the first time since his debut. In the following section, I want to argue that the familiar motif of repressing past traumas functions rather differently in this text precisely because of this modification, which in turn leads to an interesting alteration in the treatment of the issue central to my thesis, that of the way Swift’s characters create their identities through language as well as their struggle to embrace the provisional nature of any sense of subjectivity acquired through the symbolic. For these purposes, I will consider the disturbances in the relations of the protagonist of *Wish You Were Here* with the Other, and the consequences of rejecting loss as presented by the novel’s third-person narrative voice. In doing this, I will focus on the role of the narrator’s intrusive presence as a context for the strategic silences informing the relationships between the characters, shaping the omissions central to the private and public discourses of the novel and

³⁴⁸ Krystyna Stamirowska, “The Use of Ambiguity and Inconclusive Endings in Graham Swift’s Novels,” *Anglica* 24/1 (2015), 79.

³⁴⁹ Pessoa-Miquel, “Changing Contours,” 146.

revealed – though only partially settled – by the scene of spectral apparition in which its plot culminates.

In a manner symptomatic for Graham Swift as a writer, the title of his ninth novel uses a worn-out cliché to announce powerfully a number of interconnected issues essential to the text. Playing out the drama of absence and separation which lurks behind the implications of carefree holiday fun, the eponymous phrase prepares the reader for the consideration of the interplay of the public and the private that the novel offers, along with the costs of the depoliticisation of the former in the name of the latter. On a more general level, the title refers to the precarious position of presence and absence in their different modes, especially as mediated by – however problematic – representation, in language or in any other medium.

Both of these themes are actualised in the novel through the motive of the sense of obligation imposed by family bonds, remaining of vital interest for Swift throughout his writing career, though this time situated in an increasingly globalising and mediatised world. While some of the writer's earlier plots relied very strongly on the significance of being embedded in a specific locality – *Waterland* or *Last Orders* come to mind immediately, though virtually all other novels could to some degree be used as examples – the title of this book signals a shift of interest towards displacement and dispossession on an unprecedented scale. Finally, bringing together the problematic status of presence and the obligations towards the network of symbolic dependencies, the title also embodies the pull of the absent other on the subject: the “not being there” does nothing to diminish the force of its call, even – or, in fact, especially – after death. The main characters of *Wish You Were Here* find themselves separated when they are together, yet

inextricably bound when they are apart. The very notion of presence is rendered troubling by the conflict between the individual desire and the communal obligation which lies at the heart of the drama driving *Wish You Were Here*. It will therefore inform my interpretation, allowing me to situate the novel within the Swift canon with its agenda of exploring ambiguities impossible to unravel, considering its position in relation to both his earlier, more explicitly “obsessive” narratives, and the later ones, displaying an increasing tendency for a form of “hysterisation” of their narrative voices.

As a study of the tragic potential hidden in the dichotomous interdependence of presence and absence, of togetherness and separation, *Wish You Were Here* constitutes another instance of Swift’s preoccupation with the role of storytelling in individual and communal mythmaking. The effectiveness of speech in ordering experience, the im/possibility of intersubjective communication, the ambiguous status of voice between presence and absence have all long been central themes in the writer’s work. Stef Craps has used Maurice Blanchot as a point of reference in approaching also this aspect of Swift’s oeuvre. It is undeniable that his narrators’ hesitation between embracing language as a protection against the chaos of traumatising experience and feeling disappointed in it for never really capturing reality informs Swift’s novels as much as Blanchot’s thinking. For the French critic, language “not only fails to guarantee access to Being but that it guarantees the opposite – it is the guarantee of the absolute loss of Being.” In a passage that corresponds closely to the fundamental principle of Lacan’s symbolic, Blanchot explains: “For me to be able to say, ‘This woman’ I must somehow take her flesh and blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its

nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being – the very fact that it does not exist.”³⁵⁰ This is a constation carefully concealed in everyday language, all too eager to have its speakers believe that “on the level of being (idea), the word restores to the [object] all the certainty it had on the level of existence.”³⁵¹ This is exactly the temptation that many of Swift’s protagonists face, one whose promise remains unfulfilled, whether they yield to it or not. True to Blanchot’s postulate that “literature, by its very activity, denies the substance of what it represents,”³⁵² Swift’s narrators consistently bring into the open the self-contradictory nature of literature, consequently producing the effect already observed in the *Waterland* section, that of resisting illusions of completeness and finality with a tense balance of opposites. Craps quotes another text by Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, in which the French thinker concludes that

the more the world is affirmed as the future and the broad daylight of truth, where everything will have value, bear meaning, where the whole will be achieved under the mastery of man and for his use the more it seems that art must descend toward that point where nothing has meaning yet, the more it matters that art maintain the movement the insecurity and the grief of that which escapes every grasp and all ends.³⁵³

The image Blanchot offers is arguably neurotic in its assumption of full control and presence, visibility, excluding the unconscious the way the obsessive subject tends to do. Art, in its tendency to complicate this perfect picture, comes across as a hystericising influence, making the subject sensitive to the desire of the Other. Craps rightly points to the analogy between Blanchot’s insistence on all ordering operations being fundamentally

³⁵⁰ Maurice Blanchot, “Literature and the Right to Death,” in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction & Literary Essays*, ed. George Quasha, trans. Lydia Davis, Paul Auster and Robert Lambertson (Barrytown: Station Hill, 1999), 379.

³⁵¹ Blanchot, “Literature,” 381.

³⁵² Blanchot, “Literature,” 367.

³⁵³ Qtd. in Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 86.

dependent on the “traumatic non-sense at the heart of the reality”³⁵⁴ and Swift’s own epistemology.

As will be demonstrated further on, the dichotomy offered by Blanchot also corresponds to that of the voice and meaning: in both cases, the meaningless materiality of language (or the voice) is juxtaposed with the meaning which it serves to convey. Swift also appears to agree with Blanchot in his perception of the ethical task of literature. Consistently presenting his output as an exercise in empathy, an attempt to bring the reader in contact with the reality of another human being, Swift clearly follows Blanchot’s theses on the task of the writer: “[I]t is dangerous to write for other people, in order to evoke the speech of others and reveal them to themselves: the fact is that other people do not want to hear their own voices; they want to hear someone else’s voice, a voice that is real, profound, troubling like the truth.”³⁵⁵ Swift has been both accused of literary ventriloquism and praised for his perceptiveness in creating compelling sonic portraits of his characters, but the creation of “someone else’s voice” is undeniably central to his writing method. Indeed, voices speaking (and those that do not speak) in Graham Swift’s predominantly first-person narratives play a role important enough to have earned this aspect of his oeuvre a separate monograph (Pascale Tollance, *La Scène de la Voix*, 2011).³⁵⁶ The plots of the novels invariably revolve around the tension between speech “talking over” trauma and speech made impossible by its effects; both responses are revealed as acutely insufficient. In *Wish You Were Here*, words that have

³⁵⁴ Ibidem.

³⁵⁵ Blanchot, “Right to Death,” 365.

³⁵⁶ A volume that has already been referred to in this chapter – *Voices and Silence in Contemporary Novel in English* – devotes a quarter of its chapters specifically to the consideration of the interplay of speech and its absence in a selection of Swift’s novels. (ed. Vanessa Guignery, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009)

not or could not possibly have been uttered also figure as strikingly as words spoken that cannot be taken back.

In a significant departure from Swift's writing choices, however, the novel uses distinctively profuse, intrusive, third-person commentary. This framework is coupled with a feature far more familiar to Swift's readers: a particularly reticent protagonist, who is, furthermore, exceptionally hesitant, and inert, even in comparison to such figures as Bill Unwin. In fact, this is presented as his defining feature: "It had always been, in any case, Jack's basic position in life to hesitate, to ask too many questions." (122) His tendency not to communicate clearly about the most significant issues is shared by other characters, so that their experience is both covered up by the voice of the narrator and silenced in various other ways, while their tortured confessions appear to have a deeply destructive potential. This once again refers us to the neurotic characteristics of the people inhabiting Swift's world. In what follows, I will consider the "unspeakabilities" involved in the interpersonal dynamics of the novel, along with the catastrophes caused by attempts to contain experience in silences of different sorts.

The word itself appears in the novel to refer to the indescribable horrors of World War I, which could never possibly be included in an affirmative, patriotic official narrative of these events. The process of this selective, sanitising symbolisation produces an irremovable remainder which in turn provides a foundation for a return of the repressed. These inherent limitations of all sorts of symbolising (and, by implication, silencing) techniques constitute, in my view, one of the pillars of the novel, consistent with Graham Swift's overall narrative politics. The ostensibly more objective or reliable narrative presents a protagonist who also strives for a sense of completeness in his

discourse, who yearns for a justification, a liberation from the nagging uncertainty as to what the Other wants. Following the obsessive tendencies of virtually all of his predecessors, Jack Luxton wants to know what is expected of him by the network of signification founded in social relations. He is beyond any doubt haunted by the neurotic uncertainty characterising most Swiftian protagonists, although he is certainly different from so many of them in never making any claim about possessing any sense of completeness or closure. The apparent stability of the narrative style arguably plays into the demands of the readers, so while the protagonist is not trying to convince us he has a full picture of reality, the narrative form certainly invites such an impression (predictably, only to frustrate it), and leads the readers to assume that all loose ends will be tied and all ambiguities cleared, in a manner comparable on some levels with *The Sweet Shop Owner*, *Shuttlecock*, or *Out Of This World*. In a sense, this is ostensibly what happens both for the protagonist and the reader, but in ways which effectively refuse to provide straightforward answers.

The neologism therefore succinctly captures the principle behind the entire narrative, with its sense of an empty centre, of crucial questions that remain unanswered, hidden behind the omissions – and the emissions – of language. It is hardly surprising that some reviewers complained about the ultimately anti-climactic build-up in the book's ending; *Wish You Were Here* was, justifiably perhaps, read by many as a thriller, which made such disappointment inevitable. In a novel where pieces of the puzzle serve to obscure the truth rather than to make a coherent picture, where unclear implications refuse to come together into a satisfying climax, the dramatic resolution cannot but fail to resolve anything. The real drama is always, inescapably, concealed somewhere between

the lines, within the cracks in the narrative voice, covered over by the veil of language. Suitably, the denouement of the novel's plot takes the form of a spectacular return of the repressed, easily the most tangible one in Swift's entire body of work.

I will demonstrate the tensions invited in *Wish You Were Here* by the conflicted interdependence of voice and silence both on the level of the events of the plot and of the novel's narrative structure, with strategic silences between characters being paralleled by the silences introduced by the omniscient narrator, selective about revealing information. I will argue that the narrative model chosen here has profound implications on the notion of self-creation through narrative, constituting a central feature of almost all of Swift's previous novels. In fact, my argument will largely be that the very function of the final scenes of the novel is to open up any sense of closure it might have created, both for the protagonist and for the reader. In effect, I will attempt to link the novel's climax, seen as a surplus produced by the very perfection of the structuring processes of the symbolic, with an examination of Jack's functioning within the register. In the light of previous sections of my thesis, my aim here is to demonstrate how the denouement works against the obsessive tendencies present on many levels of the narrative.

With regard to his relation with his parental figures, the protagonist's prominent disinclination to take action invites a reading informed by the Oedipal scenario as a model for how desire manifests itself. Alenka Zupančič demonstrates this connection in pointing to

the conceptual value of the Oedipal myth: it situates the source of tragedy in fully, "one hundred per cent completely" accomplished symbolization, in the word after the appearance of which the Sphinx vanishes without trace. What "seals the fate" of Oedipus is not some hidden remainder of the Sphinx/Thing, but precisely the word and its consequences (its

“remainder”). Hence Oedipus’ ruin will be brought about by the fact that he will remain (albeit involuntarily) true to his word.³⁵⁷

As I will demonstrate below (especially in section 3.4), Jack’s own Oedipal situation illustrates the tensions involved in functioning within the symbolic, and in the context of my thesis, situates him at a crossroads between Swift’s early, more insistently “obsessive” narratives, and the later ones, displaying fewer such characteristics. The central character of *Wish You Were Here* can be seen both striving for a complete symbolisation and suffering from the frustrating uncertainty in the face of the mystery of the desire of the Other. Ultimately, his endeavour to banish the Thing very nearly brings about a tragic finale, but, unlike Oedipus, Jack is forced to face the incompleteness of the symbolic before his own fate is sealed.

3.2 Implications of third-person narration

From the point of view of the author’s preoccupation with literary voice, the situation in *Wish You Were Here* is rather peculiar, not only because this is the first time since Swift’s 1980 début that he employs third-person narration. What is more, the narrator of *The Sweet Shop Owner* served, as Tollance argues,³⁵⁸ as a stand-in for the collapsing consciousness of its protagonist. The narrative reflected very closely Willy Chapman’s perspective, and in fact switched to first person at points. In *Wish You Were Here*, the narrator is a distinct entity, commenting on the characters’ words, thoughts, and actions from a detached position. While the speaking voice at times approaches or mimics Jack Luxton’s thoughts (as well as those of other characters), the status of the

³⁵⁷ Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 190.

³⁵⁸ *La Scène*, 160-61.

speaker tends to be ambiguous even when read as a somewhat complicated variation on free indirect discourse. As just one example of this, at times rather ironic, distance, we might consider a somewhat puzzling exchange between Jack and his brother Tom: “‘This is just for your ears, Jack.’ / ‘And the cows’”, Jack might have said if he’d had the quickness of mind.”³⁵⁹ There are a number of instances in the narrative where the speaker insists on being separate from any voice that Jack might have at his disposal.³⁶⁰ At the same time, the fact that the statement quoted is in fact never uttered by Jack and remains purely hypothetical is only revealed by the narrator’s comment. This means that the reader is, if only for an instant, misled about the identity of the speaker: in a sense, the narrator plays on the expectations that might be activated by the free indirect discourse like that of *Sweet Shop Owner*, marrying the modernist technique of that novel with an arguably somewhat Victorian intrusive style of narration.

The importance of Swift’s preference for first-person narrative voice is stressed by Tollance, and, drawing on her brief review of narratological criticism, I believe it is safe to argue that the switch back to third person is bound to be of significance as well. Tollance refers to the “Writing and the Novel” section of Roland Barthes’s *Writing Degree Zero*,³⁶¹ with its argument that the convention of “he” along with the past tense shores up the solidity of the novel’s reality. Barthes also notes that the third person narrative performs a function defining to western art, that of pointing out its own artificiality: “The preterite and the third person in the Novel are nothing but the fateful

³⁵⁹ Graham Swift, *Wish You Were Here* (London: Picador, 2011), 179.

