

BOŻENA KUCAŁA
Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie
e-mail: bozena.kucala@uj.edu.pl

Intimations of Mortality and Recollections of Early Happiness in Graham Swift's Novels

Abstract

Several of Graham Swift's novels are permeated with the sense of an ending and eschatological reflections. The characters' vision of their lives tends to be underpinned by a notion of decline. While the experience of loss and the confrontation with mortality depicted in Swift's fiction have been extensively analysed, less attention has been paid to the fact that in perceiving their lives as a process of deterioration, the characters implicitly acknowledge the existence of an initial stage of happiness against which this process may be measured. This paper will identify and examine the infrequent yet meaningful intimations of primal harmony and happiness, which sometimes take on quasi-religious overtones, reminiscent of the concept of paradise.

Keywords: contemporary English fiction, Graham Swift, retrospection, mortality, paradise in literature.

1. The myth of paradise

In his *History of Paradise* Jean Delumeau claims that until recently many civilisations maintained a belief in "a primordial paradise," marked by happiness, peace, contact with the divine, an abundance of resources and the absence of conflict and tension. Such a conviction generated in the collective consciousness a nostalgia for the lost paradise and a yearning to recover it. The notion of initial happiness is to be found both in religions which have a linear concept of history (in Judeo-Christianity, humanity must regain its severed connection with God) and those which believe in cyclicity (in Hesiod's historiography the golden age periodically returns).¹ However, the psychoanalyst Mario Jacoby denigrates this grand conceptual pattern, arguing in his book *Longing for Paradise* that this universal

¹ J. Delumeau, *History of Paradise. The Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition*, trans. M. O'Connell, New York 1995, p. 6. Richard Heinberg points out that whereas the Western notion of paradise is shaped primarily by the Greek and Hebraic ideals, other cultures too had corresponding concepts: the Sumerian

nostalgia is simply an expression of a common fantasy that life was better in the past:

We project backward into the Golden Twenties, the Belle Epoch in Paris, the time of the *Wandervögel*, the medieval city, Classical Antiquity, or “life before the Fall”. The world of wholeness exists mostly in retrospect, as a compensation for the threatened, fragmented world in which we live now. “How lovely it is to be a child!” can be uttered only by an adult who, looking backward, idealizes the alleged innocence and security of childhood.²

The narrator of Graham Swift’s most acclaimed novel *Waterland* (1983) observes:

How we yearn [...] to return to that time before history claimed us, before things went wrong. [...] How we pine for Paradise. For mother’s milk. To draw back the curtain of events that has fallen between us and the Golden Age.
So how do we know – lost in the desert – that it is to the oasis of the yet-to-come we should be travelling anyway, and not to some other green Elysium that, a long while ago, we left behind? [...] Which way does salvation lie?³

In this paper I would like to demonstrate that such questions have continued to underlie much of Swift’s fiction, although they have never again been voiced as explicitly and in such universalising terms as in *Waterland*. What I suggest links the narratives of most of his novels is the degenerative direction of the protagonists’ lives in general, and, associated with this, their tendency to look back and conjure up a vision of a primordial state of happiness. Daniel Lea notes in his overview of Swift’s fiction that “the investigation of where and how things have gone wrong implies that there exists an idealised norm from which events have deviated”.⁴ Although it is certainly true that for Swift’s characters the old days were better than their present, this article will demonstrate that the characters’ nostalgia transcends a personal dimension, and will further argue that their simultaneous longing for paradise and disbelief in its existence are related to their post-Christian mental attitudes.

2. “Which way does salvation lie?”: Swift’s characters’ journey to the past

Swift’s stories tend to be told in retrospect either by first-person narrators or through character-focalisers facing a current crisis and looking back with the conviction that their lives were once happier and have since deteriorated. If the metaphor of life as a journey is applied to the characters in *Waterland*, *Last Orders* and *Wish You Were Here*, then it may be said that they find themselves lost in a desert, approaching their journey’s end and unable to find any way forward. The Old Testament allusion in Tom Crick’s description of the human predicament is by no means a mere rhetorical figure. Without being a religious writer, Swift nonethe-

Dilmun, the Iranian Garden of Yima or the Egyptian realm of Te Zepi. R. Heinberg, *Memories and Visions of Paradise. Exploring the Universal Myth of a Lost Golden Age*, Los Angeles 1990, p. 49.

