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“Tremulations on the ether”: The sublime and beauty in Graham Swift's humanist art

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This paper aims at investigating the interplay of the sublime and beauty in Graham Swift's attempts at communicating humanly and vividly with readers about human experience. In the author's works, both the sublime and beauty convey a sense of order and destabilisation. Both can be construed as enlightening transitions. Sublime patterns of human transgression trigger a quasi-divine sublime revenge and result in the unveiling of a new agnostic order. However, this new sublime-induced order is in turn irremediably damaged by the mutual erosion of art and reality created by sublime terrorism. As far as beauty is concerned, if characters do discover their *integritas*, the total fulfilment of their possibilities linking them to the universe and hence to the natural order at large, if *erôs* and *philia* have them progress towards greater truth, the novelist's aesthetic conceptions prove to be far from stable. Indeed, Graham Swift's sense of beauty incorporates contemporary anti-aesthetics, the elaboration of a beautiful realism as well as a critical distancing on beauty.

Key words: Graham Swift, contemporary British literature, beauty, sublime, aesthetics.

The novel is the one bright book of life. Books are not life. They are only tremulations on the ether. But the novel as a tremulation can make the whole man alive tremble. (Lawrence, 1936: 535).

INTRODUCTION

This work has the particularity of dealing with the crucial intertwining of the sublime and the beautiful in Graham Swift's fiction. Actually, in this author's works, the sublime implies the presence of beauty and *vice versa* though, in the Burkean tradition (Burke, 1909-1914), the two concepts should be opposed, one appearing unconnected with human temporality, the other reverberating the image of an ordered world or the plenitude of a motionless paradise (Girons, 1993: 509); one being characterised by unalterable newness whereas the other is ephemeral (Girons, 1993: 509). This original association of the two aesthetic dimensions enables Swiftian works to convey human experience as vividly as Lawrencian tremulations on the ether.

As Girons underlines, the sublime usually leads the reader to an unstable and dangerous world where identity always has to be re-conquered. Now, most Swiftian

narratives are at least partly situated in war contexts leaving “a world in which holes might open, surfaces prove unsolid” (Swift, 1980: 96) behind them. Identity, never self-evident, is rather a matter of chance as it reveals the narrator's all too unexpected loss of landmarks at the end of “The Son” (Swift, 1982: 61), the orphaned Gabor's relationships with his adoptive family in “Gabor” (Swift, 1982) or the disturbing and confusing proliferation of Bill's fathers in *Ever After* (Swift, 1992).

The sublime transition or translation - if we consider the references to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in “Waves” (Swift, 2009: 230) or in *Tomorrow* (Swift, 2007: 142) - far from involving tastes, has to do with what constitutes the core of the Swiftian narratives: the elevation and edification caused by momentary destabilisation, unease and distress. Appealing to the deepest emotions in human nature, the sublime enables

characters to evolve from deeply rooted convictions or illusions about reality. Graham Swift follows Jean Bessière's interpretation of the sublime (Bessière, 2007). By going beyond the awe normally characterising the sublime, by presenting Jean-François Lyotard's unrepresentable (Lyotard, 1991: 119) - what has never yet been constituted as presence, such as Sophie's reflection on the white blinding light of the explosion in *Out of this World* (Swift, 1988: 109) or the complex feelings surrounding the apparition in *Wish You Were Here* (Swift, 2011: 338-346)-, the author seems to negate the existence of limits to make humans include these very limits within the scope of their faculties. If we agree with Bessière (Bessière, 2007) that when an author uses the sublime, he puts his ability to represent to the test, Graham Swift seems to question the very power of art and of the artist.

The Swiftian sublime, mainly consisting in an art of passages, transitions, transgressions, vertigos, oblique intrusions of the unconscious, could be compared to the alchemy alluded to in "Chemistry" (Swift, 1982: 127) as it invariably purifies characters' and readers' relationships to the world. Similarly, adding his own contribution to the contemporary rewriting of the famous romantic theme, the author reinforces his refusal of artistic norms and thus purifies his aesthetics.

A good reason to focus on beauty, aside from the fact that it is a sort of stabilised equivalent of the sublime, is that one of the Koine Greek adjectives from which the English word "beautiful" was derived was "horaios" (coming from "hora" (hour) and literally meaning "of one's hour"), a word not unreminiscent of the etymological sense of the word "novel" designating a new genre and a new aesthetics. If Graham Swift declared for *The Guardian* (2011) that he does not believe a novel could rigorously be contemporary, for him, beauty can come from the genre's adequacy to adopt a certain perspective on long-term evolutions in society and in private life as well as to treat more or less topical issues (IRA or Islamist attacks in *Out of this World* or *Wish You Were Here*):

[novels]’re there to take the long view to show change and evolution, human behaviour worked on by time. But none of this means that novels, which can never be strictly of now, cannot have their own kind of newness. [...] They can have immediacy.

Owing to the straightforwardness, simplicity and historical dimension of streams of consciousness, more often than not linking the individual to a larger community, the beauty involved in Graham Swift's style, like Saul Ostrow's concept, becomes a node in a complex network "connecting our concepts of aesthetic judgement to truth, purity, art, the political" (Ostrow, 2013: 15).

The beauty to be found in Graham Swift's fiction also has to do with the author's use of heterogeneous

transartistic materials enhancing it. The work is pervaded with references to popular or operatic songs such as *Blue Bayou* in *Last Orders* (Swift, 1996: 12), Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here* in *Wish You Were Here* (Swift, 2011: title), or Mozart's aria "Dove sono I bei momenti" in *Ever After* (Swift, 1992: 18-19) where female ballet dancers have a role (Swift, 1992: 19). In *The Light of Day*, one may be impressed by the combined use of Caravaggio's *chiaroscuro* technique and of the film *Dressed to Kill* (Swift, 2006).

