

CAUSALITY, UNCERTAINTY AND MISRECOGNITION IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S *EVER AFTER*

Abstract: This paper analyses the main themes of the novel, which reveal the characters' concerns and their outlook on existence, which are manifest in their interactions and in the way they manage their positions and roles. The themes are connected with one another and mirror in their turn the characters' ambivalence. These are: the impossibility to know the truth and the struggle to see through equivocalness; archaeology as a search for meaning that is fossilised, i.e. preserved in an altered state, modified and nevertheless the same; reality as a complex simulacrum; the world as a theatre; the preoccupation with death, but only in tandem with life and love, whose value death is paradoxically meant to highlight; problematic relationships between parents and children. In the end, the discussion on gifts takes an interesting turn which suggests that Meaning exists – gifts are seen as hinting at the existence of a macro order, according to which things unfold beyond the mere negotiation of obligations. The ultimate meaning is given by love (whose existence has been denied), not by knowledge (which is in the end revealed as futile).

Key-words: uncertainty, causality, ambivalence, performance, identity

Introduction

Perhaps the most prominent preoccupation in Graham Swift's *Ever After* is the protagonist's need to know, the drive to find out the truth. It need not surprise readers, as it can be equally explained and fuelled by the successive disasters that the main character sees happening around him.

On the one hand, there is the obsession with an elusive reality which seems to be changing irremediably around him, without prior notice or warning – armed conflict destroys an aesthetic world that can never be recovered, namely pre-World War II Paris. Besides the feeling of confusion given by this context, he has to face one of regret for the lost values and beauty of a world once filled with ballerinas, cafés and theatrical performances – symbols of civilisation and culture that are in danger of disappearing. Moreover, Unwin experiences loss on a more personal level as well, suffering after the passing away of his wife, mother and step brother; it is important to note that all the deaths in his family occur within a relatively short period of time.

All these aspects make the character's search for truth almost a compulsion meant to provide him with something solid that he can rely on and use as a starting point in the attempt to (re)build his life, sense of self, identity and world view. Another (side) effect is a need to analyse and inspect the course of events quite obsessively, in the hope of understanding what triggers particular outcomes, to learn lessons that would help one avoid unpleasant results. If the fabric of the universe were to become clearer, at least to some extent, a small measure of peace of mind could be gained. Consequently, inquiries into the existence of this universal order, as far as its validity and logic are concerned, bring about the probing into causality and determinism. They give rise to questions and hypotheses. Tolerance to uncertainty decreases

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and an analytical mind and stance take its place. All the aspects of the novel that we will be discussing here are somehow connected to this way of thinking and appear as many facets of it.

Types of history/ies

As in other novels of Swift's, an important theme is that of interest in history. History is both the succession of events and their account (Malcolm 146). Historical, macro scale events are superimposed on private ones (Malcolm 146). They are connected not only in one's memory, but also by determinism. From this proximity, a sense of futility of life and of utter disempowerment arises. Still, connections are sought between individual lives and grand historical events, in an attempt to prove the existence of a grand order.

The main focus is the Second World War, and the obsession with technological development. The atomic bombing overlaps with personal episodes from the pasts of Bill's parents. Colonel Unwin may have contributed to the turn of events, by "sorting out the world" and "talking with the Allies" (Swift 16). He may even have influenced the advancements towards the atomic bombing (193), thus deciding the fate of the world. On the day the atomic bomb was dropped, Bill's mother was celebrating her birthday in the course of an outing at Aldermaston (229). A century before, engineer Brunel's advanced technology, along with breakthroughs in biology and geology, had triggered and exacerbated Matthew Pearce's atheism. Also, in the novel's more recent past, another advancement, in plastics this time, brings prosperity to Sam Ellison. Sam's money puts Unwin through university, on track of an ever-developing career, literally conferring him his status.

In connection with the other meaning of history – an account of past events – the unreliability of all discourses comes to the fore. It is combined with an obsession with the impossibility of knowing, and with a spiritual crisis that is ever-present in both the nineteenth and the twentieth century. Distrust of any type of text is hyperbolised in the ultimate form of questioning – self-doubt. Unwin, the narrator, draws the reader's attention to the uncertain nature of his own narration: "have I got it all wrong? I invent. I imagine" (212). Similar words get repeated in the novel upon various occasions, with respect to virtually every situation that he presents. Thus, in relation to most characters and events, he stresses the fact that he is merely making suppositions.