² Qtd. in R. Heinberg, op. cit., p. 188.

³ G. Swift, *Waterland*, London, 1983, p. 118. Later in the text as *W*.

⁴ D. Lea, *Graham Swift*, Manchester – New York, 2005, p. 76.

less tacitly employs in these novels a pattern of thinking which is rooted in the Judeo-Christian idea of man's expulsion from paradise and his search for salvation. The question asked in *Waterland*, "Which way does salvation lie?", connotes the two visions of salvation present both in popular myth and in theological thinking. Salvation is envisioned either as the recovery of paradise, the restoration of the original blissful existence, or as the admission to heaven as a new realm of being following individual death and the end of the world. In other words, the quest for salvation may involve looking back, i.e. may be an attempt to restore the state of primal perfection, or looking ahead, within the eschatological perspective.⁵

Taken together, *Waterland* and the other two novels reveal a shared pattern. The sense of crisis that Swift's characters experience, on the most general level, stems from their dim awareness of this underlying grand narrative combined with their overwhelming scepticism about it. Faced with the prospect of mortality, they turn to the past. Retrospection appears to be the only strategy of coping mentally with the present predicament, without, however, offering any chance of alleviating it. As Lea observes in connection with *Waterland* (which is true of other novels by Swift as well), "intrinsic to the understanding of an ending is a concomitant contemplation of the point of beginning".⁶ In Swift's fiction, paradise cannot be regained; it can only be nostalgically recollected, and/or critically and ironically re-examined.⁷

3. Facing finality

At the stage at which they tell their stories the protagonists all have come up against mortality and cannot see beyond it; for Tom Crick in *Waterland* and Jack Luxton in *Wish You Were Here* the future is completely void, deprived of any hope of salvation or continuity, in either a secular or religious sense of the word. The novels abound in eschatological references, the most obvious instance being *Last Orders* in which the action revolves around a funereal journey from London to the

⁵ There has been confusion and uncertainty among theologians regarding the distinction between "paradise" and "heaven". In the first centuries the Church believed that Jesus had reopened the earthly paradise, shut since the expulsion of Adam and Eve, hence for some Christian thinkers, e.g. St. Basil, "paradise" and "heaven" were the same place. Others (St. Irenaeus, St. Clement of Alexandria, the Venerable Bede), however, believed that paradise was an intermediate place in which the souls of the blessed waited until the day of universal judgement, before being transported to the kingdom of heaven. Isidore of Seville (*De ordine creaturarum*) distinguished between the paradise of Adam – supposedly located on earth but inaccessible to humanity – and the heavenly paradise, located above our atmosphere. J. Delumeau, op. cit., p. 29–33.

⁶ D. Lea, op. cit., p. 73.

⁷ Explicit references to paradise appear also in another novel by Swift, *Out of this World* (not analysed in the present paper). Cf. Anna's monologue: "But paradise is never where you think. It's always somewhere you once were and never knew at the time, or somewhere you never guessed you might find it". G. Swift, *Out of This World*, London 1988, p. 173. Her daughter Sophie, when asked by her therapist about her earliest memory, replies that it might be sheer fantasy, but hers is "that everything was just fine, of course. That everything in the garden was lovely. Hasn't it got to be that way? So we can believe we come from Paradise? Then it gets fucked later". Ibid., p. 51.

seashore at Margate. The jar with Jack Dodds's ashes, which his three friends and his adopted son have been instructed to scatter over the sea, is a disturbingly material *memento mori*.⁸ Through their encounter with death, the characters experience "an emotionally trying confrontation with the specific convictions that sustain them" and are "forced to test those convictions in the consciousness of their own mortality".⁹ The interior monologues that constitute the novel are individual accounts of the journey interspersed with memories of the dead man. The journey to Margate is effectively Jack's passage to the realm of non-being – as long as the jar containing the ashes is with them, Jack's escorts have an obscure sense of his physical presence. Hence they speak awkwardly of the ashes as Jack. As David Malcolm observes, the characters, in their unsophisticated way, actually "engage in a substantial amount of metaphysical reflection".¹⁰ The final episode of the journey, i.e. the act of dispensing with the ashes, is the ultimate stage in Jack's life but also the end of a vital part of the living characters' biographies in which Jack has been a fixture. Their moving farewell over the ashes exposes the nothingness that Jack has become, and, through its biblical allusion but without the inherent biblical message of hope, stresses the uniformity of the human lot:

Then I throw the last handful and the seagulls come back on a second chance and I hold up the jar, shaking it, like I should chuck it out to sea too, a message in a bottle, Jack Arthur Dodds, save our souls, and the ash that I carried in my hands, which was the Jack who once walked around, is carried away by the wind, is whirled away by the wind till the ash becomes wind and the wind becomes Jack what we're made of.¹¹

In *Last Orders* Jack Dodds's friends accompany him as far as the threshold of dissolution and non-being.

In Swift's latest novel *Wish You Were Here* the protagonist's journey to the burial of his brother (a soldier killed in Iraq) is punctuated with memories of disastrous events not only in his family history but in the public sphere as well. These two levels turn out to be correlated. Jack Luxton is the last representative of a farming family whose history goes back several centuries. He has, however, given up his inheritance, which has recently been destroyed by the mass slaughter

⁸ The ambiguity of the title corresponds to the disturbing conjunction of everyday life and the prospect of mortality – "last orders" may signify both the last opportunity to order drinks before closing time (the journey begins in a local pub) and the last instructions issued by the dying man.

⁹ D. Lea, *op. cit.*, p. 165–166.

¹⁰ D. Malcolm, *Understanding Graham Swift*, Columbia 2003, p. 181. Stef Craps aptly observes that the characters constantly have a sense of being watched by "an invisible external authority" but treats this aspect of the novel as evidence of the author's manipulative presence, albeit in disguise. S. Craps, "All the Same Underneath"? *Alterity and Ethics in Graham Swift's Last Orders*, "Critique" 2003, no. 44.4, p. 409–410. However, I think that, given the oblique religious connotations of the story (not least the intertextual echoes of *The Canterbury Tales*), there are grounds for interpreting this invisible presence as metaphysical rather than authorial. Reading *Last Orders* in the light of theologies of personhood, Jane de Gay persuasively argues that the novel "gives us a glimpse of persons as being held in the sight and mind of God, suggesting that persons are constituted through relationships (however imperfect) not only with other people but also with God". J. de Gay, "What We're Made of": *Personhood in Graham Swift's Last Orders*, "Christianity and Literature" 2013, no. 62.4, p. 570–571.

¹¹ G. Swift, *Last Orders*, London 1996, p. 294–295. Later in the text as *LO*.

of cattle following the outbreaks of BSE, or mad cow disease. The apocalyptic images of burning carcasses in the opening scene of the novel correspond to the incredible pictures of the 9/11 attacks which Jack watches on TV. His opening reflection, "There is no end to madness [...] once it takes hold"¹² functions also as a summary of the story which is to be told, and which is primarily a story of the family's decline and of the larger world going the same way.

4. Paradise recollected

The characters' present despondency may be assessed as such because they cherish intimations of a lost ideal against which they measure their decline. As the protagonist of *Waterland* suggests, the longing for paradise or a golden age is part of the shared mythology of mankind and seems to be part of human nature, so much so that even a sceptical attitude cannot completely erase it. Indeed, to the less sophisticated of Swift's characters their private paradise appears recoverable. Jack Dodds's posthumous journey to Margate is an ironic counterpoint to his dream of returning there after retirement, in order to start a new life, in a new shape. Margate had personal resonance for Jack – it connoted the happy memories of his early married days, as well the incident which alienated him from his wife. The plan to go back to this particular place holds the promise of a recovery of primal bliss by making amends for the wrong done to Amy. However, even without Jack's terminal illness, which put paid to his preparations, the plan was unrealistic from the start, because only by magic (or a miracle – in another discourse) could the past be redeemed. Jack's vision of a redemptive transformation is distinctly down-to-earth: his idea is to give up his oppressive job, for his wife to break the habit of visiting their handicapped daughter, and for both of them to buy a bungalow at Margate and become "new people". But this life, in his friend's understated judgement, is "not exactly the promised land" (LO 15), whereas Jack's wife reflects: "As if we could put the clock back and start off again where it all stopped. Second honeymoon. As if Margate was another word for magic" (LO 229).¹³ In yet another act of detraction from the myth of paradise, on the funeral party's arrival the magic of Margate turns out to amount to the typical tackiness of a seaside holiday resort. The ugliness and emptiness of the out-of-season place corresponds to the bleak mission that Jack's companions accomplish, while what was intended to be return and recovery becomes Jack's annihilation. Other works by Swift may toy with the notion that time is circular, but here, in the words of Gaby Wood, "despite the circling in and out of memory, time is linear".¹⁴

