

# “Happiness is fine, but it’s rather boring”. Polyphony, crisis and return in Graham Swift’s novels

---

Andrea  
Tolu

---

All right, so it’s all a struggle to preserve an artifice. It’s all a struggle to make things not seem meaningless. It’s all a fight against fear. [...] What do you think all my sounding off is about, and what do you think all these stories are for which I’ve been telling [...]. It helps to drive out fear. I don’t care what you call it – explaining, evading the facts, making up meanings, taking a larger view, putting things into perspective, dodging the here and now, education, history, fairy tales – it helps to eliminate fear. (*Waterland*)

Graham Swift was born in London on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 1949 and attended Cambridge University, from which he received a B.A. In 1973 he received M. A. from York University. Some of his short stories were published in literary magazines at the end of the Seventies, and in 1982 they were collected in *Learning to Swim & Other Stories*. Whereas his first two novels, *The Sweet Shop Owner* (1980) and *Shuttlecock* (1981), went almost unnoticed, the following book, *Waterland* (1983), proved to be a best-selling novel and a world-wide success, and for a long time was considered to be the author’s masterpiece. In spite of this belated fame, Swift is considered one of the best authors writing during the 70s and part of the 80s, along with Barnes, McEwan and Ishiguro. After *Waterland*’s success, Swift became a full-time writer.

The following novels, *Out of this World* (1988), and *Ever After* (1991), which were inevitably compared to *Waterland*, left the critics cold, even though this negative attitude led to putting an important evolution in his writing into the shade. His latest novel, *Last Orders* (1996), won the Booker Price and was helpful in renewing interest in the author.

From the stylistic point of view, Swift's main feature is certainly polyphony. This becomes more polished when one takes a linear view of his output. *The Sweet Shop Owner* is a long soliloquy by the protagonist, Willy Chapman, who recalls the past through an imaginary dialogue with his daughter Dorothy. At a certain moment Willy's thoughts break off, and the author lets Irene – who is Willy's dead wife – speak, without introducing her. Irene is an enigmatic woman, and her words make the reader understand to what extent the man and his wife were worlds apart. Willy dies at the end of the novel of a heart attack.

In *Shuttlecock*, the second voice is introduced by the protagonist himself, Prentis, who quotes long passages from the autobiography of his father – a former British secret agent during Second World War – entitled *Shuttlecock: the Story of A Secret Agent*. Studying this book, and trying to read between the lines, is the only way Prentis has to get in touch with his father, who has withdrawn into himself, suddenly and inexplicably, in a complete and prolonged silence. In *Shuttlecock* there is no narrator of any kind, as the protagonist is the actual author of the book, which is, hence, an autobiography. The books of Prentis and his father, in spite of their incommunicability, have the same titles. Indeed, it should be noted how, whereas his father was a “secret agent”, Prentis is a mere “shuttlecock”. In this respect, the polyphony effectively represents Prentis' unresolved relationship with his father, which is the main cause of his crisis.

*Waterland* is the only novel without any polyphony, as the one and only voice is, from beginning to end, that of the protagonist Tom Crick. Again from a functional perspective, it should be noted that, if different voices provide different points of views, which contradict or complete that of the main character, Tom – who is involved in a deep and provocative reflection upon history – proves to be perfectly capable of doing this himself. It is important to add, however, that even though this lack of linearity is a symptom of Tom's crisis, it does not in any way undermine the validity of his reflections.

When *Out of this World* was published, as noted earlier, the unanimity of the critics' approval towards Swift ceased. According to Sexton, the novel is “Not a book the reader is likely to forget, [it] deserves to be ranked at the forefront of contemporary literature”. According to Bemrose, it is a “very cerebral book that describes strong emotion while failing to communicate it”. Poole, avoiding both praises and prejudices,

notes that *Out of this World* “is Swift’s least successful novel, but it is important and spasmodically exciting because it is searching for a new solution to Swift’s big difficulty: how do you animate more than one life at a time, more than one story, more than one voice? *Waterland* was one kind of answer, but it’s not repeatable”.

