

**Shock Tactics:
The Art of Linking and Transcending Victorian and
Postmodern Traumas in Graham Swift's *Ever After***

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Abstract:

It is the purpose of this paper to argue that trauma constitutes the bond between the Victorian and postmodern civilisations such as they are depicted in Swift's *Ever After* (1992). By fictionalising the Darwinian, nuclear and ontological crises, Swift manages to capture the quintessence of both nineteenth- and late twentieth-century senses of loss, deprivation and doubt. Beyond the historicised treatment of trauma, what interests Swift in this novel is the ethical dimension of trauma, which he explores by reassessing the suffering of the minor actors of history. As a reader of the recent and distant past, Swift takes on the responsibility of historical testimony and embodies the ethics of witnessing. As a novelist juxtaposing, comparing and adjoining Matthew's ethics of truth and Bill's ethics of dissolution, he embodies the specifically postmodern version of an ethical plurality. What is also, and perhaps mainly, postmodern in Swift's novel is the deconstruction of the concept of transcendence and its replacement by the concept of excedance, that is, the ethical urge to explore forms of otherness, as defined by Emmanuel Levinas. Swift illustrates this ethical drive by textualising the infinite otherness – and, of course, similarity – of our Victorian alter egos. As such his quest is typical of neo-Victorian fiction which can be considered as a form of literature of excedance.

Keywords: ethics, *Ever After*, excedance, postmodernism, Graham Swift, trauma.

In a catastrophic age [...] trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves. (Caruth 1995: 11)

Cathy Caruth's transhistorical comment in the epigraph aptly stresses the connective propensity of traumatic experiences – even if it is limited to the white, western world and thus fails to take into account the wide variety of other, and particularly postcolonial, types of trauma.¹ It is the purpose of this article to show that this connectivity constitutes the unifying device of Graham Swift's multi-layered *Ever After* (1992) written at the beginning of “the 1990s [the] times of looking back in order to see ahead” (Waldrep

2000: 62). Swift's novel, starting as it does with the contemporary protagonist's confessions after a failed attempt at suicide, is almost entirely retrospective. Bill Unwin's depressive thoughts systematically lead him to the past, his own past, his wife's, his parents', his other relatives' past, and eventually the (past) life of his Victorian ancestor Matthew Pearce – whose notebooks he inherits from his dead mother. As a teacher of literature, Bill often reflects on the solace of poetry, which allows the novel to nourish and develop a meta-literary vein; as the recipient of a Victorian manuscript, Bill adopts a historian's attitude, which allows the novel to nourish and develop a meta-historical vein. The historical self-consciousness of *Ever After* cannot but recall *Waterland* (1983), Swift's other fictional masterpiece, where the protagonist is also a middle-aged, male teacher in a state of shock. Trauma in its repetitiveness and ubiquity features prominently in *Waterland's* idiosyncratic and definitely postmodern theory of history. An analysis of this historical dimension of trauma might then represent a relevant complement to the study of the ethical side of trauma undertaken in this paper.

Ever After is too often approached as a novel with a single narrative voice,² whereas there are two main narratives, Bill Unwin's and Matthew Pearce's, a late twentieth-century voice and a Victorian voice. In other words *Ever After* is too often perceived as a specifically contemporary work, whereas it is a neo-Victorian work whose interest lies precisely in the establishment of bonds between a postmodern and a Victorian state of affairs. Swift's novel's particular postmodernism, which I want to suggest, is typical of much of neo-Victorian fiction's postmodernism and also of the synthetic and syncretic type of postmodernism of late twentieth-century British fiction, consists then in connecting various traumas, various contexts and various aesthetic traditions – a connexion which is also explored by the other main representatives of British postmodernism like John Fowles, Jeanette Winterson, A.S. Byatt, Peter Ackroyd, D.M. Thomas, Julian Barnes or Angela Carter. Through this labour of interconnection Swift also establishes parallels and comparisons, which inevitably call for a series of reconsiderations of both the near and the distant pasts. It is by reassessing history and its actors, be they famous or anonymous, that Swift includes the ethical dimension in his novelistic undertaking. This return of ethics, it seems to me, is fundamental in the appraisal of neo-Victorian fiction's

postmodernism – as opposed to the determinedly aesthetic emphases of early postmodernism’s more formal experimentations.