³⁶⁰ Another good example is an extended consideration of the position and perception of the oak growing on the farm, summed up with what amounts to a reminder of the narrator’s independence of the characters’ perspectives: “None of these thoughts had particularly occurred to Michael or Jack (or, when he was there, to Tom). They were so used to the tree straddling their view that they could, for most of the time, not really notice it.” (243)

³⁶¹ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (Trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. Boston: Beacon Press, 1977).

gesture with which the writer draws attention to the mask which he is wearing.”³⁶² This is an issue which we have already seen to be of interest to Swift (most keenly, although by no means exclusively, in *Out Of This World*). This is why I maintain that, while fuelling the author’s ongoing explorations, the narrative form of *Wish You Were Here* may be seen to involve a loss of the immediacy which Swift has declared to be crucial to him as a writer on numerous occasions. Tollance further notes that the third person also means greater narrative stability and a shift away from voice towards enunciation. I agree that this is in a sense what can be observed in *Wish You Were Here*: we are no longer dealing with a speaker concerned about the threat of the uncontrollable voice overflowing the rationalising, systematising networks of speech – such as Tom Crick in *Waterland* or Bill Unwin in *Ever After*. No more slips of the tongue, no more hesitation, no more retracting of one’s own words (or admitting one’s own lies and manipulations, as was the case with Prentis in *Shuttlecock*).

More significantly, from the point of view of my thesis, the change opens an entirely different perspective on subjectivity in the narrative. As I will demonstrate, this shift promises reliability, finality, closure – to the audience if not to the characters – but, as may be expected from Swift, the novel subverts these expectations. The silent voices of the first- and second-person narrators of most other novels by Swift resonate ostensibly within their minds and thus bring up associations with a subject locked up in his own discourse, insulated from the mystery of the desire his others, who are reduced to props in his stagings. In *Wish You Were Here*, on the other hand, we are dealing with an impersonal, abstract voice speaking for no particular subject, and regarding the characters

³⁶² Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 40.

of the novel in an apparently much more objective fashion, more prone to register their actions naturalistically, from outside.

At the same time, the effects of the change are not limited to the supposedly increased objectivity: indeed, I feel that greater narrative control inevitably implies greater tendency for omission or exclusion. In a sense, the stability of third person narration offers a possibility of achieving the kind of obsessive neurotic certainty for which, as I have shown in previous sections, Swift's narrators have predominantly been striving, though the ethical cost of such achievement has always been stressed in his novels.³⁶³ In *Wish You Were Here*, the possible repercussions of the presumed reinforcement of narrative authority are seen for example in the narrator's tendency to disclose information not available to characters themselves. In the absence of any loquacious Swiftian speaker, his, equally typical, mute characters are thus rendered perhaps even more silent, as I hope to demonstrate further in my analysis. What is more, as the example above shows, the ambiguity about narrative authority remains a prominent feature of Swift's prose and, in a sense, the narrator's tendency for conditional mode performs a function which I see as analogous to that of his other speakers' self-questioning. This is why I would insist that, while in Swift's other novels the protagonists offered testimony to their own struggles with delusions of completeness, *Wish You Were Here* addresses an equivalent challenge directly to the reader through a narrator uninvolved in the events, but doing much to undermine the reliability of his account with its speculative tone or frequent use of free indirect speech.

³⁶³ The obvious difference is that in this case this is to be the readers' achievement rather than the characters.'

In his study, Barthes emphasises the gap separating the use of the third person in classic prose of the nineteenth century and in early modernism, indicating the shift from its function as a convention that serves to impose order on represented reality to that of exaggerating or destroying conventions to escape the ideological involvements of literature: “Modernism begins with the search for a Literature which is no longer possible.”³⁶⁴ As I noted in previous sections, Swift self-consciously positions himself as an heir to modernism’s impossibilities. Hence, I find it all too appropriate that the expectations associated with the nineteenth-century model of omniscient external narrator who explains and regulates the reality of the text, should be activated only to be undermined in *Wish You Were Here* as much as in any of his novels. In what I would call his signature move, Swift takes up another literary device, another generic convention, only to subject it to scrutiny and conclude that it also can at best produce a delicate illusion of completeness – which is perhaps the best possible solution in any case. In the following section of the chapter, I would like to explore how the ideologically informed interplay of what is revealed and what is concealed functions on the level of the narrator’s commentary and on the level of diegesis itself.

3.3 The narrator’s voice and the silences between characters

The tale presented by the external narrator of *Wish You Were Here* is a variation on themes familiar to Swift’s audience, with its focus on the crumbling of a family farm, initiated by the death of the wife and mother, Vera Luxton. The consequences of this loss are exacerbated by the outbreak of the BSE and followed by the departure of Tom, the

³⁶⁴ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 40.

younger of Vera's two sons. The more openly rebellious one, he is guilty of "[r]unning away from the war against cow disease and agricultural ruin. And against his own embattled father." (179) Tom defies the father, Michael, and leaves the farm – in effect severing all ties with the family – to join the military on his eighteenth birthday. His older brother, Jack, only follows in his footsteps by abandoning the farm after Michael's suicide. Even then, he requires intense prompting from his wife Ellie, who suggests selling the farms they had both inherited and starting an entirely different business together. The narrative frame of *Wish You Were Here* is constituted by events of what threatens to be Jack's final day. Feeling betrayed by Ellie, who refused to attend Tom's funeral, and altered by his solitary journey, Jack voices his long-concealed unease about the changes in their lives and what he perceives as testifying to disloyalty towards their families. His accusations of Ellie's contributing to her own father's death lead to an explosive confrontation between the two and bring Jack to the brink of suicide.

The voice which delivers this story certainly shares one feature with Swift's other narrators: it glosses over crucial information while offering an overwhelming amount of dramatic detail. The fates of the brothers are traced back to their childhoods, grounded in family history (admittedly, rather sparse by Swift's standards) and brought to their near-tragic conclusion in the narrative present. What is more, the reader is offered insight into the characters' unexpressed thoughts, emotions, and actions concealed from their close ones (for example, readers learn far more about Tom's motivations and his life after abandoning the farm than his brother ever will). Still, we may get a sense that something is eluding us, that the outbursts around which the plot is built are not motivated sufficiently by what we are told about the characters. The suspicious reader of Swift's

fiction is put here in a considerably different position than usually: whereas in the past the strategic omissions or manipulations could have easily been attributed to the self-interest of the narrator, and seen as essential to the speaker's self-construction, in *Wish You Were Here* there is ostensibly no such motivation. Thus, I would argue, more than ever before, narrative deformations affect above all the audience (rather than the speaker him- or herself), subjecting Swift's reader to the familiar challenge of excessively easy closures with renewed intensity.

Jack's guilt in particular does not appear to be well supported by material provided in the narrative: after all, it is Tom who escapes and Jack who takes on himself the father's fury, Tom who gets to go out into the world and Jack who remains "a prisoner" on the farm,³⁶⁵ Tom who does the "bastard thing" of remaining quiet even after their father's shocking death (202) and Jack who undertakes repeated attempts at communication (75).³⁶⁶ Still, Jack's position remains indissolubly ambiguous – certainly in his own eyes – and the question of what the Other expects of him is without any doubt of central significance: "Tom was the deserter, the traitor? But if so, Jack was a traitor too, for covering for him. Or Jack was doubly loyal. To Tom, for not betraying him, and to Dad, or to the farm, for staying put himself." (182) This ambiguity is reinforced by the fact that the arrangement remains unstated, and if the brothers ever did discuss it, there is no direct relation of the conversation in the narrative. Jack's paralysing uncertainty therefore seems to result from a neurotic striving to overlook the other's desire: the

³⁶⁵ Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, 137.

³⁶⁶ Indeed, the attitudes of the brothers fit all too well into the hysteric/obsessive distinction. Colette Soler explains: "The obsessive generally feels guilty and his guilt may at times be so great that Freud is led to wonder if there is any difference between obsession and melancholia. The hysteric, on the other hand, accuses the Other: It is always the Other's fault. Obviously one can also find accusation in the obsessive and guilt in the hysteric, but the main axes of their discourses are, in the one case, guilt and, in the other, accusation." ("Hysteria and Obsession", 255)

interpretation of his own actions, his others' motivations, the relations on which his own situation in the symbolic relies – all of this remains hauntingly indeterminate. What is more, as a number of examples from the novel will illustrate, a great deal of the dilemmas which he faces remain only for him to disentangle, never being consulted with his others.³⁶⁷

Suitably for a drama of dispossession and disrupted transmission of family traditions, the issue of inheritance is quite revealing of the tensions, as well as the silences, involved in the relationship of the brothers. The fact that Tom is left out of the will by the enraged Michael is hardly surprising and Jack's inheritance is repeatedly – and explicitly – shown as a compensation for being left behind: “And no word from him. And hadn't that settled the matter? Wasn't that even Tom's way of saying it again – what he'd never actually said in the first place? All yours, Jack – and you're welcome to it.” (181) At the same time, Jack's right to the farm can hardly be said to have been “asserted”: after all, it is introduced by a series of negated questions, and the only positive statement concerns Tom's silence on the issue.

In fact, this situation illustrates perfectly how the silences of the characters are the function of the narrator's voice: while the legitimacy of Jack's claim to his inheritance is actually confirmed rather directly at another point in the narrative, this confirmation is never communicated between the brothers. In a section of the novel describing Tom's service in Iraq, the narrator discloses his position on the matter, giving the reader an advantage over the characters in the novel that is unusual in Swift's writing. Referring to

³⁶⁷ This is another trope prevalent in Swift's protagonists that implies an obsessive subject: “The typical obsessive [...] is a man who stays in his study and thinks about his problem all by himself. The obsessive's immediate tendency is not to go out and talk with people. It is rather to put his head in his hand and think without stopping.” (Soler, 262-3)

the contents of the letter which informs Tom of their father's death, the narrator reveals that it also contains details of Michael's will: the farm was left "to Jack and Jack only. Well that was no surprise. That had even been the deal." (202) The privileged position of the narrator is here emphasised by the fact that Tom's words are only offered in the form of reported speech: once again, the narrator speaks for – and thus silences – the character.

Marking a distinct departure from Swift's predominant narrative strategies, *Wish You Were Here* therefore introduces a fundamental gap between the level of diegesis and the narrative commentary, and the dynamics of the two are employed in a way that in my view adds depth to the writer's exploitation of the interplay of the voice and silence in forming the novel's discourse. Admittedly, the narrator's voice supplies crucial information concealed in exchanges between the characters themselves, although in a meandering style which hides almost as much as it reveals. At the same time, however, drawing the readers' attention to the disparity between their knowledge and that of the characters invites a parallel doubt about what is made known to them and what is not (for example, Tom's motivation for breaking off contact with Jack finds little support in what is said either between or about the brothers). Confidence in the omniscience or objectivity of the speaker is invited and frustrated by the same gesture, and thus creates a background for a sense of concealment, a foundation for the return of the repressed, parallel to that which exists in the form of the gaps in the communications between the characters themselves. Thus any neurotic attempt to eradicate the unconscious is negated: crucial elements of the narrative remain conspicuously unspoken.

The disturbances of intergenerational transmission – another constant concern in Swift's writing – also have considerable ramifications for this question. The central

prominence given by Swift to the motif of inheritance and property in his consideration of the (dis)possessions experienced by the characters of the novel can hardly be considered an incidental move in a writer so concerned about issues of literary heritage and intertextuality. Peter Buse and Andrew Stott make the same kind of link explicit in their introduction to a collection of texts on the affiliations between spectrality and deconstruction, psychoanalysis and history, pointing out that such analysis cannot but “hint that where there are disputes over property, we find ghosts, or that where we find ghosts there are bound to be anxieties about property.”³⁶⁸ Buse and Stott emphasise the tensions between the efforts to exorcise the violence involved in obtaining material possessions and the stubborn returns of the repressed reality of those processes. The price paid for possession is apparently never sufficient, leaving a ghostly debt of guilt. In Lacanian terms, this irreducible remainder clearly translates into a product of flaws inherent in the process of symbolisation, which I signalled earlier as being of primary importance for the novel, and will discuss in more detail further on. The guilt involved in Gothic elaborations of the theme of the troubled passing on of inheritance, in its turn, may then be read in terms of the symbolic debt, located at the foundation of our very existence as speaking subjects.

The possibility of omissions to which the narrative style of *Wish You Were Here* contributes is thus central to the processes of exclusion equally fundamental to Gothic literature’s concern with economic processes and to the subject’s functioning within discourse as described by Lacanian psychoanalysis. With the particular model of narrative voice chosen for the novel, the silences between the characters are rendered all

³⁶⁸ Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (eds.), *Ghosts. Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 9.

the more resonant, as are their voices, once they are finally heard. Tom's situation is especially illustrative in this respect, since in many ways he is erased (or erases himself) from the family narrative: refusing to take the place assigned to him by the father, he leaves the farm and discontinues communication with his brother, ignoring even his summons to their father's funeral. His voice is, furthermore, largely (and at crucial points) replaced by that of the narrator. At the same time, in his very absence, he remains a structuring force in his abandoned relatives' lives. Ellie's awareness of the limitation of her influence on Jack is based precisely on this: "And though Jack had come out of the shell of his past long ago, even become a new kind of man [...] she knew that the obstacle was still Tom, who was still in the picture though out of it." (115)³⁶⁹ In this, he appears to embody various aspects of the voice: he is a structural feature, ostensibly deprived of content, yet irremovable, representing absence and presence at the same time. In some way, Tom is just another character in Swift's oeuvre who turns into a voice – though there is a significant difference: his predecessors were the speakers of their narratives, while he is largely absent, and silent, in *Wish You Were Here*. Considering the central role that Tom's spectral intervention plays in the culminating scene of the novel, and the fact that his influence reaches its peak only when he speaks, I would like to use his example to speculate about the functions of the voices – and silences – permeating the transmissions of property in *Wish You Were Here*.

³⁶⁹ One example is the selling of "the stuff inside" the inherited house, for which Jack requires Ellie's approval, and which even then "cost him a wrench, a hell of a wrench." The set of objects that are sold conspicuously includes the cradle in which he once rocked his younger brother – but not, equally explicitly, the shotgun with which Michael has taken his life or the medal awarded posthumously to two Luxton brothers fallen in World War I and treasured by their descendants. (106-7). Tom is therefore removed from Jack and Ellie's lives, but the spectre of the violent ideology that led him to his death in combat remains.

3.4 The spectres of silence

3.4.1 The framework of maternal voices and paternal silences

As has already been demonstrated, the silences of the characters are not merely reported but also orchestrated by the narrator: admittedly, at times they are the characters' decisions, disclosed by the narrative commentary, but at times the otherwise omniscient narrator unexpectedly appears limited to the perspective – and knowledge – of a given character (the example of Michael's final night is particularly useful here: Jack witnesses his father's suicide in some way, but the narrator's account makes no attempt to dispel the protagonist's profound uncertainty about what actually happens).³⁷⁰ Thus, the voices of the characters themselves do not constitute the frame of the narrative as such, although within the reality constructed by the narrator's voice, they inevitably play a crucial role, also, if not actually above all, in their absence.

