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The Use of Ambiguity and Inconclusive Endings in Graham Swift's Novels

Abstract

The paper examines, with reference to Swift's later novels (*The Light of Day*, *Tomorrow*, *Wish You Were Here*), the function of his consistently employed strategies which, rather than undermine, reinforce the writer's commitment to realism and give his narratives additional power and depth. His characters are mostly ordinary people, yet their lives are shaped or changed by a larger historical context or by dramatic events beyond their control, and often, beyond their understanding. Swift's claim that literature brings us into contact with fire, yet we do not get burned, echoes Aristotle's notion of catharsis. To make this contact with fire possible, Swift selects easily recognizable ordinary areas of shared human experience, which bring the reader close to the protagonist, and simultaneously establish distance by deliberate indeterminacies and refusal to provide disambiguation. A paradoxical coexistence of identification with characters and an underlying sense of suspicion on the part of the reader produce a unique version of contemporary realistic narrative with its ethical and aesthetic commitment.

Graham Swift's three most recent novels published over the last twelve years, *The Light of Day* (2003), *Tomorrow* (2007), and *Wish You Were Here* (2011), are like and unlike one another, a feature they share with Swift's earlier fiction. A recurrence of dominant themes of loss and mourning, which inform his writing, as well as the use of some typical strategies have been noted and discussed; what I shall attempt to do is to examine, in the context of each work, the construction of the openings and endings of the three novels, all of which span one day and go beyond this limit by excursions into the past and the imagined or anticipated future. The question underlying the examination of the past concerns its irreversibility: can a past-oriented life can also be future-oriented.

The distinguishing feature is the choice of the narrator: typically for Swift, the first person and male in *The Light of Day*, untypically, and possibly, less successfully the first person female in *Tomorrow*, and the third person and the use of free indirect speech in the most recent novel. The tellers are placed in time and

space, which define their field of vision and activity: the place in the two earlier novels is South London and in *Wish You Were Here* – the Isle of Wight; the time is restricted to one day in the life of the protagonist; the dates are respectively: 20 November 1997, 17 June 1995, and November 2006 (Tom's death was on 4 November, his brother Jack learns about it in "early November").

In each novel the narrative is preceded by an epigraph. In *The Light of Day* it is a familiar proverb "All's fair in love and war," ascribed to John Lyly's novel *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*, indicating a link between these two seemingly opposite areas of life. Yet love and death, passion and violence are intimately and perversely associated, in life and in art; hence the use of similar images: in painting, in literature, in love poetry (Donne or Marvell), and in opera (*Car-men* being perhaps the most striking example of love's deadly potential). Frustrated love sometimes turns into violence, and, as Bob's case demonstrates, can destroy its object. David Malcolm (2003) points out to the explicit connection Swift makes between the war in Croatia, which destroys Kristina's family; and Bob's death occasioned by his rejection of Sarah's love. ("Streets in Dubrovnik. In Croatian villages. All the pools of blood. Forget Wimbledon, forget Beechem Close" 198). Additionally, we are also told that Bob's and Kristina's final walk at Heathrow Airport takes them through "a battle zone." Another echo of the epigraph is George's speculation about what Kristina might have been living through during the war in Croatia: "Atrocities on both sides. Fair's fair" (107).

The question "Were we not weaned till then?" which serves as an epigraph to *Tomorrow* is taken from Donne's poem *The Good Morrow* celebrating spiritual love. Re-contextualized and rephrased, it could also be asked by the narrator Paula, who spends a restless night, agonizing over what she and her husband Mike are about to reveal to their twin children in the morning. It is with reference to this prospect that Paula is re-examining her life and marriage, and repeats the words: "And now, good morrow." In her seemingly very successful relationship with Michael there is a lot of John Donne calls "country pleasures," which implies the couple were not weaned; at least not in the sense suggested by the poem. The question form used by Donne makes the poem more apposite to Swift's narrative than it would have been as a statement. Paula and Mike do not seem entirely weaned from the pleasures (of which they availed themselves in the past, with different partners), but this is not the point; and as such, the epigraph seems, in the context of the narrative, only loosely relevant and therefore more ornamental than organically connected. The couples' love may be solid enough, but it is hardly spiritual. Remembering her early fascination with John Donne, Paula repeats to herself: " 'And now good morrow...' Will then tomorrow be a good morrow?" The question, to our disappointment, is never answered.