A lot of these contexts concern his family, that is individual histories. He wonders about the reason why his "father", the Colonel, committed suicide, whether it was for personal motivations, or for issues linked with his job. Bill conjectures the potential sources of his father's depression. Unwin Senior might have not borne to be cheated on, a surrogate father to Bill, Sylvia's choice of a husband as a means towards convenient acquisition of high status by marriage, a way out for a pregnant woman, for social reasons. However, he might have killed himself out of remorse for the role played in the global war arena. Bill does not know what the Colonel's feelings towards Sylvia were either. He might have been so much in love with his wife, and so afflicted by her infidelity, as to take his own life. Nonetheless, just as likely, he could have been a hard-headed "careerist, another star-chaser", "good Berkshire stock" (33). He may have chosen his first wife (in India, where he had previously served) to accomplish "one of those pathetic, semi-arranged marriages" (34). Accordingly, he may have seen in Sylvia only a "pretty adornment to his own advancement" (35), a trophy to complete his image. In this latter case, Bill could forgive his mother for "fortune-hunting" (34). The theme of elusiveness of truth(s) has under its umbrella the construction of ambivalent character relations and identities.

Sylvia is a controversial character as well. After having presented her in an unfavourable light as shallow, Bill seems to reconsider. The fortune hunter, who "despised this man she had married, exploited, cheated – destroyed" (23), is presented from a different angle. Her superficiality and almost animal-like dependency on pleasures of the senses are shown as possibly rooted in a more profound causality than mere satisfaction of bodily needs. She might have displayed her "will to live" not out of superficiality, but out of courage and "contempt for the fear of death and [...] disdain for those who fell prey to it" (23). Sylvia dares not delude herself that death can be postponed or avoided. She assumes its certainty and lives

life to the fullest. She consequently appears as stronger and bolder than those who think that they can trick death (like her uncles). These characteristics are also proved by her dislike of story-telling, which she considers a “weakness” (26). She refuses to take refuge in the explanations provided by narratives, which she knows to be self-justifying means to exorcise fear of life’s burdens and death.

Her initial appearance as a superficial woman, who seemed to have found a consequently perfect match in the much younger, good-looking, American plastic-monger Sam, is questioned. She “scoffed at Sam’s recent researches in that area”, and merely indulged him “as you might indulge a child” (26). This contradicts her image of a childish, frivolous *ingénue* in need of protection, who stood on Sam’s lap and fluttered her eyelashes. She played the simple-minded woman who asks excessive questions and is constantly explained something. She knows that such a woman is attractive to some representatives of the opposite sex, according to a stereotype that seems to fit superficial Sam. Besides being reinvented from the point of view of her depth, Sylvia is also constantly recreated within her relationship with Sam. To him, she is a surrogate mother, an *ingénue*, but also a more experienced lover.

The third question concerning Sylvia casts doubt on her image as unkind. In order to do this, Bill puts forth his paranoid suspicions regarding the timing of his mother’s death. He wonders if she caused it to come immediately after Ruth’s, in order to spite Bill and to “steal Ruth’s afterlight” (31). Then, he submits an interpretation that is at the other extreme – that Sylvia’s good nature is visible in having died at the precise moment when she did. Her purpose might have been to alleviate some of her son’s pain:

But then it struck me that perhaps all of this could be turned round yet another way again, and that, amazing as it was to conceive, there might have been in the cruelty a shred of unbelievable kindness: she was using her death to shake me out of my stupor of grief (‘Buck up, darling, it’s not the end of the world.’) There was a moment when my grasp of this possibility must have shown in my eyes; and her eyes had glittered back: you see, I am really a mother, after all, not such a selfish bitch – I gave myself up for my son... (Swift 31)

These impressions may seem the delusions of a grieving individual. However, the kind look on his mother’s face may indeed show her warm feelings towards her son. There are reasons to consider her sentiments, roles and character as ambiguous.

