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No more drama

[G. Swift, *Here We Are*, Scribner, London 2020, pp. 195]

"A quiet triumph" is one of those reviewer's clichés that have graced the cover of more than one of Graham Swift's eleven novels, and his latest certainly also deserves the title for many reasons. Since the writer himself has always been fascinated with worn out phrases and known for dissecting dead metaphors (as well as breathing new life into them), it will hopefully not be out of place to centre this review around considering exactly in what ways and in what sense this expression is literally true.

Here We Are (2020) is a novel by an author who established his reputation decades ago, and who no longer has to prove anything. Swift made his debut in 1980, gained fame and renown with his third novel, *Waterland*, published in 1983, and cemented his position with a Booker prize for *Last Orders* in 1996. Swift's latest novel is not necessarily a peak in his writing; instead, it is triumphant in the grace with which he moves through the catalogue of his recurring motifs, figures, themes, and modifies them to produce ever new effects. In many ways *Here We Are* reads like a collage of the author's earlier texts. The most overt point of reference is precisely his Booker-prize-winning tour de force, *Last Orders*. One of the central figures of *Here We Are* is called Jack, and he functions as a parental presence in the group of protagonists (the narrator states this explicitly:

"He was only twenty-eight, same age as Ronnie, and none of them knew then what was coming, but it was part of his function to act older than his age. He was master of ceremonies, and daddy to them all." (95))[1]. In the narrative present Jack is dead, his body has been cremated and ashes scattered. Jack was involved in a love triangle including an old friend whom he had met in the army during World War II, and in the resolution of the romantic drama a significant object was cast into the sea from a pier in a popular holiday destination. All of these elements resonate with plot details of *Last Orders*, although they undeniably function in a very different setting. The story of magician Ronnie Deane, his assistant Evie White, and his friend Jack Robinson, for whom she eventually leaves Ronnie is, nevertheless, typically achronological and includes both analepses and prolepses. Ronnie's backstory is especially important for the narrative, and in particular his stay with a middle-class couple in the countryside during the war, where he is first introduced to magic and receives a kind of education which alienates him from his own working-class mother. The issue of troubled relations between generations is in itself immediately recognisable to Swift's audience, and I will return to the figures of parents in the final section of my text.

Graham Swift has always been consistent in both his methods and his interests as a writer (which won him both praise for pursuing his themes in depth and scorn for obsessive repetitiveness), but he has also persistently experimented with and modified his formula gradually over the years. The tendency to reuse similar material while exploring new aspects of already familiar territory is undeniably a trademark of Swift's writing, and in his latest novel he avoids repeating himself with the skill that is only to be expected from a writer as accomplished as he is. *Here We Are* contains a number of more or less direct echoes of Swift's other texts: during the war, Jack and Ronnie are assigned to unheroic administrative tasks in the army, like Willy Chapman in *The Sweet Shop Owner* (1980); the secrecy of Ronnie's craft as magician is likened to the pledge taken in intelligence, central to the plot of *Shuttlecock* (1981) and more recently appearing in *Mothering Sunday* (2016), where the main character contemplates Joseph Conrad's metaphor of the writer as a secret agent; images of a childhood

[1] Tellingly, being a father is here shown as an act, a make-believe. This is consistent with Swift's years-long preoccupation with the figure of the father as an impostor, and will be given more attention in the final section of this review.

spent in the shadow of World War II, barely perceptible somewhere in the distance, figure as prominently as in *Waterland* (1983). The courtship between two background characters is based on the eminently unromantic gesture of the boy offering spare beans for the wooed girl's family, which also brings *Waterland* to mind, with its scene of offering an eel in for the same purpose. More significantly, both girls undergo a prematurely terminated pregnancy which results in infertility, although the treatment of the motif is sufficiently different to illustrate another important feature of this book.