What appears striking in the two traumatic experiences depicted and interrelated in *Ever After* is their highly historicised quality, and it is with this historical contextualisation that I want to begin. In her seminal article, Sally Shuttleworth states that it is the hallmark of what she calls “retro-Victorian fiction” to display “an absolute, non-ironic fascination with the details of the period, and with our relation to it” (Shuttleworth 1998: 253). By thus “recreating the detailed texture of an age”, the contemporary fictions of the Victorian period manifestly aim at connecting characters and context, story and history,³ the particular and the general (Shuttleworth 1998: 255). In *Ever After* the reconstitution of the Victorian context is effectuated through a subtle combination of first-hand testimony and *a posteriori* research. The extracts from the surveyor Matthew’s diary – full of information about the biological discoveries of his time, the craze of the copper mines or the building of bridges – are constantly complemented by the twentieth-century narrator’s investigations about Darwin, Brunel or the development of the Western Railway. To diversify his historical presentation Swift associates information and analysis, scientific insight and interpretative hindsight. By focusing on Matthew Pearce’s Darwinian crisis of faith, Swift also manages to inscribe his historical contextualisation within a richly literary framework. Matthew’s Darwinian epiphany, eventually leading to his dramatic apostasy, takes place in Lyme Regis when “he had come face to face with an ichthyosaur” (Swift 1992: 89). Lyme Regis cannot but evoke the setting of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* (1818),⁴ and the confrontation with a fossil inevitably recalls Henry Knight’s shattering experience in Thomas Hardy’s *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873) (see Hardy 1985: 209-213). When one takes into consideration that these references are self-consciously taken up in Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) and that *Ever After* transparently draws on Fowles’s pioneering neo-Victorian novel,⁵ one realises that through this “palimpsestic stratification of literary forebears” Swift “completes a postmodern cyclicity, *Ever After* being a novel commenting on a novel commenting on the nineteenth-century novel” (Lea 2005: 136-137). Even in the intertextual network, Swift suggests the interdependence of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as if he were systematically exploring

the ramifications, in history and in literature, of one of his paradigmatic metaphors, that of geological stratification.

The historical context of Bill Unwin's narrative is just as complex, since his late twentieth-century, post-suicidal situation cannot be disentangled from the vexed issue of his paternity. As Peter Widdowson has established, it is the Second World War which constitutes "the key formative event" of Bill's present state of affairs, particularly because both his biological father and the man whom he had always considered as his father prove to be casualties of the war and its nuclear conclusion (Widdowson 2006: 67). Although this event is chronologically closer to Bill than the Darwinian crisis, there is no historical documentation about it and this absence is indeed very meaningful, signalling as it does Bill's exclusion from the history of his own time. As to Bill's very contemporary context, it is encapsulated in two extended metaphorical paradigms, the plastic industry with its "polymerization of the world" and play-acting with its "grotesque performances" (Swift 1992: 7, 119), both of which point to Guy Debord's notion of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1998) and to Jean Baudrillard's theory about postmodernity as the advent of a new order of simulations (Baudrillard 1983).⁶ Here again the historical context has major literary corollaries, this time not in the field of intertextuality but in the very method of composition. The twenty-two chapters of *Ever After* do not follow any temporal or thematic principle; they oscillate in a haphazard way between Bill's present post-suicidal situation, his parents' background, his more distant forbears' history, his Victorian relative's life and diaries, and even his putative Renaissance ancestor's vicissitudes. If one were to draw a diagram of the temporal links between the various chapters one would end up with a series of criss-crosses and entanglements that would constitute a telling metaphor of the narrative's chaotic structure.

The novel's muddled arrangement in terms of chronology can only be understood as the result of the principle of the association of ideas, and this principle can only be understood as the result of a psychoanalytical undertaking aimed at coming to terms with the loss of his father caused by the Second World War. The association of ideas is for the structural logic of the novel what the stream of consciousness is for its syntagmatic chain. Bill's historical orphanhood may also explain his quest for historical forebears (in the guise of Matthew Pearce) and for literary models – in the guise of Hamlet, for example. The specifically postmodern context, on the