The most recent novel, *Wish You Were Here*, is preceded by an epigraph from Blake's poem, which, again is a question, "Are these things done on Albion's shore?" The original context for the expression of bewilderment is a punishment

dealt by a deranged priest to a small boy (unfortunately, depicted in detail). The question connects with the first words uttered by the protagonist "There is no end to madness once it takes hold." Madness in the form of extreme irrational behaviour is as adequate a description of the fictitious priest's mindless cruelty, as indeed, it may seem the only explanation of some political events and decisions of the late twentieth century: the vast scale destruction of healthy cattle in Britain following mad cow disease, or various acts of terrorism. What connects the real and imagined victims are the recurring image of burning fire; which are now haunting Jack. It is also by fire that the little boy in Blake's poem dies.

The three titles are somewhat misleading in the sense that they focus on the anticipation of the future: *The Light of Day*, when contextualized, turns out to refer to a distant future (at least eight years from now), when today's darkness may / will be replaced by light. *Tomorrow*, quite logically, is about anticipation of the day to come and speculation about what it will bring (not that we ever find out). One of the reviewers complains that tomorrow is about the past and the imagined future, but leaves out the present.

Wish You Were Here connotes absence and loss; the phrase recurs like a refrain throughout the text and the *you* refers to two people: Jack's brother and his wife, and the narrative – in contrast to its predecessors – finds an unexpected, if only hypothetical, resolution at the end of the long day during which the protagonist, Jack, re-examines the dramatic events of the preceding 48 hours, and their antecedents belonging to the past, both recent and also, not so recent. It is not, however, that indeterminacy and a sense of inconclusiveness is entirely removed: the complex fusing of temporal dimensions (expressed by Future in the Past, Future Perfect in the Past, Present Simple, Past Simple) combined with and also, resulting from the uncertain status of the reported events leaves an area for doubt. The solidity of the happy ending is undermined by the intrusion of the supernatural, namely, the inexplicable double intervention of Jack's dead brother. Is this to be taken at face value? Was this yet another illusion experienced by both Jack and Ellie who wished for reconciliation? Or a pretext for reconciliation? This deliberate obscurity brings to mind Swift's interview with Patrick McGrath, published in 1988, in which, in the context of *Waterland*, he speaks of some elements of narrative "deliberately baffling to the reader" and of a "mixture of the intensely concrete and the world of ideas."

Swift's favoured choice of temporal structure is the one-day framework of the present, recording the events, interrelated with two other temporal dimensions: the past and the anticipated future. The time shifts add to the difficulty of establishing what really happened, combined with some fluidity on the level of subjective, projected or imagined emotions, memories and decisions. This indeterminacy built into the narrative structure is confirmed by the ending. The reader is denied any ultimate revelation, and the significance of the clues, or what looks like clues, is, as it turns out, deferred for ever. Conventional expectations and

answers to the question: what happened next? Did they live happily ever after? are of course frustrated. Which is Swift's reading of the mimetic principle: there are no neat endings in human life; not even death can be experienced by the self, as this experience is reserved only for those left behind.

Despite Swift's commitment to mimesis, his own method of rendering experience prioritizes obscurity and ambiguity. The coexistence and blending together of the temporal perspectives impose a labyrinthian structure responsible for the reader's sense of uncertainty regarding the sequence (and therefore, causality) of events, especially when location also shifts without a warning; to the point when even a competent reader feels confused. Yet, ultimately, the narrative offers a sense of catharsis as darkness opens up to light, in a way suggesting a light at the end of a tunnel: not very clear, perhaps illusive, but indicating that there may be hope. In his discussion of *The Light of Day* David Malcolm speaks of a "narrow way" referring to Greene's *The End of the Affair* as an intertext for Swift.