¹² G. Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, London, 2011, p. 1. Later in the text as *WYWH*.

¹³ His wife Amy is the only one who understands Jack's insistence on being taken to Margate, and she refuses to take part in the funeral rites because she understands, as Richard Pedot punningly puts it, that the journey is "a dead end", that one cannot have one's life all over again. R. Pedot, *Dead Lines in Graham Swift's Last Orders*, "Critique" 2002, no. 44.1, p. 68–69.

¹⁴ G. Wood, "Involuntary Memories". *Last Orders by Graham Swift*, "London Review of Books", 8 Feb. 1996, p. 20.

The protagonist of *Wish You Were Here* clings to a very different vision of paradise; however, Jack Dodds and Jack Luxton share an understanding of the place as a combination of spatial and temporal dimensions: a geographical location and one's nostalgic, idealised image of it. In other words, the private paradise cannot be regained because it is situated in the past, but the location which was once endowed with paradisiacal features can be revisited in reality. The references to the family farm in Swift's latest novel connote an idealised image of pastoral England, held especially by those who know little of country life.¹⁵ The soldiers who meet Jack's brother Tom in the army are reminded of this cliché: his voice "wasn't the obvious voice of a corporal, it was the voice of a cowman. It made them think of green English fields, perhaps, out here in the dust and crap" (*WYWH* 207). The Robinson family from London buy the farm for a similar reason: to cultivate their romanticised idea of a "country place": "... now they had this retreat, this place of green safety" (*WYWH* 319), "their 'very own little piece of England'" (*WYWH* 327). Even though experience of genuine country life precludes such naive notions, Jack Luxton nevertheless relates his present futile existence to the vague childish memories of a harmonious co-existence between man and nature, and the meaningful, life-supporting daily work. The protagonist's attachment to the farm stemmed also from the sense of being the rightful and natural successor to generations of his relatives who had tended the same piece of land (*WYWH* 22).

The journey described in the novel is effectively, as in *Last Orders*, a belated visit to a lost paradise. Jack's mission is to bury his brother. Not knowing Tom's wishes, Jack assumes he would have wanted to return to the place from which he once felt expelled. He orders an ordinary oak coffin and refuses to have it wrapped in a Union Jack, acting on the belief that in Tom's case "repatriation" specifically means a return to his native village. Jack's intuition is correct – the narrative gives an insight into the dying soldier's mind and shows him experiencing a moment of peace when mentally he is back on the still unspoilt farm (*WYWH* 209).

Far more sophisticated and more articulate than Jack Luxton, the first-person narrator of *Waterland* quite explicitly evokes the Christian metanarrative of mankind's history but at the same time utterly dismisses the possibility of regaining the paradisaical state. The protagonist is a historian, intent on inscribing his own life in large-scale processes. His personal crisis, his sense of finality and loss of meaning in life are matched by his students' fears of the end of the world. Telling stories is the imperfect solution Tom Crick resorts to in order to alleviate his own and his students' anxieties, but this solution is also an expression of his epistemological crisis. No longer certain if history has any direction, whether it moves forward or perhaps in circles, Crick exposes the futility of man's struggle to return to "that time [...] before things went wrong" (*W* 118). *Waterland* "is driven by the search for definable beginnings,"¹⁶ but both the existence of a primal state of perfection, whether it is envisaged as paradise, a golden age or "some other green Elysium" (*W* 118), as well as the possibility of finding it by going back or going

¹⁵ I have analysed echoes of the rural tradition in this novel in B. Kučala, *The Demise of Rural Life in Graham Swift's Wish You Were Here*, "American and British Studies Annual" 2012, vol. 5, p. 49–55.

