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## I Am Not Me. The (Re)construction of the Self in Graham Swift's *Ever After*

Graham Swift's *Ever After* (1992) is narrated by – in the protagonist's own words – “a dead man.”<sup>1</sup> Shaken by his father's suicide, an uneasy relation with his mother and stepfather and finally by the suicide of his wife, Bill Unwin is troubled throughout his life by a 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 are repeatedly frustrated, leading ultimately to a suicide attempt, after which he embarks on a quest to understand his new self, the man “born again in plastic.”<sup>2</sup> 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, which he associates with the production of synthetics and the empty language constructs of academia. His contempt for these is contrasted with a nostalgia for the well-ordered, “real” reality of the nineteenth century, which is 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,<sup>3</sup> 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 need to refine, process, manufacture what is discovered.

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Swift, *Ever After* (London: Picador, 1992), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Swift, *Ever After*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> 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 Freudo-Lacanian theory of mourning as a process analogous in many ways to 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 the reluctant achievement of what Tammy Clewell reads to be Freud's recommendation "to relinquish the wish for a strict identity unencumbered by the claims of the lost other or the past."<sup>4</sup> In Lacan's terms, Unwin's evolving worldview corresponds to the final stage of the process in which personhood is established, that of the subject's entry into the Symbolic, which necessitates accepting lack as constitutive of selfhood and involves abandoning the fantasy of an object that will conclusively satisfy 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."<sup>5</sup>

Bill Unwin signals his fantasy of an ultimate plenitude beyond the limitations of the symbolic when he remarks early in the novel that the narrative is an attempt "to recover my substance."<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, he also expresses doubt about such recovery: in observing the change wrought in 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."<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup> However, as his repeated declarations of searching for or indeed having found "the real thing"<sup>9</sup> suggest, Unwin persistently attempts "to ignore loss as a constitutive dimension of the human condition."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Tammy Clewell, "Mourning beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 52, no. 1 (2004): 65.

<sup>5</sup> Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge, 2005), 55.

<sup>6</sup> Swift, *Ever After*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 94, 149, 218, 251.

<sup>10</sup> Stef Craps, *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift: No Short-Cuts to Salvation* (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), 121.

His wish to regain 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."<sup>11</sup> Fantasy functions as a veil, hiding from the subject the trauma of castration understood as the realisation of the lack that the Other involves.<sup>12</sup> "Through fantasy, the subject attempts to sustain the illusion of unity with the Other and ignores his or her own division."<sup>13</sup> To enter the symbolic, one has to abandon the illusion of complete satisfaction of desire and subject oneself to the absolute otherness of the symbolic, a system which allows the articulation of desire, binding it with the desires of other subjects to the extent that "we are condemned to speak our desire through the language and desires of others."<sup>14</sup> 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."<sup>15</sup> Fink discusses this inadequacy 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. In the case of Swift's protagonist, it is his father who is taken to guarantee freedom from ambiguity and absence, freeing Unwin from the quest for the *objet a* which would make him whole again, and give him a firm sense of identity. After his father's death, Unwin looks for the same kind of guarantee in the clearly symbolic constructs of literature, romantic love and history and, as Stef Craps demonstrates, he is disappointed each time. In rejecting the inadequacy of substitutes, Unwin insists on returning to a state in which he feels himself complete, negating the claim of psychoanalysis that "to come into being as desiring subjects we are forced to acknowledge the impossibility of the total fulfilment of our *jouissance*."<sup>16</sup> Unwin obsesses over his lost objects, the ever-elusive "real thing," even though he acknowledges that, in the words of his stepfather, "the real stuff is running out, it's used up, it's blown away,

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Wright, *Speaking Desires Can Be Dangerous* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 61.

<sup>13</sup> Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, 87.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Fink, "Reading *Hamlet* with Lacan," in *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Willy Apollon and Richard Feldstein (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 190.