The Light of Day opens with the words: "Something's come over you," originally addressed to George, a private detective, by his assistant, Rita two years before. He is quoting her, adding a comment: "now she knows it wasn't just a thing of the moment" (3). The nature of 'something' remains unclarified until much later, and the key phrase (whose meaning is not unlike "there is no end to madness") keeps recurring throughout the story.

George suffers a double fiasco, both as a policeman, who once followed his intuition, and, on an impulse, acted against accepted procedures and was dismissed; and as a husband left by his wife. These two critical events shatter his confidence and cast a permanent shadow upon his perception of self and of others. His professional and personal past co-determine his later career as a private detective specializing in what he calls "matrimonial work." Given his acuity and gift of observation as well as his marital experience, it is not surprising that he has a keen eye for adultery. His female clients ask him to follow their unfaithful husbands so that adultery can be confirmed.

He looks at other couples through his own trauma resulting from being let down, and also, letting down others; he knows about guilty secrets and deception. Early on, he became aware of his father's affair, and he kept the secret in order to protect his mother, yet, after his wife walks out on him, he has a string of erotic adventures, both with some of the women who work for him and with a few of his female clients, without too much scruple. It is only his obsessive interest in his client Sarah, whose husband becomes fascinated by Kristina, a Croatian refugee and a student of Sarah's, that makes him forget his other pursuits. Daniel Lea interprets George's interest in Sarah's marital difficulties as a projection of the failure of his own marriage (211); at the same time, Bob's hopeless involvement with Kristina mirrors George's feelings for Sarah; yet his strangely neurotic fascination does not paralyse his professional performance. Sarah's request is that he supervise Bob's return to her, by first following the adulterous couple to the

airport and making sure that Kristina actually boards the plane alone and then by 'escorting' Bob during his drive back home. This, if achieved successfully, would have provided a happy end both to Bob's aberration and to Sarah's suffering. Such a resolution would have been at George's expense, but it seemed, even to him, to be a fitting one, given his role. "I wanted her to see her get her husband back, to be a witness to that. So then, at least, I'd see her happy" (181).

Yet things go wrong: on his way back from Heathrow, Bob first tries to put an end to himself by driving into a lorry, which also would have been a possible "end" to the narrative, and then visits the flat where he had once installed Kristina, before, finally, making his way home. He is then stabbed by Sarah, whose expectations of a happy resolution are ruined as soon as he enters in his half-deluded state.

Two years later, with Sarah now imprisoned, George sees his position as if refracted through Bob's one-time involvement: "a little for a lot in this world – the only rule." It may have been Bob's rule too. It's all on remand. This can't last, this will end in disaster – but I'll always know this madness" (104). George not only obsessively reconsiders past events, but also, to fill in the gaps, invents the situations which he could never observe, like the beginning of Bob's affair with Kristina, Bob's visit to the Fulham flat after he parts with her, or Sarah's meticulous preparations for Bob's return. The use of future perfect in the past – the "would" structure lets him create an alternative reality for himself: "he'd have made himself scarce, he'd have beat a wise retreat, and also, for Sarah: "She'd have eyed herself in the mirror. She'd have gone back to the kitchen. She'd have been doubly careful to put on an apron" (165).

Watching others implies an awareness of reciprocation, of being watched, even though George is careful to "see and not to be seen." Being watched also involves an ontological problem. He believes that others may always see him, including not only the living, but also, the dead, and, especially, Bob whose grave he is visiting on the anniversary of his death (132) and whom he imagines as "A ghost, a shadow. The perfect detective, watching" (154). This awareness brings him occasionally to the point of identification with the former object of his pursuit: "I drive into Beecham close. As if I am him. I'm Bob Nash on a night two years ago" (203). Projecting himself into Bob he believes he can hear him speak from his grave: "'You are glad to be alive?' He is smiling coldly at me down there." How do the dead relive?