By resorting to such a transartistic inspiration, Graham Swift's idiosyncratic art - like Hans Georg Gadamer's philosophy - seems to distance itself from abstract literary appreciations and transcendent justification to taste (Gadamer, 1992: 12). Moreover, as he features a certain number of artist figures (Mrs. Singleton from "Learning to Swim" in the eponymous collection of short stories, the would-be painter in "The Tunnel", photographers in *Out of this World* and *The Light of Day*, lyrical artists in *Ever After*, the art specialist in *Tomorrow*), the author leads the reader to consider the aesthetic activity as belonging intrinsically to the normal flow of human activity in general.

As for his own art, forever on the brink, it always evades aesthetic certainties as it relies on romantic but pragmatic wanderings between magical realism (*Waterland*) and fantastic inspiration (see the mysterious textual apparition of Jack in *Last Orders*), between literature and theatre (*Out of this World*, *Last Orders*), prose and poetry (see the poems in *Making an Elephant*), true art and entertaining pseudo-art (Collingwood, 1938: 80), history and parenthetical humour, autobiography and autobiographical creation, and, last but not least, between beauty and the sublime which is our subject here.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

So far, critics engaged with the aesthetic appreciation of contemporary literature have determined a whole set of ever-recurring issues among which the emotional response to fiction (Winnberg, 2003), the Flaubertian strategy of the manipulative author's withdrawal from the narrative, the dismissal of the notion that art exists solely to create pleasure.

Of course Graham Swift, once labelled "terminal poet" (Pesso-Micquel, 1999), is famous for his treatment of mourning and trauma and for the underlying psychoanalytic dimension of his narratives sometimes relying on perlaboration (Porée, 1989). The related vocal aspect of Swiftian narrations or emphasis on the creation of voices has already been discussed in Tollance's works (Tollance, 2011).

As for contemporary aesthetics, it is still concerned with finding a definition of art covering all art forms. Consequently, one still has to situate any artistic inquiry

concerning the novel within the framework of theoretical questions about the nature of art, about the difference between works of art and artefacts, about the values embodied by art and the special qualities relating to individual art forms ^(see "Eighteenth-century foundations"). However, one cannot but be influenced, on the one hand, by Leo Tolstoy's definition of art as a transmission of feelings involving artist and audience/readership (Tolstoy, 1996: 51) and, on the other hand, by Morris Weitz's conception of art as an open concept (Weitz, 1956: 31).

Therefore, if this reflection on beauty and the sublime in Graham Swift's works does not directly deal with aesthetic psychology and, more to the point, with reader-response psychology, it does not preclude the research in this field and even takes it as a starting-point. The emotional link of the reader to the text is assumed to condition their relationships to beauty and sublime in the literary work. One should bear in mind that the reader's experience of the sublime involves profound thought, intensity of emotion and necessitates that the work must provide the reader with material for reflection (Oatley and Gholamein, 1997: 170).

As far as reader-response psychology is concerned, Wittgenstein's refusal of the quantification of aesthetic pleasure (Wittgenstein, 1971: 75) comes to mind as none of the Swiftian novels are interchangeable. Adorno's position also seems relevant as he rejects the idea that aesthetic appreciation necessarily implies pleasure (Adorno, 1974). As far as sociologist Demeulenaere's work is concerned, it is particularly thought-provoking as it conceives the representation of most painful events as pleasurable because action becomes a positive aesthetic means of going beyond negativity (Demeulenaere, 2002), of taking distance from it.

The readers' ability of being moved by the beauty and sublime of a literary work largely depends on what Fizer calls the "[...] psychological transcendencies of the perceiving individual [...]" (Fizer, 1981: 187) and on "[...] the exclusive role of the eye/I of the intellect in creating, perceiving, contemplating and knowing aesthetic realities [...]" (Fizer, 1981: 189). It also builds on how the author deals with their emotions. For Oatley and Gholamein (1997), fiction must first be a good imitation of life so that readers may be able to identify with the main character, and be able to "wish they were here". Unobserved observers, readers must then be able to posit as sympathetic spectators (Nussbaum, 1995) in order to fully benefit from the necessary latitude of emotions. Empathy then relies on "[...] accumulated perceptions, mnemonic residua, impressions, judgements and divergent ideas [...]" (Fizer, 1981: 189). Moreover, the intensity, frequency and originality characterizing emotions a reader may feel when reading a novel are caused by the writer's careful selection and direction of episodes (Oatley and Gholamein, 1997: 170). The story must somehow function as "[...] a clue to explicit or implicit recall of fragments of our own autobiographical memory

[...]" (Oatley and Gholamein, 1997: 170).

Demeulenaere's *Théorie des sentiments esthétiques* insists on the reader's quickly metamorphosing emotions during the reading experience (Demeulenaere, 2002: 164). According to him, the confusion and complexity of these emotions make them difficult to identify and classify. However, drawing on Kant's previous distinction between what is pleasant and what is beautiful (Demeulenaere, 2002: 176), the sociologist insists on what is interesting, meaningful for readers and what is not (Demeulenaere, 2002: 176).

The debate opposing Derek Matravers and Kendall Walton may also be interesting. Indeed, Derek Matravers contends that when reading a novel, readers who make believe they are facing a report of actual events experience real emotions and not quasi-emotions as Kendall Walton had put forward. However, David Novitz claims that literature provokes an anaesthetics of emotions as art has the power of persuading us to renounce ideas we previously held dear without arousing fierce emotions.

METHODOLOGY

This article is conceived as a kind of prologue to a reflection on the interartistic dimension of British contemporary literature. This reflection would mainly aim at the progress of the history of ideas and representations and at demonstrating how beauty in the novel is best achieved when aesthetic emotion circulates from one art to another.

Here, to give a background to these transartistic studies, the paper chooses to study what is at the core of the novelistic aesthetic and transartistic experience in Graham Swift: the organisation of the relationships between the sublime and beauty. Both philosophical approaches (Plato, 2008; Friedrich Nietzsche, 1995; Lyotard, 1991) and works by specialists of the sublime and beauty (Alberro, 2004; Girons, 1993; Berléant, 2009; Cheng, 2006) will be used to cast light on the Swiftian fiction. This paper shall progress from notions of order to ideas/ideals of precariousness, from the positive assertion of the need for beauty to the hesitation on the type of beauty needed.