“Swift’s big difficulty” is, in other words, that of elaborating the polyphony further. In this novel there is not a single main voice, but two – Harry and Sophie, father and daughter – which are given equally important weight. Like in *The Sweet Shop Owner*, theirs is a dialogue in the distance, yet a distance which is – most likely, though not definitely – to be filled after the end of the novel. Harry is a war photographer, most professional when it comes to portraying the world of great events, but unable to see that he is becoming more and more a stranger to his daughter, and that his wife is betraying him with his best friend. Sophie, on the other hand, suffers the loss of the little, fairy-tale world of her infancy, which is represented by her grandfather, an arms industrialist killed by an IRA car-bomb. After her grandfather’s murder, Sophie flees to the United States, refusing any contact with any world other than the one she lost.

Harry and Sophie have two opposite personalities, they represent two complementary worlds which, after a ten year crisis, meet, so to say, half-way. He will give up photojournalism, fall in love with a much younger girl, and go to live in a small cottage:

Now look at Harry Beech. Former rover of the world, former witness to its traumas and terrors. He steps from the back door of a country cottage, dressed only in a dressing-gown and old slippers, to tip bits of bread and bacon rind on to the bird-table in the garden. (*Out* 82)

On the other hand Sophie will understand her father, recognising his qualities and forgiving his mistakes: “He tried to get close to certain things. It’s just that he wasn’t much good at closeness” (*Out* 140)

Furthermore, Swift adds two voices (who speak once only): Anna’s, Harry’s dead wife, and Joe’s, Sophie’s husband.

In *Ever After*, the polyphony is very similar to that which is used in *Shuttlecock*. The protagonist, Bill Unwin, is a don who is recovering from an attempted suicide. In the middle of a serious existential crisis, which begins with his mother’s and wife’s deaths, Bill comes into possession of a manuscript of one of his ancestors, Matthew Pearce. Long passages from

this document will be quoted in the novel, whose author, like in *Shuttlecock*, is not an anonymous narrator, but Bill himself.

Whereas in the former novels the lives of the characters can be easily connected to each other, in *Ever After* the liaison between Bill and Matthew is not so evident. Matthew lives in the eighteenth century, and is married to Elisabeth, daughter of a minister. His life is upset by two events. The first is a chance encounter with the fossil of an ichthyosaurus. The doubt arises in him, that it may come from a far remoter era than the one indicated in Genesis. When he falls in love with Elisabeth, his blasphemous doubts are set aside. Ten years later, his life is upset for a second time by the death of his son Felix, just eighteen months old. Matthew wonders why, if God has a plan, it should include such an unjust death. His diary starts at this point. Matthew writes of his unresolved doubts and his intellectual struggle with his father-in-law. In the meantime, Darwin publishes his revolutionary theories, which Matthew sees as a confirmation of his doubts. After defending his ideas for six years, Matthew breaks with his family, and decides to build for himself a different life in the New World. But he will never get there, as (according to other documents) his ship sank.

Sertoli understandably writes that "here it is difficult to understand what Matthew Pearce's troubled situation has to do with Bill Unwin's, what Darwin and evolutionism have to do with the hamletic-puccinian reveries of an elderly adolescent".

Yet, the lack of a clear relationship does not necessarily imply that there is no relationship at all. As far as the question is concerned, "what has Bill to do with Darwin?", the answer is: nothing. Bill reads Darwin, but finds him boring, as what proved revolutionary more than one hundred years ago has now become everyday. The affinities between Bill and Matthew are firstly to be found in their lives, which are much more similar than it might appear. Both have been upset: Matthew has lost his faith, whereas Bill can no longer rely on the "hamletic triangle", composed of a dead and respectable father, an adulterous mother, and her lover, who takes his father's place in the family. This triangle, on which Bill has based his life as a would-be Hamlet, disappears when his mother dies and when he finds out that his father, whom he wanted to revenge, was not his real father. Furthermore, both Matthew and Bill feel the need to put their thoughts into writing. Apart from the external coincidences, what prompts

