FORMS OF AFFLICTION AND IDENTITY IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S NOVELS

Alexandra Roxana Mărginean, PhD
Romanian-American University, Romania

Abstract

This paper looks at forms of affliction in Graham Swift's novels. The idea is to analyse these in order to see the way identity is constructed by the characters in some special circumstances that test one's physical endurance, nerves and resolve. The first case scenario we are looking at is the objectification of one's body, going beyond the classical instance of women being reduced to sex objects, and looking at the way one's gaze may objectify a man as well, in a totally different sense than a sexual one. For this latter example we go into Lacan's theory about the mirror image. Other special instances of objectification under analysis are the symbolical reduction of the person to a dummy or an automaton, the implications of which are dwelled on in detail. The second part of the paper gets into more concretely violent forms of abuse – mutilated bodies, either in war or by torture, rape and even murder/suicide – explaining their impact on the characters' psychological profile and the personality/identity modifications that they entail. The conclusion of the paper is that apparently destructive elements may display building potential when it comes to identity.

Keywords: Identity, affliction, ambiguity

Introduction

Sometimes identity and subjectivity emerge in the most unexpected instances. We generally assume that self-assertion occurs or is more evident whenever the individual feels most empowered, in a position of superiority in relation to the others, as self-assertion is paired in common knowledge with freedom of one's actions. However, if we look at it from a different angle, we may plead for the idea that, on the contrary, it is when individuals are at their most vulnerable state that they give through their actions and attitudes the true measure of their personality and nature. A vital state of affairs may bring out unknown potential – either (for) good or bad deeds – from an individual, a potential that people may not have been aware of, and which may not have become known or surfaced at all in unexceptional positions. It is this latter aspect that I am interested in here.

Hence, I will firstly analyse instances in which the characters in Graham Swift are abused, in order to extract personality features and the way they build their identities in those difficult situations, following the logic that sometimes critical circumstances are the most revealing for who one really is. Secondly, we will see how interpretations referring to identity and certain roles played by the characters in Swift's fictional novelistic world are ambiguous, showing that things are never black and white, but preserve their elusiveness, challenging the reader to extract her/his own conclusions and to read between the lines.

Objectified Bodies

We will first look at instances of objectified bodies. By objectification we understand here an abuse in the form of the reductionism of the person to its body, and of the body to an object. It is usually done by others, bringing an affront to the individual, but it may be

performed to one's own body, for various reasons. Probably the most common context is considering women sex objects. In *Shuttlecock*, Prentis objectifies his wife, Marian, when he takes advantage of her flexibility, comparing her to the soft substance of "clay" (Swift 1992b: 27).

Turning the body into an object is primarily done through gaze. When gazes are sexual, the "victims" are most commonly women, but not exclusively. In *The Light of Day*, Sarah's portrait is a result of George's analysing stare. On the one hand, his interest is in her as a client, for aspects that potentially help the case. From the information obtained visually, he can approximate her financial status, in order to infer potential advantages for him as a payee. On the other hand, George's gaze is also sexual. Details such as the way light falls on her knees, while sitting in his office on the client's chair, make her vulnerable to him (*Ibidem*: 19). He is unprofessional, abusive in his position of a detective, while she seems to be the victim. However, one should not dismiss the possibility that she may be capitalising upon her beauty, manipulating him, in order to draw his attention to her and obtain a more involved collaboration from George.

Gazes are not always sexual, or directed at women in Swift's world. In *Ever After*, Bill Unwin's gaze in the mirror and his failure to recognise himself show his self-alienation. This feeling is the consequence of his attempted suicide, and the ensuing (as well as previous) trauma. However, Unwin confesses that he has always felt this way: "I recognise that I have never truly recognised it [his face]" (Swift1992a: 3). The sensation haunts him "especially these days" (*Ibidem*: 118), but not only, so it is not necessarily related to recent events. In Lacanian terms, misrecognition occurs when the infant cannot integrate the image (s)he sees in the mirror. Although (s)he recognises its correspondence with the boundaries of his/her own body, its ideal integrity cannot be identified with the imaginary "I", which has been experienced as incoherent. Bill has a similar feeling. He is surprised at his corporal integrity and at his ability to perform as an actor. Therefore, he experiences himself as a fraud, as unreal. He faces the task of self-reconstruction, as he wants the result to be authentic, not a mask. This self, which he feels to be illusory, points to the theme of simulacra. It shows Bill and his discourse as ambivalent.