other hand, accounts for the extreme fragmentation of both structure and syntax: the loss of ontological and epistemological landmarks in a culture of simulacrum initiates what Andrew Gibson calls “an ethics of dissolution” which, in the field of fiction, means “an ethics of the novel which emphasizes multiplicity and the movement of the dissolution of cognitive horizons” (Gibson 1999: 91). If one is to believe Brian McHale’s contention that “the dominant of postmodernism is ontological”,⁷ then another distinctly postmodern feature of *Ever After* is its ontological questioning (McHale 1989: 10). Bill repeatedly meditates upon the essence of the real and of the self – “[s]o what is real and what is not? And who am I? Am I this, or am I that?” – and these meditations are systematically related to his task as a writer trying to recreate a historical being “part truth, part fiction” (Swift 1992: 90). The self-reflexively ontological interrogation of the real appears especially relevant, since it is related to the paradigmatic exploration of the notion of ‘the real thing’, one of the novel’s leitmotifs. Considering that the novel begins by positing the equivalence “[r]eal: that is, flimsy, perishing, stricken, doomed” and that it goes on by stressing contemporary reality’s derivative, second-hand, defiled, polymerised nature, one cannot but perceive that the insistence on the apparently assertive real thing is in fact pervaded with ironic doubt (Swift, 1992: 2). When the narrator ends up associating the repetitive phrase with his love for Ruth – “Ruth and I were the real thing” – the irony becomes blatant because of the obsessive references to unfaithfulness – “an old story. Cuckoo! Cuckoo!” – and because of the intertextual evocation of Tom Stoppard’s play, *The Real Thing* (1982), a play which is precisely about infidelity (Swift 1992: 149, 212).⁸ Clearly then, the real thing *in* the novel and the real thing *of* the novel are equally deconstructed, so as to highlight the challenging of the text’s basic ontological concepts. So the ontological reflexion leads to intertextual or metafictional practices, thus linking the ideological and aesthetic practices in a convincingly coherent artistic project. Through his emphasis on a problematics of ontology-cum-metafiction Swift leads a parallel exploration of the nature of man and the nature of fiction, of ontology and literature, identity and textuality, the body and the text, the text of the body and the body of the text.

If we take stock of Bill’s historical situation it becomes manifest that he is a fitting representative of postmodernism in general. As an heir to the advent of nuclear warfare and its unacceptable legacy, Bill cannot connect

with his recent past. As a witness of a civilisation of the fake, he cannot connect with his immediate present. His quest for more distant forebears, particularly Victorian ones, appears then as a logical consequence of his doubly forced rejection. Similarly, postmodernism born in the aftermath of Hiroshima and highly critical of its own culture of “the precession of simulacra” naturally turns towards pre-1945 ethical and aesthetic models, from which to effectuate a labour of comparison, reconsideration or re-enchantment (Baudrillard 1983). To give another illustration, one could turn to A.S. Byatt’s now canonical *Possession* (1990). Among the numerous characters of this foundational neo-Victorian novel, Roland Michell incarnates the figure of the hero, not mainly because of his narrative prominence but because the narrative techniques direct the reader’s benevolent affects towards him. As the hero, Roland becomes a privileged axiological medium and his position can therefore be seen as emblematic. In the bulk of the novel, Roland appears diminished, hindered and inhibited by his poststructuralist upbringing. As far as his identity is concerned,

[h]e has been trained to see his idea of his ‘self’ as an illusion, to be replaced by a discontinuous machinery and electrical message-network of various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language forms and hormones and pheromones. (Byatt 1990: 424)

His self-deconstructed identity manifests itself most blatantly in the field of sexuality where theoretical self-consciousness and metadiscursive habits lead to paralysis and inability. It is in the field of poetic expression, though, that the trauma of his deconstructionist education is most acute, insofar as it literally blocks his creative attempts: “He had been taught that language was essentially inadequate, that it could never speak what was there, that it only spoke itself” (Byatt 1990: 473). It is by studying closely and thoroughly pre-structuralist poetic creation and getting acquainted with prestructuralist passionate and uninhibited behaviours that Roland manages to find his poetic voice and to make his romantic choice; in other words, it is by immersing himself in the analysis of a Victorian model (with its achievements and failures) that *Possession*’s hero succeeds in overcoming his specifically postmodern traumas.⁹ If postmodernism is indeed “the true age of anxiety” (Bracken 2002: 181), it is primarily so because of its

ontological crises, which upset, modify and even overturn the concepts of subject and text, thus overwhelming the narrative and discursive contracts and their inevitable combination of these two concepts.

To come back to Swift's novel, the careful historical contextualisation cannot be reduced to what Shuttleworth calls the "forms of nostalgia", be it only because the contemporary conjuncture is just as particularised as the Victorian (Shuttleworth 1998: 253).¹⁰ The interest of *Ever After*'s historicity lies in its capacity to augment the narrative with additional dimensions. The insistence on Victorian positivism, for example, highlights the idea of epistemological transience, especially since it is presented in parallel with the contemporary ethos of doubt and the advent of the atomic bomb, a cruel demonstration, as the narrative voice repeatedly stresses, of the questionable nature of scientific progress.¹¹ The account of the Tavistock slave-workers in the copper mines, on the other hand, fosters a vein of social criticism denouncing the oncoming capitalistic spirit, according to which "the stakes were dividends and miners' bellies" (Swift 1992: 218). Almost naturally, this critical tendency is carried out in the mode of social Darwinism, using an extended analogy between miners, slaves and insects:

Because in the habitat of their workplace they do indeed appear as so many termites labouring in the dark and occupying a literal sub-existence, we convert the appearance into substance. But by what perverted definition of common humanity do we pronounce that they are brutes and not we? (Swift 1992: 218)

Finally, the description of the birth of nuclear civilisation raises an ethical dilemma, which affects both Bill's father and Bill himself: what action is to be undertaken against such an outrage? The father answers that question by committing suicide, but the son can only record his absence from the protestations and demonstrations against this historic event. Manifestly then, his notes and thoughts, that is, the very text of *Ever After*, constitute his own ethical (albeit belated) response to the nuclear advent. Beyond these additional dimensions, what remains of paramount importance for Swift is the a-temporal, a-spatial, universal aspect of the novel – the human component. *Ever After*, then, is not, or not primarily, a historical novel but

rather a neo-humanist novel, which Cora Kaplan deems typical of what she terms “the new literary humanism” (Kaplan 2007: 161). The forms of human suffering are at the centre of Swift’s novelistic apparatus, and the historical parameter is only crucial insofar as it substantiates the types of trauma. By combining the Darwinian, nuclear and ontological torments, Swift masterfully manages to capture the quintessence of both Victorian and postmodern crises.

That the priority resides in individual traumas is obvious in the situations of enunciation. Both narratives, Bill’s embedded one and Matthew’s embedded one, are generated by a traumatic event: Bill starts to jot down his notes after a series of deaths leading up to his failed suicide, and Matthew initiates his diary immediately after the decease of Felix, his ill-named son, but several years after the shock of his encounter with an ichthyosaur that leads up to his gradual apostasy. Both narratives correspond, then, to the passage from traumatic memory to traumatic narrative, which Anne Whitehead sees as part and parcel of what she calls trauma fictions and in which the catastrophic events or experiences are “integrated into a chronology of the past and into the individual’s life story” (Whitehead 2004: 140). The main two narratives thus imitate the very principle of the traumatic experience which, according to LaCapra, is only registered belatedly and not during the very moment of its occurrence. Putting the trauma into words, narrativising the experience is one way of “working through” – LaCapra’s translation of Freud’s notion of *durcharbeiten* (LaCapra 1994: 48). Considering the shattered chronology of Bill’s double-layered narrative, one might add that the very form of his account mimics the form and symptom of trauma itself. As Whitehead contends, the narrative formulation of trauma “requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence” (Whitehead 2004: 6). In its extreme fragmentation *Ever After* proves typical of postmodernism and

its memory project. Its innovative forms and techniques critique the notion of history as grand narrative, and it calls attention to the complexity of memory. Trauma fiction emerges out of postmodernist fiction and shares its tendency to bring conventional narrative techniques to their limit. In testing formal boundaries, trauma fiction seeks to foreground the nature and limitations of narrative and to convey the

damaging and distorting impact of the traumatic event.
(Whitehead 2004: 82)

Quite remarkably the novel's formal variations and explorations (not only in terms of chronological sequence but also of discursive and narrative patterns) are not restricted to the contemporary narrative but include the reconstitution of the Victorian text and context. The crucially chronological principle of the Victorian diary, to take the most blatant example, is disrupted, and the extracts from the diary are (also) presented in a random, unpredictable fashion, following only the contemporary protagonist's arbitrary associations of ideas. In this inclusion of the Victorian strand in Swift's postmodern experiments one can see the relation of continuity between the Victorian and postmodern situations; one might even argue that through this formal contamination *Ever After* establishes a contiguity and a similarity between the Victorian and contemporary traumas. Bill's appropriation of his Victorian forefather's trauma does not limit itself to a formal quest; it also concerns the field of affects. It is because Bill identifies with Matthew – "You see, it is the personal thing that matters" (Swift 1992: 49) – because his forebear's plight deeply affects him, mirroring as it does his own plight, because he questions the Victorian surveyor's testimony, because he probes into the hidden, unsaid and hypothetical, that his reconstitution tallies with what LaCapra calls "a discourse of trauma", a discourse "that itself undergoes – and indicates that one undergoes – a process of at least muted trauma as one has tried to understand events and empathize with victims" (LaCapra 1994: 221), and which corresponds to the notion of "empathic unsettlement, a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position" (LaCapra, 2001: 78). By giving a few facts and texts about a Victorian drama and by raising innumerable conjectures about its causes and consequences, both Bill, in the strictly fictional realm, and Swift, as a reader of the past, take on the responsibility of historical testimony and embody therefore the "ethics of witnessing" (Kaplan, 2005: 135).