The most striking pattern here is that of the all-embracing, time-defying voices of the departed mothers and the stubborn silence of the fathers. Reworking a motif present in many of Swift's earlier works,³⁷¹ Michael Luxton and his neighbour Jimmy Merrick remain taciturn regardless of whether they are in fact there or not. Indeed, in a passage pivotal for the understanding of the relationship between Jack Luxton and his mother, her voice is stated rather openly to perform functions normally reserved for father figures. It is Vera Luxton who introduces her son to family history, and the task is shown as one that her husband is incapable of performing: "His mother had given Jack the plain – proud, illustrious – facts, a man's story coming from a woman's lips. And all the better for it, Jack would later think. His dad would have made a mumbling hash of it." (12) For this

³⁷⁰ I will return to this episode in more detail in section 3.4.

³⁷¹ Tollance, *La Scène*, 19.

reason, she narrativises the founding horrors of the family's war history, an indisputably masculine domain of military "unspeakabilities," in which two Luxton brothers, Fred and George, are killed during World War I.³⁷²

The fact that she does this might appear surprising in the light of the psychoanalytic model in which the mother is associated with the pre-symbolic realm of bodily union with the infant, and the father figure is taken as the installer of the symbolic law. However, apart from the fact that the person (or indeed any other entity) filling a certain position does not need to correspond with it in terms of gender, or indeed be embodied at all,³⁷³ Vera's taking the masculine position may also be accounted for with the use of Kaja Silverman's conception of the maternal voice. Silverman notes that, despite being overwhelmingly associated with the repressed pre-discursive, bodily reality, the mother's voice at the same time plays a crucial role in the infant's accession to the symbolic, by means of her performing in the first years of the child's life "the functions of language teacher, explicator, and storyteller. Psychoanalysis tells us that the mother's voice is usually the first to be isolated by the infant from other noises, and that it is by imitating the sounds she makes that it produces its own initial articulations."³⁷⁴ The mother's voice therefore performs the role of the symbolic mirror in which the child may perceive its illusory unity, proving that even the supposed self-sufficiency of the imaginary is dependent on social relations.

³⁷² Their exact relation to Michael remains conspicuously unspecified – George is described as the indisputable "village hero" (11) and "the Luxtons' claim to fame" (12) and it appears that in Vera's story both brothers are primarily Luxtons, property of the community, rather than anybody's father or great-uncle specifically.

³⁷³ Dylan Evans notes that "the symbolic father does not usually intervene by virtue of someone incarnating this function, but in a veiled fashion, for example by being mediated by the discourse of the mother (see S4, 276)." (62-3)

³⁷⁴ Kaja Silverman, *Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema. Theories of Representation and Difference* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 76.

Vera adapts the masculine family narrative for her own purposes: retrospectively identified by Jack as a rite of passage (an observation he was too young to make when he first heard it), her version is embellished by an “extra, imaginary bit” (13) which shows the two brothers sharing the medal awarded posthumously to one of them. Jack wonders whether his own brother had heard a different rendering in his time (12) and, characteristically, cannot be sure of that, since he never mentioned the topic to Tom. However, the very suspicion signals a difference in their formation, and may in fact help account for their later life choices: “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) In any case, the story presented to Jack carries with it a requirement of loyalty, an image of brotherly bond stronger than death. This meaning of the episode is constructed retrospectively as well, because when Vera told the tale, Tom was not born yet and, for medical reasons, no one expected him ever to be born. In imposing a narrative that will continue to organize Jack’s system of values to the very edge of self-destruction, Vera’s message therefore inscribes into the notion of the maternal voice as “the nest and the cage,”³⁷⁵ standing for the idealised union of the mother and the infant, which is at the same time suffocating and imprisoning.

The influence of the narrative, based on the analogies between the fates of Fred and George and those of Jack and Tom, is further reinforced by what happens to Michael Luxton and Jimmy Merrick. After Michael’s suicide, Jimmy succumbs to cancer that he has been suffering from and dies, soon enough to provoke a vague suspicion in Jack, who sets off the confrontation with Ellie precisely by pointing to this coincidence. Here, the

³⁷⁵ Silverman, *Acoustic Mirror*, 72.

correspondences run in several directions: on the one hand, the relation between Michael and Jimmy is actually compared to that of brothers,³⁷⁶ so, in the wake of Tom's funeral, this situation might be read as hinting that Jack should follow his brother like those before him did. On the other hand, the accusation that Ellie might have contributed to her father's death is rebutted by her with an analogous one, addressed at Jack. It is intended to be outrageously exaggerated and make him realize the absurdity of his own remark, but he in fact picks it up.

If Vera's tale, combined with the relation of Jimmy and Michael, set the pattern for relationships in Jack's life, it is little wonder that he reacts with pangs of conscience both to Tom's death and Michael's, while Ellie appears far less moved by her losses. In fact, I would insist that the reaction of each spouse to the deaths of their fathers may be attributed to how successfully the mother's lesson has been acquired: Ellie rather freely admits having waited for her father to die, while Jack feels like he has killed his own because he has failed to meet his expectations. The influence of disembodied voices is felt throughout the narrative and I would now like to explore what I consider to be the one crucial to the novel's resolution, the silenced voice of Jack's disappeared younger brother, unexpectedly heard again in the final scene.

³⁷⁶ Ellie makes the observation: "Jimmy had started to go downhill soon after Michael's death. Hardly a cause, but a kind of kinship. It was as if, she'd thought at the time, her father had lost a brother. Or he'd won some contest of survival and had nothing left to prove." (298)

3.4.2 Tom Luxton: the soundless voice

Mladen Dolar's discussion of the voice in Lacanian psychoanalysis takes as its starting point the fundamental juxtaposition of the voice and meaning: as bearer of sense, the voice disappears beneath the message produced, being a non-linguistic element that makes language possible, but is itself not discerned by linguistics.³⁷⁷ It is in this sense that Dolar refers to the structural dimension of the voice, as opposed to its physical, or even carnal aspect, that he employs the phrase "the soundless voice."³⁷⁸ This position creates a structural illusion that the voice has a privileged position in allowing access to the original meaning lost in the process of symbolisation, which must be dismissed as a retroactive construct: "The voice is not taken as a hypothetical or something of mythical origin that the analysis would have to break down into distinctive traits, not a diffuse substance to be reduced to structure, but rather the opposite — it stands as the outcome of the structural operation."³⁷⁹ Dolar further demonstrates the rudimentary narcissism involved in the voice, seemingly having no need for an other – and too easily disturbed by its appearance, as can be seen in the Narcissus story: when repeated by Echo, his voice becomes alien and unbearable, especially after her death, when it turns into "the voice without a body, the remainder, the trace of the object."³⁸⁰ Instead of sustaining the illusion of self-transparency and perfect coinciding of the sender and receiver of one's own intentionality, the voice enters into the dimension of the Other and gains a disturbing autonomy. What this shows is that the voice is necessarily problematic for psychoanalysis: even in its narcissistic, imaginary dimension, there is a threat of

³⁷⁷ Mladen Dolar, "The Object Voice" in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 1996), 7-31.

³⁷⁸ Dolar, "The Object Voice," 7.

³⁷⁹ Dolar, "The Object Voice," 9.

³⁸⁰ Dolar, "The Object Voice," 14.

disruption in the form of the voice of the Other, imposing itself on the subject.³⁸¹ This is the voice of consciousness, of the superego, endowed with a surplus that places the subject in the position of ineradicable guilt – the more one obeys its injunctions, the more one feels guilty.³⁸² On the other hand, with its illusion of privileged direct access to being, the voice functions as a counterpoint to the negative differentiability founding the symbolic subject, and is thus associated with the “retroactive fantasies of a primary fusion prior to the introduction of a signifier and a lack,”³⁸³ and therefore with the idealised pre-symbolic relation with the mother.

Always situated at the interstices of two frameworks, the voice always refuses to belong to either: it is the space between language and the body, between the moral law and the law of the superego, between presence and absence. The voice therefore displays the paradoxical features of *objet a*, the object cause of desire, promising to fill the fundamental lack and in fact only marking it. Perhaps most significantly for my consideration of the final confrontation between the brothers, the introduction of the voice may be read as a form of defence against absolute subjection to the symbolic. As Alenka Zupančič remarks, endowing the law with the voice (or the gaze – both being exemplary Lacanian objects), is an attempt to fill the lack in the Other. This implies a switch from the moral law (the ruthless demands of the law of the symbolic, whose very incompleteness she posits as the condition of ethics) to the law of the terrifying demands of the cruel superego, embodied through affect. Trembling before the voice or the gaze of the superego, however, is in itself an escape from the confrontation with the moral law.³⁸⁴

³⁸¹ Dolar, “The Object Voice,” 13-4.

³⁸² As has already been observed, this is Jack’s position in the novel.

³⁸³ Dolar, “The Object Voice,” 15.

³⁸⁴ Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 147-8.

This perspective will inform my interpretation of the final spectral apparition of Tom in the novel.

Through the prism of the voice, I read Tom as one of the several manifestations of the disturbing remainder produced by the ordering narrativising processes carried out by the novel's characters (primarily, though not exclusively, Jack) and, by implication, also by its narrator. Jack, like most Swiftian protagonists, displays an obsessive longing for a sense of closure, at crucial points in the narrative explicitly insisting on full presence, or questioning the very possibility of representation.³⁸⁵ Reflecting on the length of the memorial service, he concludes that it appears "to go on for an unendurable length, but also not to be nearly long enough, as if this procedure of under an hour was all there might ever be to stand for the whole life of his brother." (165-6) My argument is that episodes such as this one signal the destabilisation of the symbolic for the protagonist, which culminates in a profound crisis of his relation to language and social interactions more generally – both embodied in his increasing inability to speak and ultimately in his near-suicide. Tom's voice, on the other hand, counteracts this crisis, restoring the lack necessary for the functioning of the neurotic subject, as the elusive object of desire, serving, in Alice Lagaay's words, "not to refer to a particular object but to name an unresolved problem."³⁸⁶

Throughout the narrative, Tom persistently comes across as excessive, always an uncontrollable surplus. As was already remarked, his very birth was unexpected and dangerous to Vera's life: whereas Jack had been "truly intended [...] Tom, it seemed, had

³⁸⁵ The way this plays out for him is tellingly quite different from Chapman or Prentis, who undertake drastic actions to achieve their goal, but not impossible to relate to Beech or Unwin.

³⁸⁶ Alice Lagaay, "Between Sound and Silence: Voice in the History of Psychoanalysis," *E-Pisteme*, Vol. 1 (1), 2008, 60.

turned up by surprise and at much hazard to his mother.” (21)³⁸⁷ If Vera’s narrative of brotherly love in the military context is intended to position him within the family narrative, he subverts this discourse too: Tom joins the army like his ancestors, but only in order to leave the family obligations behind. In the final scenes of the novel, he acts as the voice responding to Jack’s increasing silence, or, to use Dolar’s comment on Heidegger’s ethics of the voice, as “the call to an opening to being, to get out of the closure of one’s self-presence.”³⁸⁸ We may add to this Kaja Silverman’s observation that the voice is considered a trace, a leftover of the supposed unity of the mother with the child, always conceptualised as already lost, and therefore possible to qualify as *objet a*. This, in turn, means that while it promises a paradise of unity and completeness, it belongs to the very category of objects introducing and testifying to separation and lack.³⁸⁹

This is crucial for the central drama of *Wish You Were Here*. Regardless of any differences between him and the protagonists of Swift’s earlier novels, Jack Luxton replicates one feature common to most of their central characters: he aims to be subjugated to the symbolic without a remainder, to surrender his voice to the letter, to have his place in the system unambiguously confirmed, to earn his peace by making Mom and Dad happy.³⁹⁰ This is arguably the obsessive neurotic’s wish to have his own

³⁸⁷ More precisely, this is another speculation, another fact unverified either by Jack himself or the novel’s narrator: “It was only later that he drew the conclusion – or formed the theory – that Tom hadn’t been meant to happen. It was a risk. His mother had problems in that department. She’d had a bad time with him, he *vaguely* knew. Though he also *understood* that that she’d thought it was worth it. She had an even worse time, as it turned out, with Tom. Between the two of them, Jack sometimes wondered, might they have given her the cancer?” (21, my emphasis)

³⁸⁸ Dolar, “His Master’s Voice.”

³⁸⁹ Silverman, *Acoustic Mirror*, 85-6.

³⁹⁰ For example, the narrator comments on Ellie and Jack’s marriage ceremony by noting that Jack “hadn’t felt her presence – her touch, her whispered approval – in that registry office in Newport,” (26) marking the event as a violation of Vera’s dream of a white wedding for her son. Even more powerfully, Jack notes, while running away from the awkwardness of the communal commemoration of his brother, that

desire superseded by the Other's. Jack never desires "in his own name": it is either his parents or his wife who tell him what to do. Tom - an undeniable presence in his life even when he has long been gone - is the only one among his nearest and dearest who remains inscrutable to Jack. In other words, whereas everyone else formulates specific demands in relation to him, Tom remains a figure of desire. For this reason, I believe it is possible to read Tom's utterance as the unbearable reminder that Jack can never know what the Other wants from him, that Vera's injunctions - or Ellie's persuasions - will never solve the mystery of the Other's desire, that he will have to remain unjustified, constantly questioning his position in the symbolic. In this sense, Tom's voice is central to the disappointing denouement: it reveals the empty, content-less centre, which remains to haunt the supposedly complete discourse in which Jack seeks to situate himself. Tom's voice is the effect - and proof - of the faults inherent in the processes of symbolisation, straining to contain the unruly carnality of the living speech, and instead producing that which was supposed to pre-exist their structuring work.

Therefore, the silencing processes permeating the novel on many levels inevitably involve a return, with the voice subverting the very notion of complete elucidation, and functioning as an "empty left-over of a (structurally neurotic) subject defined by lack, and whose desire, moreover, can never be fulfilled."³⁹¹ Precisely like the object voice, Tom's spectre is produced at the point where he is supposed to have disappeared completely. Upon receiving the news of his death, Ellie begins calculating her potential gains in the emotional economy of the family. Her initial share was not excessively great, since "Jack

abandoning his dead is "hardly proper, hardly decent. But who was going to stop him? ... Only the voice of his mother, impossibly calling to him - 'Jack, don't go' - could have stopped him." (289) The influence of Vera's voice will be discussed in more detail in section 3.3.1, as will be the sense of doubt and disloyalty that haunts Jack in relation to Michael.

³⁹¹ Lagaay, "Between," 57.

[...] was a slave to his father, and he was his mother's favourite [...] and there was the big chunk of him anyway that belonged with his brother. How much did that leave for Ellie?" (113) Ellie herself was tied to her father's farm, but with the departures of the parents, her chances of escape began to increase until "[t]here was just one gap in the picture, and that was the gap that corresponded to the part of Jack that still belonged to Tom, even though Tom had been absent." (114-5) However, she no sooner allows her hopes to soar when Tom dies than she realises that her influence on Jack will only diminish: "She'd seen the bit of Jack that belonged to Tom, even though he was dead, only growing bigger and the bit of Jack that was hers only growing smaller." (117) Tom's death makes impossible the careful elimination of his existence from Jack and Ellie's life: for years, the potential dangers of his profession have been "blanked out" and Tom himself hardly mentioned at all, but when news arrives of his death, Jack and Ellie share the realisation that this is no longer possible, "as if, strangely, now Tom was dead, she could no longer rely on his absence." (216) It is precisely this unreliability of Tom that will play a crucial role in the novel's dissolution, which will be discussed in more detail in section 3.6 of this chapter, but before I move on to the climax of the narrative, I would like to consider some secondary characters, whose experience mirrors that of Tom in significant ways, as well as to consider a dramatic event in Jack's life which foreshadows his final showdown with Tom.