Bill to investigate Matthew's life is an emotional need. At the beginning, Bill sees Matthew's notebooks – which are, after all, a rare historical document – as a means of justifying his presence at the university. At a certain point his interest changes, so that his aim is no longer scientific research, but the attempt to prevent his own life from coming to grief. In other words, Bill helps himself to find a new identity, by giving one to Matthew. In doing so, he does not hesitate to give up a strictly scientific method:

The facts, mixed with a good deal of not necessarily false invention. [...] I am not in the business of strict historiography. It is a prodigious, a presumptuous task: to take the skeletal remains of a single life and attempt to breathe into them their former actuality. [...] Let Matthew be my creation. [...] And if I conjure out of the Notebooks a complete yet hybrid being, part truth, part fiction, is that so false? I only concur, sure, 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? (*Ever After* 90)

In *Last Orders*, Swift's polyphony achieves a further complexity. The author presents different lives and points of views, clashing with and crossing each other, and forming a complex web of relationships and conflicts. The novel tells of a journey by car from London to Margate, of four friends, on an April afternoon. The aim of the trip is to fulfil the "last orders" of Jack Dodds, a butcher from the Bermondsey area of London, who asked on his deathbed that his ashes be scattered off Margate pier. There are four main voices – three friends of Jack's: Ray, Lenny, Vic, and his adopted son Vince – plus Amy's – Jack's wife – Mandy's – Vince's wife – and Jack's. Even though they all speak in the first person, one feels the presence of an invisible and omniscient narrator. The reader gets the feeling that the characters are almost taken by surprise. It seems as though Swift, while writing the novel, bore in mind Harry's "first rule of photography: that you must catch things unawares" (*Out* 13).

Whereas a constant feature in Swift's writing style is polyphony, his novels deal constantly with men and women in a profound state of crisis.

The crisis of the characters should not be seen as a state of paralysis but as positive and dynamic. It is a sudden change, a moment in which all the things the subject has so far taken for granted, and based his identity on, are – or might be – seriously called into question. In such a state the

subject is prompted to ask himself what is and what is not real. The crisis follows a period of “stillness”, of immobility and routine, coming from within the family, and then spreading outwards.

This circumstance has several implications. Firstly, the character turns to the past, his or his family’s, in order to discover what caused and continues to cause the present situation.

The crisis is also a moment of knowledge, when desires are discovered that, due to guilt or misfortune, could not be fulfilled. This void in the characters’ lives leads them to resort to compensations and substitutes. In *Waterland*, for example, Tom’s wife Mary remains sterile, because when she was a young girl she had had an abortion. After spending part of her life trying to compensate for her sterility by nursing old people – while Tom finds in his pupils surrogates of the sons his wife could not give to him – once, when she is in menopause, she kidnaps a baby from a department store, believing it is a gift from God. In the short story “Seraglio”, the frequent trips of the protagonists – again a married couple – act as substitutes for the sons they cannot have:

Because we could have no children we made up for it in other ways. We began to take frequent and expensive holidays. We would say as we planned them, to convince ourselves: ‘We need a break, we need to get away’. [...] Because we had no children we could afford this [...].

This became our story: our loss and its recompense. (*Learning* 5-6)

Abortion, adoption, incest, relationships between men and much younger women are both causes and consequences of the emptiness of the characters, and provide them with a pretext, a mediation, and a “settlement”. Their function is to help the character to bear a situation in which there is not only sterility, but also sons who do not want to follow in their fathers’ footsteps, lack of affection caused by sudden deaths or serious illnesses, couples in crisis.

The awareness which arises from the crisis is not always welcomed, as potentially it might lead the character to uncover his pretences, undermining his equilibrium. The subject, left alone to bear reality, feels that he might be overwhelmed. Refusing to know reality is therefore a possible solution, which is sometimes taken into serious consideration, even though it might be too late: “Tell me, who are we? What is important, what isn’t? Is it better to live in ignorance?” (*Learning* 88) asks the protagonist

of himself in the short story "The Son", after discovering in his middle-age that he was adopted.

