

GRAHAM SWIFT'S LAST ORDERS – OF VARIOUS JOURNEYS

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Abstract

The title of the paper is given by the title of Graham Swift's novel, followed by a comment pinpointing the most prominent aspect in it, which is analyzed from the perspective of cultural studies. We deal with the manifold material or symbolical journeys accomplished or attempted by Swift's characters. Considerations on stability and nomadic tendencies try to explain behavior attributing certain attitudes to characters in connection with the generation they are part of. The space of the car plays an important part in the definition of individual identity, and we try to observe which drives of one's personality it can fulfill. Starting from the physical expedition endeavored by Jack's friends, the paper touches upon the subtle ones (of, for instance, life towards death), to the purpose of seeing how they contribute to the construction of identity for the fictional characters involved, and, why not, for the real people and their own travels of all kinds, which they mirror.

Keywords: journey, identity, stability

Starting point – death

In *Last Orders*, the main motif, of the journey, is the framework for a discussion on identity. Since travel is occasioned by the decease of a character, death becomes a second key factor in this frame. As death triggers the writing of the story, we must examine its influence on identity.

Death is ambivalently a provider and a dispeller of communality. Death as a phenomenon is paradoxical, and so is the way people relate to it. Probably the most powerful reminder of one's solitude in the world, it brings people together, because, although everyone dies alone, all people are ultimately subject to the same fate. This makes death their one definite point in common. The paradox goes further, as death is the only known, and at the same time unknown event. It is a biological certainty, but as an experience it remains a mystery. The fear triggered by this aspect requires exorcism, which happens, again, through communality. In a world in which all the motivations to establish ties with the others become questionable, death offers the ultimate one.

This phenomenon effaces identity, but also constructs it. First, it creates the identity of the undertaker (Vic, as previously discussed). Then, it allows multiple identity construction in its theatrical nature. The dead person has a personal show, in two senses. Literally, the remains are displayed in a coffin, in the centre of the gathering. Figuratively, the departed dominates a ceremony, gaining a type of visibility that (s)he may not have had in life. Sometimes (s)he also receives a description, in speeches made by the acquaintances and the priest, which are a popularization of the person (s)he once was. This identity

creation is conditioned by the end of existence. The creation of Jack Dodds as a character, as well as the others', is occasioned by his death. On the one hand, the grandeur of funerals generally depends on how high the social rank of the deceased was. On the other hand, since all mankind is bound to reiterate the same experience, death is also equalitarian and democratic (its complex ambivalence being manifest in this aspect): "But the dead are the dead, I've watched them, they're equal. [...] It's what makes all men equal forever and always." (Swift 1997 143) Other identities are created as well. The participants in the funeral build their social selves as: grievers for the loss, loving (Ray), self-centered (Vince, Lenny), strong (Vic, Amy), weak, careless, practical-minded (Bernie) etc. In *Last Orders*, this construction is made through the words of the main narrators – Ray, Vince and Vic – in a memento that covers lifetimes.

The funeral "show" is cathartic, to the purpose of "abreaction" – defined as "the discharge of emotion attaching to a previously repressed experience" (Rycroft 1972 1). This emotion is the above-mentioned fear. Abreaction is also a reassertion of life, a rejoicing in survival – a *status quo* made official in the act of commemoration. Funerals are evidence of life being a stage, because, even at the end of their existence, people find no other way to acknowledge the change, except by putting on yet another show. When faced with the exit from the stage of life, they do not know how to quit acting, which they have been learning since birth. Acting earned them a place, an identity of their own, which they still cling to. Pushing death to the "front" region, or stage (Goffman 1969 32), to make it a spectacle becomes a performance *for* life as well, in the midst of its very subversion.

The confusion and dread associated with death transform people into submissive beings, in need to be told what to do. This perspective presents the situation of a funeral as a power arena that creates identity within its play of positions: "When those curtains come across and the music plays nobody knows when to turn round and go. There's no one to say 'Show's over.'" (Swift 1997 79). The figure of the undertaker as master of the ceremony comes to the fore in these cases, (as mentioned by Goffman): "When people don't know what to do they have to be told."

Types of journeys

The journey to Margate forces a reunion of the characters, who in this way clash, rehash issues, diverge, but also achieve a form of togetherness. Jack's friends unfold in their minds bits and pieces of their separate and/or common histories, which they recount, creating their identities. The purpose of this travel is therefore not only the execution of a last wish, (of "last orders"), but also identity construction. The stream-of-consciousness of their memories is sometimes triggered by geographical sites encountered on the way, which function as *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1984). Moreover, the journey is a quest for sense, rather than the fulfillment of a duty.