RESULTS

The issue of beauty and sublime in Graham Swift's works has never been truly raised so far. Applying Girons' analysis (1993) to the Swiftian corpus permits to consider how the sublime elevation undergone by the characters makes them envisage (self-) knowledge differently. Indeed, they come to participate better in infinity once they have felt the distinct, incomparable transfixion of the sublime. As they commit sublime transgressions, the characters also come to grasp with the hierarchical sense of order implicitly pervading the Swiftian thought.

Out of this World or Wish You Were Here force readers to acknowledge with Berléant (2009) that any aesthetic experience should encompass the negative dimension of human existence even if it implies dealing with the

problematically media-covered acts of terrorism. In *Wish You Were Here*, by placing terror at the heart of individual and of global histories, Graham Swift seems to agree with Arnold Berléant's idea that though terrorism can never be justified, it can and even must be understood. Sublime terrorism is thus linked to terror, in a logic inherited from Arnold Berléant. *Wish You Were Here* also seems to embed in its structure a reflection on Karlheinz Stockhausen's terrorism conceived as a work of art making normality, reality and art collapse.

Graham Swift's works also exhibits a beauty reminiscent of François Cheng's religious sense of existence (Cheng, 2006) even if classical beauty is deliberately denigrated for being both necessary and fraudulent in a Nietzschean perspective. Indeed, conveniently making Bill lose sight of a too ominous, painful reality, the classical beauty of Sylvia's voice is synonymous with the futility of adulterous relationships

The wisdom of the author's art triumphs over the sufferings imposed by life. Ordinary beauty, traditionally rejected for being useless and vulgar, is what really matters in Graham Swift's novels. The novelist seems to think that ordinary beauty is the only one that counts at a contemporary era marked with the unease with bourgeois 18th century aesthetics.

DISCUSSION

Subliming the destabilising sublime or approaching a fragile agnostic sense of order

Secular though sacred: the organising sublime of the ordinary

As Girons (1993) underlines, the word "sublime" first designated Ganymed's abduction by Jupiter's bird (17). In Graham Swift's works, it is possible to say that the mourning male characters (for instance Willy Chapman in *The Sweet Shop Owner* or Bill Unwin in *Ever After*), forever on the brink of death and madness, being suddenly carried away as they are by love and unfulfilled desire, suffer a comparable sublime situation which enables them to reach a higher viewpoint on the meaning of life. In fact, if they suggest the inanity of all cravings, including the wish to understand the world, this and other Swiftian proliferating sublime predicaments act on the characters' desire for knowledge as well as on preservation and representation instincts. Indeed, unsettling as Swiftian sublime experiences are at first sight, they eventually seem to lead to their own subversion as they encourage narrators and readers to distance themselves from their usual perspective to participate more consistently in infinity, eternity, the absolute of men's aspirations and spiritual quests and, in the end, in creative forces themselves. Thus, these experiences seem designed so as to convincingly convey the Swiftian conception of a

sacred though agnostic order under which the characters live, emanating from the memory-wise author identifying with the divine elephant Ganeish as the title *Making an Elephant* suggests. This paper will try to explore the structuring dynamic of the sublime as it appears through the whole Swiftian corpus.

In his very first novel, even before tackling what Tom Crick from *Waterland* designates as the "here and now" attacking Marie-Antoinette (Swift, 1983: 52) and reminding the reader of Burke's immanent sublime (Burke, 1909-1914), Graham Swift lays bare Girons's *sui generis* emotion of the sublime (Girons, 1993: 514-5), relating to the common Burkean notions of awe, terror and delight as negative pain (Burke, 1909-1914) but defined as becoming transfixed or as fearing transfixion. This overpowering emotion controls humans who cannot control it or even intentionally communicate it. Because of a breakdown, due to his incapacity to remedy his isolation, the surviving Mr. Chapman, a little like Bill Unwin, both longs for and dreads death. Like another King Lear suffering *angina pectoris*, he waits for the transfixion of his chest which he and only he supposes will turn him conveniently into "a cold statue" to welcome his unforgiving daughter (Swift, 1980: 10). Even in the first pages (Swift, 1980: 9-11), his theatrical passivity in front of indomitable terror, conveyed by the linguistic inscription of the character's wavering between life and death, motion and immobility, compels him and us to adopt a humble, low point of view.

The author's creative superimpositions of temporal strata - birth coincides with death (Swift, 1980: 10) making all life events merge into a single one - manage to give the impression of a fossilized ordinary time and underline the importance of describing things not as they really are but as they are really felt.

In Swiftian works, sublime passages abound, particularly those revolving around the structuring motif of the fall. Inspired by classical Greek and Christian cultures, driven by their *hubris*, Swiftian characters have fallen from grace, transgressed - sometimes because they have wanted their love affairs or other emotional engagements to last "ever after" (*The Sweet Shop Owner*, *Ever After*, *Wish You Were Here*), sometimes because they wanted to see time, death or all sense of responsibility abolished ("The Watch", "Chemistry", "Hotel"), sometimes because they have lost contact with nature when entering the world of knowledge (*Shuttlecock*) - seemingly waiting for redemption.

Sublime transgression often implies semi-oneiric narrations playing with the fulfilment of the characters' worst nightmares (*Learning to Swim and Other Stories*). Then, transgression may be of a Promethean kind ("Hoffmeier's Antelope", "The Watch", "The Hypochondriac"), or related to the fear/desire of disappointing familial, socio-ethical expectations binding society together ("Seraglio", "Hotel", "The Son", "Gabor", "Tunnel", "Learning to Swim", "Cliffedge", "Chemistry"). In "Hotel", the

narrator - himself a victim of his mother's sexual perversion - gives free rein to his unconscious fear/desire of facilitating incestuous relationships. In "Cliffedge", the narrator enacts his fratricide fantasy in the same way as the narrator of "Chemistry" enacts his fantasy of murdering his dearest relative (his grandfather). Likewise, narrating "The Hypochondriac" seems to help the doctor-narrator purify his mind as it allows him to give a complete expression to his darkest fears: killing an otherwise healthy young man by negligently negating all possibility of illness and encountering a ghost.