If the crisis is the result of the character's realisation of his unhappiness, the previous "stillness" can accordingly be seen as a period of happiness. Whether real or a mere illusion due to substitutes, this stage is not the object of narration, and the characters only hint at it. As Swift says during an interview with David Profumo, "happiness is fine, but it's rather boring": happiness does not produce novels, therefore should not be interesting for a writer.

*The Sweet Shop Owner* is, as a matter of fact, an important exception to these premises. If "crisis" is synonymous with "change", both a desire to change, no matter how imperfect and immature and a future, no matter how imaginary, in which this change can occur, are necessary. Yet, both are totally absent from *The Sweet Shop Owner*. Willy's death is neither unexpected nor sudden, as he deliberately provokes his heart attack on Dorothy's birthday. It is meant to be an impressive way of leaving the scene, an extreme attempt (we will never know how useful: as the novel ends right before Willy's death, we cannot be sure that this attempt will fail) to establish a relation with her: after losing all hopes of being loved and respected by his daughter, Willy links her birth with his death, in order to generate at least a sense of guilt in her. The result is that Willy's thoughts generate an atmosphere full of death and regret, that could not be found in Swift's other novels.

It should be clear, by now, that the only means the characters have to solve their crisis, is through narration. This remark is explicitly confirmed by Swift himself: "[crisis] seems to me the point in which – in life, not just in literature – one wants to tell the story, one needs to tell the story, as a process of repairing, of mending the bad situation. I do believe very strongly that fiction can do that" (Swift, Profumo).

The therapeutic effect of narration is, of course, an important premise of psychoanalysis. As Jeffrey Berman points out, "It is an intriguing accident of history that the first patient of psychoanalysis was also a storyteller. And the motive that prompted her to enter therapy, escape from imaginative terrors, was also the impulse behind her fiction" (Berman 2). He refers to Berta Pappelheim, a woman suffering from hysteria, treated by Josep Brauer first, and then by Freud. Endowed with remarkable literary talent, in telling her thoughts to the analyst, "It was as if the creative

and therapeutic process were inseparably joined” (Berman 2). Apart from the artistic qualities of her speeches, imaginative language may be much more helpful to the analyst than everyday speech.

On the other hand, Freud was fully aware of the power of the word to influence the audience. In this respect, a particularly vivid, or “artistic” language could help psychoanalysis – which was still a new science at that time – to convince the sceptics. Freud even admits that “To describe a patient’s psychiatric disorder, [...] it is necessary to imitate the imaginative writer, who intuitively knows how to capture the workings of the mind” (Berman 8). It is, of course – as Berman goes on to remark – a quite contradictory attitude, because if something is true and scientifically demonstrable, there would be no need to convince anyone anyway. It is then interesting to observe that the fields of psychoanalysis and literature are sometimes contiguous and that the implications are very different: the step that fiction takes towards psychoanalysis adds fascination, whereas the step that psychoanalysis takes towards fiction is a contradictory and dangerous one.

The issue of the relationship between reality and narration is specifically dealt with in *Waterland* and the following two novels. Although not explicitly, they are concerned with the incredulity towards the “founding discourses” of science and arts, the so called “metanarrations”. This condition was defined by Lyotard as “postmodern”.

It should be noted, as Silvia Albertazzi points out, that many contemporary writers refuse to be defined as “postmodern”, as they rather feel part of a “sort of ‘historical project’, a re-reading of official history, according to personal forms and ways” (Albertazzi XI). As Swift says,

I studied English literature at university many years ago, and since that time I have had virtually no contact with the academic world. I am almost entirely ignorant of the revolutions and counter-revolutions in critical theory which have occurred since then, and I do not regret this ignorance. I am not very interested in critical theory. (Graham Swift’s letter to Barry J. Fishman)

A confirmation of this attitude is provided by the answer Swift gives in an interview, when he is asked whether he knows that his work is often labelled as “historiographic metafiction”<sup>1</sup>, and whether he knows what it means: “No. (laughs). No and no” (Gossmann, Haak, Romberg, Spindler 159).