Parallel to the actuality which he is trying to share with Sarah now, George is constantly aware of an alternative sequence of events which would have produced a happier present: going through the events of the November day two years ago, he re-examines them again. "Replaying it like a film [...]. Trying to find the point where the sequence might have been different, where it might have turned another way" (155). And then urges himself to do the impossible: "But go back, go back to that kitchen before it was the scene of a crime. [...] Rewind the clock. Relive it. It might be different this time" (166):

If I'd carried the job through to the end, delivered him back – special delivery, to the door, like a gift. Here he is. There were problems on the way, but here he is. [...] So happy she'd have come in to see me, a last time, to settle the bill, to thank me in person, a few moments in my office instead of years – of this. To sign a check and thank me and suddenly, hug me, maybe kiss me even, on the cheek. She'd have walked out free and happy [...]. And that might have been and should have been gift enough for me. (189)

He considers yet another scenario:

Or it might have been better, a thousand times better if I'd watched them fly off together [...]. He wouldn't have been lying in that pool of blood. And she wouldn't have been sitting there, shaking. And it might have been just me – how many times have I imagined this, rehearsed it? – who came back that night, rang at the door, stepped in. (211)

Those imaginary resolutions are produced by restoring a *status quo ante* in the light of subsequent knowledge which, if it had been available, would have dictated a different choice. A termination of a character's life occurring within the narrative context, whether factual or merely imagined could also signify the end of the story. At one point, George conjures a scene when Bob and Kristina are walking in Wimbledon Common woods, and she pretends to have been poisoned by taking a bite from a toadstool. Her impersonation of being in severe pain gives them for a moment a new answer to the question "How it will end." They both realize that a joke could turn into reality: "this is how it could end anyway – with poison, with death" (108).

Bob, by deliberately driving into a lorry, seems to ante-act his otherwise unexpected death shortly before it actually happens. He fails; yet an hour later, the death-wish finds fulfilment through Sarah's action. Thus Kristina's departure combined with the elimination of Bob leaves only two actors, technically a neat outcome, had it not been for ensuing complications: Sarah's imprisonment and George's inability to give her up. Although he is freed from his rival (yet more obsessed with him than before, given Sarah's continuing love for him), their contacts are limited to two-hour fortnightly visits allowed by the prison regulations.

Considering George's expertise on adultery (both at first and second hand) it is natural that he locates himself within a broader spectrum of experience: the actors include, first of all, his parents; the adulterer being George's father; his mother, possibly, preferring not to know; yet she may have accepted it, just as Sarah accepts Bob's adulterous relationship in the hope that she'll finally keep him. George's assistant and one-time lover, Rita, was betrayed by her husband. Kristina's brother, killed in the war, was a compulsive womanizer.

Another, rather spectacular, example is a historical figure, Napoleon III, an adulterous husband, whose biography, or, rather a biography of him and his wife Eugenie, Sarah is translating when she is in prison. Her interest is first generated by a strange coincidence: Chislehurst a South London district where she spent her childhood is the place where the Emperor and his wife settled after they fled France following the battle of Sedan. George and his family lived in the same place, and this is where his father had his studio, and, among thousands of other pictures, he also took a photograph of the five-year-old Sarah. The strangest part, which, as George believes, "draws Sarah" to the story, is the striking motif of a long-life commitment: "Those nearly fifty years. Twenty years of marriage. Seventeen years of empire. Nearly fifty years of afterwards [...]. She never remarried. No one to take the Emperor's place" (237).