Bill’s most masterly exposition of suppositions regarding his mother’s actions and their rationale takes place at the end of chapter sixteen. His comments also reveal the theme of ignorance seen as part of human condition. They create ambivalence around the characters, constructing them as users and abusers of positions in relation to others. The suppositions show Sylvia to be potentially anything between self-sacrificing and murderous. She “did or didn’t know I was another man’s son”; “she would or wouldn’t have told me in the last days, hours of her life” (195). Also, “he [Colonel Unwin] killed himself because of my mother and Sam”, or for other reasons (195). She might have “told him he wasn’t my father [...] never thinking the revelation might kill him”, or, on the contrary, “knowing that the man was primed, in any case, to commit suicide” (195). In the latter case, she would be “a murderous bitch” (196). If “he really was my father and she told him he wasn’t”, she would be a “lying, murderous bitch” (196).

The intricate argumentation does not stop here. Bill continues by guessing at Sylvia’s reasons for taking one of the above-mentioned courses of action. Her alleged confession to an emotionally unstable man – the Colonel – that he wasn’t Bill’s father, could have been aimed at a number of things. Perhaps Sylvia wanted to take off Sam’s shoulders the blame of having pushed the Colonel to kill himself by having an affair with his wife. She could also have invented this confession to her husband in order to mask the real reason for the Colonel’s suicide: a guilty conscience because of his politics. In another scenario, she may have wanted to relieve “a long-suppressed and burdensome truth” off her own conscience (196).

Unwin makes assumptions about his real father as well. He was an engine driver in Aldermaston. Bill imagines, encouraging readers to imagine as well, that, at some point during his train spotting, he

might even have crossed looks with his own father, or waved at him without knowing, just as he did with many engine drivers. Then, he corrects himself, thinking: “But he was ‘killed in the war’ – so how could I have waved to him in the summer of ’45? Dead even then.” (200) In the presentation of events, the narrator often uses this strategy of taking a certain track that seems a logical development at a given point and then giving reasons to show why it is wrong. This method is meant to highlight the subjective nature of the account. It also stresses how a lot of apparently meaningful things are the result of chance. Bill imagines himself as a child, scrutinising the horizons by the sea shore, like his ancestor, Sir Walter Raleigh, and feeling the “call of destiny” (200). Then, he abruptly interrupts his lyrical digression: “But I was not born within scurrying distance of the sea” (198). Bill uses the same trick in praising the English countryside: “O West Country world! [...] O green dreams! O Mendips! O Quantocks! O England!” (199) He immediately corrects this effusion: “But I didn’t have such thoughts” (199). This series of comments beginning with “but” is meant to point to the highly hypothetical nature of the accounts, and to uncertainty as a general state of mind.

Apart from the above-mentioned meanings, history may also refer to natural history, especially the study of fossils. The theme of archaeology, present in other novels as well, such as *Out of This World*, has Foucauldian and Freudian implications. Foucault wrote in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*:

There was a time when archaeology, as a discipline devoted to silent monuments, inert traces, objects without context, and things left by the past, aspired to the condition of history, and attained meaning only through the restitution of a historical discourse; it might be said, to play on words a little, that in our time history aspires to the condition of archaeology, to the intrinsic description of the monument. (7)

In the case of archaeology, facts need discourse to make sense, whereas in modern times discourse(s) need(s) to retrieve the facts without which the truth may seem elusive.

Matthew Pearce, the other character apart from Bill who displays an interest in archaeology, is a Victorian born in Cornwall in 1819. He is the author of the Notebooks studied by Unwin. First, Matthew discovers at an early age his passion for “natural history, geology, the ever-absorbing study of his fellow-men” (Swift 93). Then, he develops an interest in palaeontology, because “this study of dead stones offered the clue to Life itself” (93). He sees in geology “the very key to that thing on which all human endeavours began and must surely come to rest” (93). It is a suitable preoccupation for him, as he was “no scholar”, but a “naturally inquisitive mind” (93). The implication here is that his curiosity should be everyone’s, since it represents a desire to understand where people come from as a result of evolution, as well as to reveal telicity in the universe. At twenty-five (as Unwin imagines it) Matthew visits Lyme Regis (89), the area of Dover where fossils were the main attraction. There, he has the “revelation” that one can distrust God and the existence of a Purpose, i.e. the telic nature of the universe. The epiphany happens when he sees the skeleton of an ichthyosaurus. Fossils show evolution, and thus implicitly involve learning about continuity. Paradoxically, they may be considered to both reveal the existence of an order in the universe, of a master plan of evolution that contradicts randomness, and thus of God, and undermine Him. Matthew subsequently becomes an atheist and leaves his family in order to seek meaning on a greater scale. His nature is ambivalent, as he is a declared non-believer who nevertheless dedicates his life to the search of an all-encompassing explanation. The theme of literal and metaphorical excavation into the past is thus (ab)used by Swift’s narrators, up to the point of playing the roles of (non-)believers.