The itinerary is meandered, they are "abjuring the straight line of history" (Lea 2005 1), along the sites of Rochester, Chatham, Wick's farm, and Canterbury. As Lea notices, the winding route suggests a few things. It is the deferral of acknowledgement of concrete and figurative endings (such as death, crisis of faith, or absence) (2). At the same time, the meanders symbolize an engagement with traumatic experience through convoluted memories (2). Curves point to digressions, which further suggest the (ab)use of fixities.

We have said that a journey can help one acquire identity. It is, for instance, the case of the Australian Andy, Susie's suitor, who comes to England to look for his roots. Susie's evolution into a grown woman is connected with accompanying Andy. A journey can change statuses and *status quos*. Susie would have become a teacher, had she not decided to follow Andy; thus, her career was sacrificed. The other sacrifice is her relationship with her father, Ray. When Susie leaves, he feels abandoned by everyone: his wife, his friend Jack, who has just died, and his daughter. Journeys of all kinds cause various changes, and new turns in people's lives.

While the young refuse fiercely to be tied to a place, the elderly do not, but become subversive of their situations through comments and actions. More than once, Ray says that the pub frequented by the locals "aint never gone nowhere" (Swift 1997 6), despite being called The Coach and Horses. This remark reveals the regret of a whole generation, for which the pub is an iconic place: fixity hiding a secret longing for movement. Ray has not traveled outside Bermondsey to any significant distance for more than fifteen years. He is not really worried about his daughter going to Australia, but envious of her, because she gets to travel. Ray has a camper that he occasionally uses, at some point even for fourteen weeks in a row, to transport Amy to visit her institutionalized daughter. This helps the initiation of an affair between them, which can be perceived as a deviation from the fixity of a home, and from convention (since they are both married). To Ray, the affair and the trips mean overcoming the feeling of abandonment, as well as that of being less of a man than Jack. The only other surrogate trips that Ray can find are the horse racetracks in his mind:

"When I can't go to sleep I tick off in my head all the racetracks I've been to, in alphabetical order, and I see the map of England with the roads criss-crossing. AscotBrightonCheltenham-DoncasterEpsom." (112)

Upon retirement, Jack wishes to sell his place and go live by the sea, at Margate. Had he been in the Navy, Vic Tucker would have voyaged at sea. As a professional fist fighter, Lenny Tate got to travel, whereas as a vegetable vendor he does not. To sum up, the seniors have a nostalgia for traveling and movement, perhaps even for freedom from a daily role with which they identify.

The insertion of the carnivalesque

The men going to Margate do not take the shortest route, and make a lot of detours and stopovers. Pursuing a winding road hints at their rejection of the mainstream. This rejection is also visible in the use of carnivalesque or lay elements in the story. The juxtaposition of the serious and the frivolous, of "the sacred and the profane" (Lea 2005 166), serves to indicate two main aspects. One is the need for meaning and order. Guiding lines or master narratives (faith included) are absent or distrusted. There is lack of "an appropriate and agreed register" (167) for conduct, of an etiquette to regulate behavior in specific situations. The other aspect is a subversive questioning of protocols (of Bourdieu's *habitus*) (Bourdieu 1977) as *sine qua non* conditions for the authenticity of experience. Hence, indirectly, there is an implied apology of the validity of plural visions upon a given issue. Characters defend perspectives built upon the deconstruction of propriety, decorum,

and norm. They believe that, through these perspectives, one can, contrary to expectations, gain access to the truth. Consequently, both “demystification” (Lea 2005 169) and “resignification” (or “symbolic realignment”) occur. These two processes express the use and abuse of perspectives and positions.

The subversion of institutionalized forms of mourning is most blatantly manifest in the characters’ displacement of the sites of grieving. Instead of the usual ones, of the church and the cemetery, they use a pub – Bernie’s Coach and Horses. Nevertheless, its appearance is that of a church (Swift 1997 1). Vince and Lenny fight at Wick’s farm over the jar with Jack’s remains, as they cannot agree whether some of the ashes should be scattered there. Vince carries the ashes in a coffee jar, and the jar in a *Rochester Food Fayre* bag (145). The men include the religious landmark of Canterbury in their itinerary, but for sightseeing reasons. These carnivalesque details construct mourning in a manner that seems perhaps outrageous, or even blasphemous. However, its informality suggests more intimacy and sincerity of feeling than the rigid rituals imposed by convention. It is both a construction and a deconstruction of mourning, a use and abuse of it. This practice reunites the men in a being-for communality that is contrary to atomistic tendencies inspired by the Thatcherite eighties.