To the figurative falls are linked literal falls permeating the texts such as Irene's uncles' fall "in action" (Swift, 1980: 49), Willy Chapman's echoing fall from his ladder (Swift, 1980: 43) and his metaphorical plunge from the diving-board into death (Swift, 1980: 222); the doctor's collapse in "The Hypochondriac" (Swift, 1982: 76); Martin Luther's, the tree's and the grandfather's fall in "The Watch" (Swift: 1982: 104, 105); the crashing planes of "Chemistry", *Out of this World* and *Ever After*, Uncle George and Uncle Rupert's tumbles in *Ever After* (Swift, 1992: 28). Sarah Atkinson's fall and Dick's own plunge in *Waterland* ascribable to the characters' assumed wickedness (Swift, 1983: 66, 310) strangely reiterate the motion of God's punitive aborted dropping of the stars (Swift, 1983: 1). Indeed, due to a network of correspondences binding the individual to the universal, in their agnostic sacredness, Swiftian falls seem both to reverse and sanction the unethical progress of a harmful civilisation able to produce ever ascending bombers. The logic underlying this dynamics is enhanced in *Out of this World* where the joyful landing onto the moon is counterbalanced by the Vietnam War on earth (Swift, 1988: 12-13), and where war orphan Anna's hubristic adulterous sex symbolised by Mount Olympus is punished by the gods' revenge when they have her plane crashed (Swift, 1988: 181).

Hence, if there is no real God in Graham Swift's fiction, morality and order win the day, particularly when the author adapts the Greek *de casibus* tragedy to his literary purposes and teaches his characters to fall as well as to swim. To try and adopt a divine position hubristically invariably fails as exemplifies the one hundred and sixty-two year old grandfather from "The Watch" punished for his family's obscure dealings with time when falling - however deliberately - under a quasi heavenly scimitar of lightning (Swift, 1982: 105). In a sublime moment at the end of the short story, the forever elusive sense of eternity rendered absurdly graspable within earthly time by the perfidious clock-makers simply vanishes (Swift, 1982: 113).

From Swiftian falls to the reinvention of a Fall to be associated with the novelist's more or less assumed attempts to reconnect with a transcendence there could be but one step, potentially made at the end of "Seraglio". The final passage from the two-dimensional skyline to the "scintillating façades" (Swift, 1982: 9) seemed to evoke

the crucial transition from the primaevial unity formed by sky, earth and water (water/land) to the ensuing separation and nostalgia for unity. Therefore, transcendent order is reverberated in the spatial organisation of the Swiftian fiction.

Following the delineation of the sublime emotion in *The Sweet Shop Owner* and the elaboration of transgression/fall patterns, the invention of sublime infinite verticalities manifested by *Last Orders'* Canterbury Cathedral (Swift, 1996: 194) comes to echo the enigmatic experience of the link between sky, earth and water at the end of "Seraglio", a link re-wrought in each of the water-related Swiftian works ("Cliffedge", "Hotel", "Learning to Swim", *Waterland*,...). The psychic elevation inherent in the sublime experience could already be read through the cliché metaphor of Quinn's cherry-trees in *Shuttlecock* (Swift, 1981: 17) heralding *Wish You Were Here's* old oak, metaphorically linking the transgenerational theme with the sexual and suicidal one (Swift, 2011: 274-275). The tree cannot help reminding the reader of the figure of Ganeish whom Graham Swift identifies with. On top of the Tree of Life uniting Earth and Sky, the elephant/author, like another god in his realm, seems to cast his light illuminating the world to the deepest valleys, thus permitting poetic action.

More generally, in Graham Swift's fiction, sublime landscapes provoking awe symbolise human realities in a tradition inherited from romanticism. One may think about the skyscrapers in *Out of this World* (Swift, 1988: 16), the dangerous cliffs of "Cliffedge" in the eponymous short story (Swift, 1982: 116, 119), the violent middle-East in "Seraglio" or "The Son" (Swift, 1982: 3, 52), the still unfinished suspension bridge over the estuary in "Learning to Swim" (Swift, 1982: 134).. Facing the hallucinatory power of the skyscrapers in the land of cancelled memories without a past (Swift, 1988: 16), both a land of amnesty and of guns (Swift, 1988: 16), Sophie remarks: "[...] all these clean, hard, soaring, futuristic lines were mixed up with something crumbling, blighted, decomposed. As if the skyscrapers had to sprout out of some fertile rot. But sweetness and innocence were never really the ticket, were they? If you want them, go walk in some English meadow" (Swift, 1988: 16).

A prominent feature in Graham Swift's treatment of the sublime and of the ordered world it implies is the organisation of narrations according to a *chiaroscuro* technique suggesting the typical ambiguity of the characters and also facilitating awe and horror in them. Thus, in "Chemistry", the narrator's grandfather's uncertain death and the apparition of the dead father occur at night (Swift, 1982: 128-129), the most sombre passages of *Shuttlecock* happen in the darkness of le Goret's room (Swift, 1981: 138-139). In this second novel, power has to do with the ability to access light since only Quinn has a window in his office (Swift, 1981: 17). *The Light of Day* which, from the very title, refers to Caravaggio's style, relies on the clear opposition between the gloomy world

of the prison, of Sarah's deed and the clear light of day corresponding to the narrator's freedom and to his ability to conceive a future.