Simulacra

The theme of the struggle with not knowing is directly connected with that of simulacra (Baudrillard 166-7), of representations where the real looks absent. Illusion begins with Bill’s misrecognition of himself: “I simply feel as though I have become someone else” (Swift 3); “I am not me. Therefore, was I ever me?” (4). The way he writes does not resemble his style either: “these words, or

rather the tone, the pitch, the style of them and consequently of the thoughts that underlie them, are not mine” (4). Hence, during an identity crisis, a character who does not feel like himself writes something very much unlike his views, the truth of which he questions every now and then. Further, he questions his own doubts by continuing to narrate facts.

Life seems unreal, fictional – a feeling shared by Unwin and Pearce – just as poetry or fiction seem at least as genuine and important as life. Since existence itself is a performance, it then follows that any record of it is the representation of a representation. Following this logic, recordings such as discourses, diaries, or memoirs are both more illusory than life, and just as genuine. Bill explains poetry in a comment that conveys the above-mentioned ambivalence. Poetry “states the obvious”, which is “transformed into the sublime” (70). He describes the curative function of literature: in it, “darkness is matched with light and life is reconciled with death” (71). Thus, literature contains a magic recipe for people’s reconciliation with human condition. It is thereby real, valuable, holding truth to it, even though it obviously remains what it is: fiction. Theatre and poetry “only tell us what is in our hearts”, they are “only mirrors for our lost, discredited souls” (249). Hence, if they are illusory, then perhaps the reality they mirror is in fact so.

There are other elements that support the idea of simulacra as well. Among them, the city of Paris and the varsity world. Bill describes Paris, because of the ubiquity of art and beauty, as a “palpable network of ‘scenes’”, concluding that “we see what we choose to see” (13). In the University, the members of the teaching staff consider that they gain in virtue and wisdom with age. At “no longer galloping careers [...] they decide [...] that true donhood, like the quality of good wine, is inseparable from age” (249). By their seventies or eighties, they believe that they have reached “true flowering” (249). Members of the academia also believe that they hold higher ethical standards than those living outside their circle. This is however an illusion, as this seat of learning is a symbolical battlefield, where competition gets exacerbated. This is due to the scarcity of means and resources that ensure survival and continuity in one’s career. Whenever such a source appears, in the guise, for instance, of a fruitful subject of research, the scholars would go to any lengths to take hold of it. More to the point, Michael Potter asks his own wife to make advances to his colleague Bill, in order to obtain Matthew’s autobiographical Notebooks. Moreover, Michael does something as reckless as pressing the throttle pedal to the maximum while in the car with Bill, threatening to kill them, in order to scare the latter into consigning the notes to him. On the other hand, Bill uses the Notebooks, i.e. another man’s private life and feelings, to ensure his job at the university. He questions the adequacy of his gesture himself.

The identities announced at first to be in opposition, the aging, respectable, wise dons inside the University, and the savages and “Vandals” outside it, those who are “a prowling, snarling lout, all tattoos and bared teeth” (2), become indistinguishable. The respectable are vandals themselves. Also, the academia, Bill included, are subjected to the dominant authority, which they implicitly reinforce. However, Bill’s irony towards these supposedly respectable people is subversive of it.

Another illusion is glamour, considered a “dressing, trick, a concoction, the promise of something else. (Beauty, love, happiness...)” (75). It is “as desirable and as meaningless as money” (42). Nevertheless, Bill stresses his wife’s talent and “presence” (75) (i.e. visibility, glamour), even back in her days as a *débutante*. “Presence” made her a successful actress, from girl number three in a group. According to Unwin, it is his wife’s glamour that constructs him as a person before the others. To conclude, simulacra are both positively and negatively connoted: both illusions and more real than supposedly “real” things.