Besides alienation, this mirror image also produces a positive effect, of "defence against the anxiety of bodily fragmentation" (Bonner 1999: 239). The mirror presentation of the individual as a unit exorcises the anxiety that this integrity is available to the subject only through the eyes of the other (*Ibidem*: 240). This fear is born around the age of eight months, (but stays throughout one's life), and bears the name of "stranger anxiety" (Spitz qtd. in Bonner 1999: 240) or "wariness" (Kaplan qtd. in Bonner 1999: 240). It is as if a "'confiscation' of the subject by the others who look at him" (Merleau-Ponty qtd. in Bonner 1999: 241) could take place, potentially resulting in desire for the other, in order to retrieve one's self. Bill's image depended on Ruth, who made him interesting to the others, and on Sam, who was his "other" as a plastic man of surrogates. Their death may have left Unwin without an image of his self, which he now tries to recuperate by glancing in the mirror. However, absence of the other(s), whom one's image depends on, may also be an opportunity to (re)create oneself outside their authority. Without their help, the individual could obtain a more "real" self, which Bill may in fact be attempting in his gesture. Ambivalence of both the interpretation of the mirror glance and Bill's empowerment is preserved.

In *Shuttlecock*, in the subway, people are subjected to each other's aggressive gazes. Even purposefully not watching somebody else is aggressive, because it is a reminder of the inescapability of the situation shared by the commuters. They are strangers violating each other's private space. Proximity makes them more visible to the other, and thus more vulnerable. Prentis ends up imitating the deliberately daring, self-confident, and zealous manner in which certain citizens in the subway move. These busy people hold jobs that

integrate them in the system of privileged positions of the metropolis. Their demeanour lends them an aura of importance. It is an image of success that Prentis copies and transmits to the others around him. However, he rejects this projected, socially integrated self, which is merely dissimulated by him as a survival strategy.

In *The Light of Day*, George's daughter, Helen, objectifies her own body as a place of protest: "She had a stud struck in the side of her nose […] In those days that sort of thing hadn't yet become a kind of uniform." (Swift2004: 62) This form of manifestation is self-expression, (therefore use of the body to this purpose), as well as abuse – a somewhat violent alteration of its natural state. It is empowerment by showing the courage to defy norms, but also integration: non-conformity is, for people her age, a type of conformity. Underneath her nonconformist appearance, in school she abides by rules, being an exemplary student, particularly in Art and History. By means of her body, she abuses both positions – the rebel and the good girl. Her revolt is against George, as he is Helen's other in three respects. Firstly, he is her father, so her other by power position and generation gap. Secondly, Helen rejects patriarchy, which is visible in her sexual orientation. Thirdly, her father is the servant of a system that relies on rationality, facts, evidence, and practicality, whereas her preoccupations show an inclination towards aesthetics, art, the unpractical and the beautiful. Despite these aspects, she proves to be on his side, not on her mother's, which subverts her own subversion again.

The reduction of the person to a "dummy" takes place in *The Sweet-Shop Owner*, in the case of Will Chapman. He feels like "someone borrowed for the occasion", reduced to the function of a bridegroom, merely necessary as ornament, as "to have a wedding, you needed a bridegroom" (Swift 1993: 23). To Irene, he is "only something to occupy her with" (*Ibidem*: 22). To the others, he is a hollow, nicely-decorated package, an exhibit for the sake of the ceremony and saving appearances. Reduced to a straw man, he is allowed to exist in a position for as long as he does not upset the plans made for him by others. In his roles, he is a puppet that moves according to the way the strings are pulled. He is not supposed to have emotions or a will of his own. He must function within strict, pre-established routines, with exterior, controlled progression. His identity is not really his, and his personality is annihilated: "The content was unimportant. It was the layout that mattered." (*Ibidem*: 24) Nevertheless, as long as he finds a place, it suits him to perform received roles. Even if it gives him no freedom of expression in the creative sense, at least it spares him the trouble of inventing himself. For a weak character such as Will, this reductionism is a type of agency.