The protagonists of *Waterland*, *Out of this World*, and *Ever After*, as noted above, are Tom, a history teacher, Harry, a photojournalist, and Bill, a don. Although their state of crisis arises out of a similar incredulity towards their personal metanarrations, their needs and aims are different. In the case of Tom and Harry, history and photography are no longer able to represent faithfully and objectively past epochs and actuality. For Tom – whose wife has become insane without him realising it – history has become “that impossible thing: the attempt to give an account, with incomplete knowledge, of actions themselves undertaken with incomplete knowledge. [...] by forever attempting to explain we may come, not to an Explanation, but to a knowledge of the limits of our power to explain” (*Waterland* 94). The aim of history is to analyse events, 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...” (*Waterland* 121). Harry, as a young man, firmly believes that a photograph is “truth positive, fact incarnate and incontrovertible” (*Out* 205). Yet he will come to the conclusion that “A photo is a reprieve, an act of suspension, a charm. If you see something terrible or wonderful, that you can’t take in or focus your feeling for [...] take a picture of it, hold the camera to it. Look again when it’s safe”. (*Out* 122). Both history and photography then, can deter from reality. As Price – the most rebellious and intelligent of Tom’s pupils – says, “explaining’s a way of avoiding facts while you pretend to get near to them – ” (*Waterland* 145).

Whereas Tom and Harry long to regain contact with reality, Bill’s crisis emerges when literature, which he knows to be based on illusions, is no longer able to preserve him from any contact with reality, which he consciously refuses. Therefore he can no longer rely on the two “fairy-tales” that have always protected him: *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The first, as we said earlier, was based on the “tragic triangle”, and vanishes with it. The second was based on his sincere love for his wife Ruth, a theatre actress – who sincerely returned his feeling. Bill’s marriage is a very happy one, a most uncommon thing in Swift’s novels. After her death, Bill can no longer live as “a perpetual stagehand waiting for the leading lady’s kiss; a lurker amidst lights and scenery; a shambling devotee of poets and performers: a humble thrall to this business of show-business” (*Ever After* 75).

As we have seen, although moving from opposite perspectives, Tom, Harry and Bill are forced to re-elaborate their relation with reality. Yet, the way this re-elaboration occurs is not the same for all of them.

On the one hand, Tom and Bill realise that, after all, they still need a narration. Tom's incredulity, as far as history is concerned, does not amount to a refusal of history itself, but to a renewed confidence in it, together with the awareness of its limits and of the risk that it might act as a story, a fairy-tale, an escape from reality. As Tom says in his final speech,

There's this thing called progress. But it doesn't progress. It doesn't go anywhere. Because as progress progresses the world can slip away. It's progress if you can stop the world slipping 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. (*Waterland* 291)

Progress is a good thing only if we can control it, only if we can know exactly what is going on. The only way we can achieve this, is by means of history, whose method is similar to the "reclamation" of the land.

Bill, after his forced expulsion from the artificial world of poetry, feels the need to recount Matthew's life. He first tries to follow a scientific method, then follows his emotional needs, mixing fact and fiction. It unfortunately turns out to be a hopeless task. Bill's crisis reaches its peak anyway, then he tries to kill himself. Once he fails, he gives up writing about Matthew completely, because, "you see, it is the personal thing that matters. The personal thing. It is knowing who Matthew Pearce *was*" (*Ever After* 49). It is only now that Bill starts to write the story of his own life:

what can I say about this old and terrifying bugbear, *mors, mortis*? That it turns you (surprise surprise) into nobody. That my little bout with it has left me with a ghostly disconnection from myself – I am wiped clean, a *tabula rasa* (I could be anybody) and a strange, concomitant yen, never felt before, to set pen on paper. (*Ever After* 231)