In *Here We Are*, all of these recognisable traits return as if at a distance, through some sort of film, without the immediacy with which they were endowed in their original iterations. The infertility issue is a perfect example: in *Waterland*, the pregnancy is ended by a primitive abortion, carried out by a local "witch" on a desperate sixteen-year-old, and described in gruesome detail. The girl never really recovers psychologically from the event, and years later, gradually alienated from her husband, suffers a mental breakdown which leads her to kidnap an infant in front of a supermarket. In *Here We Are*, the "nasty miscarriage" (184) affects an already married woman, and is briefly mentioned in a single paragraph as a distant memory. Unlike in *Waterland*, the event does not lead to the couple's estrangement – quite the opposite, their loving marriage is ultimately rewarded with the appearance of a foster child. The fates of characters in Swift's later novels reflect the atrocities to which their earlier counterparts were subjected, but envision brighter alternatives for them. This tendency is already familiar to his audience, although in *Here We Are* it receives a shape that is still relatively new, perceptible in the most striking feature of the novel's plot structure, a narrative device introduced in his previous book, *Mothering Sunday*. Whereas majority of Swift's oeuvre (all the novels from *Shuttlecock* to *Tomorrow* (2007)) employ first-person, homodiegetic narrators, and in some cases equate the narrative and the diegetic present,[2] increasingly, his novels are narrated from a point further and further away from the crisis. Additionally, since 2011's *Wish You Were Here*, third-person, heterodiegetic narrators have returned to Swift's writing. The shift away from the troubled present may most clearly

[2] The first three novels do this to the largest extent, although they all also feature a significant amount of retrospection.

be demonstrated by comparing *The Sweet Shop Owner* with *Ever After* (1992): the former novel culminates in the protagonist's suicide attempt, while the latter is introduced as "the words of a dead man,"[3] a confession of a recovering suicide, who struggles to make sense of the incidents that had led to his desperate deed. *Mothering Sunday* and *Here We Are* embody a similar, and a much more profound alteration: both begin with a detailed observation of events as they unfold, which may indeed lead readers to expect another one-day novel, in which the intricacies of the situation are explained through numerous retrospections (like *The Sweet Shop Owner*, *Light of Day* (2003), or *Tomorrow*). At some point in both narratives, however, the temporal perspective skips several decades into the future, leaving the troubled present far behind. The central consciousness is also abandoned in both cases – in *Mothering Sunday* in favour of a heterodiegetic narrator, and in *Here We Are*, the initial protagonist's widow.[4]

The effect of this shift is to move beyond the drama: the characters are no longer recovering from trauma[5] like in *Ever After* or *Last Orders*, and the plots no longer really attempt to create any sort of build up or suspense. *Here We Are* is perhaps less extreme – it arguably does have a fairly conventional climax, although it is introduced in a way that makes it almost entirely predictable.[6] In both of the author's latest novels, however, it becomes patently obvious that his aim is by no means to create anything approaching a cathartic resolution. Evie White's position is here analogous to that of Jane Fairchild in *Mothering Sunday*, Briony Tallis in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) or, indeed, Lilly Briscoe in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927): a survivor recounting situations that once had an undeniable urgency about them, but are now only a distant – if still moving – memory. Time takes away none of the emotional force of the experience, but allows one to contemplate it more calmly. Admittedly, even

[3] G. Swift, *Ever After* (London: Picador, 1992), p. 1.

[4] Indeed, *Here We Are* juggles between the three protagonists: Jack is initially the focal point of the narrative, but is soon replaced by Ronnie, and ultimately, with both men absent in one sense or another, Evie takes over for the remainder of the book.

[5] In *Here We Are* Evie admittedly lost her husband just a year before, and is still not quite over the death, but she certainly is not in the throes of despair. During a conversation that might turn uncomfortable for her, she even contemplates the possibility of instrumentalising her bereavement: "She was glad she had already done her sorrow and weeping, but she still might fall back, if needed, on excusing grief." (155)

[6] In *Mothering Sunday*, the breakthrough in the protagonist's life happens as if despite or regardless of the tragic death of her lover, which is related in a surprisingly offhand manner by the narrator.

in the past, when Swift employed genres such as detective novel or thriller, his treatment of their conventions made it rather clear that his interests do not lay in building suspense or shocking the reader with unexpected revelations. With his last two books, something undeniably far more profound is taking place.