<sup>16</sup> Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, 99.

or it costs too much.”<sup>17</sup> However, his wish to reverse the process of castration is impossible to satisfy since, as Elizabeth Wright points out, for Lacan the loss of a loved object leads to a melancholic reaction in which “the trauma of this loss forces a repetition of the original entry into the symbolic” and this involves precisely paying the price of “a renewed acceptance of castration.”<sup>18</sup> Lacan presents castration as the process of giving up the imaginary phallus, the object presumed by the child to fulfil completely the mother’s desire, normally imagined to be possessed by the father. The child’s realisation that the mother’s desire is not directed at him or her in its entirety marks the collapse of the pre-Oedipal union between the two and the child’s attempt to become the completing object for the mother is an inevitably failed endeavour to re-establish the union. This failure forces the child to recognise that the mother is also a desiring subject, marked by a lack, and to have its desire repressed by a third figure intervening between the mother and the child, enforcing an interminable delay of the satisfaction. Therefore, the transition from the influence of the mother to that of the intervening third (the “Name-of-the-Father”) involves exchanging the lure of satisfaction for an endless deferral of desire in a constant shift from one signifier to another, all characterised by the same absence.<sup>19</sup> Failure to mourn conclusively the sense of self-completion associated with the imaginary phallus on the symbolic level and to accept castration results in a disturbance both in the subject and in the system of signification: “The work of mourning is first of all performed to satisfy the disorder that is produced by the inadequacy of signifying elements to cope with the hole that has been created in existence, for it is the system of signifiers in their totality which is impeached by the least instance of mourning.”<sup>20</sup> Paradoxically, Unwin appears to be aware that the system of signifiers that he suspects his father of dreaming up is an illusion. Remembering his father as caught in a longing for an imaginary world of old values, he wonders whether Colonel Unwin was creating a new order after the trauma of World War II or rather trying to re-create

some old dream-world restored, in which implacable British sergeant-majors bawled for ever over far-flung parade grounds and men followed well-trodden paths to glory and knighthoods? He was fifty-five. And I had the insight of an infant. But it seems, now, that I could have told him then: that world was gone. An axe had dropped on it.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Swift, *Ever After*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 81–82.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism – A Reappraisal* (New York: Routledge), 103.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*,” *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977): 38. Lacan also emphasises the communal aspect of mourning in this context: “The work of mourning is accomplished at the level of the *logos*: I say *logos* rather than group or community, although group and community, being organized culturally, are its mainstays.”

<sup>21</sup> Swift, *Ever After*, 18.

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 in fact be argued that the protagonists' tendency for totalising first person narratives, which fail to recognize the lack implied in language, gradually diminishes. One might situate Bill Unwin halfway between the rigid, monologic and manipulative narratives of Swift's early novels (*Sweet Shop Owner* (1980) or *Shuttlecock* (1982)) and the variety of voices or the ethically "awoken" protagonists of his later output (*Last Orders* (1996) or *The Light of Day* (2003)). This article aims to discuss this process as epitomised in the gradual maturation of the protagonist of *Ever After* towards becoming the Lacanian castrated subject in the context of the latter's discussion of the analogous progression in *Hamlet*.

Stef Craps convincingly argues that Unwin's initial approach to his lost others through literary conventions makes him a melancholic subject, 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"<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> The refusal to mourn the loss in turn involves the 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 fully to enter the symbolic order and embrace the lack involved with it, since, as Sean Homer notes, for Lacan, "the lower case 'other' always refers to imaginary others. We treat these others as whole, unified or coherent egos, and as reflections of ourselves they give us the sense of being complete whole beings."<sup>24</sup> It is therefore not surprising that the suicide of his terminally ill wife Ruth, followed shortly by the deaths of his mother and stepfather, shatters the stability of Unwin's identity entirely, depriving him of all influences that give meaning to it. His response to Ruth's death bears clear melancholic characteristics when he states: "But only Ruth will do. She represented life to me. I know that, now that she is dead. She was life to me."<sup>25</sup> 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, who had been 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

<sup>22</sup> Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 140–41.

<sup>23</sup> 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."

<sup>24</sup> Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, 70.