Life as performance

The motif of life as performance is mirrored by Ruth’s profession and by her husband’s insights on it. It is connected with the theme of coping with not knowing. As far as Joan is concerned, her daughter Ruth “might have done something solid and sensible with her life”, instead of this “foolishness”, this “play-acting” (Swift 114). Joan’s negative view is visible in her advice as well: “Don’t try to be something

you're not" (114). This prejudiced perspective presents acting as dubious, irresponsible, and the practitioner as a false person. Acting is a second-rate identity for a second-rate person who is not good enough for a respectable preoccupation.

On the other hand, acting is also depicted as having crucial functions: to help life, to mirror or represent life, and to create identity. Let us consider them in turns. In the first sense, acting (both on a professional stage and in everyday life) may have didactic and therapeutic effects: "We look to actors and actresses – don't we? – to show us how to act" (119). Bill says of Ruth that "It was her job: to represent life to people." (120) Performance becomes at least as important as life itself, since it teaches and enables people to cope with it. Hence, it supports life. This didacticism is so important that it must be achieved at all costs, even in a grotesque manner. Dying people, like Ruth, are supposed to appear victorious over death and thus set an example of dignity. The act of performing and the performer are in these cases both noble (brave and self-sacrificing) and grotesque: "They [the dying] are supposed, by the sheer force of their personalities, to make miracle recoveries and so inspire us all", "to turn their inexorable demises into brave, grotesque performances" (119). The attitude to illusion becomes paradoxical and ambivalent, as it is pretence and fiction that come to support human values, life, and reality.

To Bill, Ruth's frequent naps in the afternoon, in the last stage of her life, are his own rehearsals of a life without her. He tries to imagine that she has passed away, in order to get accustomed to being alone. He can keep up with this act only for brief intervals. This pretence helps him cope with an unavoidable future situation, having a therapeutic effect. Ironically, Ruth's last part – of Cleopatra, the Queen of Egypt – mirrors her own tragic end. Here, representation acquires prophetic overtones in two of its forms: theatre (the part itself), and the reviews written on it. Newspapers announce "that she evoked the 'defiant incandescence of soon to be extinguished glory'" (115). The word "incandescence" accurately suggests the cause of her death – smoking, which literally burnt her lungs. The queen of the Nile was poisoned, and the "nemesis of nicotine" (115) is the form of poison that kills Ruth.

We have said that life *is* performance. Before Ruth's death, the couple visits with Joan and her second husband, Roy. The visit is called by Bill "an exercise so mawkish, so awkward, so like a piece of treacly black comedy, that you were tricked into thinking none of it could be real" (117). Also, when Ruth behaves more naturally in the last months of her life, because the imminence of death makes keeping up appearances too difficult, she actually appears to be performing more than ever. Bill notices that "this trying to be simply, at last, herself, was itself a kind of rehearsal (so rich with stage fright), a learning of the final part" (117). Acting creates identity for Bill, as he learns to fulfil multiple roles around his dying wife, which he otherwise would not have had: "I developed unsuspected skills as a nurse, chef, maid-of-all-work." (117) This whole argumentation shows that the line between reality and performance is blurred.

Death as a creative force

The theme of (preoccupation with) death and suicide emerges as a natural consequence of depression caused by epistemological uncertainty and illusion. It is however, just as in *Last Orders*, a pretext for the remembrance of the paramount importance of life. Paradoxically, death not only annihilates but also creates identity.

The series of deaths in Bill's family – those of his father, mother, Sam, and Ruth – damaged his psyche and made him attempt suicide. Death turned him "into a nobody", a person who got "wiped clean, a *tabula rasa* (I could be anybody)" (Swift 231). However, this *tabula rasa* is also the state before creation, which precedes and announces it. The unsuccessful experience of suicide leaves Bill with an awakened "yen, never felt before, to set pen to paper" (231). It is proximity with extinction that motivates Bill to become an author. Writing involves leaving one's imprint or "mark": "To leave one's mark! To build a bridge, christen a theory, name a pear, write a book." (231) He warns that it is not vain glory in the future that he is looking for. He wants to establish a continuum, and thereby contribute to meaning-making. By looking into the past, he also wants to find out who he is. Writing becomes an anaphoric quest for identity, not a cataphoric one for success. Death is the phenomenon that occasions this quest – in both

Bill's and Matthew's cases. For the latter it was fear of inexistence that motivated him to keep diaries. Another example of how death is paradoxically creative is the event of the Colonel's passing away. This trauma forces Bill to grow up more quickly and also corrects his perception of reality: "it was only after my father's demise that the war, which I had lived through but conceived of as some remote, rumbling, impenetrably grown-up affair, became real for me." (58) The effects of being confronted with the liminality of death may be thus seen as both positive and negative.