3.4.3 The haunted outsiders

The plot of the novel ties in with Gothic literature's traditional involvement in haunting and implications of (dis)continued family lines, explored, as was shown above,

through the relations within the Luxton family, but also through the introduction of colonising, rationalising outsiders, who possess the place but are also themselves exposed to haunting. The ordering discourses justifying the atrocities committed in the name of intergenerational transmission, typical for the Gothic tradition, are therefore subjected to the same sort of subverting operation that were shown to affect Jack's self-narration above.

In a shift fundamental to the drama of the novel, the younger generation of Luxtons and Merricks decide to abandon the family tradition as well as the locality associated with it. Jack himself is predictably 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 in fact detach their property from its history and put it up for sale not as a farm but as a country 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 Zygmunt 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."³⁹² The wealthy Londoners, whose "Jebb life" is limited almost exclusively to summers, strive for local security of a controllable environment in a world increasingly affected by "unlocal malaise of

³⁹² Quoted in Tadeusz Rachwał, "Capital, Tourism and the Feminine Mobility," in *On the Move: Mobility and Identity*, ed. Krzysztof Knauer and Tadeusz Rachwał (Bielsko-Biała: Wydawnictwo Akademii Techniczno-Humanistycznej, 2005), 34.

insecurity.” (313) Their specific understanding of the term is also explicitly stated: what 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)

In a certain sense, Jack and Ellie in their new life as the owners of a caravan site are as much impostors as the Robinsons themselves. Both couples achieve not so much a liberation as the impression of escape. In both cases the escape is conditioned by an otherwise unfortunate realignment of the status quo, whose unpleasant and often violent manifestations range from the BSE and the subsequent farming crisis, through the rise of terrorism and Tom’s disappearance in Iraq, deaths of Michael and Jimmy, to marital infidelity in the case of the Robinsons. Even more significantly, the dearly-bought getaway proves to be as illusory for Swift’s characters as it was for Robinson Crusoe himself, who concludes more than once that his exotic adventure in fact proves to be little less than the fulfilment of the middle-class future envisioned for him by his father.

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

In other words, the passing of the farm from hands to hands is conditioned on a series of silences, omissions, denials. As Claire’s uncanny episodes signal, this renders the reality constructed by the Robinsons susceptible to fundamental disturbances. The third-person narrator proves indispensable here, reporting thoughts and experiences which the characters barely dare admit to themselves, much less voice in front of their others. In this sense, the narrative structure of *Wish You Were Here* allows Swift to signal the strategic omissions of the novel’s discourse as efficiently as the aposiopeses practiced by the first-person narrators of his earlier works. This is very clearly visible in the episode of Michael Luxton’s suicide, anticipating Jack’s own desperate act. In the following section I will attempt a Lacanian reading of this part of the novel.

3.5 The father who does not know he is dead and the burning child

In “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious” (1960), Lacan uses an alternative narrative to discuss the situation of the

desiring subject. The most famous myth of psychoanalysis, that of Oedipus, is replaced by a dream (or, to be more precise, a class of dreams) discussed at two different points of Freud's theorization.³⁹³ A man's dream of his father, who is dead without realising it, offers a significantly different perspective on the functioning of the symbolic subject, while retaining crucial parallels with the Oedipal model: whereas Oedipus's tragedy derives from his ignorance of his parents' identity – and when he gains the knowledge post-factum, it is precisely this knowledge that leads to his destruction – in the dream of the dead father, it is the father who is ignorant rather than the son, although, like in the myth, once he gains the missing knowledge, he fades into non-being. Jane Gallop's reading of "Subversion of the Subject" emphasizes that it is in Freud's account of the dream that the ignorance is associated specifically with the father – Lacan is careful to blur the distinction, employing the third-person masculine pronoun, which might equally well refer to the son.³⁹⁴ Gallop also points out that while in Freud being (dead) and knowing receive equal status in the grammatical structure of his text, in Lacan being becomes dependent on knowing (i.e. this verb is situated in the subordinate clause, while the former is in the main clause of the sentence).³⁹⁵ The dream is therefore grounded in uncertainty about the identity (or the very existence) and authority of the person associated with the father function, making the father the site of ignorance.

Gallop complements the influence of this dream on Lacan's conceptualisations with the dream of the burning child, discussed by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1913) and later reinterpreted by Lacan in *Seminar XI* (1973). The dream concerns a

³⁹³ Lacan attributes it to Freud's article, "Formulations Regarding the Two Principles of Mental Functioning," (1911) but the dream is also mentioned in the section of *Interpretation of Dreams* devoted to absurd dreams (trans. and ed. by James Strachey, New York: Basic Books, 2010, 434-465).

³⁹⁴ Or the third male figure present at the scene, the old man hired to watch over the body.

³⁹⁵ Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 158-9.

father falling asleep while keeping wake for his dead child. In the dreamer's vision, the child comes back to life to admonish him for being asleep: "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" These words awake the father, who discovers that a falling candle has indeed caused a minor fire, damaging the dead body. Lacan reads the situation as an escape from the real of the dreamer's failure as a father into the dream of waking – symbolic – reality of the child's actual death. Like the dead father dream, this scenario is also marked by the father's ignorance of death (this time the child's), but in this case emphasis is placed on the inadequacy of the father in performing his duties. Furthermore, in both dreams the moment of the shift from ignorance to knowledge is the moment when the father disappears from the scene, into oblivion or into the waking reality, respectively.

The narrative of Jack's memory of the final night in his father's life is marked by a strange sense of suspension at the border of dream and waking, and a sudden transition between the two states, induced by a factor impossible to locate unambiguously in either. The father-son relationship is here infused with enormous tension and guilt involved in both positions, and the way the episode is presented in the novel appears to provide evidence for the impossibility of adequately witnessing another's death. All of these features arguably allow us to link it with the dream of the burning child. At the same time, it is clearly possible to relate the episode to the dream of the dead father: a son is literally watching his father walking around with a shotgun even though he is (practically) dead already. Michael's mind has quite clearly been made up earlier and the events of his final Remembrance Day only confirm his determination, so when Jack sees (or dreams of) him leaving the house, one could say that Michael is already dead, only his death has not been registered in the symbolic yet. Perhaps even more significantly, just as

in Freud's writing the dream of the burning child is complemented by its obverse in the form of the other class of dreams, the scene of Michael's suicide may be paired with its counterpart in the form of Jack's final encounter with his brother's ghost, to which I will return in the section 3.6 of this chapter. This analogy is in fact essential in my reading of the novel, since it captures, as I will attempt to show, a central feature of the process of subject formation, which bears on Jack's striving for a complete entry into the symbolic. In fact, the drama at the centre of the denouement of the novel may be read as an oscillation between the protagonist's encounter with Michael – the father who is not quite dead yet, or who is soon to be dead, but not yet aware of this; and his confrontation with Tom – his younger brother, repeatedly situated in the position of his son,³⁹⁶ who is undeniably dead, but admonishing his "father" all the same.

Significantly, while Freud reads the dream of the dead father as an expression of the dreamer's desire to take his place (and, by implication, face his own mortality), for Lacan, the figure of the (un)dead father stands for the completeness of the symbolic, denial of lack which the Name-of-the-Father represents. In other words, both readings embody what the obsessive neurotic strives for, and both apply to Jack. On the one hand, the family drama, in which Michael's death is one of the culminating points, leads him to the verge of suicide, and thus to literally taking Michael's place. On the other hand, the crisis Jack experiences in terms of social interactions before this moment is marked by his nearly successful striving to remove lack from the symbolic, to achieve the state represented by the undead father. The two incidents in Jack Luxton's story, just like the two dreams, illustrate the vain striving to achieve complete symbolization, and the means used to prevent this completion. If the figure of the dead father stands for the complete

³⁹⁶ This will be discussed in detail in section 3.5.

symbolic, the dream of the burning child reminds us of the necessary failure of the law of the father, represented by the inevitable inadequacy of the individual taking the father's position.

Jack Luxton's not objecting to what Ellie intends as an absurd accusation that he shot his father means that he is prepared to consider the possibility. Along with his apparent uncertainty about whether he awoke at the sound of the shot or much earlier, of whether he in fact was witness to Michael's final walk, this is undeniably central to the understanding of the motivations behind the protagonist's actions which lead to the situation in the narrative present. Michael Luxton shoots himself on the night of the first Remembrance Day after Tom's escape from the farm. Tom's absence once again subverts the father-son relationship, organized by the well-established patriarchal and patriotic system of values. The official occasion, celebrating and confirming Michael's position in the "long line of generations" thus becomes a moment of disturbing tension, with a potential of transforming the crisis in the family into public business. Throughout the day, Michael does his best to keep his face in the community, and while initially Jack is uncertain of whether the two are going to attend ceremonies, in fact his father prepares for them with even more care than usual, omitting only the ritual visit to the pub afterwards. At the same time, the narrator observes Michael's "smirk" while he is getting ready, suggesting an ironic distance to the situation, "as if to say: 'Well, this is a bloody joke, isn't it?'" (231) More importantly, Jack feels that the responsibility for deciding whether the two should risk participating in the informal part of the celebrations – and, consequently, acknowledging Tom's absence – has been left to him. This might serve to

account for the guilt that he feels: he shirks the responsibility,³⁹⁷ and never even discusses the issue with Michael. Jack only says, obsessively, to himself: “You bastard, for leaving it to me, you bastard for not doing the decent thing yourself. And thought it ever since, gone over it repeatedly in his head.” (232)

The account of the tragic night itself undercuts the potentially objective, assertive narrative that the narrator might offer already in its opening lines: “That same night – this is what Jack told those he had to tell, and he had to tell it several times and never without great difficulty...” The destabilising effect of this introduction is reinforced almost immediately: “There’s a version of it all that Jack tells only himself, an over-and-over revisited version that allows more room for detail and for speculation, but it’s essentially the same version that he gave others...” (232-3) Both remarks place the responsibility for delivering the story uniformly on Jack, and both appear to emphasise the – at least potential – unreliability of his words. The uncertainty is in fact also explicitly shared by the protagonist himself:

Jack, usually a sound sleeper, would puzzle over what it was that woke him. The shot, of course. But then if the shot had woken him, he later thought, he wouldn’t have *heard* it, he would have wondered, still, what it was that woke him. In Jack’s recounting of things – understandably confused – there was always a particular confusion about this point. He *had* heard the shot, yet the shot had woken him – as if in fact he was already awake to hear it, had known somehow beforehand that some dreadful thing was about to happen. (234-235)

³⁹⁷ Characteristically, not assigned to him by Michael openly, only inferred by Jack himself from his father’s behaviour.

The similarity of Jack's confusion and Freud's account of the burning child dream is unsettling: the sleeping father is awakened by an image/sound in the dream that in fact stands for the waking reality – or, even more precisely, for the real of the situation, covered over by this reality. Jack is unsure of whether he was awoken by a shot or rather had been awoken before the shot by a realisation of some more disturbing truth that had in fact made his father pull the trigger. The guilt that a son feels for the death of his father may admittedly appear to be reverse of the guilt of a mourning father falling asleep next to his child's coffin. However, if we remember Jack's calling Michael "bastard," and the fact that Michael appears to have abdicated as the patriarch of the family, leaving it to Jack to take over his position, the analogy might perhaps be preserved.

The narrator brings the ambiguous relation to our attention by dutifully pointing out the pun in the inadequate use of the term: after all, "it's not a word you use of your father or of any father, it's a word that works in the other direction." (248) The father is thus shown not to be up to his task, not to fulfil his function appropriately. At the same time Jack, who has more than once filled his position in relation to Tom, is suddenly reluctant to do it again. His literal refusal to be a father when Ellie suggests having children is consistent with this.³⁹⁸ The inadequacy between the empirical father and his symbolic role is made explicit here, and – like in the dream of the burning child – Jack prefers to awaken to the reality of death rather than to face the real in the dream, "the terrible dream out of which he surfaced, years later, in a hotel room in Okehampton." (232) Through his inertia, Jack in fact lets down all three members of his family. Tom's departure remains unrecognised communally, though the pub outing on Remembrance Day would make a perfect opportunity to mention his military career. More gravely, Jack

³⁹⁸ I will say more about this in section 3.5.

considers the possibility that Michael might still be alive “if he’d grasped that decision [...] for God’s sake, if he’d just bought his father a bloody pint – how different the consequences might have been.” (232) Somewhat more remotely, Jack also disappoints Vera, by not taking the position in the family she assigned to him by her repeated placing Jack in the competence of Tom’s father and/or her husband.³⁹⁹

Although Jack refuses to preside over the communal rites recognising the disappearance of his “son” from the life of the village, and although he literally avoids walking into Michael’s footsteps,⁴⁰⁰ he cannot but end up as the father. Just as his secretive departure to Tom’s funeral is likened to Tom’s own hushed leaving the house on his eighteenth birthday (in both, there is presumably someone secretly, guiltily, listening to the person leaving – Ellie in the first case, Jack in the latter; in both situations the listeners remain inactive, unable to stop the person leaving), these two situations resonate with references to the night of Michael’s death: Jack in his memory is equally unable to act. In all three the inescapable family fate is reflected: Tom leaves the farm only to kill and be killed in the army, Michael walks away to a death from his own hand, and Jack gets away only to come back and then try to repeat his father’s desperate deed. The narrator stresses this by extending the analogy to the earlier generations: Jack reflects that his tense silence with Michael reached the point of no return at the same spot where Tom, almost a year before, realised he could not go back, and the same point where another

³⁹⁹ I will discuss this motif in more detail in section 3.5

⁴⁰⁰ “In his statements Jack had voluntarily made the point that when he’d spotted his father’s tracks he’d both followed and avoided them, even carefully skirting around the broad mark where the slip had occurred. He had instinctively not walked through them, not out of forensic considerations, but because, as he failed really to convey clearly but as his listeners may have grasped, they were the last footsteps his father had taken.” (244)

pair of Luxton brothers, George and Fred might have turned back on their way to the war that was going to take their lives – but did not.⁴⁰¹

Jack's refusal to act on the night of Michael's death is arguably a culmination of the tendency which has already been indicated. In fact, at least twice before this episode, Jack is explicitly described as "doing the decent thing" when he refrains from acting. When arranging the funeral of his brother with a representative of the army, he subjects a conventional phrase ("Major Richards had said [...] that Jack shouldn't hesitate if there were anything he wished to ask") to a classic Swiftian overanalysis, concluding that "it really meant its opposite: that the decent thing was actually to hesitate completely – not to ask anything at all." (122) In the other instance, Jack is overwhelmed by the perspective of explaining to the police the significance of his father's leaving the blanket which used to belong to their dog on his bed before killing himself. "So he'd done the right thing at the time – which in most cases, in Jack's experience, was to shut up or say very little." (155) As the final remark suggests, these two situations are no more than examples of a much broader tendency in Jack's behaviour, and the way in which he justifies himself in both opens up the possibility of reading in him the obsessive neurotic tendencies observed in most other of Swift's narrators. Hesitation is on the whole associated with the neurotic structure, but – in a twist characteristic for Swift – Jack hesitates *completely*, which means that he in fact makes a very specific decision.