And I am not sure if I accept or resent the process. One part of me seems to have occupied a place of serene detachment. [...] While another part of me – hence these ramblings – feels the forlorn urge to find and meet my former self again. (*Ever After* 3-4)

In spite of that “ghostly disconnection” from himself, recounting his life is a very important step for Bill, because in doing so he finally has to recognise that a life of his own exists. True to himself, Bill rejects the publishers’ offers to write his wife’s biography. Whereas telling Matthew’s story would have been “a prodigious, a presumptuous task”, writing Ruth’s biography would have been an “impossibility, a falsehood, a sham. It’s not the life, is it, but the *life*? The *life*” (*Ever After* 253). The use of italics underlines the difference between an imaginary life, and a lived *life*, a difference that Bill has finally understood.

Even though Harry resorts to narration as well, his condition is less painful, because he eventually finds out that the perfect reality that does not need to be either mediated or avoided is love. Harry comes to the conclusion that “when you put something on record, when you make a simulacrum of it, you have already partly decided you will lose it” (*Out* 55). In line with his character, he does not need to take a picture of his beloved because, as she points out ““If you have the reality, who needs the picture?”” (*Out* 56). Harry adds that “She makes me feel that the world is not so black with memories, so grey with age, that it cannot be re-coloured by the magic paint-box of the heart” (*Out* 141). The word “happiness”, though not uttered, certainly occurs.

All Swift’s characters hence resort to narration to solve the state of crisis they are in. With the exception of Willy in *The Sweet Shop Owner*, and the characters of *Last Orders*, they are all aware of the therapeutic effects of narration. Among them, Tom, Harry and Bill, thanks to their background of having had a good education, carry out a particularly deep analysis of their condition. Significantly, analysing how Swift’s characters would like to be, how they imagine their lives without a crisis, does not require any kind of distinction: no matter what education, profession, or origin, what they want is to return to the condition of innocence prior to their crisis.

In *Waterland*, the issue of return is very important in Tom’s reflections. In this respect, he draws a neat distinction between human and natural history: History “goes in two directions at once. It goes backwards as it goes forwards. It loops. It takes detours. Do not fall into the illusion that history is a well disciplined and unflagging column marching unswervingly into the future” (*Waterland* 117). Human history is neither a straight and “unswerving” line, nor a perfect circle. On the contrary, natural histo-

ry (of which eels are a perfect example) often accomplishes a perfect, perpetual, and mysterious return to the birthplace.

The conclusion Tom comes to, is that humanity longs for a return, which, when it does not turn out to be a total failure, is at least imperfect. Therefore, Tom's view of history is not cyclical, although some critics have been misled by his intellectual tortuosities. More specifically, Higdon, who also argues that "Tom replace[s] his dead child by converting Price to his cyclical view of history" ('Unconfessed Confessions' 188). Even though Tom's reflections are not always consistent, nonetheless his attempts to explain himself and make amends for his mistakes, have certainly a greater dignity than a mere attempt to exert his power over a weaker subject, by appealing to his own knowledge. Furthermore, Brewer and Tillyard argue that "if there is a lesson to be learnt from history, it is not, according to Crick, that the history of mankind is the history of progress and improvement, but a circular and cyclical process" (50). According to them, natural history "accepts, rather than questions, recognising – and not resisting – the circularity, the cyclical character of the human and natural condition" (Brewer, Tillyard 50-51). The first argument against this remark is indeed very banal: "human" is different from "natural", otherwise there would be no need to make a distinction between them. The "cyclical character of the human and natural condition" is therefore a contradiction in terms. In fact, Tom's conclusion is that humanity cannot get rid of history, in spite of all of humanity's disastrous attempts to do so, as eels do. Dick's death is a clear example of this antinomy. Dick, half man and half fish, is an ambiguous and amphibious being. He is indifferent to what surrounds him, but not to the sexual instinct. It is not just the instinct for reproduction, but a desire for love. When Tom tells Dick that he was born out of an incestuous relationship between his mother and her father, Dick kills himself by jumping into the river. In telling Dick his real story, Tom is perfectly aware that he is conveying to his brother a knowledge that Dick's underdeveloped brain will not be able to deal with. Tom is therefore consciously, though not directly, responsible for his brother's death. According to Higdon, Tom is "Motivated by sibling jealousy, by sexual jealousy since Dick might have been the father of the baby, and by fear" ('Unconfessed Confessions' 188). These reasons would be a good motive in a detective story, but Tom's situation is more complex. Just because he is aware of the opposition between the human and the nat-