Love and parental relationships

Love is permeated with insecurity and adultery, so it is under the sign of supposition as well. Bill wonders why Ruth has chosen him, and thus indirectly questions the truthfulness of her feelings for him. He also makes it clear that he lives in his wife's shadow, as Ruth has all the glamour and Unwin has: "no intrinsic magnetism. What worldly adroitness I can muster, what chutzpah and charm, what spring in my step (I suffered in my younger days from flat feet), I owe to Ruth" (Swift 42).

He suggests that part of her identity and aura are transferred to him, that he is ultimately and partly made by her. Thus, he casts suspicion on the nature of her interest in him, as she could have chosen somebody more interesting and similar to her. Doubt falls on his feelings for his wife as well. Bill is envied for being married to a beautiful star. It is this fact that makes him interesting at all. Otherwise an unexceptional man, he attracts attention at the university because of Ruth. Even after her death, she continues to contribute to his image, as he is considered "no ordinary widower" (43).

Bill doubts that his wife is faithful to him. He surprises her manager G giving her a kiss on the forehead while socialising in the garden of the couple's home in Sussex. The kiss may however have been merely platonic and compassionate – a kiss given out of concern for a fragile, dying woman. Bill implies both alternatives in his description of the situation, leaving room for ambivalence: "It wasn't what you think. It was only the thought of the *possibility*. It *could* have been Ruth and G – all along, not Ruth and me. Them, not us." (112) The suspicion of adultery lingering over Bill's wife is paralleled by the one introduced by Matthew Pearce in his autobiography regarding his own spouse, Elizabeth, in the context of a similar presentation of his presuppositions (209-10).

The very possibility of love is seen as a Romantic illusion of poets. Bill's standing in Ruth's shadow keeps open the hypothesis that he is selfishly using his wife to construct himself. Moreover, Bill openly expresses his distrust of love on various occasions in his monologues. The other characters manifest the same scepticism. Sam sees his relationship with Sylvia as a "fling" (157). He complains to Bill that she kept a tight rein on him while he would have liked to be unfaithful. Matthew, living in the nineteenth century, was more interested in understanding the origin and purpose of life than in his wife, whom he therefore left. On the other hand, Sam and Sylvia's "fling" lasted for forty years. At the end of his fruitless search, which he considers to have been an irrelevant one, Matthew chooses to return to his wife. To reconnect with her, he writes "that flimsy, romantic thing, a love letter" (221).

Bill's comment – "it was *her*, it was *her*, you see, never those roles" (referring to Ruth) – makes readers understand that he indeed loved his wife, and not her image as a glamorous actress. His words point not only to real love, but also to a particularly profound one – Giddens' "pure" relationship (Giddens 88) that is held together by real feelings, not by external motivations. Although he includes love among illusions, its loss is what he cannot stand and the reason why he commits suicide. His despair bursts out in a passage towards the end of his memoirs, which is strikingly sorrowful and emotional for the cerebral man he pretends to be:

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. What does it matter if the world (out there) is lost, doomed, if there is no sense, purpose, rhyme or reason to the schemeless scheme of things, so long as – But when she

is gone, you indict the universe. I would believe or not believe anything, swallow any old make-belief, in order to have Ruth back. Whereas Matthew— (Swift 256).

For a character that straightforwardly exposes the illusion of love, the comment above is fairly inconsistent. A contradiction is also expressed by the old clock made by Matthew's father, which has "*Amor vincit omnia*" written on it. The object and the inscription are a paradoxical association. The clock encloses a belief in love and in the fact that it is eternal. However, a clock *represents* transience, it is a reminder of the way things come to an end. The two significations are mutually subversive. Love is both real and a fantasy, lasting and temporary. The narrator's ambivalent attitude to love could probably be summed up in a description of it as "im(-)material". The word has various meanings. On the one hand, it refers to something illusory or irrelevant, as it is meant to end anyway (in adultery, literal death of the lovers, or the figurative one of their feelings). On the other hand, it denotes something intangible, eluding description, (enduring) beyond the material, unworldly (in the positive sense of extraordinary and special). Love can be what makes the human being transcend materiality.