¹⁶ D. Lea, op. cit., p. 79.

forward, are subject to questioning. Nearly all the action is set in the Fens, and this setting is depicted in the novel as a major formative factor in the narrator's life and a model for his thinking about history.¹⁷ The Fens are the place where his own life originated, but its portrayal in Tom's narrative associates it also with the earth during the Creation. The Fens are dominated, shaped and reshaped by the rival elements of land and water, as if the two have not yet been separated. During his childhood, the protagonist's perception of the place effortlessly combined the biblical account of creation with fairy tales:

... we lived in a fairy-tale place. [...] Up above, the sky swarmed with stars which seemed to multiply as we looked at them. And as we lay, Dad said: "Do you know what the stars are? They are the silver dust of God's blessing. They are little broken-off bits of heaven. God cast them down to fall on us. But when he saw how wicked we were, he changed his mind and ordered the stars to stop" (W 1).¹⁸

The place is represented as being in a state of *primaeva* flux, still watched by the Creator. The fairy-tale mode co-exists with a version of the paradise story in Crick's recollection of his relationship with his future wife. Addressing the absent Mary, the narrator remembers them as incarnations of Adam and Eve in a land of magic and miracles, unashamedly enjoying their sexuality with the approval of their Creator: "Do you remember how we looked up at the sky, into blue emptiness, and how out of the sky (because I told you: my homespun religiosity for your Catholic sophistication) God looked down on us: how He'd lifted off the roof of our makeshift home of love, and we didn't mind?" (W 101). Mary's sexual curiosity and Tom Crick's sharing of his dangerous knowledge of his family's history set off a chain of consequences, including the abortion of Mary's child, the murder of Tom Crick's friend and the suicidal death of the protagonist's brother.

Tom and Mary are reunited in their adult life and together consent to the prospect of a shared bleak and humdrum succession of days, devoid of curiosity, hope or faith – which is how their married life appears. Although both seem to have accepted the futility of this life, Mary gradually loses her capacity for realism, and, true to her name, undertakes a mission to bear the saviour of the world. In her insanity, Mary believes not only in the possibility of undoing the wrong she once did and so achieving personal redemption, but also in her ability to save the world

¹⁷ David Malcolm regards the Fens as a "composite metaphor for emotional and psychological states and for the existential conditions that give rise to them". In his interpretation, they become "a metaphor for the emptiness of human life, the inadequacy of human knowledge, and the oppressive absurdity of history". D. Malcolm, *op. cit.*, p. 97–98. Speaking about his novel twenty-five years after its publication, Swift contended that choosing the Fens for the setting was a key moment in the genesis of *Waterland*: "It seems to me now that the metaphorical dimension is virtually limitless. You can make it work in all kinds of human dilemmas, in all kinds of historical situations, including those the world is in right now". In S. Craps, *An Interview with Graham Swift*, "Contemporary Literature" 2009, no. 50.4, p. 641.

¹⁸ Tamás Bényei argues that: "The world of the suspended blessing is an essentially eschatological one, a world that is waiting for the end, measuring itself and its time against its imminent end. Crick's narrative is an eschatological story of a wasteland that has lost its original fertility". T. Bényei, *The Novels of Graham Swift: Family Photos* [in:] *Contemporary British Fiction*, eds. R.J. Lane, R. Mengham, P. Tew, Cambridge 2003, p. 51.

through her action. Her theft of a baby from a supermarket is clearly motivated by her awakened religiosity, but it is striking that Crick, although ironically, resorts to the same narrative pattern in recounting the experience. He describes his wife nursing the stolen child as a “bizarre Nativity” and refers to himself as a teacher-turned shepherd arriving to welcome the son of God.¹⁹ Within the framework of the grand Christian narrative, Mary’s action represents an attempt to regain the paradise from which she and Tom were once expelled.