At the same time, by neglecting to do "the decent thing" he fails to question the destructive familial narrative of violence. In his refusal to take over responsibility from

⁴⁰¹ Again, the perspective is blurry: the first analogy is clearly attributed to Jack ("Though, afterwards, he was to think it was the same point where Tom [...] must have known [...] that now he couldn't, wouldn't go back"), while the second one might be the narrator's comment as well as Jack's ("And it was the same point, perhaps, where George might have stopped with Fred.") (18)

Michael, Jack has been preceded by Tom: after Vera's death, apparently in an effort to kill the pain of the loss, Michael commands Tom to shoot their terminally ill dog. After he is forced to do it himself, Michael comments, foreshadowing his suicide in the same field: "And I hope one day, when it's needed, someone will have the decency to do the same for me." (143) The report from these events, admittedly, constitutes another example of the narrator's destabilising effort, presenting an account of Jack's perception of Tom's story. At points the instability is made explicit: "He couldn't be sure either if, just a fraction before he'd fired, Dad had said, 'Goodbye, Luke.' Or if it was a fraction afterwards. Or if he'd just imagined that Dad had said it. (Jack, listening to Tom, thought: Tom said it, Tom said it to himself. He said it aloud or just inside, but Tom said it himself." (143) Jack's doubts about the story are also articulated openly: "But Jack would never be sure about the next bit in Tom's description. Though why should Tom have made it up?" (141) This remark links to a doubt expressed earlier about the most central issue of this story, Michael's wish to be euthanized, (75) and undeniably informs Jack's readiness to take on the guilt assigned to him by Ellie.

This information also serves to obscure the responsibility for the death: if this is what Michael wanted all along, how can Jack be guilty for not stopping him? The question of responsibility – or authority – is significant in this context, if we consider Gallop's comment on a crucial aspect of both dreams of dead relatives, the ambiguity of the masculine pronoun, which makes it impossible to determine the agent in each scenario.⁴⁰² Additionally, in a confession never made to his brother, Tom explains that his own refusal to kill Luke was motivated by fear that if he had taken up the gun, he would have shot his father rather than the dog. By refusing to follow his "killer instinct," Tom

⁴⁰² Gallop, *Reading*, 170.

stops Michael from instrumentalising him. (208) All of the above certainly informs Jack's guilt about Michael's death, as much as his Oedipal inertia. Alenka Zupančič points to the fundamental difference between the positions of Oedipus and Antigone as two different types of tragic heroes: "Oedipus opposes himself to nothing, he rebels against no one, he does nothing 'heroic'. What he does is travel a certain distance under the sway of a knowledge that does not know itself, and accomplishes its work."⁴⁰³ Indeed, the overall effect of the narrator's oscillating between the speculative phrases ("He couldn't be sure...") and the strikingly assertive ones ("Jack [...] thought...") is to create an impression of looking for excuses, of raising uncertainty about authority and responsibility for words and actions, disturbing any sense of certainty that the third-person narrative might potentially provide. Jack certainly "travels a certain distance," acting on impulses whose source appears to remain not entirely clear to him. In a case study of a neurotic patient, Bruce Fink describes the challenge of "bringing Robert to the point of formulating a question of his own – that is, of problematizing his own motives for his actions – and this was never fully achieved."⁴⁰⁴ This is certainly something that Jack Luxton struggles to do, and perhaps actually avoids doing.

In the end, Jack evidently has no more decency about meeting his father's supposed demand than his younger brother, but while Tom only leaves the violence of the family tradition to enter the state-sanctioned violence of the army, Jack is the one who is really likely to escape. On the other hand, Jack is not able to break free from the narrative, to question it more fundamentally, which may explain why his "ethical act" is as terrifying as to produce the ghost. His indecision – not obeying the demand of the

⁴⁰³ Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 206-7.

⁴⁰⁴ Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 144.

Other, but not following his own desire either – shows an ambiguous relationship with the discourse regulating his life: he apparently perceives its fundamental insufficiency, but is unable or unwilling to abandon it.

His split position may certainly be related to the influence of two very different maternal voices: the voice of his own mother and the voice of Ellie's. Jack has been installed in the history which he is trying to leave behind by Vera's narrative, offering him a place among "the generations going back and forwards" (29) by introducing him to "something that seldom otherwise came into his thinking, let alone his talk: his future and his responsibilities. Or, to put it another way, his name." (22) Even at first glance, this action has powerful resonance of an entry into the domain of absence and substitution, but these symbolic associations arguably extend much further. For example, quite apart from the conspicuous exclusion of the father from these conversations, Jack's mother herself is using them to prepare her son for her own inevitable eventual passing and at the same time ensures her continued presence in the form of a voice establishing and internalising the communal law: the constantly echoing question of "what would mother say" is described as Jack's "internal yardstick, his deepest cry," (20) and the sense of her presence (or lack thereof) as a factor allowing him to determine the correctness of his behaviour.

The influence of the other maternal voice, that of Alice Merrick, works in the opposite direction to Vera's, on behalf of the underside of the law, although it is in equal measure focused around the mother's absence. Alice left her family for a lover when her daughter was still a child, and in the narrative present, despite all the differences between her and Vera, she also functions as a voice from nowhere, an absence which remains the

source of speech. Alice's disembodied voice accompanies Ellie as stubbornly as Vera's does Jack, but its message teaches her that "the past is the past, the dead are the dead." (33) Indirectly, this influence works on Jack as well: Ellie implores him repeatedly to "forget Tom" and apparently achieves a great deal in terms of making Jack "a new, lighter, gladder, luckier man." (57) Operating in the same vein, when the necessity arises to attend the funeral in their village, Ellie bluntly refuses, denying any connection with Tom. As has been demonstrated in section 3.3.2, the paradoxical nature of the voice accommodates easily for both of these stances. The voices of his dearly departed tell Jack both that the Other is complete and he does not depend on it, and that he is part of an Other that transcends him and he can never be sure what it wants from him.

3.6 The protagonist's troubled relationship with language

The two dreams of caring for dead relatives illustrate the problematic entry into the symbolic in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Cathy Caruth observes that, in the light of Lacan's reinterpretation of the dream of the burning child, the child's accusation of the father's inadequate response to the death is fundamental for his identity as a father, and in this corresponds to the subject's relation to reality in a more general sense.⁴⁰⁵ Likewise, Jack's witnessing Michael's suicide and his final encounter with Tom constitute two crucial points in his own struggle for a position in the symbolic. We have linked Jack's situation both to manifesting the desire to finally replace the (un)dead father, to fulfil the Oedipal urge to kill the patriarch and take his position, and seen the figure of the dead father itself as promising the filling of the gap in the symbolic, the achievement of the illusory completeness. We have also drawn analogies between his situation and the dream of the burning dead child, opening this gap anew, emphasising the inevitable lack, the impossibility of adequate representation. In other words, the night of Michael's suicide may be read as exemplifying Jack's striving to fix the rules of the symbolic once and for all, while Tom's intervention happens at the very moment when he is about to reach his goal. Before we move on to the effects of Tom's voice, let us analyse the language crisis affecting Jack directly before this event, as the factor producing his brother's apparition.

As another aspect of the loaded interdependence of voice and silence introduced above, I consider the collapse of the protagonist's functioning in the symbolic to be central to all the major themes of the novel. Jack finds himself, on the one hand, weighed by the obligations of the family tradition, while on the other subjected to Ellie's pressure

⁴⁰⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 92.

to abandon them. Unsurprisingly, negotiating his relation to his others – and thus, to the Other – has implications on his position in symbolic structures, expressed in the way he operates within language. Typically, Jack's attitude in this situation bears traces of the obsessive neurotic position, with its tendency to neutralise the desire of the Other by transforming it into demand, in that he acts as if he does not have to decide anything, expecting to be told what he is required to do.

Admittedly, the change is initiated by somebody else: Jack merely accepts Ellie's demand to refashion their lives, even if only partially. To a certain degree, her role corresponds here to Irene's in *The Sweet Shop Owner*, in the sense that she solves the riddle for Jack and provides a definite answer to the enigma of the Other's desire. Jack's passivity is typical of the obsessive neurotic: "As soon as he is in a situation where he must choose for himself – where he must speak in his own name without the support of his master – he is blocked. [...] In fact, he almost finds it annoying that he *has* his own name, because it reminds him that he is summoned to his own desire, which does not dissolve into the desire of his master."⁴⁰⁶ Jack's life for the most part is regulated by the expectations of the Other – embodied both in his mother's instruction, his father's harsh demands, positioning him within the framework of family tradition, as well as his wife's tempting offer of liberation from precisely that situation.

For a time, Jack appears as content to accept Ellie's solution as Willy was, although he evidently lacks his predecessor's resilience in embracing his position. The farms are sold, the couple's lifestyle is changed diametrically, their village left behind, but Jack categorically refuses any compromise on the question of children. Ellie's simple,

⁴⁰⁶ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 263.

robust, “well known remedy for grief: you lose one, you make another” is met by his conclusion that “if he was going to be the last Luxton ever to farm there, then there shouldn’t be any more Luxtons at all.” (115) Subjecting the simplistic resolution of his dilemmas to his neurotic scrutiny, Jack draws a radical conclusion from Ellie’s assumptions: the principle of substitution, where the significance of any given element is determined exclusively by its position in the system, and therefore any element may be replaced by any other, fails to operate if it is taken to its logical extreme. If anything can replace anything, everything ceases to matter. In a sense, Jack’s determination here resembles that of Bill Unwin in *Ever After*: if his emotional energy might be attached to any object with the same effect, the coordinates of his own symbolic existence are lost. Like his predecessor, the protagonist of *Wish You Were Here* demonstrates that substitution is not and can never be a free play of signifiers. As Philippe Van Haute explains, the realisation that any sense of completeness is impossible in language does not change the fact that “in the unconscious the subject remains unavoidably and structurally attached to (the dream of) a *jouissance* uninhibited by any law, beyond the lack that is instituted by the symbolic.”⁴⁰⁷ Indeed, the symbolic subject remains stretched precisely between the impossibility of functioning exclusively within the realm of signifiers and the impossibility of reaching the endlessly fascinating – and equally unattainable – *jouissance* that lies beyond it.

Also like Unwin, Jack appears to be objecting to the insufficient mourning which arrests the movement of desire, and consequently disturbs the functioning of symbolic procedures. In this sense Ellie rightly identifies the source of the problem in Jack’s melancholic relation to Tom, or, as the narrator puts it, in “the part of Jack that still

⁴⁰⁷ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 279.

belonged to Tom.” (114-15) Indeed, Jack insists he “simply hadn’t wanted any more of himself, of his own uprooted stock, after Tom had left and then he and Ellie had left too. And Dad had gone anyway. He hadn’t wanted any passing on.” (105) This also parallels Unwin’s melancholic position: Jack is entirely encompassed by his grief, and the loss of his loved ones equals the loss of the whole world. Moreover, this can also be read in the light of the obsessive neurotic structure: much as the neurotic wishes to take the father’s position, he is terrified of doing so. At the same time, he ends up taking a/his father’s position: he feels guilty and inadequate in his relationship with his ‘son’ as embodied by Tom, and he repeats their father’s suicidal attempt.

The relation between the brothers is further enriched by quite numerous father-son undertones, seen – for example – during the holiday trip that Vera takes with her sons. In a characteristically ambiguous and restrained manner, the narrator makes some rather pregnant observations on the relation between the mother and her elder son: “In the evening, it was true, back at the caravan, it could all turn round. Something quite new could happen to Jack. It could seem that he might be twice thirteen. It could seem that he and Mum were a couple and this was their little home and, for this one week at least, he might be Tom’s dad. That was how it could seem.” (67) Another clear example might be the moment when Jack is encouraged to rock Tom under Vera’s gaze: here the narrative comment focuses on “a thrill in perceiving the prompting,” implying that Jack actually enjoys taking responsibility for his brother as much as he does obeying the mother’s instruction, happy to have the desire of the Other neutralised by being reduced to a specific demand.⁴⁰⁸ Interestingly enough, even in this situation he does not take the

⁴⁰⁸ Indeed, emphasis on Vera’s voice *and* gaze in this situation reinforces the superegoic dimension of her figure.

paternal position as such: “And Jack had rocked him. Pretty often. Like a mother.” (104) However, the entire arrangement has undeniable Oedipal implications, which shall be discussed further on; at this point let me only observe that in this light, Jack’s objection to having children of his own certainly connects closely to the trauma of Tom’s death. What can be read as Jack’s melancholic refusal to replace his grieved loved one in its turn echoes problems with substitution appearing in other contexts in the novel. The Oedipal implications also align with the obsessive neurotic orientation of the situation, linking it with the state of plenitude before the introduction of the paternal prohibition of incest. The situation certainly invites reading in terms of what Van Haute calls “an imaginary interpretation”⁴⁰⁹ of castration, which presumes the possibility of making the Other complete, removing the lack that is admittedly installed by the paternal intervention in the neurotic subject’s case but is not entirely accepted. As a result, the obsessive wishes to remove or replace the father and at the same time is terrified of this actually happening, much like Luxton.

The significance that I assign to Jack’s troubled relation with language and absence is, I believe, confirmed by the episode involving the novel’s eponymous phrase. Away on his first summer holiday, he feels the obligation to acknowledge the importance of Ellie, although “it was with 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) The substitute of the linguistic sign is at the same time a tribute to the significance of Jack’s absent other and a sign of his betrayal. This sense of inadequacy is possible to relate for example to Bill Unwin’s

⁴⁰⁹ Van Haute, *Against Adaptation*, 248.

relentless refusal to write his dead wife's biography. Arguably, Jack is more malleable in accepting the inevitability of substitutes – but at the same time, it is never entirely his own decision. He cannot cope with the task of writing a postcard to Ellie without his mother's aid, and finally uses the expression that Vera suggests to him. Significantly, he does that with utter conviction, since he is unaware that “it was the most uninventive of messages,” (63) again displaying an arguably neurotic feature: he expects to find a signifier that will account for him entirely, and, just like Sylvia Unwin in *Ever After*, his mother does not make him realise his mistake. However, his acknowledgement of Ellie's importance in his life is insufficient, as he soon realizes: for her sake, Jack in fact feels compelled to pretend that “it was all forgotten and had never been so important to him.” (64) Ellie responds in kind: despite her jealousy over the holiday that does not include her, “her heart had soared (though she'd never said so) when she'd got that postcard from Dorset.” (112) Jack's worry is therefore justified, and the token of his memory is welcome – but he will never know either of these. This is arguably a neurotic position: Jack remains uncertain and troubled by the uncertainty.