Because he assumes the role of a historical witness, Swift adopts the ethical position of the bulk of neo-Victorian novelists, who strive to lay bare and voice the various injustices, sexual, social or political, of the Victorian era while constantly urging us to consider the possible parallels or

continuations in our own contemporary period. It is through the restitution or fabrication of historical testimonies of trauma that Swift and his generic kindred restore the prevalence of ethics. By embracing an ethics of witnessing, neo-Victorian fiction

requires a highly collaborative relationship between speaker and listener. The listener bears a dual responsibility: to receive the testimony but also to avoid appropriating the story as his or her own. A fragile balance is engendered between the necessity to witness sympathetically that which testimonial writing cannot fully represent and a simultaneous respect for the otherness of the experience. (Whitehead 2004: 7)

By shifting its perspective from the self to the other or by integrating the other's perspective in the perspective of the self, neo-Victorian fiction "readjusts the relationship between reader and text, so that reading is restored as an ethical practice" (Whitehead 2004: 8).

In *Ever After*, both extra- and intra-diegetic narrators are then in a state of post-traumatic shock, while they record their thoughts (which constitute the bulk of the discourse) and the whole text is subsequently marked by the seal of mourning and suffering. According to Stef Craps, mourning is not only the dominant mode of *Ever After* but also of postmodernity in general – committed as it is "to living with loss and uncertainty as a permanent condition" (Craps 2005: 19).¹² In Swift's novel, even the moments of happiness are told from the perspective of pain, so that any kind of lightness or playfulness can only be analeptic or anamnestic. The particular enunciative principle of this doubly traumatic narrative is based on a split temporality where the dystopian present of narration is entirely devoted to coming to terms with the events of the past: the present is the temporality of reflection, while the past is the temporality of experience. It is in these retro-active postures, in these perspectives of reappraisal, reconsideration and re-examination, in this logic of dejected projection in time that the novel most resembles its narrators and best embodies the neo-Victorian obsession with the need for constant reassessment and ceaseless investigation of the past.

Comparing the nature of the catastrophic events, which shatter the two narrators, and their respective reactions, one notices major differences that extend beyond the sphere of fictional characterisation to amount to ideological statements about the protagonists' historical and ethical contexts. Matthew's is a religious crisis, the first catalytic element of which resides in his encounter with an ichthyosaur defying the laws of creation according to Scripture. This experience tallies with Caruth's analysis of trauma, the import of which lies not in the event itself but in

the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. (Caruth 1995: 4)

It is indeed only ten years after the event that Matthew registers what he calls "a moment of acute *perspicacity*" and which amounts to nothing less than an epiphany – albeit a belated and negative epiphany (Swift 1992: 100, original emphasis). For Matthew, then, starting a diary means starting to acknowledge to himself the reality of his "unbelief" (Swift 1992: 101), and this private acceptance leads progressively to a public confession, an avowal which costs him his home, family and happiness. Matthew's notes lay bare his struggle of conscience and partake of an ethical logic: the Victorian notebooks reveal a commitment to truth, which can be likened to Badiou's "ethics of truth", defined as the unconditional "fidelity to an event" (Badiou 2001: 42).

As Craps has remarked, Bill, in contrast with his Victorian ancestor, "cannot be suspected of any moral soul-searching. Too busy nursing his private melancholias to care about anyone else's predicament, Bill appears supremely unconcerned about the exigencies of the world which he inhabits" (Craps 2005: 140). In the present of narration Bill is either in his college room, reached by a medieval spiral staircase, the epitome of the ivory tower, or sitting in the college gardens behind a locked door with a special key, wholly isolated from the world at large and withdrawn in his individual concerns. Correlating Matthew's doubt and Bill's anomie, Widdowson likewise describes the former as "rigorous, finally unflinching, honest, marked by integrity" and the latter as "flabby, equivocating, self-deceiving, a 'substitoot' for 'the real thing'" (Widdowson 2006: 75). Bill's

pathology after his wife's death can be described as a kind of narcissistic melancholia characterised by an inability to achieve what Freud calls cathexis – “the canalisation of libidinal energy into a particular object-relation” (Lea 2005: 148).¹³ It might be argued that Bill's attempted suicide stems from the realisation that his wife is not irreplaceable and that therefore love, which he deemed sacred, can also be commodified and find substitutions. Both the pragmatic realisation and the escapist measure taken thereafter stand in sharp and unfavourable contrast with Matthew's earnest soul-searching and brave undertaking. The parallel that Bill insistently draws between himself and Hamlet, then, is only a futile attempt at bestowing a tragic dimension on his own discontent; it is also and fundamentally misleading insofar as Bill's predicament is precisely bereft of the historical, political and social dimensions which set apart the tragic hero. Cut away from his surroundings (and hence from his historical actuality), indifferent to others, Bill cannot be said to embody an ethical being, if one accepts that “the heart of ethics is the desire for community” (Siebers 1998: 202).¹⁴ The only ethical type Bill might represent is Gibson's already mentioned ethics of dissolution, defined negatively as the loss of “an original and fundamental unity” (Gibson 1999: 91).