Part of the carnivalesque, a resignification in itself, as well as one of the effects of lack of order, is the disempowerment of masculinity, which suffers a fall from grace. Men seem less “manly” – in the sense of the conveyed stereotypes of masculinity. They are vulnerable and display an unusual disposition towards minute analysis. Emma Parker goes as far as claiming that “last orders have metaphorically been called for masculinity” (Emma Parker qtd. in Lea 2005 182), as the issue is extended to other novels by Swift as well. The central character, Jack Dodds, seems to be incapable of providing for Vince and June, as he borrows money from his son. Also, he does not have the job he has wished for. The majority of Swift’s narrators, which are men, display the same insufficiency. As Lea gathers, this revisitation of masculinity is primarily a consequence of the general somber downfall of all master narratives. Therefore, death in the novel is not only literal, but also a symbolical one of masculinity, dogmatic orthodoxy, and faith. Nonetheless, the demise of masculinity may also be read as a consequence of the powerful female figure of the British Prime Minister of the eighties, as Malcolm (2003) and other critics have duly suggested.

Gifts

The issue of gifts appears in Jack’s relationship with his adoptive son, Vince. Dodds expects his son to give him money, in compensation for having been adopted, and for his refusal to carry on with the family tradition of becoming a butcher. Vince is for his father a gift literally fallen from the sky, as the baby cot was thrown out of the bombed house of the Pritchetts into the Dodds’, as a result of a bomb blast. This was an unplanned “journey”. The infant was Jack’s homecoming present upon returning from war, as well as a compensation for the misfortune of having a retarded daughter, June.

Jack and Vince are supposed to be each other’s gifts. This situation of (mutual) indebtedness (Mauss 1993) is too strenuous. Hence, Jack fails to be a good father, putting pressure on Vince, neglecting his wishes, and exploiting him. Vince fails to be a good son, because he refuses his family duties and joins the army instead. However, Vince’s refusal

has its roots as far back as his childhood, when he felt rejected by the Dodds, who preferred and favored another child – Lenny and Joan's little Sally. During trips for picnics at the seaside, in order to offer Sally the comfort of stretching her legs in the van, Vince was made to ride in the back, where the smell of meat made him nauseous. This injustice was imprinted in his memory as traumatic. It made Vince spiteful towards both his father and Sally, whom he otherwise could have loved. Further complications triggered by his spite ensued. Vince got Sally pregnant, only to leave her afterwards, destroying her life, and attracting Lenny's hatred upon himself. Failures to honor gifts, (starting with Jack's neglect of his real daughter), cause interconnected misfortunes that impact the characters' destinies.

Cars

Vince's occupation brings forth the symbolical space of the car, and its connections with identity construction. His rejection of fixities is more poignant, as he is part of the young generation, of the 1960s, when individualism and anarchic tendencies were starting to shape social attitudes visibly. Vince's unwillingness to be a butcher, in conjunction with a sense of rootlessness and *apodemia* (Liiceanu 1999 40), and a need for independence bring him to the choice of his profession, which involves cars. The space of the car connects identity with themes like journeying and refusal to be fixed in one place/position.

The car helps Vince build the image of a macho: "cruising through town on a hot day with your shades on and your arm dangling out the window and a ciggy [watching] some skirt" (Swift 1997 71). However, Swift's characters are bound to go far beyond such clichés. The car can be an *ersatz* for an impossible, but sought-for emotional bond. In this respect, it is a fetish:

"It's a mate. It won't ask no questions, it won't tell no lies. It's somewhere you can be and be who you are. If you ain't got no place to call your own, you're ok in a motor" (73).

The "motor" represents "a comfort and companion and an asset" (71).

When Vince says "I ain't just a car dealer, I'm a car tailor", the customized car reflects a modern man that is easily adaptable to change. Motion is the way of the world, and versatility in that sense is the key to survival: "It's mobility, it's being mobile" (105). Vince tells Mandy that he keeps the pace with change, thus being in harmony with his times: "I'm in the right trade, the travel trade. So don't tell me I ain't with it".

The car represents, via mobility, "a new kind of subjectivity" (Baudrillard 1999 67), which appears to be "bounded by no circumference", in opposition to the "subjectivity of the domestic world", which is "strictly circumscribed". Compatibility with cars may suggest unstable relations to the others, rejection of dwelling, and setting a high valuation on "individual freedom" (John Lucas in Thacker 2003 63) and "change". This attitude can be extended to the characters' approach to roles, to the fact that they play ambivalent and sometimes contradictory ones. The car as a moving space symbolizes freedom, and indirectly mirrors the attitude of use and abuse of positions. That is why Vince's identification with it is complete: "It's the combination of man and motor, it's the intercombustion. A motor ain't nothing without a man [...] and sometimes a man ain't

nothing without a motor” (Swift 1997 71) This identification, or “motorvation”, was also reflected in the way he would lie down, as a child, in the back of the meat van, listening to the engine, and pretending to be one with it.