5. Paradise lost

All the three novels centre around the main characters’ futile wish to go back to the idealised place of their early years. The protagonist of *Last Orders* dies too soon to re-possess his private paradise but at least has been spared the frustration of having his dreams contrasted with reality. In *Wish You Were* the protagonist makes the journey, but is aware that not only entrance to the family farm is now forbidden to him, but that the place itself has completely changed its identity. The story is situated in a fallen world, with memories of disastrous events flashing through the character’s mind on the single day on which the action is set. Even though Jack Luxton has renounced the family farm and chosen a different mode of life, he still feels that the farm was his true home, one that is now irrevocably lost. In the words of James Grainger, the protagonist’s memories are “pierced by images of loss” and he is “stricken by constant feelings of dislocation”.²⁰ Re-possession of this personal paradise is impossible because it has become ruined from the inside by death, disease and family disagreement²¹ and simultaneously damaged by pressures from the violent world outside, which is seemingly bent on self-destruction.²²

In *Waterland*, the narrator’s account leaves no doubt that Mary’s desire to return to the state of primal innocence, before she and Tom were expelled from the paradise of their youth, stems from her madness and desperation rather than any divine intervention. The stolen child is duly returned to its mother, and the episode of the supposed saviour becomes no more than a short-lived local sensation. However, Mary’s action is not without precedent in the story, and both instances serve as illustrations of the human need to redeem the original sin. Crick’s grandfather, in response to the calamity of the Great War, conceived by his daughter a child

¹⁹ Crick’s first reaction to the sight is the spontaneous exclamation “Christ almighty – !” (W 229).

²⁰ J. Grainger, *Wish You Were Here* by Graham Swift. Review, “The Toronto Star”, 31 December 2011, http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2011/12/31/review_wish_you_were_here_by_graham_swift.html (access: 29.12.2014).

²¹ Benjamin Markovits draws attention to thematic and formal similarities between *Wish You Were Here* and *Last Orders*. In both novels, the action revolves around funeral arrangements. Both narratives include the betrayal of father by son, which involves the rejection of the father’s profession, and, in the case of *Wish You Were Here*, also the rejection of the father’s land. B. Markovits, *Wish You Were Here* by Graham Swift. Review, „The Observer”, 12 June 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/12/graham-swift-wish-you-were> (access: 29.12.2014).

²² Jack thinks: “Everything is mad now, everything is off its hinges” (WYWH 300).

whom he endowed with a mission to save the world. The scheme resulted *from* madness, as in the case of Mary, but also resulted *in* madness – Dick the supposed saviour turned out to be a malformed, retarded creature. The madness which fuels dreams of salvation in this book invalidates them from the start and exposes such expectations as pitiable and possibly even dangerous fantasies. As Malcolm points out, Crick's reflections amount to questioning the whole idea of progress: "All our beliefs in progress, purpose, and utopia are dubious; they are narratives – stories – to fend off the nothingness, uncertainty, and malignity of things".²³ In the last scene in *Waterland*, Dick "the saviour of the world" removes himself by jumping into the river. With the novel's supposition of the cyclicity of history, the character's disappearance in the ever-circulating waters may signify both the futility of dreams to redeem mankind's original sin and return to paradise, and the persistence of this idea.

Delumeau claims that the origins of European modernity were characterised by "a keen sense of the impossibility of returning to the golden age or the earthly paradise (these two unreal places of the past were often identified in people's minds)".²⁴ Swift's protagonists' failed search for meaning and purpose, although set in a secular world, is consistently couched in semi-religious language, albeit this may not be immediately noticeable in particular works – the post-Christian discourse has been quite openly employed in *Waterland*, but only intimated in the other stories. However, when analysed jointly, Swift's novels reveal much more than a pattern of individual failures. The myth of paradise is invoked to convey a sense of irredeemable loss which affects all men and women living after the fall. His characters live in a purposeless world in which the future offers no prospect of salvation while the idea of paradise has been relegated to the realm of myth and fairy tale.

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²³ D. Malcolm, op. cit., p. 106.

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