This is Swift at his most satisfyingly mature. In fact, the evolution on show here brings to mind the film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*,[7] where the first murder committed by the arch-villain is shown in all its shocking brutality, from a godlike perspective, with the camera hovering over the gruesome scene from beginning to end. By contrast, the only indication of the final death inflicted by Chigurh is the character's checking the soles of his shoes for traces of blood after leaving his presumed victim's house. Swift has similarly established his credentials as a connoisseur of trauma sufficiently not to have to resort to any drastic occurrences this time. His previous plots include rape, torture, incest, a car bomb, suicide, marital murder and – over and over again – the "unspeakabilities"[8] of armed conflicts. Admittedly, Swift's readers are rarely shown any of these in any detail, but the struggle of his characters to cope with the aftermath is justified by the horrors they were forced to encounter. Increasingly, however, the author chooses to deny his readers the satisfaction of the big reveal, or anything approaching the blood-stained drama of his earlier output. Nothing overtly horrible needs to happen for humans to experience extreme emotion. As an example illustrating this approach, one might consider the scene where Evie goes out to her garden early in the morning to visit the site where she had scattered Jack's ashes, driven by some inexplicable impulse, and is agitated by walking into a spider's web on her way,

> and though a spider's web was one of the most familiar of mental pictures – who has not at some point doodled a spider's web? – the actuality was bewitching. How on earth was it done? How on earth were they conceived and constructed, these entrancing, lethal things?
>
> She had not anticipated that the garden would be decked out like this, as if just for her. And look what she'd done. Intent on something else, she'd walked straight into one of these wonders and ruined it. (148)

[7] J. Coen, E. Coen, *No Country for Old Men*, Paramount Vintage, 2007.

[8] A term introduced by one of the minor characters of *Wish You Were Here*.

There could hardly be a more explicit illustration of Swift's recalibrating his readers' attention to minute detail than using phrases like "wilting collapse" or "wreckage" (148) to refer to something as insubstantial as a spiderweb. In some sense, the nonchalance with which Swift in his later plots dismisses any drama brings to mind Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, a point of reference perfectly understandable for an author who openly styles himself as an inheritor of modernist traditions. Her narrative is admittedly more radically experimental, but the analogy remains clear: the middle section of *To the Lighthouse* abandons almost all human presence and focuses on poetic description of processes of entropy. Deaths of significant characters are briefly announced in brackets, and the situation in the final chapter is very much like in Swift; the concerns of the day presented in detail at the beginning of the book appear petty and insignificant, although the dead are still with the survivors, and emotional investments remain valid. This is reminiscent of *Mothering Sunday*, where the death of the protagonist's lover is revealed in the following way:

> Can a mirror keep a print? Can you look into a mirror and see someone else? Can you step through a mirror and be someone else?
> The grandfather clock chimed two o'clock.
> She had not known he was already dead.[9]

Nothing quite as extreme as the killing of a significant character in a car crash happens in *Here We Are*, so let us take as an example Evie's memory of Jack's brief infidelity some forty years earlier, which merits little attention and virtually no emotion at all. "All things being relative. And who cares about the famous two-week fling, back in the Seventies […] with a well-known rising actress (and where was she now, and what was her name again?). Did 'Mrs Robbins' […] care? Jack came back, tail between his legs" (84).

More impressively, Evie's own infidelity to Ronnie, which is undeniably at the core of the narrative, is presented with similar impassivity. Ronnie brings his fiancée into a stage show run by Jack, who is introduced as a womaniser. His proposal itself is shown to be motivated in part by his fear of his friend's charm, and Jack's reputation is commented on at length. But before any tension is really built up, the narrator skips ahead fifty years, and

[9] G. Swift, *Mothering Sunday*, (London: Scribner, 2016), p. 65.

reveals that Evie is now Jack's widow, not Ronnie's. When her change of heart is actually discussed, it is presented as somehow inevitable and fate-ordained: "She'd got into bed with Jack Robbins. She'd known what she was doing. She'd even known that sooner or later it was bound to happen, as Jack had known. As much as anything can be bound to happen in life" (145). The whole episode has an air of fatalism about it; the characters appear to sense that their actions are leading to irreversible change, but are unable or unwilling to even admit this openly, much less prevent it in any way.