<sup>25</sup> Swift, *Ever After*, 120.

me it would be an impossibility, a falsehood, a sham. It's not the life, is it, but the *life*?"<sup>26</sup> 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."<sup>27</sup> Unwin's insistence on 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 the 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."<sup>28</sup> This incident takes place three days after the stepfather's revelation that Unwin is not the son of the man he had mourned. The rejected substitute father thus also makes Unwin realise that the "genuine article" was no more than a substitute himself. Unwin has to recognise that it is impossible to use strictly symbolic structures – the models of literature, romantic love – which are repeatedly demonstrated by the narrator himself to be no more than the product of literary conventions, or the narratives of history – to recreate the pre-linguisitic sense of unity with the world. Disgusted as he is with the hypocrisy and inauthenticity of social existence, Unwin has no choice but to face the fact that the very notion of "the real thing" is a construct precisely of the Symbolic.

The protagonist's eventual reluctant embrace of the inevitability of substitution comes only after a long struggle, initiated by a disturbed Oedipal resolution, marking his later relations to his others. Colonel Unwin's suicide triggers in his son a re-entry into the symbolic in which he self-consciously identifies with Hamlet, presenting himself as similarly haunted by the neglect of mourning rituals and a "ghostly identification"<sup>29</sup> with his dead father, making his turmoil parallel to Shakespeare's "drama of blocked desire [and] the mourning that is required to unblock it,"<sup>30</sup> at the same time allowing it to be considered from the perspective of Lacan's elaboration of symbolic castration and constitution of the subject by use of *Hamlet*. 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."<sup>31</sup> The child is wholly at the mother's mercy when he faces the fact that her desire is not directed at him in its entirety. It is her reply to the child's question about his place in the structure of signification that causes him to realise that his desire

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>30</sup> Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 81.

<sup>31</sup> Lacan, *Interpretation of Desire*, 17.

may never be fulfilled because his mother's is not either. This reply makes the child realise that he is merely a substitute for the mother's missing phallus.<sup>32</sup> Gertrude's inappropriately quick 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.<sup>33</sup> Hamlet is therefore not introduced to the signifier of lack in the other, which might effectively enable the fully-fledged desire and *jouissance* associated with symbolic castration.<sup>34</sup> He is instead left to continue striving "to separate himself from the demand of the (m) other and realize his own desire."<sup>35</sup>

Like Hamlet, Bill Unwin finds himself unable to mourn his dead father. After Colonel Unwin's suicide, he is preoccupied with mourning for the paradisiacal world of his childhood, spent largely with his mother in Paris, a city described by him as a "palpable network of 'scenes,'"<sup>36</sup> impossible to distinguish from his perception of it. This is his imaginary period of the mother-child dyad, where he learns from Sylvia Unwin, his mother, "to see the world as a scintillating shop window, a confection, a display of tempting frippery."<sup>37</sup> In this setting, Unwin feels much closer to her than to her considerably older husband and his reaction to the latter's death is not unaffected by the context. At first, the young Unwin's sorrow focuses on not having been able to participate in his father'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."<sup>38</sup> Even when the sorrow for the loss of the father – or the remorse for the absence thereof – finally appears, it also takes a form of mourning the imaginary: Unwin refuses to grieve for the deceased, focusing instead on being deprived of the experience of encountering a "vision made fact"<sup>39</sup> in the shape of Paris. "Only when the image of my ballet-girls faded did grief for my father emerge to take place. Or rather ... a nagging, self-pitying, self-accusing emotion born of the guilt at not feeling grief." 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" to the mother and her lover. This identification in turn moti-

<sup>32</sup> Dylan Evans, *Dictionary*, 117.

<sup>33</sup> Fink, "Reading *Hamlet* with Lacan," 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."

<sup>34</sup> Fink, "Reading *Hamlet* with Lacan," 191.

<sup>35</sup> Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, 78.