George visits Sarah in prison every two weeks, prepared to wait as long as necessary: one day she "will walk out at last into the clear light of day." This regularity and predictability of this ritual seems, in different ways, to fortify them both, but also creates dependence. "Another game we play: the big continuous game. It's not you who's locked in, sweetheart, it's me who's locked up" (175). Given the shifts in his assessment of the past and future and extreme subjectivity of his speculations, this sober self-perception seems crucial. Not only does it testify to his sanity, but also places his desperate loyalty to Sarah within the context of ethical responsibility and commitment, rather than irrational obsession. This attitude could, partly at least, compensate for his former failure and may offer a chance of redemption.

Tomorrow is addressed to the twin children of the female protagonist, Paula: the second person plural is used throughout the 154 pages monologue, silently articulated during a sleepless night preceding what Paula imagines could be "a bomb going off and this house falling to bits" (155). Her silent communication concerns a revelation to be made to her children in the morning, the nature of which, although alluded to with considerable accuracy, is spelled out only half way through the story. 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 Putney.

You're asleep, my angels, I assume. So, to my amazement and relief, is your father, like a man finding it in him to sleep on the eve of his execution. He'll need all the strength he can muster tomorrow. I'm the only one awake in this house on this night before the day that will change all our lives. (1)

A juxtaposition of "angels" who are asleep, with a sense of violence produced by the reference to "execution" is unusual and prepares the reader for some terrible event to come or to be revealed, yet the monologue that starts off from the

announcement of some impending disaster, gradually veers away from the tense anticipation of tomorrow to focus on the past history of the family, including three generations. The grandparents also have a role in the drama that is gradually being displayed including the events from the past, both directly and indirectly connected with the story proper. In this way the actuality of the present – the dawn in the household that has not yet awakened is conflated with the past, and the past episodes are shown in the light of their possible relevance to and impact on the present, and, especially on the future relations between the parents and children; including a shrewd grandmother, who, as Paula imagines, may have been suspecting something. In her anticipation of the crisis, Paula is trying to rehearse some of what her husband will articulate in the morning. Her anxiety is intensified by her own sense of guilt about both her vanity and (possibly) innocent flirtations with her boss; and more seriously, by her single experiment in adultery.

Yet despite a recurrence of the children's names, the addressee of her confidences changes imperceptibly in the process of Paula's confessional narrative: the content of what she, almost contingently, reveals leaves no doubt that she is talking to her husband. The details concerning their sexual life could hardly be meant for ears other than Mike's. Her monologue brings to mind Molly Bloom, which Swift is careful to point out by putting into her mouth, at the end of chapter 11, Molly's famous words "Yes, I said. Oh yes, yes, yes" which may indicate the type of personality far less sophisticated than the self-creation projects. Paula, despite the triviality of some of her concerns which occasionally border on the ridiculous, especially when she is mythologizing the role of the family cat and of the vet who treats him ("Alan isn't your father, any more than Otis was. It's just that without either of them, you might not be there at all," 183), or overemphasizing her own professional position, does come across as an authentic figure whose problem is real enough.

Having gone through the ritual of self-doubt and self-examination, she is offered a chance of redemption through her love for her children and husband; as the rainy dawn finally breaks, she experiences a rush of hope, in the shape of "some bedraggled bird [...] which no doubt has a nest somewhere which is getting drenched, too" and "is singing its heart out. Perhaps I am wrong but sometimes mothers can just tell things" (247). And she repeats what she has said before: "the mother always wants the best for her children," which although it may seem a banal comfort sounds genuine. During this particular night, the present time which is the location for anxiety consists exclusively of the remembrance of the past and anticipation of the future.

Wish You Were Here opens with the words which in their gist are reminiscent of the milder "something's come over you" phrase used by Rita in *Light of Day*: "There is no end to madness, once it takes hold." The diagnosis comes from Jack Luxton, who refers both to the destruction of his herd of healthy cattle following mad cow disease some time before, and to his present marital crisis: "So, it had

flared up now in him and Ellie." The two situations conflate in Jack's mind: the smoke and fires of the past substitute for a moment the present view of "a grey sea and a sky full of wind-driven rain," signalling the dangerous and violent element out of which his absent wife, Ellie can materialize. This conflation signals the blurring of the sinister memory of uncontrollable forces with the present experience of violent crisis: the two images in his present other-worldly state interpenetrate to the point of becoming indistinguishable.