Car movement reflects ambivalence in roles. Vince is and at the same time is not Jack’s son (as he is adopted). He is Mandy’s lover, but also brother, since Jack brought her in the family, which is a symbolical “adoption”. Moreover, Vince is like a father to the girl in some ways, as he is her elder by quite a few years: Mandy is “*supposed to be the sister I ain’t got*” (103). They are “somehow, underneath it all like brother and sister, worse, father and daughter”, (157) “so it was like *committing incest*”. Mandy is “Vince’s floozy, Vince’s wife, sister, daughter, mother, his whole family”. The same ambivalence of roles is characteristic of Mandy. It is manifest not only in her relation with Vince, but also outside it. She was both a helpless “orphan” and a devilish, naughty daughter, giving her mother and stepfather “hell”. According to Mandy, her behavior was only a defense mechanism for what they did to her. Mandy was both a victim and an oppressor, innocent and mean: “I wanted to be Mandy Black, and I wanted to be wicked [...] I gave Mum and Neville hell, which was only what they gave me” (155).

After the First World War, the car could be considered a class identity marker. It offered representatives of the middle class the opportunity of taking a vacation, usually a trip to the seaside (O’Connell qtd. in Thacker 2003 172). It also favored commoditization (173). Moreover, it brought about the realization of the “narrowness of a unitary self” (Thacker 2003 174), motivating people to broaden their cultural horizons by visiting other places. It allows the characters going to Margate to “glimpse into a past world” (175), through time. They look back on both global history, (for instance, they think about victims of war upon visiting the Chatham memorial), and personal history. The car reminds one that all sites are constructs, “emphasizing how all space, as Lefebvre argues, is the product of human activity” (180). All the aspects above widen people’s awareness and experience, and help them gain independence, making their relation with space fluid.

It has also been said that the car enables a “narcissistic projection onto a single phallic object [...] or a single objectified phallic function (speed)” (Baudrillard 1999 68). Hence, the car brings about “androgyny” (Thacker 2003 183), unsettling “established categories of thought”. For this reason, Thacker considers the car a “heterotopia” – a subversive space. He points here to gender melting with the help of the car. Mandy becomes manly, functioning as a help or even guide for Vince. Vince sees her as, among other things, a mother, who takes control, looking after him.

Journeying into genealogy

Another type of metaphorical journey is into the past, in one’s mind. One aspect of it is the interest in genealogy. Characters try to compensate for loss of continuity by looking for their ancestors (Lea 2005 164), as in *Waterland*. They seek for meaning in an analysis of their personality as their parents’ children, based on biological resemblance or role-modeling. This endeavor is countered by the stress on life’s “accidents of birth” (Swift 1997 97) (Vince’s identity and June’s retard). The ultimate realization is that accidents, rather than any genealogical continuity, have brought them where they are. This idea is nevertheless sabotaged by the very obstinacy of the search.

Vince analyses his past, in order to understand who he is, just like Mandy. Andy investigates his roots upon coming to England. Ray is haunted by his father's words, that his puny build made him fit for bookishness, but incapacitated him to be a real man. Jack becomes a butcher like his father, praises the occupation as dignifying and manly, but at the same time resents it, as his hidden wish was to wear a different robe – that of a doctor. Vic remembers how his father told him that, before dismissing the job of an undertaker for “foolish notions like running away to sea, mermaids and monsters” (126), he should first have a look at what it presupposes. Vic apparently sees the logic in choosing this occupation, but is also ironic towards the business when he remarks that one cannot go bankrupt in it (78). Thus, we ultimately do not know what his real opinion on his job is. The fact remains that his father's influence is decisive for what Vic becomes. The essence of the symbolic journey into genealogical ties is that they function as “spaces” of partial sense making, by (ab)use.