Problematic parent-child relationships appear as well in *Ever After*. The father-daughter ones are marked by two basic elements. Firstly, a weak father is outwitted by his daughter, to whom he feels inferior. Secondly, he functions as a buffer between his wife and his child. It is the case of Ruth's family: "Bob was the classic, doting father of an only daughter, happy for his child to do whatever she wished. I picture Ruth as a young girl quarrelling with her mother, and Bob trying, rather ineffectually, to keep the peace" (Swift 114).

Bill's situation is more complicated. He has more potential "fathers". He has never known his real, biological one. Fatherhood as a mirage meets the theme of the futility of knowing the truth: "What difference does it make? The true or the false. This one or that one." (114) Even if he found more information about the engine driver, Bill would neither be closer to him, nor recuperate the absent father. The other "fathers" are Colonel Unwin and Sam. In a way, the Colonel was more real to Bill because he was physically present in his life. Nevertheless, the physically visible is an illusion. We could say that what is present is not real in a significant or relevant way, and, vice versa: what is real is not there. Sam Ellison becomes Bill's adoptive father, by marriage to Bill's mother, Sylvia. On the one hand, Sam is unfit for the role, as he is a symbolic usurper, and he is also much younger, a surrogate brother, rather. On the other hand, he is more appropriate than the other two. In opposition to a biological father, he is actually present in Bill's life. In comparison with the Colonel, he is closer to Bill emotionally, and he is more honest to him, telling Bill about the boy's true descent.

Gifts

Narrator Bill starts his comments on gifts from Sylvia's beautiful voice. He suggests that her death from laryngeal cancer may have been a punishment for having neglected her gift, and echoes Mauss' assumption that the receiver of a gift is "*reus*" or responsible for what (s)he does in relation to the gift (Mauss 143). In her youth, Sylvia gave up a budding musical career for the status of a kept woman, married to Colonel Unwin. She exploited her voice only for material gain, out of "economic necessity" (Swift 31), that is she "abused" it indeed. Bill dismisses this causality as mere "superstition" (32), but further undermines his own subversion by dedicating a two-page commentary to this "superstition".

The question of whether a gift is "simply something we have rather than receive", (in which case it involves no "duty") (31), or if it is something that "we must serve" (32) arises. The conclusion is not drawn, and an extrapolation is made: "A gift is a gift: to treasure or disdain, to use and abuse, keep or reject. Including our bodies? Including our lives? Including our selves?" (32) The ultimate hint is that since our very lives and identities may be gifts, existence might be part of a system that involves duty. Consequently, a grand order of things must exist. The discussion on gifts pinpoints an existential question and leaves it unanswered. The belief in the existence of order is ambivalent.

Gifts are also discussed in contexts meant to present only their contractual quality, and the implicit roles of the participants. For instance, Sam makes gifts to little Bill in the hope of winning his “filial allegiance” (64). Gifts may bear additional gender and national insignia, functioning as identity markers. Sam’s gifts to Bill, particularly the plastic scale-model aircraft, “tended to have a masculine and practical as well as American bias” (64). The job of an aeroplane pilot is usually held by men and thus points to male identity. It also hints at American national identity, via manifold connotations: war and the Marines, aggressiveness, the plastic industry. Plastic suggests both material prosperity and kitsch – ideas stereotypically associated by Europeans with the Americans. Gifts have rich implications that construct personal, social, and national identities.

(Ab)use of roles

In the discussion of the main themes, we have disclosed some of the positions (ab)used by a few characters. Attention will now fall on two of them, in order to show the (ab)use of other roles. Bill Unwin characterises himself (as a separate entity, and in relation to the others) as Hamlet (Swift 4), which also gives his mother the role of Gertrude, Sam that of Claudius (6), and Ruth that of Ophelia (5). Unwin’s indecisiveness is his paramount resemblance to the Renaissance hero. On the other hand, he describes his father as Hamlet as well – because of the latter’s moral dilemma about his political role, his suicide, and his being out-of-his-time. This undermines Bill’s own role as a central figure of the story. His complicity with Sylvia to her adultery is an element that brings him closer to Polonius, along with his tendency “to regard life from a position of exteriority” (Lea 139). Bill is both the hero and a marginal character, a victim and an accomplice, innocent and guilty with respect to his father’s tragic end.