<sup>36</sup> Swift, *Ever After*, 13.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 19.

vates the idealisation of Colonel Unwin: “I began to summon a father I had never really known: noble, virtuous, wronged.”<sup>40</sup> According to Elizabeth Wright, an analogous approach to his own father indicates Hamlet’s inability to complete the process of castration.<sup>41</sup> Unwin thus appears to persist in his attachment to the imaginary phallus, 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.<sup>42</sup>

The questions Bill Unwin might want to address to his mother, concerning his identity and origins, remain unanswered until Sylvia is on her deathbed.<sup>43</sup> 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.”<sup>44</sup> Sylvia Unwin’s role in her son’s Oedipal crisis is suitably analogous to that of Gertrude in *Hamlet*. Described by Unwin as “a woman given to severing herself from the past,”<sup>45</sup> 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.”<sup>46</sup> 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 communicating to him that achieving this does not involve castration.<sup>47</sup> Her advising Unwin “against the ruinous desire to outwit mortality”<sup>48</sup> may be interpreted in this light as a form of taking a stance against entering the symbolic, against the lack that this involves, a declaration of living entirely in the present. However, like Hamlet, Bill Unwin is no longer able or willing to return to the pre-Oedipal dyad.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>41</sup> Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 84.

<sup>42</sup> Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, 77.

<sup>43</sup> And even then the reply leaves out crucial information, such as the identity of Bill’s father.

<sup>44</sup> Swift, *Ever After*, 26.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>47</sup> Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 79.

<sup>48</sup> Swift, *Ever After*, 231. 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).

<sup>49</sup> As an adult he questions his mother’s relation to him; her “divinizing the world and emphasizing the bond between them is revealed as a crude strategy of self-aggrandizement and egotistical projection” (*Craps, Trauma and Ethics*, 125).

Bruce Fink argues that this is impossible for Hamlet, because the first stage of his symbolic castration, that of alienation, has already taken place. Similarly, 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."<sup>50</sup> He 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,"<sup>51</sup> which, as Stef Craps notes, is valuable to him primarily as a stabilising influence on the chaos of reality. 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."<sup>52</sup> His identifications with literary models appear to ignore the limitations of the symbolic; both his others and he himself are assumed to be figures in prescribed scenarios and Unwin is repeatedly surprised by people not behaving the way he imagines they should. True to his Hamlet identification, Unwin expects a confession of guilt and shame at contributing to his father's suicide both from his mother and stepfather. As an adult, remembering himself asking Sylvia Unwin about the motives of the desperate act, he still believes that "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."<sup>53</sup> Sam Ellison also refuses to play along with Unwin's imagination when, years later, he decides to reveal that the main motive might have been the fact that Colonel Unwin was not Bill's father: "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."<sup>54</sup> Unwin himself is unable to enforce the adolescent dream of killing his stepfather who, like Claudius for Hamlet, "represents the completion that [he] wants to be for the mother: this completion must be there because this is where Gertrude finds it with Claudius."<sup>55</sup> This in turn does not allow Unwin to separate himself from the other's desire, not having confronted a lack in his mother, for whom there is apparently nothing to mourn. The melancholic refusal to mourn observed in Unwin indeed equals the subject's inability to abandon the assumption that he or she can become the only object of the mother's desire (in replacing the father whom Unwin quite literally imagines to have embodied it) and in consequence to perceive the phallus as representing her lack rather than self-

<sup>50</sup> Fink, *Reading*, 192.

<sup>51</sup> Swift, *Ever After*, 69.

<sup>52</sup> Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 39–40.

<sup>53</sup> Swift, *Ever After*, 22–23.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>55</sup> Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 84.

sufficiency and completeness. The narrator's failure in making this shift is arguably repeated when he loses his wife – once again, in a parallel to *Hamlet*, in the context of repeated insufficient mourning.<sup>56</sup>

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 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*."<sup>57</sup> This is arguably what the text of Matthew Pearce's notes finally does for Unwin. Stef Craps points out that Unwin's pre-Oedipal sense of completeness linked with times before his "world ... had fallen apart (it did, you see) with [his] father's death"<sup>58</sup> is an entirely fictional construct corresponding to Lacan's imaginary order 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."<sup>59</sup> 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."<sup>60</sup> 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. 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,"<sup>61</sup> which he inscribes with "stability, ... an intuitive sense that all things must have their basis."<sup>62</sup> Unwin's initial treatment of his ancestor's testimony is in a way analogous to the operation of 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

<sup>56</sup> Lacan refers to Polonius's 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, *Ever After*, 30–31).