Therefore, while he never approaches the extremes of the Swiftian psychotic mute characters (set by Prentis senior or Dick Crick), his struggle with language is reminiscent of theirs. At the same time, he is by no means any closer to the other extreme of Swiftian response to trauma, that of loquacious narrators such as Tom Crick or Prentis junior. Nevertheless, in Jack Luxton's case the system of substitutions is accepted as inevitable because of the obligations towards one's others, but for him entering it evidently also breaks the supposedly ideal past state and always proves painfully deficient. After all, what he ineptly attempts to capture in language for Ellie's sake are “the best times of his

life up to that time. Maybe even, he sometimes thought, the best ever.” (64) This is the idyllic past state that we have seen in so many other of Swift’s narratives, never to be achieved.

Not only because these “best times of his life” are spent in the company of Vera, Jack’s sense of inadequate functioning within the system of language inevitably links with Swift’s persistent motif of absent mothers serving as the guardians of the symbolic. From Irene Chapman, a distant, unmaternal figure, subjecting both her husband and her daughter to the demands of the Law, through Prentis’s mother, barely mentioned in the novel, whose death comes across as a flagrant illustration – or perhaps the cause – of her son’s tendency to whitewash his past, or Crick’s dying mother instructing him and Dick on singleness of events but also the need to record them, all the way to Sophie Birch’s mother revealing the fragility of constructs used to paint over the gloom of traumatic existence or Sylvia Unwin effectively blocking her son’s accession into the symbolic, the mother figures in Swift’s novels are, predictably, central for the protagonists’ struggle to embrace the contingency of the symbolic. With this in mind, I think it is justified to read Vera Luxton’s intervention in writing the postcard as well as her story of the glorious past as bringing Jack into the symbolic but not allowing him to find his own position within it. Vera’s intervention can be read as an attempt to disturb the imaginary situation, to introduce lack into their relation and thus, to direct Jack’s desire away from her. This, however, effectively still provides the answer to his question about the Other’s desire, and thus, turns it into demand, instead of allowing him to search for it himself.

In this light, Jack’s memory of playing Vera’s husband adds another dimension to his relationship with the symbolic. As a worthy successor to Bill Unwin, the protagonist

of *Wish You Were Here* is placed within an adolescent idyll which explicitly involves taking up the position of the father. Already upon Tom's birth, "Jack had felt not so much like a brother, but – long before Tom would show the same aptitude – like a bit of a mother. And a bit of a father." (103) In an analogy to Bill's self-perception as a stand-in for Colonel Unwin after his suicide, this memory may thus be read as a fantasy of embodying the phallus, falling for the illusion of completeness, neutralising the desire of the (m)Other by satisfying it. This helps to account for the protagonist's tendency to perceive the symbolic as complete and self-sufficient, which, in turn, creates the threat of its collapse. This is precisely the state interrupted by Tom's spectral presence. The apparition acts not just as the voice in its subversive properties, but also as the voice of the dead child from the father's guilty dream. Tom – in many senses portrayed by the narrator as Jack's son – becomes the burning child addressing his father in an interrupted dream that makes him realise his inadequacy in the symbolic role of a father. This is an inadequacy that Jack has long realised and that made him repeatedly attempt to renounce the role. It is, however, Tom who finally protects Jack from the destructive consequences of successfully concluding his striving for completeness in the symbolic.

The potential dangers of complete identification with one's symbolic function are usefully explored by Terry Eagleton, who notes that the threat is founded in the very logic of equivalence on which the symbolic is based. The possibility of replacing any element with any other, fundamental to the functioning of symbolic exchanges, is both the source of the system's framework and the potential cause of its destabilisation:

Because such symbolic economies are precisely regulated, they tend to stability; but because the rules which regulate them can permutate any one item with another, indifferent to their specific nature, they can breed an anarchic condition in which every element blurs

indiscriminately into every other, and the system appears to be engaging in transactions purely for their own sake. There is something in the very structure of stability which threatens to subvert it.⁴¹⁰

If the symbolic is not frustrated in its striving for substitution, every one of its elements becomes entirely replaceable, rendering representation ineffective. The imperfection of representation is therefore a necessary safeguard against this anarchic condition as well as its precondition: representing another involves both identity and difference, the rules cannot be expected to be observed without any mitigation, or they become counterproductive. Once again, we see that the disturbing remainder is not something “left over” from an ideal state before symbolisation, something that escapes its operation, but rather something produced by the very perfection and completeness of the signifying processes, undermining the structures they create from within.

One possible consequence of the overtly perfect symbolic is the violation of its foundational incest prohibition: if potential partners cannot be distinguished, it is impossible to decide who should be excluded. The situation in the Luxton family in many ways implies precisely this sort of crisis: Jack is at the same time Tom’s brother and his father, playing the role alongside both his own mother and his wife Ellie; Tom himself takes the position of Vera after her death; and Michael and Jimmy are likened to brothers, which renders the very union of Jack and Ellie incestuous. Eagleton’s warning suits all too well the Gothic novel’s motif of subversion of identity, also inevitably complicating issues of inheritance.

Jack Luxton’s sense of symbolic inadequacy obviously also resonates with other aspects of substitution in the novel, and it might be informative in considering certain

⁴¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers*, 137.

instances from the masculine domain of the military, featuring prominently in the plot and not unrelated to the functioning of family as a framework for assigning identities. These include the commanding officer's inability to distinguish between Fred and George Luxton,⁴¹¹ or Jack's impression that Tom's coffin is impossible to tell apart from those of two other soldiers brought from Iraq with him. There is also an observation ascribed to Major Richards, who assists Jack in the funeral proceedings. When the Major offers his condolences, the narrator makes the following comment – which is another example of the speculative mode frequent in the novel: “He said it as if he [...] might have suddenly become [...] some sort of temporary father [...] and might have wished even to reach out and grasp Jack's arm, so conveying that he understood that Jack was of the same stuff as the dead man [...] that he, Jack, and Tom were interchangeable. The Luxton brothers.” Jack's perspective is presented as perfectly reciprocal: “[...] he'd had the impossible thought that this figure in a uniform might be Tom” (93). This tendency for men in uniforms to be interchangeable – and for civilians to be seen as made “of the same stuff,” or at least equalized with them through military metaphors – offers an interpretative key for Jack's struggle. After all, the story which taught him what his communal duties are is one of faithfulness to the traditionally masculine domain of institutionalized violence. In this context, Jack's choice not to give Tom a military funeral might be seen as a defence against the lethal efficiency of precisely this depersonalising discourse.

⁴¹¹ Indeed, the significant imaginary addition in Vera's story is based precisely on the fact that the commanding officer is unable to tell exactly which of the brothers merits the medal, even though he “had witnessed the act of valour himself [...] But though he knew he had two Luxtons under his command [...] he had never known precisely which was which. In their full kit and helmets they looked like identical twins. They *all* looked, he sometimes thought, like identical twins.” (10)

3.7 The politics of silence: the ghost as liberation or escape from freedom

The violence goes beyond the family's military tradition, extending from World War I to the war in Iraq. Tom makes the connection between the realm of farm work and war explicit, by replacing images of people he kills with images of burning cattle (204). His father's unusually poetic comment on the colour of soil in their area carries similar undertones ("Earth with dried blood in it" (219)). The problematic – and unwanted – interrelation of the familiar and the far away, of the threatening and the peaceful, returns in several different contexts: the new owners of the farm see it as "a little piece of England," (327) a haven from global insecurities, and during Tom's funeral Jack observes a "silent communal effort" to negate any link between Devon and Iraq, "[a]s if Tom had died, at a tragically early age, just a little distance away. A tractor accident, perhaps." (271) These silences – whether private or public – enable the sustaining of different provisional discourses shaping the characters' realities. Those whose actions might disturb the constructs, have to be erased by silence; if they are not, they threaten their decomposition, as Jack's situation amply illustrates. In a sense, it is only the dead – those who have already been erased in one sense – that are capable of disturbing these constructs at all. In fact, the situation appears to be paradoxical: silences condition the existence of ordering discourses, which themselves produce a surplus that undermines them.

Thus, while the mother's voice induces Jack into a narrative of the endless progression of generations, and the father's mostly silent presence disciplines him into obeying the demands of its restrictive framework, Tom's departure, combined with Michael's suicide and the final push from Ellie force him to step outside the place fixed

for him in the “man’s story.” Admittedly, he does not truly support or reject the abandoning of the family tradition, in fact choosing neither; instead, like an obsessive neurotic subject, he allows changes to take place, himself remaining indecisive, inert – his only decision is, as always, not to decide. The news of Tom’s death, the loss of the final link to his past, proves to be a terrifying confrontation of the private desires and the communal commands. The sense of being a fugitive, an outcast, the expectation of being arrested at any moment haunts him throughout his journey to Tom’s funeral and is captured perfectly in an inconspicuous phrase: “This was all suddenly quite terrible.”⁴¹² (161) Ostensibly referring to Jack’s ignorance of the military protocol, it encapsulates his general feeling of being, in more than one sense, out of place and may be read as another manifestation of the neurotic’s dread of what the Other may require of him.

It may also shed some light on Jack’s symbolic debt and help find motivation for Tom’s appearances, which otherwise go against what we expect from spectral visitations. After all, are ghosts not supposed to appear when *they* have an unsettled account with the living? Here, it is Tom that apparently owes Jack, not the other way round.⁴¹³ My argument is that Jack’s reluctance to participate in the rituals of his brother’s burial may be read as a culmination of an unease which has been growing in him for some time: he is no longer “tethered [...] to a herd of Frisians”, but occasionally does feel anxious on his holidays with Ellie. (27) Even more tellingly, when Ellie laughs at his fears, “the sheer outrageousness of it had got to him, driven him, tipped him over. The sheer fact of it. They could do it, do as they pleased now.” (69) Jack’s sense that perhaps he has gone too

⁴¹² Pointed out to me by David Malcolm.

⁴¹³ Admittedly, Jack feels like a ghost himself (227).

far, become too free of his social roles opens a dizzying perspective of freedom which, I would argue, “tips him over” into seeing ghosts.⁴¹⁴

A brief glance at two foundational discourses of spectral studies – deconstruction and psychoanalysis – offers two contrasting ways of considering the function of Tom’s appearances and Jack’s responses to them. In his “The Spectre of Ideology,”⁴¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek provides a helpful juxtaposition of the theses of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida on the motif of the spectre. Derrida stresses the emancipatory potential of the ghost, whose appearance disturbs the dominant narrative and by its radical otherness prevents the closure of the ideological discourse shaping human reality. The phantom, as a rejected element of the past, disturbs the present in offering the possibility of an alternative account. Derrida’s spectre demands an ethical response from the haunted subject and encourages stepping beyond the all-encompassing discourse, activating the ethical dimension and potentially liberating the haunted from full subjection to the rules of the symbolic order. For Lacan, as Žižek reads him, the apparition is in itself a response to the terror of such disturbance and to the consequent possibility of liberation. An encounter with the real of our desire breaks the coherence of the symbolic, which might enable the subject to disobey its demands, but in fact proves too traumatising itself to be faced. The return of the repressed, unsymbolisable element excluded from symbolic reality – which takes the form of spectral apparition – serves both to testify to the fundamental lack in the system grounded in such exclusions and helps to cover over this insufficiency. In the remaining part of the text I would like to argue that Jack’s confrontation with his

⁴¹⁴ He only sees the ghost of Tom, but half expects that his presence is only a beginning: “Now all the other ghosts, it suddenly seemed to him, were waiting for him too – sensing his approach, beyond the end of this blue, sneaking motorway.” (217)

⁴¹⁵ Žižek, “The Spectre of Ideology,” 1-33.

brother's ghost appears to follow the Derridean model, but ultimately has more in common with the Lacanian one.

With Vera's death "the whole pattern was lost" (23): the structure in which Jack has been placed by her speech begins crumbling, a process accelerated by subsequent crises: private and public (Tom's escape, the deaths of Michael and Jimmy, Jack and Ellie's abandoning their inheritance; a more general economic decline, BSE, the war in Iraq). Jack's ethical act – breaking with the insufficiencies of the symbolic – might indeed consist in abandoning the compromised model of violent military masculinity, the obsolete family tradition, and the model of masculinity associated with it, diagnosed by Tom as crucial for his own decision to leave: "A disease had already been eating away at Michael Luxton and starting to eat away at him, Tom, too." (199-200) Tom only manages to achieve a semi-liberation, exchanging the violence of the family tradition and farm work for the socially sanctioned violence of the army. While he correctly identifies the masculine violence as the source of threat ("the killer instinct" (208)), and embraces feminine roles both at home (replacing Vera) and in the army (mothering the soldiers), Tom apparently decides that violence is his destiny, and the only alternative to following in his father's footsteps that he finds is limited to legitimising it in the military. His freedom is limited to choosing the form of the violence. Jack, on the other hand, achieves a far more radical departure. At the point when he gets a passport and is surprised to discover that "he was now a citizen," he can look back on the farm as "its own land, even its own law, onto itself," as a thing of the past. Jack's naïve realization that "even little babies born on farms [...] were citizens" (146) gives broader implications to the patterns in which he used to function and which he now has rejected.

In fact, along with the familial narrative, he appears to be refusing the entire system of symbolisation and substitution, leaving behind not only a model of masculinity but language itself. While travelling to Tom's funeral, he has repeated and increasing difficulties with speaking. He cannot possibly imagine making a speech or even pronounce Tom's name, unless to himself; he questions the value of words in general, instead insisting on – impossible – presence. When invited to pay his respects in front of the coffin, Jack feels he has been assigned “some inextricable riddle [...] a dilemma beyond solving.” (270) In a sense, Jack's confusion about what is expected of him, his inability to fit into social convention, indeed signal facing an impossible riddle: Jack encounters the mystery of the desire of the Other, the question of what the system of signification wants him to be or do, in its most frustrating manifestation. This helps to account for the devastating effect of Tom's death: even though he had refused any contact with his family for years, a hope of reconciliation was always a possibility, but his death is an official confirmation that none of Jack's doubts will ever be clarified. Tom will now remain a mystery forever, which is an unbearable prospect for a neurotic. The symbolic recognition of Tom's significance in his life is – once again – painfully inadequate and at the same time necessary as regulated by social discourse: “‘Take your time.’ How could any time be long enough? Yet it had to be limited – outside were all those people. On the other hand, Jack couldn't find the words, the thoughts or whatever it was, beyond his physical presence, that might have properly filled this unrepeatable interval.” (270) Characteristically, Jack is momentarily relieved only when his shaken sense of self is confirmed upon being officially acknowledged – “ticked off a list” – before he collects Tom's coffin, although his self-affirmative response (“I am Jack Luxton” (160)) is not

presented as part of dialogue, uttered instead by the voice of the narrator. His place in the system is thus temporarily confirmed, his wish to be recognised or justified is in a sense fulfilled at this point, although Jack's own voice is once again silenced by the novel's free indirect discourse.