In another context, in relation to his wife, ambivalence arises again. He describes himself as a “man behind the scenes” (Swift 70). This portrayal is double, containing an antithesis. Someone who is “behind the scenes” may be an insignificant person, but also a puppeteer that orchestrates everything. Thus, it is a position of both power and disempowerment. Bill’s relationship with Ruth may be read in the same key. He pulls the strings on her career, in his quality of manager, but admits to being created by her aura, and that “it was she, after all, who held things together for me, who held my world together” (114). The legitimacy of his position as an academic is debatable. He may be considered a fraud, since he earns his place there as a result of Sam’s money (even more ironically, out of plastic – a surrogate). From a different perspective, he is more entitled to be part of the community than the others, as he is the only one in possession of a genuine piece of history (Matthew’s Notebooks) and thus of a research subject. Moreover, Bill’s use of the Notebooks places him in an equally ambivalent light. Instead of showing genuine, academic, intellectual interest in a subject and resourcefulness, it could make him appear as an insensitive opportunist.

Sam’s plural role in relation to Bill may be explained by elements of his family history. Sam was exempt from military service due to “complex reasons of primogeniture and [his] father’s involvement in a new and militarily useful industry” (59). His younger brother, Ed, was sent to serve in the army in his place, thereby making Sam indebted to both his father and brother. This indebtedness became accompanied by guilt, as Ed was killed in battle. Sam’s resulting outlook on the situation is summed up by Bill: “You have to live for Ed now; to take on Ed’s lost chances (and Ed was great with the girls, they just fell over him). To become a perpetual nineteen-year old...” (59). Consequently, Sam wants to redeem himself by doing well by a kid brother, and he chooses Bill. Sam’s difference in age from his lover, Sylvia, makes her suitable for a surrogate mother. Therefore, Sam plays a multiplicity of contradictory roles.

The role of a surrogate brother to Bill has to be reconciled with that of a competitor for the affection of their “adoptive” mother, and with those of a husband to her, and of a pseudo-father to Bill: “Sam saw in me a bizarre substitute for Ed. (And you gotta have substitutes.) That he side-stepped the dread question of his surrogate paternity not to say his entire adult responsibilities – by this appeal to the chummily fraternal.” (Swift 59-60) This reunion of opposites is hinted at in the appellative Mr. Plastic,

which suggests both a replacement, and something versatile that can be easily moulded, and is thus potentially (more) suitable. Sam uses the money from his plastic business to buy valuable artefacts – Tudor furniture, a mansion, antiques, and Bill’s place in an English university – i.e. insignia of Englishness. He even drops his Cleveland accent, for that of a “Real English Gentleman” (8). Authenticity is bought with inauthenticity.

Conclusions

The ontological and epistemological worries in the novel contribute to the sense of despair. However, pessimism is not a solution. The crisis is solved by means of love, along with the acceptance of limitation as intrinsically human.

The themes above show the simultaneous presence of opposing tendencies. The importance of knowing goes hand in hand with the idea that all knowledge is ultimately an illusion. The plea for a quest for it is doubled by discouragement that all such attempts are futile. Love is simultaneously made the only rationale of life and yet another illusion. We are exposed to contrasting possibilities, for which arguments are simultaneously provided verisimilarly, so as to be equally convincing, whereas at the same time we are told that they are merely suppositions. Even stated uncertainty is submitted to doubt, in an attitude not unlike the fable of the lying man who admits that he is a liar.

This stance points to a dislike of fixed interpretations, and a(n) (ab)use of all positions involved. It is also meant to show that even though Truth may never be within the reach of human beings, all suppositions, “explanations”, or “texts”, be they partial or illusory, are important, as they give meaning to life: “Like Crick in *Waterland* and Harry Beech in *Out of This World*, Unwin insists on the necessity of the flawed, the partial, the untrustworthy, and the illusory that is also beautiful and saving.” (Malcolm 156) The message is ultimately a moral one.

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