Having received a phone call about his mother's serious condition, Ronnie goes to see her, possibly for the last time. We do know that he had not been close with his mother for years at this point, and that his fiancé had never been introduced to her, but when Evie does not offer to go with him, and he does not ask, none of these are mentioned as factors in these behaviours. The situation is another instance of Swift reusing an earlier subplot with less intensity: in *Wish You Were Here*, the protagonist's partner openly, not to say aggressively, refuses to accompany him to his brother's funeral. Like Ronnie, he makes the journey alone, but is shaken up to the extent that afterwards he seriously considers shooting his wife and then himself. Ronnie's situation is nowhere near as dire: after apparently ignoring signs of the budding affair (or perhaps considering it inevitable), and coming late to see his mother who dies before his arrival, he suddenly does begin to see things with stunning clarity, even if he is still unable to talk about them.[10] Admittedly, we only have the narrator's word for it, since neither Ronnie or Evie really says anything: "And as soon as Ronnie had returned he'd looked into her face and he'd seen. She knew it. She even had the feeling he'd looked into her face before he'd left and known it then, somehow, impossibly, beforehand" (144).

Indeed, more and more in Swift's novels I have the impression that the core of the plot is "somewhere else," or even that the plot itself is no more than an excuse for the author to sketch out his reflection, while hiding

[10] This is a puzzling incident in its own right, and introduced as such in the narrative: on his way back, Ronnie's train encounters a sudden thunderstorm, "[b]ut then, just as suddenly, while in one part of the sky rain kept falling, gleaming needles against still-dark clouds, half the world was full of sunshine again." (133) The only comment he makes to Evie which may be taken to refer to her infidelity, appears to concern precisely this observation: "But Ronnie did say one thing when he returned. He saw and he knew, and what he said, given that he knew, was close to what she might have expected him to say, but it was strange. / He said, 'I saw something, Evie.' / She waited a little, even prepared herself. / 'You saw something?' / 'Yes, I saw something. From the train.'" (146)

crucial events from readers. This is not to say that the plot is in any way neglected – the characters are brilliantly and convincingly drawn, their interactions are engaging – but there appears to be a glass wall separating them from the reader. This is at least in part because, as has been stated before, the thrills of drama and romance are apparently not a central concern in Swift's latest novels. Instead, one of his major interests in *Here We Are*, continued from *Mothering Sunday*, is self-reflexive inquiry into the nature and functions of literature. And since neither of these texts can be qualified as "trauma fiction," it appears that Swift is no longer preoccupied with the therapeutic value of storytelling either (which played a central role in *Waterland* or *Ever After*), but simply takes delight in the wonders of his craft (the spiderweb episode is in a sense an illustration of this too). In this respect, *Here We Are* is also considerably more subtle than its immediate predecessor. While *Mothering Sunday* had a writer for its protagonist (for the first time in Swift's oeuvre) and devoted much attention to Joseph Conrad's equally self-reflexive novella *Youth* (1898), the metaphor for literature this time is show business, and illusionism in particular. The very notion of illusion, of making things appear to be there when they are not, as well as dependence on the audience's cooperation, imagination, willing suspension of disbelief or embracing contradictions impossible to resolve – all of these are contemplated at length by the characters, and all can be applied directly to writing fiction. In an essay about his approach to creating literature, Swift once observed that his task as a writer is often to create an elaborately crafted device which will activate a specific effect in split seconds, without the reader's realising the mechanics of the text: "A passage the writer has toiled over for weeks may have its effect in a moment and barely be consciously noticed. The vibrations of thought and feeling that a single sentence in its context may release in a reader can be too rapid for measurement."[11] This idea returns more than once in *Here We Are*, whose three protagonists are only too familiar with putting their skills on display, while carefully concealing the work required by the performance. The narrator observes about Evie, for example: "Oh the things Ronnie would do to her, ever night. […] And for all to see. Or not exactly see. Not see at all. That was the whole point"

[11] G. Swift, "On Swiftness and Slowness," in *A Between Almanach for the Year 2013*, eds. T. Wiśniewski, D. Malcolm, Ż. Nalewajk, M. Szuba (Gdańsk: Maski, 2013), p. 15.