Finally, Jack goes so far in shedding language that, after he gives up the idea of seeing the farm one last time, he is only capable of expressing himself in a form which is not only inarticulate, but actually bears close affinity to silence, at least in terms of social interactions: "Now, with a great, unearthly howl that no one heard, he drove madly on." (294) This inability to speak – or, indeed, make a sound – is all the more prominent in the light of the final confrontation of the brothers. Jack is stopped from making his suicide attempt precisely by the voice of his brother's ghost, by the first words Tom has addressed to him in many years, and presumably the last words he will ever address to him. In this encounter, the paradox of the voice/sign relation is realised: Mladen Dolar points out how the authority of the letter relies on the voice hidden behind it, but this puts the voice structurally in the position of sovereignty (it may suspend the law at any time). Tom's message to Jack is effective because it is voiced, subverting the authority of the language that was about to envelop him without remainder.

The choice of words themselves is another bad pun with interesting resonances in Swift's repertoire: "Shoot me first, Jack, shoot me first. Don't be a fucking fool. Over my dead fucking body." (346) Quite apart from Jack's doubts about whether there in fact *is* a body in the coffin, (93) the basic meaning of the phrase "over my dead body" is, after all, made literal by Tom's injunction "Shoot me first." But if his words are read in the light of Swift's tendency to revive dead phrases, they may in fact come to mean the opposite of

what they appear to. Tom *has* already become a dead body, so the usual sense of “I’d rather die than let you do it” is here dangerously close to “Be my guest” or simply “Go ahead, do it!” Considering Tom’s own life choices, as well as Ellie’s recognising in him a kindred spirit of her own mother, his address may become not an encouragement for Jack not to shoot Ellie or himself, but to live free of the burdens of the past. Finally, in the light of the analogy with the dream of the burning child introduced earlier, Tom’s words should be read as making Jack realise his inescapable inadequacy in the role of the father. If Tom is Jack’s dead son, his “over my dead body” reminds Jack of his failure to witness the death of an other. This reintroduces Jack into the symbolic, reminding him that he is indeed a lacking subject.

3.8 Conclusion

Ultimately, the resolution of the drama remains as vague as any in Swift: Tom does stop Jack from the desperate deed, Ellie exorcizes the ghost by recognising her duty to mourn Tom, and – well before this scene – Jack performs the symbolic gesture of throwing away the medal that has been in the family for almost a century and had played such a central role in securing their status within their community (it is no accident that Michael had chosen to have it with him when he took his life). At the same time, however, the removal of the gun (“still potentially deadly” (351)) is shifted beyond the frame of the plot and rendered indeterminate by the alternative offered: *it is to be sold or* thrown into the sea (352), and neither is in fact done. Most importantly, during their climactic meeting, Ellie appears to take for granted that the profound crisis provoked by the couple’s strategic silences is not sufficient motivation for them to change policy in

this respect: her relief at seeing Jack alive is accompanied by a realisation of “[t]he things we’ll never know,” (350) which presumes that the reasons behind the situation, now happily resolved, will never be disclosed. In fact, even the disappearance of the medal is to be covered with a “white lie,” (352) whose effect is to support the dominant discourse rather than to challenge it openly: “He’d have to explain that too, sooner or later: the absence of the medal. He’d say that he’d taken it with him – which was true – and had thrown it in Tom’s grave.” (352) Jack thus has no intention of revealing his “regrettable” rebellion against the heroic history of the family. Dropping the medal into the grave of his brother – after all, a war hero, like his grandfathers – is not perhaps the most radical gesture with which to question the model of masculinity that killed the three of them. Thus, while the showdown leaves Jack on his route in the slow evolution away from being a slave on his father’s farm – or potential cannon fodder sacrificed in the name of the green England – he is nevertheless likely to remain in silence about the spectres haunting him.

One interpretation of the dream of the dead father (particularly where the son protects him from the knowledge that he is dead) sees it as an expression of the dreamer’s wish to take on himself the responsibility for the aggressive desire for the father’s death in an attempt to give it meaning: accepting that the dream is an expression of his wish for the father to be dead burdens the son with guilt, but endows him with authority, posing him as a generator of meaning for an otherwise incomprehensible event. The dream of the dead father is located by Freud in the absurd dream section of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and apparently the only explanation of the dream in terms of the wish fulfilment mechanism is to understand it as an expression of a desire to control a traumatising

situation: admitting that the father's death in the dream fulfils the dreamer's aggressive impulses towards him puts the son in charge of the situation and supplies the event with meaning, of which the son is the source.⁴¹⁶

Jack Luxton's situation in many ways certainly follows this model. He would rather allow the possibility that he killed his own father than embrace the awareness that his father's way of life has come to an end. In this, the drama corresponds to that of Bill Unwin's in *Ever After*: while the protagonist spends much of his life convinced that his father's suicide was due to strictly personal reasons, he eventually gathers evidence suggesting that it might have been a broader problem ("People die when their world will no longer sustain them" (*Ever After*, 24)). Michael Luxton is also overwhelmed by the changing economy (the police officers investigating his death explicitly mention a "smaller" epidemic of suicides among farmers in the wake of the mad cow disease (240)), the collapse of his family, the death of his close friend and neighbour, all of which make his way of life unsustainable.

In Freud's framework, it is crucial for the son to avoid allowing the father to know that of which he is ignorant, since preserving the father's ignorance allows the dreamer to make the dream about his own death. Gallop observes a corresponding sentiment in Lacan's comment on the dream: "Rather than have him know, 'I' would die."⁴¹⁷ Lacan's formulation in turn corresponds to Tom Luxton's "Over my dead body."⁴¹⁸ This correspondence places Tom in the position of the dreaming son, protecting Jack from the realization of his own death, and thus preventing him from becoming the ideal father.

⁴¹⁶ Gallop, *Reading*, 167-8.

⁴¹⁷ Qtd. in Gallop, *Reading*, 171.

⁴¹⁸ Admittedly, the final encounter of the Luxton brothers does not literally take place in sleep: dream may be understood here more loosely as a moment revealing the real of a situation, hidden under the construct of symbolic reality (arguably, this makes Jack the subject of knowledge here).

Jack cannot extinguish his desire without ceasing to be a symbolic subject, that is, without ceasing to exist. Tom intervenes at the point when his brother's quest to close the gap in the symbolic is about to be completed – by removing him from existence. Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, it is Tom who seems to be unaware that he is dead, as testified by the pun, and Tom who eventually disappears (as if made aware of his own death by these words). However, in view of the power struggle involved in the dead father dream, the analogy does not have to be seen as flawed: if the gist of the confrontation is precisely to decide who has the right to be called the father, or, more generally, to be the referent of the masculine pronoun, the question of who is actually dead is far from obvious. As we have already observed, Lacan's retelling uses only the masculine pronoun throughout, making it impossible to determine who he is referring to at any given point, and abandoning Freud's apparent certainty on the matter. Gallop also points out that the movement from ignorance to knowledge in the dream in itself complicates the association of either state with just one of the figures (after all, the son is a "later moment" of the father).⁴¹⁹ With Jack repeatedly presented as a paternal figure for Tom, and Tom replacing Vera in her maternal duties after her death, the ambiguity is as evident here as in Lacan.

Gallop also remarks an intriguing nuance about Lacan's account of the dead father dream: he provides a footnote with very detailed bibliographical information on the source text, which is very much out of the ordinary in his writing, which most frequently leaves any intertextual references to the erudition of the readers, not to mention providing proper bibliographic information on the author's sources. However, the details offered by Lacan prove imprecise if not downright confusing on closer inspection: the page numbers

⁴¹⁹ Gallop, *Reading*, 172.

nearly miss the fragment he is actually referring to, and his choice of the source is debatable in itself.⁴²⁰

The apparent shift from ignorance to knowledge, from *es* to *ich*, which is questioned by Lacan's reinterpretation of the dream, produces no more clarity than Swift's shift from hesitant, limited, first-person speakers to an external third-person narrative model, although the narrator of *Wish You Were Here* – even if he is not strictly speaking omniscient – clearly knows more than the characters. The relation of the dreamer to the dead father is repeated between the dream interpreter and the dreamer himself: “In both cases a subject comes *wo es war*.”⁴²¹ Like the dreamer knows more than his dead father, and the dream interpreter knows something the dreamer does not, the narrator of the novel clearly knows more than its characters, and this places the reader in the position of the subject of knowledge, of the one who is trying, without success, not to wake up to the message of his own mortality. Gallop notes that Lacan's rereading of the dream of the dead father emphasizes the anti-Cartesian sentiment expressed by the ghost over the drama of its apparition, privileging the precision of the structures of the symbolic over the “illusions of the imaginary.”⁴²² However, she quickly adds that already in the 1970s, Lacan himself reconceptualized the relationship between his three orders, bringing to the fore their inescapable entanglement. I am by no means suggesting that Graham Swift was intentionally repeating this itinerary in *Wish You Were Here*, but in the light of the writer's earlier output, repeatedly dramatising the impossibility of the striving for a

⁴²⁰ The version of the dream provided in *The Interpretation of Dreams* appears much more suitable for Lacan's purposes, but he chooses to quote from the article “The Formulations Regarding the Two Principles of Mental Functioning.” (Gallop, *Reading*, 164-5)

⁴²¹ Gallop, *Reading*, 172.

⁴²² “Lacan distills a new *cogito* or an anti-*cogito*, much darker but with the same stunning simplicity: rather than I, he; in the place of thinking, ignorance (not knowing); the loss of the *ergo*, loss of logical causality; and in the place of being, being dead.” (Gallop, *Reading*, 160)

complete symbolic, it is not difficult to see this novel as another image of the failure of the dead father, one who is “perfectly the master of his own desire”⁴²³ and thus may allow the child in turn to master his own desire. The protagonist of *Wish You Were Here*, whether he himself realises this or not, shows us with as much force as any of his predecessors that the lack at the centre of the subject’s being is not an incidental flaw caused by trauma, but an inherent, necessary feature, determining our psyche’s interactions with the surrounding reality, marking our fundamental inability to respond adequately to events.

⁴²³ Jacques Lacan, qtd. in Gallop, *Reading*, 180.

Closing remarks

Having devoted most of my thesis to pointing out the threats, the fundamental impossibility of ultimate coherence and closure, and indeed arguing that achieving them is undesirable, it seems not only futile but in fact almost inappropriate to attempt anything like a neat conclusion that might tie up all the loose ends in my reasoning. This is all the more so that my aim was not to push any sort of agenda, reveal the author's intention, or demonstrate smooth, linear development in Swift's writing. The very structure of the author's narratives goes against this way of thinking, and I would in fact argue that his output as a whole also displays this sort of non-linear, circular, repetitive, achronological characteristics that we have come to associate with his plots. On many levels it might be easier to demonstrate affinities between books at extreme ends of his career than between publications following one another immediately. A non-conclusive series of observations on the motifs appearing in his selected novels is perhaps the best that I can hope to achieve. Lack of conclusiveness in Swift's work is not a flaw but a very carefully crafted, crucial element of the worldview that he presents, and I hope the same may be said of my work. If my remarks enable a problematization of any particular reading of Swift's prose, to produce the sort of tensions and aporias that his narrators repeatedly offer to us, my work will be successful. This is why instead of searching for a common denominator for the remarks that have been made throughout the thesis, I would prefer to offer a brief glance at Swift's two novels published after *Wish You Were Here*, to see how they work against the developments described in the earlier sections.

In a sense, *Mothering Sunday* (2016) could be said to provide the sort of conclusion that I have been reluctant to include here. Undeniably Swift's most overtly

self-reflexive novel, instead of merely performing the dilemmas that have been embodied in the plots of his earlier works, it discusses them openly. The only major work by Swift to date that has a successful professional writer as a protagonist, it explicitly focuses the majority of its reflection on the nature of literary discourse and its functions in the forming of human identity. Mirroring the self-creation of the protagonist as a person and as a writer, the book is a declaration of irresolvable ambiguity of subjecthood in general and of fiction writing in particular, and as such appears to allow no possibility of its readers' falling for the illusions it creates for them. While in his earlier works Swift tended to leave it to his audience to struggle with inherent incoherences produced by his first-person narrators, this time he declares directly through a third-person, heterodiegetic speaker that we are not supposed to expect any straightforward answers, and that the ultimate ambiguity of the reading experience is actually of crucial value. The concluding paragraph of the novel indeed constitutes a writer's manifesto of sorts:

Enough of this interview claptrap and chicanery. So what was it then exactly, this truth-telling? They would always want even the explanation explained! And any writer worth her salt would lead them on, tease them, lead them up the garden path. Wasn't it bloody obvious? It was about *being true to the stuff of life*, it was about *trying to capture, though you never could, the very feel of being alive*. It was about *finding a language*. And it was about being true to the fact, the one thing only followed from the other, that many things in life – oh so many more than we think – can never be explained at all.⁴²⁴

This is not the first time in this thesis that I have observed this, but once again Swift's very choice of words invites Lacanian associations, as do the ideas that he presents here. The fragment may very well be read as expressing a realisation of the impossibility of

⁴²⁴ Graham Swift, *Mothering Sunday* (London: Scribner, 2016), 132, my emphasis.

restoring the fullness of the living being to the speaking subject, while at the same time acknowledging the necessity to find some degree of identification with the alienating language, without relying on it excessively for final and conclusive answers. This is without any doubt the closest Swift has ever come to straightforwardly rejecting the obsessional neurotic discourse.

An additional layer to the issue is provided by the central intertextual influence in the text, also stated with impressive openness. *Mothering Sunday* devotes a considerable amount of space to a careful consideration of Joseph Conrad's novella *Youth* (1902), which is used to reinforce both the self-consciousness of the novel and its ambiguity.⁴²⁵ It must be admitted that Conrad is a perfect intertext for Swift, with his loquacious, hesitant, obsessively reminiscing protagonists who use narratives to restore a lost sense of selfhood, although in a typically perverse move, he only chooses to make these affinities explicit in a text that abandons both the first person narrator and the male protagonist. From the point of view of my thesis, both of these choices may be seen as contributing to the effect of shedding the obsessional patterns of Swift's earlier output. Conrad, whose writing embodies an epistemological uncertainty not unlike Swift's, is introduced in *Mothering Sunday* as part of a collection of "books for boys" (68), and this status is immediately put into question by the fact that he is read by a girl. Jane Fairchild, a housemaid who in her later life goes on to become a writer perfectly aware of her craft in using language never loses any of the amazement with it as a phenomenon ultimately beyond her and her control, which initially inspired her to pursue literature.

⁴²⁵ Lea's remark on Swift's protagonists' tendency to act – or fail to act – at moments of trial also has undeniable Conradian undertones to it: "All his fiction involves characters forced into positions where they have to make ethical choices about the way in which they lead their lives, choices which are rendered more difficult by the network of debts and dependencies that tie them to their place in the world." (*Graham Swift*, 5)

Unsurprisingly, the interviews she gives – or ones that the narrator only imagines her giving – resonate quite strongly in this respect with Swift’s interview for *The New Yorker* which I quoted in the introduction to this thesis.