The automaton is related to the dummy. It implies reductionism, and a loss of feeling and humanity. It is, however, more complex in signification and potentialities. As we have seen in *Shuttlecock*, Prentis feels replaced by the Bionic Man, a character that his children see on television, which becomes their hero and surrogate father figure. This situation initially makes the protagonist resort to violence towards the other members of the family, in order to reassert his place by force. Prentis's attitude to the Bionic Man is ambivalent. He unconsciously both takes it as a landmark of masculinity, and rejects it, by turning off the TV. In order to understand this interaction, we should look into Baudrillard's theory on metafunctionality.

Since an automated object "works by itself", it displays "resemblance to the autonomous human being" (Baudrillard 1999: 111). A gizmo is an unnamable thing, whose purpose is not always known, but whose most important feature is that "it *works*" (*Ibidem*: 114). It also suggests that "for every need there is a possible […] answer", with the implication that the world has "already been 'operated on'" successfully (*Ibidem*: 116). Consequently, any gizmo represents the fulfilment of basic human dreams and needs: autonomy, functionality of both oneself and of the world, mastery of the world, and the idea that the world is governed by Order. The functionality of the object is associated with that of

the human body, by transfer: "The myth of the wonder-working functionality of the *world* is correlated with the fantasy of the wonder-working functionality of the *body*." (*Ibidem*: 117) Since Prentis feels disempowered, to him the robot's functionality is a mocking reminder of his vulnerability. Moreover, as he is frustrated by his not knowing how the world "works", the Bionic Man also reminds him of his ignorance.

Ambivalently, the robot is also a reassertion of human creativity and empowerment. Due to its anthropomorphic quality, it is "a simulacrum of a man as a functionally efficient being" (*Ibidem*: 120). The resulting empowerment may be interpreted as sexual: "the gizmo, the ultimate tool, is basically a substitute for the phallus" (*Ibidem*: 117), a fetish. Although it is more efficient than the human being, it remains his/her slave, because it is *made* by a human and it is sexless (*Ibidem*: 120). Thus, the robot is safely disabled in an important respect in comparison with a real person: it is "an object to which the world is subject yet which is simultaneously subject to my will" (*Ibidem*: 121). It is a part of the human being that has been "exorcised and turned into a sort of all-powerful slave" (*Ibidem*: 121). As long as it is a slave, it is meant to relieve anxiety. From these comments, another ambivalence results. The automaton gives the human being the possibility of an indirect mastery of the world, which offers safety, but also generates unease. The "sorcerer's apprentice", i.e. the robot, "may break its chains" and take control of its maker, making her/him redundant (*Ibidem*: 121). Both anxiety and relief are illustrated in Prentis's behaviour in relation to the Bionic Man. This particular robot hero is safely kept at a distance, as it only appears on television. Prentis can shut it off at will. At the same time, The Bionic Man brings him anxiety and separates him from his children. It is both his mirror and his other, part of him and a threat. It illustrates Prentis's ambivalence, as well as his (dis)empowerment.

Bodies of Affliction

The next focus is the body of affliction – the dismembered, mutilated, raped, murdered, and suicidal bodies. They metaphorically express identity crisis and decadent humanity.

In *Out of This World*,dismemberment is generally caused by war, and shown either during the carnage or in the aftermath, in various contexts. Firstly, there is the dismemberment caused on the front, captured by Harry Beech's camera. He photographs a pilot who had "a cannon shell up his arse" (Swift 1998: 105), and who was posthumously awarded a decoration for his acts of heroism in bringing back his plane and crew from Germany. The horrible details are given on purpose, to highlight the absurdity of human condition. Heroism does not exist: it is the noble appearance used to cover cruelty, blindness, and foolishness. The presentation of scabrous facts is a form of protest to these.