(87). The manipulating presence of the magician is also delicately marked here, corresponding to the all-controlling author, not unlike the figure of Prospero in *The Tempest*.[12] These resonances are very subtly supported by a scene where Ronnie's temporary foster father delivers news of his real father's death, using images that may bring to mind those in Ariel's song for Ferdinand.[13] Over the course of the story, Ronnie progresses from being the manipulated young prince to the manipulating powerful duke, which arguably makes Evie the equivalent of Miranda. As Ronnie's assistant, she is supposedly closer to his magic craft than anyone else, but in fact the same suspension of disbelief that the audience experience is required of her: "And how do you ever explain to anyone what it's like to be levitating? Ronnie had said to her one day, 'Now you are levitating, Evie. Trust me, you are levitating.' She could only say what it felt like at the time: that yes she was and no she couldn't possibly be" (93).

The figure of the all-controlling magician plays into another one of Swift's central interests as a writer. His prose has repeatedly considered the dangers of overtly complete, coherent, all-encompassing discourses. Variations of this problematic appear in most of Swift's other narratives, whose speakers repeatedly attempt to come to terms with their traumatic experiences, only to discover that if this may be achieved at all, it is only if we accept the limitations of narrativising methods of ordering reality. The issue is perhaps approached most explicitly in *Shuttlecock*, whose protagonist rather violently introduces coherence into the self-image he crafts for himself in his narrative and to maintain it openly blackmails his potential readers "not to peer too hard beneath the surface."[14] References are made to Rousseau and pathetic fallacy, inviting consideration in terms of original tenets of autobiography, with their assumption of a comfortable point in time beyond the turbulence, from which the

[12] Already in the army, "Ronnie became known as a man you played cards with at your peril. He might not only win, but suddenly turn the game into something else altogether." (12) As his career develops, he becomes increasingly unsatisfied with conventional magician's tricks: "In short, though only Ronnie himself could have put it this way, he was moving from magic towards wizardry." (119)

[13] "'You must go to sleep, Ronnie. It's the best thing. Just to sleep.' / Ronnie had almost at once felt his eyes droop, but Mr Lawrence had added, 'I think perhaps that's how you should think of it. That he is sleeping too, among the fishes.' / It was these words, the idea that both he and his father might just be sleeping, or it was the vision of lots of glittering fish, but there had sprung from Ronnie – though it was only when Mr Lawrence had kissed his forehead and crept out – a sudden convulsive upwelling of tears." (46–7)

[14] G. Swift, *Shuttlecock* (London: Picador, 1992), p. 214.

controlling consciousness is supposed to be able to recount the experience objectively and in its entirety. *Mothering Sunday* and *Here We Are* appear to test (and falsify) this assumption, since their protagonists' controlling consciousnesses are both in perfect position to embrace the reality of their past from beyond its greatest turmoil. With both novels I feel tempted to use the term "posthumous,"[15] not in the sense of the text being published after the author's death, but rather of the characters being somehow outside the concerns of the earthly existence (in *Here We Are* there are hints, in fact, that in the final scene Evie may be joining her deceased beloved). What becomes evident, however – especially in *Here We Are* – is that this vantage point offers little in terms of clarity or control over the narrated developments. Evie is not exactly tormented by the past any longer, but she is no more free of ignorance, uncertainty, hesitation than in her youth. Her authority – and helplessness – are both stated equally directly: "How much had Ronnie ever told Jack? Whatever it might have been, it had gone a year ago with Jack. She was the only true guardian now of the life and times of Ronnie Deane" (169). Thus Evie, who has more knowledge on the situation than anyone else, is as much in the dark as even the external narrator – and as she herself has always been in relation to Ronnie. Recounting her work as Ronnie's assistant on stage, the narrator observes that "even when she'd learnt how things were done it didn't exactly stop her wondering, having her doubts. In some ways the more she knew the more she wondered" (92). Uncertainty is therefore at the heart of both the magician's and the storyteller's craft; it is not a contingent flaw, but its very essence.

This is why, even though Ronnie is thus confirmed again and again as the novel's Prospero, control, crucially, is always in the hands of "someone else," as the narrator puts it when describing the scene of scattering of Jack's ashes:

> And then, when it was too late, when she'd even thumped the bottom of the jar to get the last bits out, she'd had the thought: In the sea, in the sea, from the end of the Brighton pier even. Was it Jack suddenly, mischievously intervening? Or someone else? (152)

[15] The reviewer for The Guardian speaks about "a late-period voice, elegiac and wistful." A. Preston, "*Here We Are* Review – Breathtaking Storytelling from Graham Swift," May 18, 2020, accessed July 17, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/18/here-we-are-review-breathtaking-storytelling-from-graham-swift.