Jane’s perplexity at the nature of language is possible to attribute at least in part to her early encounter with Conrad. As an orphan employed as a housemaid in a mansion after World War I, she has an acute sense of precariousness of her identity, which she recognises in Conrad’s writing, and which she extends to the human condition as such. Jane declares a sense of liberation and relief at the awareness that her name is an arbitrary choice, and concludes that the same could be said of all names (or, even more broadly, the very link of sign to referent): “The first of May was the date of birth that has been accorded to her, by rough approximation and perhaps because it was a nice date, just as Jane Fairchild was a nice name. [...] And, if you thought about it, the name must have only been a thought anyway. And wasn’t any name just a thought? Why was a tree called a tree?” (91) She goes on to make a thoroughly Conradian observation on the matter: “And did it matter if you marked your birthday on the wrong day? [...] The wrong day became the right day. This was the great truth of life, that fact and fiction were always merging, interchanging.” (91) Seeing herself in Conrad’s condition as a stranger in a new language, and a secret agent of a writer moving between realities, Jane appears perfectly immune to any temptation of longing for a totalising discourse with which her predecessors struggled. The threat is shifted this time to Swift, at least potentially: the novel’s ambiguity is declared so openly, directly, unambiguously that the only potential source of obsessional dynamic is the author’s very overt insistence on his policy of ambiguity.

Swift's next novel appears to have taken care even of this problem. *Here We Are* (2020) restates many of the ideas central to *Mothering Sunday* in a considerably more subtle manner, not only because none of the protagonists is a writer (although several of them contemplate the idea of writing a book), and stage magic replaces fiction writing as the central motif. Nevertheless, the impossibility of stable and coherent self-construction is stated equally clearly and forcefully, and epistemological uncertainty receives as much emphasis as ever. The plot concerns the love triangle between a magician, Ronnie Deane, his assistant Evie White, and his friend, master of ceremony in the show, Jack Robbins. The narrative provides typically rich retrospective material to situate the protagonists' motivations and choices, only to refuse any information at key moments in the plot, and to shift into a weirdly fatalistic stance of seeing events as having been destined to happen the way they did. This concerns in particular Evie's abandoning Ronnie in favour of Jack, a cliché coming true, with all three characters uncannily resigned that the event is entirely inevitable: "She'd got into bed with Jack Robbins. She'd known what she was doing. She'd even known that sooner or later it was bound to happen, as Jack had known. As much as anything can be bound to happen in life."⁴²⁶ The final effect of these choices is to remind the readers once again that the conventions of storytelling are potentially deceptive and not to be taken at face value. In a novel concerning the craft of the illusionist, the idea of directing the audience's attention towards or away from an apparently crucial aspect of a situation certainly resonates with the air of irresolution and uncertainty that reappears throughout Swift's output. The puzzling account of Ronnie's reaction to the unpronounced realisation of the unfaithfulness is perhaps the most striking example here. Evie goes to bed with Jack while Ronnie is gone to see his dying mother.

⁴²⁶ Swift, *Here We Are*, 145.

On his way back, he observes a violent storm from the train, “[b]ut then, just as suddenly, while in one part of the sky rain kept falling, gleaming needles against still-dark clouds, half the world was full of sunshine again.” (133) Inexplicably, he describes precisely this incident in the only comment we see him make to Evie which might conceivably be taken to refer to her infidelity: “But Ronnie did say one thing when he returned. He saw and he knew, and what he said, given that he knew, was close to what she might have expected him to say, but it was strange. / He said, ‘I saw something, Evie.’ / She waited a little, even prepared herself. / ‘You saw something?’ / ‘Yes, I saw something. From the train.’” (146) Therefore, even if Ronnie himself appears unaffected by the neurotic doubt and hesitation, the way in which his understated illumination is presented to the readers leaves plenty of space for uncertainty and speculation.

The mystery of the interpersonal relations of *Here We Are* is reinforced by the fact that the novel replicates another significant aspect of *Mothering Sunday* in stepping beyond the “trauma fiction” of much of Swift’s earlier output: once again the plot includes a radical shift of temporal perspective from a close view of a present moment into a distant future, taking away much of the urgency of the earlier narratives, with the dramatic events having been worked through, and their emotional effect considerably subdued. In this sense *Here We Are* also poses – and dismantles – the potential for a controlling narrative position beyond the developing dramatic events. In the final section of the novel we know as much – or, indeed, as little – as the surviving character about how the central drama was resolved, and it is clear that full details will never be revealed.

This avoidance of any sort of complete subjecthood is partly achieved by means of the narrative’s moving its perspective between the three protagonists. In this sense, this

novel's most obvious intertext is Swift's own *Last Orders*, but this is not the only parallel between the two texts. From the fact that the central patriarch of the group is called Jack, and in the narrative present he has been reduced to a box of ashes, while his widow has some sort of romantic involvement with his best friend, to such details as the fact that Jack and Ronnie met during World War II, or that the resolution of the romantic drama involves the casting of a significant object into the sea from a pier, it would be difficult not to read *Here We Are* as invoking *Last Orders*.

Jack Robbins's position is set to be the sort of almighty presence that Jack Dodds – and many other Swiftian fathers – was, but it is skilfully undermined on many levels.⁴²⁷ Jack is in fact described at one point as being expected, on account of “his function to act older than his age. He was master of ceremonies, and daddy to them all. Take it from him, he'd been around he'd seen everything.” (95) Combined with his repeatedly emphasised reputation of a womaniser, he appears to be almost a caricature of the primordial father figure. More seriously, perhaps, Jack is also something of an authorial presence, able to step outside the show of which he is a part, and enjoy it as a viewer, while realising its constructedness: “In the darkness, neither in nor out of the audience, he would sometimes feel the thinness, the fakery of the plush rapt edifice around him. Plush? Turn up the light and you'd see, he knew, how tatty, how shabby, how sham it all was. How it all depended on some stretch of the mind.” (102-3) This godlike figure is reinforced by its doubling in the person of Ronnie, master magician “moving from magic towards wizardry.” (119) Both are subverted and preserved from becoming anything like a phallic father, complete and without lack. The plot culminates in Ronnie's mysterious disappearance during an

⁴²⁷ The juxtaposition of the two is also arguably more subtle than in the case of the pathologically hesitant, stubbornly unpaternal Jack Luxton in *Wish You Were Here*.

act; his whereabouts remain unspecified in the narrative present, and in fact, Evie can only guess as to whether he is still alive. Jack himself dies without ever revealing how much he really knew of the situation, so the final central consciousness of the novel is that of Evie, expressly placed in the position of limited knowledge: “How much had Ronnie ever told Jack? Whatever it might have been, it had gone a year ago with Jack. She was the only true guardian now of the life and times of Ronnie Deane. The one best equipped to tell the tale. Or to keep it to herself.” (169) The potential almighty patriarchs are both deflated and in fact equated with lack.

This is hardly surprising if one considers Ronnie’s own relation to his parents – which receives by far more attention than Jack’s or Evie’s to theirs. Both his father and his mother are handbook examples of the role of the parents being to introduce the child to the notion of loss.⁴²⁸ Ronnie’s father – a sailor, mostly absent from his son’s life anyway – only becomes more absent when his ship is bombed during the war: “His father had been ‘lost at sea’. He was ‘missing’. These were the official phrases that conveyed yet muddled the truth.” (45) Just like Jack and Ellie Luxton before him, Ronnie learns at an early age that the absent father can become more so once he is truly lost: “He had always been missing, after all. What was the difference? But there was a difference and Ronnie still struggled to understand it.” (136) In turn, Ronnie’s final meeting with his mother is literally a missed encounter: he is informed of her rapidly declining health and

⁴²⁸ The only actual parental figures in Ronnie’s life are temporary foster parents, a couple in whose countryside house he spends several years during the bombings of London. This means parents are always either impostors or absent – or both, since the death of Ronnie’s foster father is considered in a manner very similar to the deaths of his actual parents: “It was a blow, a sudden great gap in the world and a great clarification – magicians do die.” (63)

by the time he arrives, she is already dead.⁴²⁹ Ronnie is faced with her stubborn presence despite her shockingly evident absence. “See her? But how could he see her if she was no longer there? But then again, when the thing was put to him, how could he not? How could he have said, ‘No thanks,’ and turned around?” (129) The ineffable puzzle of absence that the Oedipal situation first confronts us with is embodied here almost literally: “This was his mother and he would not – could not – be here, standing here, were it not for her. This was his mother, yet she had vanished. Yet she was still here. How could anyone, anything, just vanish?” (130) Master craftsman at vanishing objects and people – including himself – Ronnie is still helpless in the face of a mystery to which he was introduced in his childhood through the relationship with his father. Ronnie’s struggle to come to terms with this peculiar bond is turned into an apt metaphor for the subject relation with *objet a* by the narrator’s final comment: “Ronnie would come to miss his father, rarely seen as he was, and would try to soothe the pain of it through his own philosophical reflection that surely he could only miss his father [...] as one might miss an apparition and not a permanent fixture, as one might miss something that might not have been there in the first place. But then wasn’t that true of everything?” (24-5)

Therefore while loss remains of central interest to Swift as a foundation of individual identity, an indispensable condition for possessing a position within the symbolic order, it appears that he no longer takes the risks of his early novels in presenting his readers with suspiciously coherent, smoothed-out attempts at narrative self-construction and instead lays the aporias of the speaking subject out in the open. Swift’s latest novels both discuss this policy explicitly and place it within the structure of

⁴²⁹ This is another faint echo of *Wish You Were Here*: just like Ellie before her, Evie decides not to accompany Ronnie, although her reasons are stated with far less clarity or force, and the consequences of her absence are also very different.

the plot in such a way as not to allow it to be overlooked. All the striking omissions of crucial details in the plots of his latest works directly commented on by their narrators, all the mysteries never to be revealed or even discovered by their characters, leave no space for illusion of closure for which many readers of his earlier output seemed to fall. Indeed, if *Mothering Sunday* and *Here We Are* were to be taken as a commentary on the observations I made in this thesis, they seem to restate with considerable force that there is always another layer of certainty to be lost.

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SUMMARY IN ENGLISH

THE SUM OF LOSSES: IMAGES OF MEN IN THE NOVELS OF GRAHAM SWIFT. A PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACH

Graham Swift is not associated with psychoanalytical, and in particular with Lacanian criticism. The writer in fact openly renounces all “revolutions and counter-revolutions in critical theory.” Perhaps the most significant current in criticism on the author’s work refers to issues of historiography; a considerable number of texts were devoted to his work from the perspective of masculinity studies.

This is not by any means to say that there have been no attempts to apply psychoanalytical criticism to Swift’s prose, and although these are isolated instances, they prove beyond any doubt that there is potential in this approach. The present work aims to analyse a cross-section of Swift’s novels with the use of the Lacanian notion of obsessional neurosis. With certain fundamental reservations, a claim is made that the attitude of voices speaking in Swift’s novels more and more clearly departs from visions of complete discourse, in which the narrator is an absolute master, and thus from the neurotic project of a subject with no lack.

I open my dissertation with a brief introduction to the theory of the functioning of the speaking subject created by Jacques Lacan, and in particular to his conception of

obsessional neurosis. I also point to the features of Swift's prose which allow for a possibility of finding reflections of this structure in his texts.

The first chapter of my thesis discusses Swift's first two novels as exhibiting most clearly perceptible features of the obsessional structure. In the second chapter, I consider the gradual modification of the writer's approach to the narrators he creates, which may be read as a departure from the model presented in the previous chapter. Questions of certainty, control over language, or rivalry with an idealized paternal figure nevertheless remain the central focus of the writer's output. The third and final chapter deals with one of Swift's most recent novels, formally significantly different from the ones discussed before. The motifs recurring in his works are also handled in a novel manner here. The result of this evolution is, arguably, paradoxical: while Swift's narrators and his protagonists are less and less inclined to believe that they can function without loss, the increasing insistence and directness with which the author himself postulates an embrace of ambiguity in itself might bring up associations with obsessive structure.

SUMMARY IN POLISH

RACHUNEK STRAT: POSTACI MĘŻCZYŹN W POWIEŚCIACH GRAHAMA SWIFTA. UJĘCIE PSYCHOANALITYCZNE

Graham Swift nie jest kojarzony z krytyką psychoanalityczną, a zwłaszcza Lacanowską. Pisarz otwarcie odcina się zresztą od wszelkich „rewolucji i kontrrewolucji w teorii krytycznej.” Najsilniejszy bodaj nurt w krytyce dotyczącej tego autora odnosi się do zagadnień historiografii; powstało również wiele tekstów rozpatrujących jego twórczość z perspektywy studiów nad męskością.

Nie oznacza to bynajmniej, że nie pojawiają się próby zastosowania krytyki psychoanalitycznej do prozy Swifta, i choć są to przypadki pojedyncze, dowodzą ponad wszelką wątpliwość, że potencjał takiego podejścia istnieje. Niniejsza praca stawia sobie za cel analizę przekrojowego wyboru powieści Swifta przy pomocy Lacanowskiego pojęcia neurozy obsesyjnej. Z pewnymi zasadniczymi zastrzeżeniami zostaje w niej postawiona teza, że podejście głosów mówiących w powieściach Swifta coraz wyraźniej odchodzi od wizji kompletnego dyskursu, nad którym narrator całkowicie panuje, a tym samym od neurotycznego projektu podmiotu pozbawionego braku.

Dysertację otwieram krótkim wprowadzeniem do teorii funkcjonowania podmiotu mówiącego stworzonej przez Jacques'a Lacana, a szczególnie do jego koncepcji neurozy

obsesyjnej. Wskazuję również na cechy prozy Swifta, które pozwalają zakładać możliwość odnalezienia odzwierciedleń tej struktury w jego tekstach.

Pierwszy rozdział mojej rozprawy omawia dwie pierwsze powieści Swifta jako przejawiające najsilniej zarysowane cechy struktury obsesyjnej. W drugim rozdziale rozpatruję stopniową modyfikację podejścia pisarza do tworzonych narratorów, którą da się odczytać jako odejście od wcześniej wskazanego modelu. Zagadnienia pewności, kontroli nad językiem, czy rywalizacji z idealizowaną figurą ojca pozostają jednak w centrum uwagi autora. Trzeci, ostatni rozdział zajmuje się jedną z najnowszych powieści Swifta, znacznie odbiegającą pod względem formalnym od poprzednich. Motywy stale powracające w jego utworach również są tu potraktowane w nowy sposób. Skutki tej ewolucji, można powiedzieć, są paradoksalne: podczas gdy narratorzy i protagoniści prozy Swifta w coraz mniejszym stopniu przejawiają skłonność do wiary w możliwość funkcjonowania bez straty, fakt, że sam autor coraz intensywniej i coraz bardziej wprost postuluje konieczność zaakceptowania wieloznaczności sam w sobie może budzić skojarzenia ze strukturą obsesyjną.