In the wake of Arnold Berléant's negative sublime: the Swiftian sublime of terrorism corroding emotions, art and human reality

After an early fiction concerned with the sublime impact of world wars on reality, *Out of this World* revolved around the familial and universal consequences of a terrorist attack ironically aimed at a bomb maker's home. Now, *Wish You Were Here*, revealing the vicious circle of terrorism, associates it to the sublime and hence to the world of deepest intimate reminiscences and feelings especially marked by strategies of mourning and of facing more or less sordid death: "A war on terror, that was the general story. Jack knew that terror was a thing you felt inside, so what could a war on terror be, in the end, but a war against yourself? Tom would have known terror, perhaps, quite a few times" (Swift, 2011: 60).

In fact, both Berléant (Berléant, 2013) and, implicitly, Graham Swift relate sublime terrorism to terror defined as the most powerful passion a human is capable of feeling, characterised by astonishment mixed with horror, causing the suspension of all other thoughts. The very terrorism Tom wants to fight against is presented as the global version of the anger- and awe-inspiring domestic and national circumstances (Swift, 2011: 60, 206).

The sublime linked to terrorism in *Wish You Were Here* is evocative of Stockhausen's 2001 definition of terrorism as "the greatest work of art ever [...] for the whole cosmos", "a jump out of security, the everyday" in which human values and the value of humans are at stake (Hänggi, 2011). Indeed, Tom's fate, linked to the re-direction of his own anger and terror, makes normality collapse under the extreme and mystical extraordinariness of ill-timed death in utmost physical pain (death by burning: Swift, 2011: 207-209). Terror and terrorism corrode the notions of reality and art as well as the frontiers between the two, leading Damien Hirst to assert the artistic value of a Ground Zero film footage (Allison, 2002). Likewise, Jack wonders about the potential hole made in the fabric of normality: "Was it conceivable that terrorists - Islamic extremists - might want to operate out of a holiday facility on the Isle of Wight? Or, on the other hand, want to crash a plane into it? Target a caravan site [called the Lookout]? He didn't think so." (Swift, 2011: 61).

Sublime suffering caused by the sublime need for the dead to reappear, opening deep chasms in the narrator's psyche after the family disaster, leads to the symptomatic apparition of the parental object's (the dead father's potentially metaphorising the nation's) repressed psychic matter or unconscious: Tom's phantom lying behind

Jack's image reflected in the mirror (Swift, 2011: 350-1). In *Wish You Were Here* rendering the animal world of beauty, almost crazy emotions triggered by familial losses and thus blurring the mental frontiers between his adult reader and his main character, one could say that Graham Swift, aesthetically mature, now uses terrorism to offer his reader a full and direct grasp of the powerful inner world of human feelings writing national and international history.

Though the rain beats a tattoo at the end of *Wish You Were Here* (Swift, 2011: 353), the world represented by Graham Swift has become even more uncertain than the post-world war universe he used to describe in his early novels.

Beauty and Graham Swift's problematic stabilisation efforts

Consolidating order after the sublime transition: Beauty as *Integritas* Linked to *Erôs* and *Philia*.

In Graham Swift's works, after the operation of the sublime transition, beauty, striking the right balance between the pleasant and the sublime, having to do with notions of justice, morality and ethics (Scarry, 2001), is still there to reassure us about the presence of the agnostic order already described above.

It is possible to interpret beauty in Graham Swift's works in the wake of François Cheng's approach (Cheng, 2006). Indeed, the latter seems fitting to analyse our corpus since it is by exploring their individuality that the characters manage to transform themselves into essences linking them to the transcendental universality of human being and, finally, to beauty, an extra source of happiness (Cheng, 2006: 26-27). Investigating reasons for the failure of his private life (Swift, 1981: 76), Prentis from *Shuttlecock* comes to situate himself in private and collective history and eventually manages to develop healthier connections with beautiful nature helping him to resolve his family trouble (Swift, 1981: 215-220).

Thus, beauty seems to spring from the uniqueness of the created characters to which the elaboration of individual voices clearly contributes. In fact, though the main narrator of *The Sweet Shop Owner* was called Chapman, the author has always denied creating types or archetypes. It is by their more or less unconscious desire to move towards their *integritas*, the beauty associated with the total fulfilment of their possibilities, that the characters come closer to universal being and to the original desire and order from which the universe proceeds even in a non religious perspective (Cheng, 2006: 27). Certain characters prove more conscious of their desire to reach their *integritas* than others. Such is the case of Willy avidly plunging into introspection, seemingly craving a unified, pacified and reified final self in view of his planned pseudo-suicide and of his daughter's arrival

(Swift, 1980: 10). It is also the case of the other old suicidal narrator, Bill Unwin in *Ever After* who also tries to grasp the implications of his aesthetic, literary, historical/ Historical identity between his aborted suicide and his oncoming true death. In contrast, George, the narrator in *The Light of Day*, far from conceiving his identity as sealed, reveals open to sudden sentimental reshuffle: "Something happens. We cross a line, we open a door we never knew was there. It might never have happened, we might never have known." (Swift, 2006: 3).

Anyway, no single character can ever discover beauty understood as his or her *integritas* reflecting the transcendental desire presiding over the universe unless his consciousness be related to the various parts of his own self and to others (Cheng, 2006: 27-28). So much so that when Graham Swift resorts to polyphonic narrations, in their quest, the characters systematically manage to summon a sign of transcendence: the cryptic ghost (*Out of this World, Last Orders*). Even when a single character takes charge of the narration, like in *The Sweet Shop Owner*, "Chemistry" or *Wish You Were Here*, and when his stream of consciousness conjures up his various temporal selves, does the familial ghost appear. In *Out of this World* or *Last Orders*, it is by interpreting life together - Vic's sections, Lenny's or Ray's all cast a different light on existence - and by pooling their recollections together that the characters are able to unveil the hidden harmony or disharmony of the world.