In the seaside show Jack himself acted as a master of ceremonies, a controlling influence whose unique function gave him an ambiguous stance much as the author's: "Some people would have said he *was* the show. And yet as compère he was, like no one else, constantly in and out of it" (100). Occasionally, Jack in fact joined the audience while other performers were on stage, which allowed him both to see through the machinery of the performance and fall under its charm: "In the darkness, neither in nor out of the audience, he would sometimes feel the thinness, the fakery of the plush rapt edifice around him. Plush? Turn up the lights and you'd see, he knew, how tatty, how shabby, how sham it all was. How it all depended on some stretch of the mind" (102-3). This clearly marks him as another figure standing in for the author (the same can be said of the similarly God-like, absent paternal figure of Jack Dodds, to whom, as has been noted, his first name refers us). In the narrative present, however, he is no more than an object in Evie's hands, and spiritually only one of the potential influences on her behaviour. In fact, the wording of the episode fully demonstrates Swift's devotion to ambiguity. By combining the third-person, quasi-omniscient narrative voice with indirect interior monologue, the narrative makes it impossible to decide whose perspective is expressed in the last two sentences ("Was it Jack suddenly, mischievously intervening? Or someone else?"). If, as is clearly the case in the first sentence ("she'd had the thought: In the sea, in the sea"), this is still Evie's perspective, "someone else" may refer to Ronnie, whose spectral presence she has been feeling that day. If, however, this is the narrator's commentary, the phrase may very well indicate the author himself, and the self-referential gesture he is performing here. The return of the third-person narrator, therefore, serves Swift only to re-emphasise the fundamental uncertainty of any discourse, as does the placing of the novel's central character beyond the diegetic present.

Whether as readers or as viewers, we will never know for certain, and indeed we should not. Evie's stubborn refusal to respond to the audience's desire to know the secrets of the trade is in itself a declaration here: "And did she find out anyway the answer to that central and enticing question? Magic: so how was it done then? / If anyone ought to have found out, it was her. But here was the crucial catch. If she'd found out, if she'd known, she could never have told, could she?" (90) To drive the point home more

forcefully, the motif is replayed in the figure of Ronnie's foster mother, Penny Lawrence: "She sometimes fancied she could write a book: 'I Married a Magician'. […] But of course she'd never write such a book, because it would involve telling, and you could never tell. It was forbidden" (183). Tellingly, these remarks mirror the virtually identical questions addressed at Jane, the writer in *Mothering Sunday*, and her equally categorical refusal to answer them: "Enough of this interview claptrap and chicanery. So what was it then exactly, this truth-telling? They would always want even the explanation explained! And any writer worth her salt would lead them on, tease them, lead them up the garden path."[16] Indeed, Jane's refusal is her primary principle as an artist: writing fiction "was about being true to the fact […] that many things in life – oh so many more than we think – can never be explained at all" (132). The purpose of literature is not to let its readers know for certain; it teaches us to embrace ambiguity, to function between reality and illusion, as does stage magic.

Finally, the themes of silence, ignorance, uncertainty, and absence resonate with the novel's handling of parental figures, as crucial here as ever in Swift's prose. Once known primarily for dissecting his protagonists' relations to their fathers – either great, domineering, suffocating in their unattainable perfection or failed, weak, incompetent ones – Swift has recently turned his attention to mothers more than ever before. Like in *Mothering Sunday* or *Wish You Were Here*, the presence of parents is most vividly felt when they are not there, and they almost never are. Jack's father is in fact a non-entity, defined only by the relation to his mother: "As for her 'first husband', there was a man who was truly nobody, truly nowhere: his father" (3). Evie's father is similarly only mentioned in passing, when her mother is being characterised: "Mothers of a certain upbringing themselves seemed to know [the value of motivation and hard work] and, especially if there was no father any longer available – here too Evie and Jack would discover they were similar – might be keen to pass this knowledge on" (16). Ronnie's father, a sailor, is forced into marrying his mother by her own father, and is mostly not part of his son's life. He becomes doubly absent when his ship is torpedoed during the war, although he is significantly never declared to be dead. The narrator's commentary on euphemisms used by adults to communicate the situation