ural condition, Tom imposes a radical choice on the part of his brother: either he becomes part of history as a human being, accepting his own story, the burden of the past, the responsibilities and the fall; or he gets rid of history, gets out of it, follows his instinct, like the eel which comes back to the place where it was spawned. Dick's life shows that for a human being there can be salvation only through death or a miracle (although Dick dies, the fact that he was conceived as a Saviour, is a failed miracle).

These considerations on the imperfection of return recur in the majority of Swift's works, with the possible exception of *Out of this World*, in which the return is less imperfect than in the other novels, and the characters are much closer to the "uninteresting" condition of happiness.

In *Shuttlecock*, Prentis yearns to come back to a natural state, which is another word for love: "what else is love – don't tell me it is anything less simple, less obvious – than being close to nature?" (35). In spite of his good intentions, Prentis' conception of love is based on possession, rather than communion – hence a conception of human relationships based on power, either exerted or suffered. At the end of the novel, after his inferiority complex towards his father is resolved, Prentis goes with his family to Camber Sands: "Why Camber Sands? [...] Sentimental reasons. It was here that Marian and I used to come [also] [...] because in the hollows of those same dunes it was possible for a young couple, with a little circumspection, to spread a blanket and make warm, airy outdoor love" (215-216). Prentis comes back to the place where, years before, he had experienced love while feeling "close to nature". Yet, even then, the scenario was anything but an earthly paradise, as it was full of relics of war. Now it is "littered in another way – by caravan sites and chalets, beach-side cafes and amusement arcades" (217). Again, a return to a "state of nature" is not possible, as history leaves its relics anyway (whether of war or peace).

In *Ever After* this situation is even more explicit. In recounting his "post-mortem condition", Bill says that

it sometimes seems to me that innocence is the very quality of which I have been entirely drained. [...] And yet [...] it seems to me, equally, that innocence is precisely what has been rendered unto me, as if my return to life [...] has restored me, but without expunging my memories, to a condition prior to experience (159).

In *Last Orders*, the issue of return is central. The novel can be read as Jack Dodd's last attempt to come back, as Tom would say, "to that time

before history claimed us, before things went wrong". (*Waterland* 118) Margate pier is the place where the separation between Jack and Amy took place fifty years before, because of their opposing attitudes towards their daughter June, born with an irreversible mental handicap. Just when Jack decides to sell his butcher's shop, in order to buy a cottage in Margate, and save his marriage, he finds out he is suffering from cancer. Not only can his return not take place any more, being fictitious, but time upsets it further. When the company of friends is at Margate, Swift skilfully renders the sense of disappointed expectations, confusing the pier, the jetty, and the harbour wall:

'Where is the pier?'

'[...] That thing you're looking at, that's the pier.'

I say, 'It don't look like a pier'.

Vince says, 'But it's called the pier. It's a harbour wall, but it's called the pier'. [...]

'There used to be this other thing called the Jetty, which looked like a Pier, which you went on like a pier, where the steamboats came in. But they called it the Jetty, and that thing over there which is really a harbour wall, they call that the Pier'.

'[...] So what happened to the other thing – the Jetty?' [...]