<sup>57</sup> Wright, *Reappraisal*, 110.

<sup>58</sup> Swift, *Ever After*, 114.

<sup>59</sup> Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 125.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>62</sup> Swift, *Ever After*, 91.

might be still higher, have already been attained.”<sup>63</sup> 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 ... he supposed that *I* found thereby a sanctuary he could not provide.<sup>64</sup>

However, the sanctuary of re-found religious certainty eventually proves contingent and insupportable. While the bereavement of his pious mother in his childhood only strengthens Pearce, since “her memory became a shrine of all his religious feeling,” and “the Bible would remain for him the sole consolation for his mother’s inexplicable departure, the only true reply to death,” the loss of his son, combined with his discovery of an ichthyosaur skeleton ten years earlier and the resulting interest in Darwin’s theory of evolution, shakes the very framework to which Pearce referred in managing the first bereavement. As Unwin observes, commenting on Pearce’s life story, “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”<sup>65</sup> After a long period during which Pearce hides his doubts out of a sense of duty towards his family, he finds himself unable to keep up the pretence. A final confrontation with his father-in-law, with whom he had been sharing his troubled thoughts, leads to the painful decision to abandon his wife and children. Later, he 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.”<sup>66</sup> In the same letter, Pearce leaves to his wife the evidence of his spiritual torment in the form

<sup>63</sup> “Ego Ideal/Ideal Ego,” in *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Alain de Mijolla (2005), accessed December 28, 2011, <http://www.enotes.com/ego-ideal-ideal-ego-reference>

<sup>64</sup> Swift, *Ever After*, 54.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 52.

of his notebooks. Surprising in their significance even to their author,<sup>67</sup> the notes may be seen as serving to overcome the “symbolic impasse” which Darian Leader presents as an aspect of negotiation of losses.<sup>68</sup> Unable to give up the self-image based on how she was perceived by the mourned person, the bereaved may find 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.”<sup>69</sup> Once Pearce arrives at the decision to leave his family, the notes are discontinued as if they have served their purpose. The act of giving up what he describes as “evidence of *me*”<sup>70</sup> 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 whole which threatens to engulf [the melancholic] at all times,”<sup>71</sup> mourning allows for a separation of the object from the space previously occupied by it and thus enables substitution. The abandoning of the book is very much like the rituals referred to by Leader, where throwing into the grave a part of the mourner’s body (a lock of hair, a fingernail, a finger) prevents the mourner from being engulfed whole by identification with the dead.<sup>72</sup> Pearce’s notes are such a substitute, a trace of the subject sacrificed instead of the subject himself.

This ability to sever the links with the past even in the face of their persistence is entirely beyond Unwin’s grasp. While Stef Craps calls Pearce another “victim to the imperialism of Bill’s voracious self, which seeks to reduce the outside world to its own solipsistic terms,”<sup>73</sup> he nevertheless concludes that in this case “the possibility of possession of the other is exposed as a delusion” since, instead of stabilising Unwin’s sense of identity, Pearce’s narrative undermines his totalising tendencies, forcing him to surrender “the narcissistic fantasy that the self-completing object can be had and that the real thing can be seized hold of.”<sup>74</sup> Pearce’s incomprehensible behaviour – abandoning the illusion of familial happiness in the face of his loss of religious faith – confronts Unwin with “the signifier of desire that just is – having no rhyme or reason, no explanation, justification, or *raison d’être*.” Thus, Pearce might be seen as enabling Unwin to associate the object of the other’s desire with *objet a* rather than the phallus, triggering separation for him and

<sup>67</sup> Shortly before finishing them, Pearce wonders: “What have I become, that I have parted from my wife, but still keep company with this book?” (Swift, *Ever After*, 183)

<sup>68</sup> Darian Leader, *The New Black. Mourning, Melancholia and Depression* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2008), 187.