The events of this single day in Jack's life are framed by the echoes of his past spanning more than three decades – from his childhood holidays to his return home on the day after his brother's burial. Ellie's unexpected refusal to accompany Jack on his journey to the military airbase to receive the remains of his brother Tom, shatters Jack. Her reaction however is an answer to Jack's earlier suggestion that now his brother was killed, they must cancel their annual winter holidays: "So we must cancel St Lucia," he says. The mutual resentment, rooted in the past, now goes much deeper; on his return home, Jack, finding that Ellie has left, suffers an onset of "madness," just as she did hearing of his intention to extend the period of mourning rather than fly to the Caribbean island.

Jack is now determined to put an end to his life, and, possibly, to hers first – if she does return. What brings him to his senses is the vision of the dead Tom blocking the door and demanding to be shot first – before the gun is used on anyone else. This unusual intervention is paralleled by Ellie's simultaneous experience; now driving home, she has a distinct feeling "that she had been preceded by a military presence." The military presence is that of the major who, originally, brought the news of Tom's death in Iraq, and, as Ellie now imagines, has just revisited their house to say that "it was all a mistake. That it was not Tom, after all" (348), but some other soldier who was killed. Inexplicably, she experiences a transformation of her feelings about Tom; she feels his presence and realizes for the first time she really deplores his death: she does wish he were here.

Wish You Were Here ends with a moment frozen in time: "Jack walks towards Ellie, holding a seaside umbrella. Ellie walks towards Jack. Then the umbrella covers them both, the wind trying to wrest it from Jack's battling grip, the rain beating a tattoo against it" (353). This projected moment of reconciliation is preceded by Jack's sudden change of heart brought about by the vision of his dead brother. Despite his lack of belief, and a pessimistic view of human condition, Swift speaks explicitly about the presence of a supernatural element in human life. In the interview with Jenny Hammerton, published in 1986, referring to *Waterland* he says: "I do think that there is a ghostly aspect to life, to experience. I think that there will always be a supernatural margin in what I write." Swift also speaks of "the way the living confront death" as "a basic, primitive and inescapable fact of life" and "one of life's principal stories" (*Kent University Student Newspaper*). His position does not seem to have changed; at least, it certainly informs the conversations with the dead both in *Wish You Were Here* and *The Light of Day*.

Tom now decides to “sell the gun rather than use it.,” not to be tempted again [...] And he imagines the immediate future: “His hand would shake as he retrieved the box of cartridges. He’d hear the splashing of Ellie in the bath” (352). Then he reflects: “But all this – while he had still to open the door that his brother had guarded – was yet to come. His scramble to return the gun to the cabinet meant there was a significant delay. It was just as well Ellie had delayed, too” (352). As in *The Light of Day* and *Tomorrow*, this suspended ending may suggest a possibility of a final happy outcome, a true reconciliation. Jack is delivered from his other-worldly violent state of mind; so is Ellie. This happens – or seems to happen – through a supernatural intervention, whether real or imagined. Echoing a deferral of the answer to the question what happens in the two earlier novels, the reader is left once again with an ambiguous suggestion. We do not cross the line between the present and the impending future: no one knows what happens tomorrow.

Refusing to commit himself to disambiguation and closure which would undermine his understanding of mimesis, based on the claim that fiction asks questions about reality but can provide only hypothetical answers, Swift leaves space for some qualified hope of secular salvation which may be achieved through coming to terms with the world as it is, rather than projecting alternative visions. This also implies forgiveness and reaching out to others, which, if only tentatively, suggests the existence of an ethical dimension to human actions and choices and invests them with meaning.

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