Secondly, war can make its effects seen and felt long after it is over. It leaves permanent physical mutilation, as in the case of Robert Beech, who wears arm prostheses. They are considered an "index of the twentieth century" (*Ibidem*: 200), due to their progressive technologisation. The ambiguity carried by such an object is transmitted to its owner. The prosthesis both maims and upgrades the body, indicating both its dysfunctionality and superior functionality. In Robert's case, it also shows absence of values and of humanity (in a double sense). It illustrates his statuses of hero and monster, aggressor and victim. The maimed body is figural of ambivalence of character, and thus of use and abuse of roles and positions.

As a violent act, war engenders a chain of violence within the mechanism of scapegoating, in René Girard's terms, causing further dismemberment and murder. An example is the Nuremberg process. The deaths of the twenty-one condemned prisoners are meant to satisfy the world's expectations of punishment for a whole series of violent acts. The condemned suffer not only physical, but also moral disintegration, by being declared

guilty and monstrous. Girard points out how violence is "deflected" to one or several individuals, who are made to bear all the responsibility and the guilt for "the troubled state of the community" (Girard 1977: 78). The effect is the appearance of a new community, based on common hatred, directed at this "surrogate victim" (*Ibidem*: 79). The mechanism is the following: "any community that has fallen prey to violence or has been stricken by some overwhelming catastrophe hurls itself blindly into the search for a scapegoat. Its members instinctively seek an immediate and violent cure for the onslaught of unbearable violence and strive desperately to convince themselves that all their ills are the fault of a lone individual who can be easily disposed of" (*Ibidem*: 79-80). Therefore, this process is no longer just about violence, but about the "*ills* or *sins*" of a community, as well as about people's need to know things and explain them in a satisfactory framework (*Ibidem*: 82). The vagueness of this knowledge is suggested here. Although it is "illusion" and "mystification", or in other words a lie, the mechanism has, nevertheless, genuine curative effects (*Ibidem*: 82). All these observations point to the ambivalent nature of the process and of its actors, in their roles. The members of the community are both victims and aggressors, cured and ill, just as the scapegoat is both poison and cure – *pharmakon* (*Ibidem*: 95) – guilty and innocent, within an interplay of use and abuse.

War also afflicts minds, jeopardising by trauma the integrity of the psyche. As a result of her grandfather's physical disintegration and death, Sophie suffers a mental breakdown, and needs psychiatric counselling. She sometimes describes her interactions with her psychiatrist as a metaphorical rape. This violent probing into her mind becomes associated with one into her body. Bodily violence becomes mind violence, which can be symbolically transferred back to the body. Sophie also resents Harry, her father, for his insensitivity in photographing the explosion scene. She authors the most violent discourse in the novel, triggered by trauma. Here, violence shows its characteristics: transmissibility and versatility.

In Swift's fictional world, the literally-raped body appears as well – Irene's, in *The Sweet-Shop Owner*. Hersexual assault by Hancock makes her a victim, but it is also a trigger for her decision to marry an uninteresting man. It leads to change of statuses, putting her in a position where she is abusing both Will and her parents, in an attempt to compensate for the harm done to her by her family and Hancock. From a victim, she becomes an oppressor. A(n) (ab)used body can therefore engender major role changes.

We will now explore war mutilation in its version of torture. Prentis Senior underwent torture in a detention camp, at Château Martine. The prisoners were "like animals in cages" (Swift 1992b:141). They had a fixed number of night pots, so, when these were not enough, the guards shot one of the detainees. An official, whom they referred to as *le gorêt*, interrogated prisoners in a special secret room, where nobody knew what was going on. Taking these facts into consideration, we may infer some of the torture techniques that were applied. The "reeducation" of prisoners (Surdulescu 2006: 77) refers to remodelling their personality through humiliation. Here, humiliation is present in the situation of the night pots, and in imposed nudity (when he escaped, Prentis Senior had no clothes on). "Internal unmasking" (*Ibidem*: 79) is peer betrayal, which Prentis suspects his father to have performed.