Duty as saving mode

All men fulfill a duty by setting off to Margate. Lenny says that “It's a question of duty” (132), but that “Doing your duty in the ordinary course of life is another thing, it's harder”. His conclusion is that “There shouldn't ever be no running off, deserting”. Amy, Jack's wife, performs habitual duty trips of her own, visiting her handicapped daughter in hospital every Monday and Thursday. Lenny refers to Amy's activity as a “question of paying your dues”, although Amy knows it makes no difference to her child whether she goes there or not. The futility of this drill is expressed by two characters: Lenny, as he says they will be “none the wiser”, and Jack, in whose opinion it was a “fool's errand” (15). Amy does not accompany the men to take the urn to Margate, as she goes to visit June instead, a gesture for which she is judged by the others (11). The fulfillment of a duty in situations when the task seems futile has been commented as “ventriloquised” faith (Lea 2005 171). Lea sees it as a “supplanting” (169) narrative that replaces the ones that have been dismantled. It is a mechanical surrogate, a pantomimic construction manifested in a “compulsion to repeat” (170). It is a habit needed to integrate reality by recourse to a symbolic fixation, which has a compensatory value. Such a duty is a ritual that circumscribes one's existence, a sort of a third space of use and abuse of a role. In it, the character proves, in an ambivalent stance, to be both an agent of a “self-willed act” (171), and a stringed puppet acting on compulsion. This performance is both a manifestation of freedom and one of absence of it.

Using and abusing roles

We may consider that Amy is performing contradictory roles. She is both doing her duty, and avoiding it; loving, and careless; extremely sensitive, and excessively cold. She (ab)uses her roles of a good wife and a good mother. The narrator does not take any stand in explaining her choices, which contributes to ambivalence as far as how Amy is. As a wife, she appears as devoted and loving. She acquiesced to Jack's desire that they move to Margate and become “new people” (Swift 1997 15), although it was not what she wanted. She also saw that his last wish should be fulfilled. On the other hand, she goes to June instead of accompanying Jack's friends to scatter the ashes. Moreover, in the past, she

accepted an affair with Ray. As a mother, she proves loyal to June, and she saves Vince by adopting him. She is nevertheless unfair to both, by directing her affections to Sally, to whom she is a surrogate mother, causing Vince pain and trauma. Her attitudes in both positions are questionable, interpretable as both positive and negative.

Other characters play the same game in their positions. Jack does that as a father. As a man, he is good-looking, the embodiment of a cliché, preferred by women, the kind that is fit for the army and who has a “serious”, “manly” job (26). On the other hand, however, small Ray gets involved with Jack’s wife, and gets praised as sexually endowed by prostitutes on the front (92). He also functions as Jack’s protector in the war in Egypt. Jack stands in his shadow, calling him “Lucky” (87), with the firm belief that Ray is a luck-charm that can prevent him from getting killed.

These comments reveal Ray’s ambivalence towards Amy, women in general, and his profession. In relation to Jack, he is a good friend. He gambles to help him pay his debt, (while Jack is helpless on his deathbed), and takes care of Amy after her husband has passed away. Ray is also Jack’s enemy and traitor, a rival in fancying his wife, and in having a moment’s hesitation whether to give Amy the money that he wins betting on horses, or keep it. In relation to his daughter, Ray is trying to keep her close to him, by preventing her from leaving with Andy. Restricting her liberty may be perceived as both an attempt to protect her and a selfish desire.

Vince is both an ungrateful son, by refusing to be a butcher, and a good one, who gives his father money and performs his last duty. He is a womanizer, ogling other women than Mandy, (like Sally, or Bernie’s waitress Brenda/Glenda) (6), but he also functions successfully in what turns out to be a stable relationship with Mandy. He is both a lucky child, for having been adopted, and a foundling. He ends up being an orphan twice, since he gets symbolically abandoned by his surrogate mother Amy, for Sally. He is capable of love: he provides for Mandy and his daughter Kath, as the head of the family. He is also a villain, as he shamelessly and abusively treats his own daughter like a prostitute, as an incentive for clients at the car shop, in order to sell his products. Vince does not mind when one of his prospective customers at the car showroom, the Arab Hussein, makes advances to Kath.

Although Vic Tucker seems the most dignified of all characters, he has an adventurous side (he would have liked to be the captain of a ship). Bernie is apparently a benign figure in the story, a middle-aged, uninteresting man, perhaps a little inclined towards drinking, judging by his appearance. Nevertheless, he becomes a priestly figure. Lenny seems insensitive and sarcastic in his comments on the others, but he is in a way more sensitive and intuitive than all of them, as he is capable of pinpointing their situations with clinical precision.

Conclusions

We have analyzed in *Last Orders* the richness of the concept of journey and its images. Among these, the symbolic one of life, as well as the last one, in death, are of particular prominence. Journeys are literal – in the minivan, in a car for leisure, to the hospital etc., or symbolical – such as living, or memory trips into genealogy and the past. They are interconnected with themes and recurrent motifs – those of: gifts, the narratives people live by (Christianity, masculinity), duty. All these reveal the way in which characters embody roles that they use and abuse.

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