[16] G. Swift, *Mothering Sunday*, p. 132.

to the surprisingly silent Ronnie betrays the dangers of language, its tendency to say too much or too little: "His father had been 'lost at sea'. He was 'missing'. These were the official phrases that conveyed yet muddled the truth. The Lawrences had wished, for considered reasons, to avoid any more definite words. So had any of it sunk in? Which was an unfortunate way of framing the question" (45).[17] Months later, when the boy is becoming accustomed to the thought of his father's death, the complexity of the very notion of absence is contemplated in a manner that echoes *Wish You Were Here*: "Ronnie [...] had almost got used to that fact by now. He had always been missing, after all. What was the difference? But there was a difference and Ronnie still struggled to understand it" (136). In *Wish You Were Here* the protagonist's brother, who had severed contact with family years earlier, only really becomes a presence in their lives again after they receive news of his death.

Ronnie himself only discovers real parental presence during the war, when he stays at the house of the rather affluent and educated Lawrences, who are not even his foster parents, properly speaking. The price of this discovery is final estrangement from his own working-class mother. In other words, he is only able to learn what it means to have parents at a time when his father dies and his mother is becoming alien to him: "Ronnie had never before had the opportunity to observe two grown-up people at close quarters, to see into their mysteries. It was perhaps that he'd grown up sufficiently himself, and yet it was strange that the Lawrences could exert this fascination which he'd never felt with his own parents" (36). The association of parenthood with absence is in fact signalled at the beginning of Ronnie's separation from his mother, in a comment made about Agnes tearfully sending him away to the countryside during the bombing of London: "This is what motherhood could sometimes mean: acts of dutiful resignation" (27). Years later, the death of Ronnie's surrogate father, followed by the missed encounter with his mother before her death only reinforce this impression. As a child, Ronnie himself makes a similar

[17] The same problem with language is demonstrated by the "system of postcards" (40) used by Ronnie and his mother. Both limit their messages to the most laconic formulas possible – Ronnie not to hurt Agnes by showing just how well he is doing without her, and she not to trouble him with the hardships of wartime in London. This is a rewriting of another motif from *Wish You Were Here*, whose very title indicates its preoccupation with absence and formulaic language.

observation about missing his father, one that rings true of many other of Swift's novels:[18]

> Ronnie would come to miss his father, rarely seen as he was, and would try to soothe the pain of it through his own philosophical reflection that surely he could only miss his father in the same way that he missed the parrot [a gift from his father, given away by his mother after his departure]: as one might miss an apparition and not a permanent fixture, as one might miss something that might not have been there in the first place. But then wasn't that true of everything? (24-5)

The father is thus a figure teaching us about absence – and about substitution, as Ronnie learns when he readily, if guiltily, accepts Eric Lawrence's consolation for his father's death. Ronnie cries "[f]rom guilt and dismay that he could cry now for his father yet feel that he had another already to replace him. From drowning gratitude that he'd been taken and dropped down in so much goodness" (47). This is a crucial lesson in a novel which devotes so much attention to the perplexing realities of grief, and in this sense Swift's inadequate parents always do play an important role in preparing their children for life. Consider Evie's thoughts a year after her husband's death: "And what's more extraordinary: that magicians can turn things into other things, even make people disappear and appear again, or that people can anyway one day be there – oh so there – and the next day never be there again? Never" (84). Again, the importance of this sense of amazement at someone's absence is stressed by Ronnie making a parallel observation when he arrives too late to see his ailing mother. After being informed she is dead, he is offered the possibility of seeing her, and reacts with a typically Swiftian amazement at the inappropriateness of the phrase and soon transforms into a reflection on the very reality of death: "See her? But how could he see her if she was no longer there? But then again, when the thing was put to him, how could he not? How could he have said, 'No thanks,' and turned around?" (129) The strangeness of the situation is revealed through the double meaning of the verb – "to see" means "to perceive an object visually" but also "to meet someone," and Ronnie is clearly doing one but not the other. This, in turn, leads to a much harder truth about loss: "This was his mother and he would not – could