Torture targets submission, and, to variable extents, renunciation to self and values. In case these cannot be done by the individual, or if peer torture is involved (*Ibidem*: 80), simultaneously-held double attitudes occur. They are enacted through pretence, as role-plays. For example, the imprisoned sometimes take turns in acting as their peers' torturer, and as the tortured (*Ibidem*: 80). Such an experience entails the emergence of Girard's "monstrous double" (Girard 1977: 164) with its characteristics: possession (*Ibidem*: 165), "hysterical mimesis", and ritualistic structure (*Ibidem*: 166). In this process, "The subject watches the monstrosity that takes shape within him and outside him simultaneously." (*Ibidem*: 165)

Loss of speech is another form of both bodily and mental affliction. It happens to Irene (*The Sweet-Shop Owner*), who is ill with asthma, and to Prentis Senior (*Shuttlecock*),in whose case it is not really clear if it is not feigned. Merleau-Ponty explains loss of speech as a "refusal of co-existence" (Merleau-Ponty 1999: 161): "Loss of voice does not merely represent a refusal of speech, or anorexia a refusal of life; they are that refusal of others or refusal of the future" (*Ibidem*: 164). In Irene's case, this theory is proved valid by the way she refuses her husband's love.

Inability or refusal to speak may also point to an incapacity to swallow, figuratively speaking, a prohibition imposed on the person (*Ibidem*: 161). Swallowing "symbolises the movement of existence which carries events and assimilates them" (*Ibidem*: 161). Irene had to figuratively swallow and digest multiple afflictions. She had to behave in a reserved way, which was deemed as congruent with her exquisite beauty. The rape she suffered was a physical imposition on her, a violent breach of bodily limits. She was prohibited to manifest her will, both during the traumatic incident, and after, as her family forced her to hide it in order to keep up appearances. Swallowing and digesting are processes that happen out of sight. They are hidden and involve transgressions, consumption, a certain amount of energy, and transformation. They imply struggle: Irene had to invisibly learn to integrate experiences that were heavy and brutal, i.e. unpalatable; Prentis Senior also needed to cope with the experience of war torture, and with betraying his comrades. Both these incidents bear similarities with rape. They involve (bodily) transgression, pain, the necessity of integration, and various transformations.

From what we see here, we may conclude that the body is a multiple interface. It transforms "ideas into things" (*Ibidem*: 164), expressing identity. The bodily transformations mentioned above are means to show an invisible truth about the person, but they may also become weapons to conceal it.

In the novels, we have a lot of bodies abused by murder – on a large scale, (at war), but also individually, for various reasons. In *Out of This World*, the explosion of the Daimler on the Hyfield lawn blows up Robert and his driver's bodies. Sarah's husband, Robert, is a victim of her jealousy, in *The Light of Day*. Moreover, murder can be attempted against oneself, as by Bill Unwin, in *Ever After*. What leads him to it is the traumatic loss of his wife, which signifies loss of love and of a chance to happiness. Death occasions an interplay of events, and discourse, which construct the characters.

In *Last Orders*,the theme of dismemberment is mirrored in the occupation of a butcher, and in the insistence on the proximity of Jack Dodds's shop to the hospital and to the morgue. Anthropologically, animal meat is on the way towards transformation into food, which supports the human bodies that will one day become lifeless flesh as well (Turner 2007: XIII). Meat points to the triumph of both life and death, and to the human being as both predator and prey. This image has multiple implications. In a positive reading, animal carcasses suggest the survival and empowerment of the human being by appropriation of the world (*Ibidem*: XIII). Consumption, or taking in the world, also has social and religious connotations. It suggests conviviality, togetherness, and social interaction: "Eating is the origin of community, where festivals are celebrations of belonging and membership through a sharing of food" (*Ibidem*: XIII). From the Christian perspective of the Eucharist, food partaking has spiritual overtones (*Ibidem*: XIV). Moreover, it asserts the human condition of "embodiment" in the world (*Ibidem*: XIII).