<sup>69</sup> Leader, *New Black*, 186.

<sup>70</sup> Swift, *Ever After*, 52.

<sup>71</sup> Leader, *New Black*, 193.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>73</sup> Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, 139.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 144.

allowing him to conclude his accession to the symbolic.<sup>75</sup> Unwin's mourning may finally become adequate and "the narcissistic investment that prevents [him] acting in his own time be surrendered." As a subject no longer striving for imaginary plenitude, he can be situated in the symbolic register,<sup>76</sup> following the example of Pearce himself, faced with the absence of religious certainty (also in the persons of his father figures).

If mourning of the phallus is to be accomplished on the level of the symbolic, and the result of the process is to be the acceptance of its inadequacies, one might say that this is what Unwin achieves in his diary, as demonstrated by the final scene of the novel, the reminiscence of his first night with Ruth during which he shared with her the memory of his father's death. Like Hamlet, half-detached from life by his own suicidal attempt (he speaks of "a ghostly disconnection from myself"<sup>77</sup>), Unwin demonstrates his recognition of the lack in the Other by marking the romantic union with his consciousness of both Ruth's and his own later repetition of Colonel Unwin's gesture of self-annihilation. 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, demonstrating Unwin's liberation both from the destructive melancholic wish to retain the lost past and from the obligation of complete mournful decathexis, 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."<sup>78</sup> As Lacan puts it, explaining Hamlet's hesitation in taking his revenge on Claudius: "It's a question of the phallus, and that's why he will never be able to strike it, until the moment when he has made the complete sacrifice – without wanting to, moreover – of all narcissistic attachments, that is when he is mortally wounded and knows it."<sup>79</sup> The final scene of the novel could in this light be seen as the surrendering of the imaginary pre-Oedipal completeness and thus fulfillment of the precondition for castration, the shift from imaginary to symbolic phallus enabling the (re-)entering into the symbolic order of social interaction.

Bill Unwin's encounter with his own transience leaves him in a state where he is indeed "mortally wounded" and forces him to give up the dream of a stable, original, complete selfhood based on his narcissistic emotional investments. Unwin's

<sup>75</sup> Fink, *Reading*, 191.

<sup>76</sup> Wright, *Speaking Desires*, 82.

<sup>77</sup> Swift, *Ever After*, 231.

<sup>78</sup> Wendy Wheeler, "Melancholic Modernity and Contemporary Grief," in *Literature and the Contemporary: Fictions and Theories of the Present*, eds. Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks (Harlow: Longman/Pearson, 1999), 75.

<sup>79</sup> Lacan, *Interpretation of Desire*, 51.

relinquishing of the imaginary phallus is indicated in a desperate renunciation of his quest for a clear ground of his identity: "Who am I? Who am I? A nobody. An heirless nonentity. What's more – a bastard."<sup>80</sup> The ultimate recognition of his affinity with the father figure is grounded precisely in the latter's constitutional absence. Unwin is finally able to become reconciled with his own losses when he acknowledges the double absence of the father figure<sup>81</sup> and recognizes the same deadly emptiness in himself as a failed suicide. The father becomes his *objet a*, not an original object to be retrieved but a non-existent one, given value only by Unwin's desire "to fill the emptiness or void at the core of subjectivity and the symbolic that creates the Thing, as opposed to the loss of some original Thing creating the desire to find it."<sup>82</sup> All the defining discourses and figures in Unwin's life are revealed as insufficient or missing in more than one sense and he arguably accepts that as a subject he is literally dependent on the absences he has been forced to face.

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<sup>80</sup> Swift, *Ever After*, 232.

<sup>81</sup> That is, the fact that the man whom he mourned was not his biological father and that the biological father himself had been killed in the war before the other's suicide.

<sup>82</sup> Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, 85.