[18] Especially, though by no means exclusively, *Ever After*.

not – be here, standing here, were it not for her. This was his mother, yet she had vanished. Yet she was still here. How could anyone, anything, just vanish?" (130)

Ronnie's missed encounter with Agnes discloses another aspect of the handling of motherhood in *Here We Are*, also reminiscent of *Wish You Were Here*: whereas fathers teach their children through their silence and/or absence, mothers are portrayed as a powerful driving force, manipulating and controlling their children from behind the scenes, remaining with them despite temporary or permanent separation. The force of the maternal voice – and gaze – recurring at various points in the narrative, is perhaps demonstrated most forcefully when Ronnie sees his mother's lifeless body: "And there she was. And wasn't. […] He was seeing her and he was not seeing her, though he could not beat back an even more bewildering possibility. Was *she* seeing him? Even judging him? Even delivering upon him her last judgement, her last unanswerable taunt" (129). Evie's own cordial, supportive mother, Mabel White, a glaring exception in the host of absent, distant parents of *Here We Are*, is also a voice heard constantly by her daughter. She is, however, somewhat overshadowed by Agnes. In fact, when considering how well she is getting along with Jack, Evie attributes this to his own 'theatrical' mother, but at the same time realises that "this only raised again the issue of how different Ronnie's mother must be" (115). Evie imagines Ronnie's mother as double, further reinforcing her significance: "When she pictured Ronnie's mother, she pictured two mothers at bitter war with each other in the same person. One called Agnes, with a heart of stone, one called Dolores, with a heart only waiting to melt" (113). The significance of mothers is pushed to the forefront during the fateful night when Ronnie is away, saying goodbye to his mother, and Evie goes to bed with Jack. She thinks of Mabel, who has met both her fiancé and Jack, and calmly reflects she might have to bring her up to date at some point: "One day there might have to be some explaining. Guess what, Mum. / In the dark they'd talked about mothers. Everyone has to have one. It was the topic of the day" (144). Characteristically, although the topic is undeniably marked, there is little detail as to what has actually been said. Jack's later remark is equally unhelpful in its terseness: "It was a Friday night, and she got to know Jack a lot more, even to know, a little bit, his mother, though she'd never met Jack's mother either. 'Mothers,

Evie, who'd have 'em?'" (145) Once again, the close intertwining of the two events is reinforced by the impression that Ronnie gets after returning from his decisive journey: "He had been to see his mother, who'd been there and not there. There was in each dissembling situation that had faced him one after the other a feeling of the world's having revealed its underlying falsity, as if the two confrontations might have been the same" (158-59). Early in his childhood, Agnes had sold the parrot given Ronnie by his father (a gift she had never approved), and when asked about its disappearance, she responded with a blatant lie. This is a formative moment in Ronnie's relation to her – and to reality in general: "he was conscious that he was getting a sharp lesson in the ways of the world at which he was miserably unproficient. […] His mother was not the woman he thought he knew" (21). When Evie leaves him for Jack, the master magician learns that this is indeed "true of everything," that reality needs not meet our expectations. And just like in his childhood, he is unable to say anything in the face of this renewed realisation.

Here We Are is therefore a quiet triumph in displaying its author's incomparable mastery at strategic use of silence as much as the words that actually appear in his novels. And, to repeat what was observed earlier, the theme of stage magic is perfectly suited for Swift's writing, which has always relied on over- or understatement, and always investigated both the limitations of speech and the functions of silence. Swift is still very much the magician here, and while much has been said about his disappearing act in his fist-person narratives (hiding behind the protagonist, becoming a ventriloquist, controlling the discourse without revealing himself), these days the magic trick has been reduced mainly to how his language both creates and obscures the images he offers to his readers.

No more drama

The article is a review of *Here We Are*, the latest novel by contemporary English novelist Graham Swift, published in the spring of 2020. The text is considered in the context of the author's earlier work, which the often self-reflexive narrative references at a number of points. The author's use of understatement and the motif of parenthood also receive the reviewer's attention.

Key words: Graham Swift, *Here We Are*, contemporary English novel, silence, self-reflexivity
Słowa kluczowe: Graham Swift, *Here We Are*, współczesna powieść angielska, milczenie, autorefleksyjność