In a Platonic vein (Plato, 2008), Graham Swift's works show how beauty is also dependent on love - both understood as *erôs* and *philia* - and plays a major role in mental development. In *The Sweet Shop Owner*, beauty emanates from Irene (and contaminates Dorothy) because we see her mainly from Willy's point of view. As in the Platonic scheme of things, Willy's original physical love (*erôs*) has quickly evolved towards an admiration for Irene's cleverness (her inner truth) and a spiritual unveiling of the truths underlying his social life since he can now speculate about the rape, his relatives' and acquaintances' secrets and the functioning of the world at large. In *Last Orders*, it is *philia* characterising the bonds between life-long friends which enables the characters to approach the intimate truth behind their friendship and behind Heideggerian spirituality. In *Tomorrow*, Paula's fascination with the rich beauty of her husband's intellectual originality seems to enhance her own artistic/aesthetic sensitivity and to deepen her reflection on beauty. Her husband's scholarly tastes for atypical subjects and "the sheer particularity of things" (Swift, 2007: 57), their beautiful originality, seduces her (Swift, 2007: 56) and seems somehow to trigger a parallel quest for beauty in Seurat's "clouds of atoms" (Swift, 2007: 57) or in unknown artists such as Vareschi, a very minor old master who painted Paula's *Gennaio e Maggio* (Swift, 2007: 171). Mike's fascination for biology which links him to the universe finds an echo in Paula's adoration of Jacopo Bassano's animal scenes (Swift, 2007: 125).

Graham Swift's art at a crossroads between contemporary anti-aesthetics, beauty, beautiful realism and a discontent with beauty

As was often remarked, twentieth-century so-called anti-aesthetics rested on a paradox since it was deeply influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche for who: "The voice of beauty speaks softly; it creeps only into the most fully awakened souls" (Nietzsche, 1995: 93). If he contributed to the initial dismissal of beauty's importance probably because it was strongly linked with eighteenth-century culture and bourgeois unpopular values, Graham Swift also re-introduced it in literature.

Graham Swift's *Shuttlecock* itself reveals the contemporary barbaric demise of bourgeois aesthetics and Western values. It can be associated with today's avant-garde almost exclusively focused on the polarisation between *Erôs* and *Thanatos*, presenting mechanical unsatisfactory sex. It somehow chimes with Gunther Von Hagen's obsession with death formulated by grotesque plasticised corpses. As such it confirms Alexander Alberro's idea that there is no intrinsic beauty in ideas such as postmodern disillusion or disintegration of the truth (Alberro: 2004).

At the same time, Swiftian texts often point nostalgically towards beauty understood as the absolute refinement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see for instance the implicit reference to Mozart's "Seraglio" in *Learning to Swim*). As for the reader's aesthetic pleasure, partly derived from the author's beautiful realism, it owes something to the re-creation of Plato's splendor of truth provoking shock, wonder, as well as seduction and suspending despair (Plato, 2008).

Thus, beauty is to be found in the way Graham Swift undermined all possible pretentiousness in order to address frankly the mystery of community life and to make the silence of daily existence speak. This silence could be linked to Boucher et al.'s "beau ordinaire" with which man is compelled to commune (Boucher et al., 2010). Graham Swift's way of making human reality manifest can also be related to Ivan Gobry's anthropophanic beauty (Gobry, 2003: 17).

Looking nostalgically for beauty and truth, the author's almost wordless writing (whatbooktoread.com) unveils what Peter Ackroyd would call an English Music (Ackroyd, 1992), *that is* the line of secret and unsuspected harmonies, correspondences and melodies at work in a godless universe where narration always has to be regenerated to be requited (see the use of female and male narrators coming from diverse social backgrounds).

Far from trying to drive us away from gloomy thoughts on our perishability, as Hogarth or Purcell's aesthetics in Peter Ackroyd's novel, Graham Swift's beautiful/truthful language forever points to mortal deliquescence to incite us to hope for a community-induced salvation. Thus, Graham Swift's Purcellian music "reflects the harmony of the soul and soars above the corruption of the flesh."

constituting “a discourse in a strain above mortality” which “has not conquered time [...] but has become a true part of it.” (Ackroyd, 1992:169). From this perspective, as Dostoevski’s Hyppolite declares (Dostoevski, 1887: 102), in Graham Swift’s world, only the beauty inherent in the poetic expression of mortal life, in “the perfectly judged and timed revelation on the page of an unanswerable truth we already inwardly acknowledge” (Swift, 2009: 13) could save the world. Happily enough, always beyond the writer, the force of Swiftian writing which is a “primitive irreducible mystery that answers some deep need in human nature” is always impossible to outguess (Swift, 2009: 12).

To a certain extent, Graham Swift’s conception of literary beauty might have been influenced by Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin’s art which the novelist admires (Metcalf, 2011). For the humble Graham Swift, Chardin’s heavy though carefully thought-out brushstrokes, his “grande harmonie des consonances qui ne coule que de la main des maîtres” (Rosenberg, 1991: 80) may reveal maturity. If Chardin’s works were first disparaged as being those of a mere copyist, the painter’s way of revealing the poetic nature of everyday objects soon grew influential. Like Chardin’s brushstrokes, Graham Swift’s simple, touching words must register the impact of events - like deaths - potentially lying beyond them or just at their edge. Thus, in the rural novel *Wish You Were Here*, one may notice the aura bestowed on simple but important things such as the big parental bedroom or the family oak which function as landmarks. In the Swiftian musical conception of literary art, reminiscent of Chardin’s “pâte travaillée, malaxée, retournée et qui sait saisir le reflet de l’objet voisin.” (Rosenberg, 1991: 80), spaces between and around words have their unspoken resonances in the same way as in music, both sounds and silences matter.

The novel had also to be true to the underlying music of life’s confusion to be actually redeeming. According to the author in an interview with Lidia Vianu (2000):

An American writer once said we all lead lives of quiet desperation. Perhaps, but I think we all lead lives of quiet confusion. The novel is a form in which you can be true to the confusion of life. I’m not different from my readers and I certainly don’t want to have power over them. I’m confused too, I’m in the same boat.

The variety of contrasting subjects invading the table of contents of *Waterland* mirrored the chaotic division founding the subject’s beautiful intimacy as well as the necessarily confused postmodern post-Greenwich temporality. Aesthetic fragmentation contaminated a description of the fens not unreminiscent of a cubist painting: “[...] [the land] stretched away to the horizon, its uniform colour, peat-black, varied only by the crops that grew upon it - grey-green potato leaves, blue-green beet leaves, yellow-green wheat; [...]” (Swift, 1983: 2).