'Got swept away, didn't it? In a storm. [...] I reckon that's why Jack specified the Pier, he meant the Jetty. [...] But he must've remembered there wasn't no Jetty anymore, so he settled on the Pier. (270-271)

Jack's desire is that his ashes be scattered from Margate pier. This act is, as we have seen, highly symbolic: to go back to the jetty where his marriage ended, fifty years before. Not only does death defeat his plans to start all over again, but fate, as a last joke, does not even allow his last wishes to be fulfilled. He is therefore forced to appeal to substitutes: the jetty which Jack would have liked to return to, though called a jetty, is in fact a pier, since there never had been a jetty in Margate, and the pier was the place to walk on. Since this pier does not exist anymore, he is forced to fall back on what is left, on what – though called the pier – is the harbour wall.

As we have seen, narration is extremely important in order to re-elaborate the past. It seems then right to conclude that in Swift's novels, the telling of stories achieves a therapeutic purpose. Since the absence of crisis is not interesting, what happens after the crisis is not the object of narration either, and the reader who expects a conclusive ending, be it happy or tragic, or a brief hint at what is to happen to the characters "six

months later”, would be disappointed. As Higdon points out, “The traditional terminology of closure – open, closed, multiple, reflexive – no longer seems appropriate to or adequate for the fictions of postmodernism”. (‘Double Closures’ 88) Nevertheless, the crisis causes some change, the characters undergo development, and the author concedes a future to them, albeit vague and uncertain.



- 1 This phrase was coined by Linda Hutcheon, to define the tendency of the postmodern novel to call its own credibility into question. According to Hutcheon, *Waterland* is one of the best examples in this category.





- Albertazzi, Silvia. *Bugie sincere. Narratori e narrazioni 1970-199*. Roma: Editori riuniti, 1992.
- Bemrose, John. "A Welcome Literary Invasion". *MaClean's* (25 April 1988): 51-52. [Http://65.107.211.206/post/uk/gswift/otw/otwrev1.html](http://65.107.211.206/post/uk/gswift/otw/otwrev1.html).
- Berman, Jeffrey. *The Talking Cure: Literary Representations of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- Brewer, John, Tillyard, Stella. "History and Telling Stories". *History Today* 35 (January 1985): 49-51.
- Gossmann, Bettina, Haak, Roman, Romberg, Melanie, Spindler, Saskia. "Graham Swift in Interview on *Last Orders*". *Anglistik: Mitteilungen des Verbandes deutscher Anglisten* 8.2 (September 1997):155-160.
- Higdon, David Leon. "Double Closures in Postmodern British Fiction: The Example of Graham Swift". *Critical Survey* 3.1 (1991): 88-95.
- , "'Unconfessed Confessions': the Narrators of Graham Swift and Julian Barnes". *The British and Irish Novel Since 1960*. Ed. James Acheson. New York: St. Martin's, 1991. 174-191.
- Poole, Adrian. "Hurry up, please, it's time".  
[Http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,98886,00.html](http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,98886,00.html).
- Sertoli, Giuseppe. *L'Indice* 9 (1995).  
[Http://www.internetbookshop.it/serdsp.asp?Shop=1&c=FTN-TMAWOJPIIU](http://www.internetbookshop.it/serdsp.asp?Shop=1&c=FTN-TMAWOJPIIU).
- Sexton, Linda Grey. "The White Silence of Their Lives". *The New York Times Book Review* (11 September 1988).  
[Http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/uk/gswift/otw/otwrev2.html](http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/uk/gswift/otw/otwrev2.html).
- Swift, Graham. *Shuttlecock*. London: Allen Lane, 1981.
- , *Waterland*. London: Heinemann, 1983.
- , *Learning to Swim and Other Stories*. London: Picador, 1985.
- , *Out of this World*. London: Penguin, 1988.
- , Profumo, David. "Using writing to explore the unknown, psychological aspects of writing, writing as a therapy, drawing upon emotion and intellect, storytelling, comparing the novel with the short story, third and first person narratives". (VHS) US: Northbrook, 1989.
- , *Ever After*. London: Picador, 1992.
- , *Last Orders*. London: Picador, 1996.
- , Letter to Barry J. Fishman.  
[Http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/uk/gswift/gdletter.html](http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/uk/gswift/gdletter.html).