However, there is a negative reading of the image of dead meat. Firstly, it calls attention to, on the one hand, the violence that dictates survival, as well as, on the other, the frailty of human condition (*Ibidem*: XIII). It shows human beings as both beast-like, essentially not different from the animals that they consume, and vulnerable, subject to the same laws of the cycle of birth, survival, and decay. Secondly, flesh evokes "sinfulness" and

sexuality (*Ibidem*: XIII). People no longer appear as grandiose and noble, but rather as mean and figuratively small.

Taking all these aspects into consideration, the image under analysis juxtaposes the sacred and the profane. In its turn, this juxtaposition reminds one of the plea for the legitimacy of subjective, alternative ways to the truth. The theme of dead meat involves both trust in human nature and distrust of it. It offers a simultaneously optimistic and pessimistic outlook on existence, and on the idea of making sense of the world.

Conclusion

Violence is apparently debunked by the narrators as evil. It is seen as destructive, desubjectivising, the mirror of a generalised crisis. On the other hand, it is shown to be creative of identity (by engendering discourse, roles etc.) Violence is versatile enough as to denote "loss or excess of meaning" (Wieviorka in Surdulescu 2006: 29). It creates identity types that are not "distinct, pure forms", but highly ambiguous: the "floating subject", of "loss of meaning"; the "hyper-subject", of excess of it; the "non-subject", or brainwashed servant; the cruel "anti-subject"; the "surviving" one, who merely tries to cope with situations (*Ibidem*: 31). Thus, it is a device that proves to be extremely fruitful to a discourse that is ambiguous and versatile itself, and which creates mostly hybrid identities of victims-aggressors. To Swift's characters, it may be seen as both a scourge and a catalyst for identity creation and for the pursuit of duty as self-fulfilment. From the afflicted bodies, both further affliction (in passivity), and the agents of these processes may arise.

The narrators' discourse is sometimes aggressive. They are looking for someone or something to blame for the crises they experience, and find it in the dominant authority and discourses. This makes them mirrors of the executioners of scapegoats, (who are already ambivalent). They are also the scapegoats, as they do not accept the dominant master narratives, (of progress, heroism etc.), and are thus outsiders, and to blame. They claim that the cult of reason has in fact made violence subtler, more deeply ingrained and undetectable in the very mechanisms and narratives people live by in everyday life. An example is television, made available by technology. Television desensitises people to violence through the distance ensured by the screen – called in psychology "cathodic anesthesia" (Surdulescu 2006: 51), a point made by Bauman as well (Bauman 1998: 151).

Generally, the negotiation of roles, their ambivalence, and identity formation entail a sort of symbolic violence themselves. By announcing symbolical deaths (Surdulescu 2006: 94), the ("post") position taken by the narrators is violent. However, Swift's character-narrator does not execute a violent discourse just for the sake of dismantling truths. (S)he is not merely performing a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (*Ibidem*: 92) to show how deplorable things have become. (S)he takes refuge in duty and/or emotional involvement and thus uses the announced endings as starting points to construct something.

References:

Baudrillard, Jean. The System of Objects. Translated by James Benedict. London: Verso, 1999.

Bauman, Zygmunt. Life in Fragments. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

Bonner, Charles W. "The Status and Significance of the Body in Lacan's Imaginary and Symbolic Orders" in Welton, Donn, ed. The Body. Classic and Contemporary Readings. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999. pp. 232- 251.

Girard, René. Violence and the Sacred. Translated by Patrick Gregory. London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "The Body in Its Sexual Being" in Welton, Donn, ed. The Body. Classic and Contemporary Readings. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999. pp. 158-166.

Surdulescu, Radu. The Raping of Identity. Studies on Physical and Symbolic Violence. Iaşi: Institutul European, 2006.
Swift, Graham. Ever After. London: Picador, 1992a.
Swift, Graham. Out of This World. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1998.
Swift, Graham. Shuttlecock. New York: Vintage Books, 1992b.
Swift, Graham. The Light of Day. London: Penguin Books, 2004.
Swift, Graham. The Sweet-Shop Owner. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.
Turner, Brian S. The Body and Society. Explorations in Social Theory. Second Edition. London: Sage Publications, 2007.