If Bill's narcissism can indeed be read as a metaphor of postmodern narcissism, it would be a serious mistake to confuse the contemporary narrator's perspective with the global perspective of the novel. Admittedly, Bill represents an aspect or a symptom of postmodernism, but postmodernism as it appears in *Ever After* cannot be reduced to Bill's notes and thoughts. By choosing two narrative instances and perspectives, two radically divergent ethical attitudes, two historical civilisations, Swift makes it clear that for him the postmodernism of *Ever After* resides in the combination of the two paradigms. One perspective is superimposed on another and thus systematically included in a relativist principle. What is postmodern is not Bill's cynical assessment of his own culture of fakes, but the relations between Bill's perception, his father's moral crisis in a nuclear context and Matthew's positivist apostasy. In other words, what is postmodern is not Bill's incredulity towards all metanarratives, as opposed to Matthew's specifically religious and ethical qualms, but the comparison and adjunction of an ethics of dissolution, an ethics of witnessing, and an ethics of truth.

From the difference between the cases of Bill and Swift, the protagonist and the novelist, can be inferred the main difference between postmodernity and postmodernism. Bill is a reluctant witness of his own civilisation, and it is this post-war civilisation with its specific crises and practices that constitutes postmodernity, defined as the cultural state of affairs of the contemporary (ongoing) times. If the protagonist is willy-nilly included in that type of civilisational postmodernity, he takes no part whatsoever in postmodernism defined as an artistic practice. His rejection of the contemporary world (including the artistic world) and his love for seventeenth-century literature, because “the thing about a poem is that it is beautiful, beautiful”, make it clear that he has no taste for the aesthetic innovations of postmodernism (Swift 1992: 70). Swift, on the other hand, proves to be an ideal illustrator of the aesthetic art of amalgamation typical of postmodernism. He shares Bill’s love of canonical poetry and inserts several quotes as tokens of this particular kinship, but he also amply resorts to (typically postmodern) pastiches; he makes use of nineteenth-century hypotactic syntax, but he also employs paratactic stream of consciousness. Swift’s systematic use of traditions and practices from different eras and ideologies puts each tradition and practice in a perspective of relativity, just as postmodernity is at the same time exploited and criticised, so much so that the author of *Ever After* seems to illustrate to the letter Linda Hutcheon’s conception of the task of postmodernism as “both to enshrine the past and to question it” (Hutcheon 1988: 126).

Swift’s logic of addition extends to the aesthetic field since from the diverse ethical problems of his diegetic characters he conceives an aesthetics of diversity. To put it aphoristically, *Ever After* transforms individualist ethics into plural aesthetics. To concentrate on the formal choices, one might start with the narrative forms and notice the juxtaposition and interweaving of Matthew’s embedded diary and Bill’s embedding notes, that is, of Victorian chronology and earnestness and postmodern anarchy and cynicism. Interestingly, the Pearce manuscript, the epitome of orderly evolution, is here presented according to the haphazard pattern of Bill’s thought processes, thus fittingly illustrating the appropriation, the cannibalisation, the *postmodernisation*, one might be tempted to say, of Victorian material. Through the amalgamation of Victorian and late twentieth-century notes, Swift also combines pastiche and parody, the serious imitation of nineteenth-century prose and the ironic

recontextualisation of the fairy tale, romance or Shakespearean tragedy. The various literary traditions to which Swift resorts also amount to an attempt at voicing the ineffable. As different trauma theorists have made clear, “the traumatic event exceeds any possibility of description as literally unrepresentable” (Newman 1996: 164), its reality or referentiality being “untranslatable” (Caruth 1995: 5). By using several narrative voices, several literary models, several intertextual borrowings, Swift strives to reconstitute the whole of the traumatic experience by focusing on its various parts in a metonymic logic of accumulation. The kaleidoscopic method of *Ever After*’s aesthetic plurality highlights Swift’s crucial intuition that the translation of trauma can only proceed by fragmentation, in other words, that the representation of fracture is itself always already fractured.