In *Ever After*, (artistic) beauty as governed by the principle of life, is everywhere present - the luminous city of Paris (Swift, 1992: 13), the world of ballerinas (Swift, 1992: 19) and of beautiful voices (Swift, 1992: 31) - though nowhere really necessary.

First, beauty is opposed to evil (the evil of the adulterous relationship Sylvia/Sam, of the war leading to young Ed’s death, of nuclear power) and helps loser Bill Unwin find meaning, comfort and a sense of direction since, fortunately, as he himself declares when discussing his infatuation with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, “The fads of adolescence die hard” (Swift, 1992: 4).

Bill being a professor specialised in English literature also acting as a literary consultant for his wife may be perceived as another - maybe superior - reader giving us the key to Graham Swift’s beauty. Indeed, he is the only one character to directly and unashamedly equate literature with beauty (Swift, 1992: 70).

For Bill, part of the aesthetic enjoyment of reading or watching *Hamlet* may accrue from the fact that though his personal story makes him identify with the eponymous character, enslaved in the postmodern world of parodies, he never undergoes the final stages of the tragedy. Therefore, the fun he seems to find in the play would have to do with seeing his deepest emotions of terror, pain, love, joy and hatred reflected and put at a reassuring distance, purified in an Aristotelian manner. What happens to Bill reading Hamlet’s tragedy may bear a resemblance to what happens to contemporary readers potentially suffering from intricate familial plights and reading Bill’s often comic story including Hamlet’s tragic one. This aesthetic structure of the book stimulates aesthetic pleasure as it implies that beautiful experiences always leave emotional traces that can be revived under propitious circumstances

However, one could assert that Graham Swift inserts negative elements undermining the power of beauty. Trying to convince himself about the legitimacy of his intellectual pleasures in order to enjoy them to the full (see Chagnat, 1860: 4), Bill likes to stage himself in the stereotyped role of the starving student neglected by his materialist stepfather and mother and fighting, suffering for true beauty (Swift, 1992: 71-72, 150). Moreover, because Bill’s connection with artistic beauty sprung from his relationships with his singing and versatile mother, the reader may notice that beauty both re-enchants the world and appeals to a grotesquely excessive sensuality. Beauty’s image is forever tarnished by Sylvia’s voluptuous greed: “Juice ran - a drop, a splash or two of pearly pear juice in that baffling opening of her blouse. Her tongue made slurpy noises, her eyes wallowed. ‘Mmmm, darling -divine’”(Swift, 1992: 230).

Bill’s present quest for beauty, associated with his painful grieving for his charismatic and potentially adulterous wife (Swift, 1992: 111), a famous gifted actress, transforms the Shakespearean plot of *Hamlet* into that of *Antony and Cleopatra* and finally into that of a tragedy

hinging on aesthetic pleasure. Then, it seems to suggest that beauty always excites desire without satisfying it, both emancipating the subject from reality and isolating it.

Conclusion

In fact, the importance bestowed on both beauty and the sublime as well as the impossibility of separating personal style from content in Graham Swift's fiction denotes the prevalence of artistic expression over representation. Indeed, if the author knows how to faithfully depict Londonian communities in *The Sweet Shop Owner* or *Last Orders*, expression remains his true artistic vehicle. This accounts for the transartistic nature of Swiftian writings which are both pictorial and dramatically, architecturally musical. This accounts for the Lawrencian-like, sensuous rendering of life emanating from the figurative use of language. Indeed, tropes such as living metaphors abound, be it the uncle running away with an antelope ("Hoffmeier's Antelope") representing the contemporary mad attempts at halting nature-endangering progress or the sublime metaphor of cliffedges representing the suicidal impulses of young people suffering from mental breakdowns and emotional shocks ("Cliffedge"). Graham Swift's humanist texts are also packed with symbols encompassing the whole subjective experience: maternal waters ("Waves", *Waterland* and *Learning to Swim*); tunnels expressing the transition to adulthood ("The Tunnel"); the east associated with both violence and refinement ("Seraglio", "The Son" and *Out of this World*); the west linked to comfortable forgetfulness (*Out of this World*); rats, holes and shuttlecocks (*Shuttlecock*). By resorting to figurative language, the author clearly means to connect the work of art with human action, life and emotion.

According to Gadamer, symbols also hold the promise "to complete and make whole our fragmentary life" (Gadamer, 1992: 32), wholeness being required in order to achieve aesthetic success. He declared: "[...] the experience of beauty, and particularly beauty in art, is the invocation of a potentially whole and holy order of things [...]" (Gadamer, 1992: 32). If the expression of emotions, such as the one displayed in Swiftian art, acquaints us intuitively with the human values and condition, it can also bridge the gap between common readers or even academics and the war photographer, the soldier about to die in Iraq, the young man mourning his dead brother and the private detective. From one original work to another, the reader is confronted "with the [still] un-conceptualised uniqueness of [the work's] subject-matter." (Scruton, 2011: 98) and evolves towards the perception of human experience as a whole

The sublime and the beautiful imply the changing emotional reactions of readers enjoying Graham Swift's works as an aesthetic experience. Readers may be amazed to be faced with a sublime triggered by the loss of the main

character's beloved, mad patterns of transgression destabilising the limits of the characters and of the texts. They also may be surprised to find reassuring landmarks signalling the presence of an order.

Graham Swift's fiction has the particularity of directly addressing its readers as both its beauty and sublime belong to the realm of the ordinary, permitting to make positive what first appeared as negative in life - contemporary crises such as the mad cow disease and terrorism but also mortality.

Anyway, nothing is self-evident in Graham Swift's art, if beauty understood as *integritas* is present, the author hesitates between anti-aesthetics, the invention of beautiful realism and a disparaging view of beauty. However badly the author may treat beauty and the sublime, what matters for the novelist is to express himself, to reinvent a sincere communication with the reader based on mutual vulnerability.