Sławomir Konkol

### Ja to nie ja

(Re)konstrukcja tożsamości w *Raz na zawsze (Ever After)* Grahama Swifta

#### Streszczenie

Na powieść Grahama Swifta *Raz na zawsze (Ever After, 1992)* składają się – jak mówi sam narrator – „słowa nieboszczyka”. Naznaczony przez samobójstwo ojca, nielatwą relację z matką i ojczymem, a w końcu samobójczą śmierć żony, Bill Unwin zmaga się przez całe życie z poczuciem braku autentyczności i obsesyjnym pragnieniem odkrycia takich metod autoidentyfikacji, które mogłyby go z niego wyzwolić. Jego rozpaczliwe próby wykszałcenia stabilnej tożsamości niezmiennie spelzają na niczym, prowadząc ostatecznie do próby samobójczej, po której Unwin podejmuje wisiółek zrozumienia swojej nowej sytuacji, jako człowieka, który „reinkarnuje się w plastiku”. Obrazy związane z przemysłem górnictwym, które w narracji Unwina pojawiają się za sprawą pamiętników jego wiktoriańskiego przodka, sugerują, jak zauważa Frederick Holmes, zarówno możliwość odnalezienia rdzenia tożsamości, odkrycia jej jak rudy, w stanie naturalnym, jak i konieczność rafinacji, przetwarzania czy produkcji tego, co zostaje odkryte. W świetle psychoanalitycznej teorii żałoby jako procesu pod wieloma względami analogicznego do rozwiązania sytuacji edypalnej, a tym samym kluczowego dla formowania podmiotu, fakt stopniowej akceptacji przez Unwina jego niejednoznacznego i nierozwiązywalnego przywiązania do opłakiwanych bliskich oraz że rezygnuje on z jednoznacznego rozróżnienia między pogardzonym substytutem a nieosiągalną autentycznością, można postrzegać jako – jakkolwiek niechętne – wypełnienie Freudowskiego wezwania do, cytując Tammy Clewell, „wyrzeczenia się pragnienia jasno określonej tożsamości, nieobciążonej zobowiązaniemi wobec utraconych innych czy przeszłości”.

Ślawomir Konkol

Moi ce n'est pas moi  
(Re)construction de l'identité dans *À tout jamais (Ever After)* de Graham Swift

Résumé

Le roman *À tout jamais (Ever After, 1992)* de Graham Swift se compose – comme le dit le narrateur lui-même – « des propos du cadavre ». Marqué par le suicide de son père, par une relation difficile avec sa mère et son beau-père, enfin par la mort suicidaire de sa femme, Bill Unwin se débat durant toute sa vie contre le sentiment du manque d'authenticité et le désir de trouver de telles méthodes de l'autoidentification qui pourraient l'en délivrer. Ses tentatives désespérées de développer une identité stable échouent constamment en le menant finalement à une tentative de suicide, après laquelle Unwin s'efforce de comprendre sa nouvelle situation comme un homme qui « se réincarne dans du plastique ». Les images liées à l'industrie minière (qui apparaissent dans la narration de Unwin à cause des mémoires de son ancêtre victorien) suggèrent – comme le note Frederick Holmes – à la fois une possibilité de trouver la quintessence de son identité, de la découvrir comme on découvre du minerai, à l'état naturel, et la nécessité de raffiner, de transformer ou de produire ce qui est découvert. À la lumière de la théorie psychanalytique du deuil en tant que procédé analogue à plusieurs égards à la solution d'une situation oedipienne et par conséquent essentiel pour la formation du sujet, le fait que Urwin accepte petit à petit son attachement ambivalent et insoluble aux proches qu'il déplore, et qu'il renonce à la différentiation univoque entre un substitut méprisé et une authenticité impossible à atteindre peut être perçu comme – quoiqu'à contrecœur – une réalisation de l'appel freudien à – en citant Tammy Clewell – « abandonner la volonté d'avoir une identité clairement définie et n'étant pas chargée d'obligations envers les proches décédés et le passé ».