Even more than the method, it is the finality of Swift’s fictionalisation of individual traumas which provides the main contention of this article and which will be briefly developed in this final part. On the basis of Gibson’s claim that “one of the responsibilities of a postmodern ethics is to resist all reductions of ethics to questions of stable identities”,¹⁵ one can safely maintain that Swift’s novel is fundamentally ethical in a postmodern guise (Gibson 1999: 78). Stability is indeed a concept which Swift deliberately undermines, be it in the field of epistemology, ontology or subjectivity. The presentation of Matthew is so replete with interrogations, uncertainties and enigmas that his subjectivity seems unfathomable,¹⁶ corresponding to Emmanuel Levinas’s conception of the other as “unknown and unknowable, refractory to all light, [...] a mystery” (Levinas 1995: 75). Bill as a subject of trauma remains similarly impenetrable, particularly because his ethical decisions are strategically left equivocal both at the end of the story and at the end of the novel. The end of the narration and its tautological exclamation, “[h]e took his life, he took his life” (Swift 1992: 261), makes it impossible for the reader to decide whether Bill finally overcomes his despair and takes his life in the sense of grasping it, or whether he performatively takes his life and, in the redundant logic of the utterance, repeats his suicide attempt. The end of the story, in terms of diegetic chronology, when Bill hands over the Pearce manuscript to Katherine Potter, does not specify the reason for this act of transmission: does Bill give up in his quest for understanding Matthew or does he accept the liberating unintelligibility of his Victorian alter ego? The very fact that

these questions should remain unanswerable shows that Swift treats subjectivity as an open, porous, undogmatic and undecidable concept.

If Bill's openness to the mystery of otherness remains questionable, the whole novelistic apparatus of *Ever After* proves that this is not the case for Swift. His ungraspable characters incarnate the other's limitlessness and this celebration of inexhaustible alterity can be correlated with Levinas's ethics of alterity. "The ethical relation", as Gibson, paraphrasing Levinas, reminds us, "is a relation to infinity [...], and begins precisely as the other in its infinity exceeds my representation of it, in the faltering or failing or 'ruin' of representation" (Gibson 1999: 57). It might be argued that the success of Swift's ethics of alterity resides in his cult of the failure of representation. Just as Matthew's "radical alterity [...] overflows the frame in which Bill seeks to enclose him", Bill's subjective enigma remains unsolved within Swift's novelistic framework (Craps 2005: 142). To a certain extent, Swift can be said to be constantly in search of what Levinas called the "epiphany of the other" thus leading an ethical quest *par excellence* (Levinas 1972: 50, own translation). This drive towards the other corresponds to the concept of excendence which Gibson, paraphrasing Levinas, defines as a dynamic reaching out to the exterior: "it turns us incessantly elsewhere, outside; not towards death, the timeless or supernatural (this would be the drive to *transcendence*, not *excendence*) but towards the other" (Gibson 1999: 37). Replacing transcendence by the concept of excendence allows the critic to make sense of Swift's project of demystification, a project which is nowhere more evident than in the systematic undoing of *Ever After*'s temptations to present love or literature as transcendental values.

What I would like to suggest as a conclusive consideration is that, in its openness to alterity, *Ever After* is quite typical of neo-Victorian fiction in general. The exploration on the part of the writer and the discovery on the part of the reader of the infinite alterity of the Victorian other and of the infinite others of Victoria alterity constitute ethical processes perfectly in agreement with the conception of excendence. The sheer variety of narrative, discursive and even iconic modes used to try and fathom the multiple forms of Victorian otherness bespeaks the neo-Victorian ethical determination to resurrect the vanished, ill-treated and ill-understood others. The empathy required to imaginatively recreate the diaries, letters, autobiographies or even thoughts and confessions of so many silenced

Victorian others – a fact which is substantiated by the predominance of first-person narratives in the reconstitutions of fictional Victorian worlds – bespeaks of the ethical desire not only to circumscribe the other but even to commune with the other. So close and so distant, the Victorian others, whom Hillis Miller paronomastically called the “wholly others” (Hillis Miller 1999: 165), are necessarily unknowable, necessarily in excess of our understanding and representation, necessarily beyond the possibility of possession. A literature which opens up to this radical otherness is per force engaged in an ethical endeavour which eschews both a narcissistic self-enclosure and the dogmatism of fixed definitions, conceptions and representations. A literature that seeks to understand someone “who is me but not myself” and to relate the givens of today to the mysteries of yesterday might be said to illustrate the concept of “transubstantiation”, which Levinas invoked to characterise the link across the rupture of generations (Levinas 1964: 271, 21). After the historical, epistemological or axiological approaches, it is time to consider neo-Victorian fiction as a literature of excedance.