SYNOPSIS OF SOME MAJOR SWIFTIAN WORKS MENTIONED IN THIS PAPER

The Sweet Shop Owner (1980)

Willy Unwin, a widowed sweet shop owner from Bermondsey suffering from *angina pectoris*, lives what he decides will be his very last day. He obviously wishes his own death to take place on this June day, the day of his daughter's Dorothy's birthday maybe in order to make her feel guilty to have left him and to have taken her mother's money. Alone on earth, stuck in the routine of his shops, he remembers his unrequited love for his wife Irene, a woman raped when she was young with her parents' more or less implicit assent. He especially remembers the trap his doomed marriage and family life soon tacitly became, as Irene never sought psychiatric care for her troubles and could never become a happy wife or a good mother. Dorothy, a clever girl escaping from her family's plight in the study of literature, is never a good daughter. In this novel, collective history also interferes with personal history and permits a certain poetic justice to take place since one of the unpleasant and aggressive Harrison brothers dies on a sunken ship while Willy survives the conflict.

Shuttlecock (1981)

Prentis investigates dead crimes in the London police archive administered by Quinn. Hoping to obtain a promotion, he dutifully gathers information from various files his boss hands him and emits hypotheses. Only to discover that Quinn is deliberately but enigmatically withholding vital clues. Frustrated by Quinn's unlimited power and his own insignificance, he fails to establish good relationships with his wife and his two sons at home. To compensate, he soon concentrates on

discovering the truth about the dumbness his father - a former wartime spy and hero who wrote his memoirs after escaping his German tormentors suffers from. Discovering why his father is permanently silent becomes a time-consuming passion as Prentis must re-read his father's memoirs to find potential clues.

Finally, it is Quinn who holds the keys to the old spy's plight. It is also from Quinn that Prentis will acquire the right professional attitude: indeed, innocent people have to be protected, even if it implies burning some documents. Progressively led by Quinn to acknowledge the relativity of all human feats, Prentis will eventually manage to return to more natural relationships with his wife and sons.

Waterland (1983)

Waterland is told by a soon to be retired history teacher called Tom Crick whose wife has just gone mad and kidnapped a baby in a supermarket. The school headmaster, Lewis, does not want Tom in his school any more. One can divide *Waterland's* action into various historical parts and temporal stratas: what happened in the fens when the teacher-narrator is still a teenager (a murder, parental deaths, a suicide, sexual experiments triggering certain uneasy courses of events), the historical strata corresponding to the narrator's ancestors, a more recent historical strata concomitant with the narrator's parents' history, the narrator's parent's history could be situated, the historical strata dealt with in the history lesson Tom Crick is still teaching (18th century and the French revolution), a most ancient and essential historical strata corresponding to the biological, geological, geographical history of the earth.

Out of this World (1988)

In 1972, bomb maker and First World War survivor Robert Beech died to a terrorist attack though ironically he provided the IRA with arms. This put an end to his son Harry Beech's and his granddaughter Sophie's careers. This also put an end to their father and daughter relationship, which had already been damaged by Harry the war photographer's frequent absence and by the accidental death of Anna, Sophie's mother Harry was actually unable to rescue. Now Sophie lives in New York and Harry in Britain. Having witnessed the terrorist attack aimed at her grandfather, Sophie still goes to see Doctor K, a psychoanalyst, while she resents her father Harry for having taken a photograph when her grandfather died. Father and daughter have almost decided to meet again for Harry's second marriage with a young woman.

Ever After (1992)

Told by an opera singer's son, Bill Unwin, *Ever After* deals with adoption and the contemporary disappearance

of meaningful father (and parental) figures. The old narrator, a university professor, has been taught only recently who his real father was. After having lived under the deception that his real father was a spy who killed himself with a gun in his office, Bill has now some difficulty to face the truth. Now his mother is dead and so are his second stepfather and his beloved wife who left him childless. *Ever After* has the particularity of spanning several centuries as it refers to Bill Unwin's personal ancestor, Matthew Pearce, an intellectual inspired by Charles Darwin, who opposed his father-in-law's religious convictions.

Last Orders (1996)

Jack Dodds the butcher dies from stomach cancer leaving his wife, adoptive son and band of old friends behind him. As they wish to respect his last wishes - he wants to be incinerated and have his ashes thrown at Margate Pier by the seaside - the friends all embark together on a journey leading from Bermondsey to Margate and take a number of detours. Geographical, romantic detours lead the companions up to Canterbury Cathedral, while mental detours enable the companions to remember their shared past.

The Light of Day (2001)

Former policeman George Webb has become a private detective investigating conjugal affairs. He falls in love with Sarah, a university language teacher who kills her husband. The latter had extra-marital relationships with a young woman, a Serbo-Croat refugee, she had decided to shelter at home. Now Sarah is in prison, George is decided to wait for her and thus to forget about his previous relationships with a headmistress, though he never forgets about his daughter Claire. He learns the latter is homosexual.

"The Light of Day" seems to be partly a reference to Claire's love of Caravaggio. Indeed, as a former art student who frequently resented her father for being a policeman, she used to identify with the master who is reputed for being often drunk and fighting with the police. Caravaggio died when running away from his city. The title also refers to the film noir, an allusion one can combine with other cinematographic allusions (*Dressed to Kill*).

Wish You Were Here (2011)

Jack loses his young brother Tom in the war against terrorism. The latter is burnt to death in Basra and his corpse must now be repatriated to Britain. This is the opportunity for Jack to remember about his troubled family past. Tom had fled the family home in Devonshire after his mother's death and after the mad cow disease imposed the burning of the farm's animals. Tom fled just

at the right time, never wishing to see his father Michael sinking into ruin. After Tom's departure, Michael commits suicide, leaving Jack alone to freely leads his life with Ellie, his girlfriend. Driven by the weight of his sad family life, Jack wishes to kill himself and Ellie

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