Notes

1. In the light of recent works on trauma, it must be specified that Caruth’s statement, if it has a transhistorical validity, has to be amply qualified from a trans-spatial point of view. Indeed the precious insights of postcolonial approaches of trauma have shown a great reticence on the part of a variety of postcolonial subjects to be assimilated with the colonisers’ discourse, particularly because that discourse is most of the time built on the modality of the past, whereas the postcolonial discourse of trauma is still developed in the present. As Victoria Burrows puts it, “such a statement [on the part of Caruth] manifestly ignores power structures. [...] However, the ‘we’ remains undifferentiated and can be assumed almost exclusively to hold the privileges of whiteness” (Burrows 2008: 163). For a fruitful discussion of the limits of Caruth’s theory in the postcolonial context, see the whole of Stef Graps and Gert Buelens’ guest edited special issue on ‘Postcolonial Trauma Novels’ of *Studies in the Novel*, but especially their introduction (Graps and Buelens 2008: 1-12).

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2. See, for example, Daniel Lea's perspicacious study, though it focuses specifically on Bill Unwin's predicament (Lea 2005).
 3. For a study of the relations between history and story, see Gallix 2003: 52-56.
 4. The reference is almost signposted by Swift, since he introduces an incident of an injured ankle clearly echoing the similar incident in Austen's novel.
 5. There are many details in the field of scientific information, theological debate, and amorous experience, which link Swift's novel to Fowles's masterpiece.
 6. The critical exploration of various representations of the fake in *Ever After* may also bear witness to Eco's study of postmodernism, which displays the wonderfully rhetorical title *Faith in Fakes* (1995).
 7. The quote goes on to state that "postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground [ontological] questions" (McHale, 1989: 10), and this deployment adequately describes Swift's own strategy.
 8. That 'the real thing' is deconstructed by the intertextual reference to Stoppard's play is signalled by Catherine Pessa-Miquel, who points to act II, scene ix, as a passage of particular comparative interest (Pessa-Miquel 1988: 102).
 9. The same process seems at work in Byatt's other neo-Victorian novel, *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), where the protagonist experiences a "state of febrile excitement" after giving up his education characterised by "post-post-structuralist clutter" and plunging into the "glittering fullness of the life" of the great Victorian polymaths (Byatt 2000: 18, 165, 18). Here again postmodernism is experienced as a hindering screen of theory and Victorianism as a model of creativity, though not one devoid of excesses and injustices.
 10. Another argument against an accusation of nostalgia can be found in Swift's idiosyncratic novelistic style. The sheer jubilation of his prose, replete as it is with neological creations, iconoclastic formulae, clashing levels of speech (mixing Renaissance poetry and sexual slang, for example) and playful linguistic associations, distortions and borrowings, shows how deeply concerned Swift is with the handling of an up-to-date (as opposed to an obsolete) language. Similarly the structure of *Ever After*, because it is so manifestly a reflection of the chaotic thoughts of its contemporary protagonist, can in no way be said to imitate the structure of a novelistic model of the past.
 11. If one accepts the historical interrelation of the atomic conclusion of the second World War and the persecutions that occurred during that war, then

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- LaCapra's remark about the Shoah might also apply to Hiroshima: "Nowhere more than in discussions of the Holocaust do positivism and standard techniques of narrowly empirical inquiry seem wanting" (LaCapra 1994: 47).
12. Craps also maintains that, through the individual traumas of his narrators, Swift "manages to evoke the cultural pathologies of an entire nation, an empire, or even an era" (Craps 2005: 18).
 13. For a detailed analysis of Bill's trauma from a psychoanalytical point of view, see Lea 2005: 148-149. Interestingly, according to LaCapra, it is precisely the true recorder of trauma, i.e. the historian (but maybe also the novelist), who is best capable of the type of investments required by Freud's cathexes (LaCapra 1994: 46).
 14. Newton has a similar conception of ethics, as can be seen in the equivalence he establishes between ethics and "human connectivity" (Newton 1997: 7).
 15. This is again a rephrasing of Levinas's ideas and his contention in *Totality and Infinity* that ethics is more important than aesthetics, epistemology and ontology (see Levinas 1964).
 16. As Craps has remarked, Swift's promotion of a "non-dominative subjectivity willing to suspend itself in defamiliarisation or doubt" is reminiscent of Keats's negative capability (Craps 2005: 207).

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