

STEF CRAPS

## “Who Lets a Big Question Upset His Small, Safe World?": British Postmodern Realism and the Question of Ethics

**Abstract:** Criticism of British postmodern realist fiction has long been marked by an almost total disregard for ethics. The reason why critics investigating the anti-representational strategies characterizing the work of such writers as Peter Ackroyd, Martin Amis, Julian Barnes and Graham Swift have for the most part remained silent about its ethical status is the widespread belief that ethics is incompatible with a questioning stance towards representation. The few academic critics who (claim to) have discovered some sort of ethical value in the self-reflexive, theoretically sophisticated fictions produced by these writers are liberal-humanists working in the Arnoldian-Leavisite tradition, who, in their search for moral truths, appear to be oblivious to specifically postmodern textual practices that block easy access to meaning. Taking its cue from the deconstructive type of ethical criticism that came to the fore in the 1990s, this article suggests an alternative to both the textualist neglect and the liberal-humanist misrecognition of the ethics of British postmodern realism. Through a reading of Graham Swift's 1992 novel *Ever After*, it shows that postmodern realist fiction has an ethical dimension *qua* postmodern realist fiction; an ethical dimension that cannot be reduced to the promulgation of traditional moral values but rather has to be conceived as the elaboration of a post-humanist, non-foundational ethics of alterity.

British postmodern realist fiction has typically been approached from a strictly epistemological perspective.<sup>1</sup> Since the late 1980s, when Linda Hutcheon coined the term “historiographic metafiction” to denote postmodern novels that “are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (1988, 5), critics have tended to limit their attention to the way in which the works of such writers as Peter Ackroyd, Martin Amis, Julian Barnes and Graham Swift undermine the truth claims of history by foregrounding its conceptual overlap with fiction. In article after article and book after book, they have sought to demonstrate how these novels self-consciously play

<sup>1</sup> The term *postmodern realist fiction* is used here in a fairly general sense to denote post-war novels which adopt a questioning attitude to history and to referentiality, and yet retain the possibility of referencing the real. Many different variants of fiction fall under this umbrella, ranging from the predominantly realist or outwardly focused type to the predominantly postmodern or inwardly focused type. However, I will mainly be concerned with the latter variety, i.e. the more overtly self-reflexive kind of postmodern realist fiction, which is best equipped to resist assimilation into the realist paradigm.

with the boundaries between history and fiction in order to expose the constructed nature of historical discourse, which is revealed as relying on the narrative modes usually associated with literature.

What often gets eclipsed in such analyses is the ethical dimension of these works. A case in point are Ansgar Nünning's publications on the different variants of post-war British historical fiction, which ascribe an ethical function only to the more moderate types of postmodern fiction (especially revisionist historical fiction), which adhere relatively closely to traditional realism,<sup>2</sup> whereas more radical, experimental postmodern fiction (historiographic metafiction *sensu stricto*) is seen to engage an exclusively epistemological problematic.<sup>3</sup> The same tendency is apparent in Elisabeth Wesseling's book on postmodern innovations of the historical novel, which she divides into a "self-reflexive" and a "uchronian" variant. The difference between these two categories – which corresponds roughly with Nünning's distinction between historiographic metafiction and revisionist historical fiction – is said to be a matter of "epistemology versus politics" (Wesseling 1991, 118): whereas the former type of fiction would be primarily interested in epistemological issues, the latter would "envisage possibilities for the future transformation of society from a standpoint in the past" (Wesseling 1991, 14). While both Nünning and Wesseling thus seek to refute nagging accusations that postmodernism is apolitical, ahistorical and uncommitted (if not altogether nihilistic and defeatist), the case they make to prove that postmodern historical fiction does perform important political or ethical work is fatally impaired by its being premised on the exclusion from the witness box of precisely that type of fiction whose textual strategies are arguably most emphatically and exemplarily postmodern.

This critical failure to find any kind of ethical relevance in historiographic metafiction can be accounted for by a continued adherence to a traditional notion of ethical criticism that cannot conceive of ethics outside of a stable mimetic project. As Andrew Gibson points out in *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*, one of the most crucial assumptions on the basis of which traditional ethical criticism proceeded was that, "in fiction, ethics and representation are inseparable. [...] In this account, ethics cannot subsist in a novel other than in relation to the

<sup>2</sup> The decentring of history which revisionist historical fiction performs concerns the content rather than the process of historical representation. Revisionist historical fiction undermines official, naturalized versions of history not so much by unearthing the subversive implications of the textual mediation of all knowledge of the past, as historiographic metafiction does, as by recovering repressed, marginalized or silenced histories.

<sup>3</sup> In his article entitled "Beyond the Great Story," Nünning attributes an explicit moral function only to revisionist historical fiction: "In the revisionist historical novel, the representation and discussion of history functions primarily as a means of historical and social critique. By telling counter-narratives, this type not only thematizes forgotten or repressed aspects of the past, but also puts into question contemporary conditions, inherited traditions and established patterns of interpretation" (Nünning 1999, 34; the translation is mine, as are all subsequent translations in this article). In historiographic metafiction, by contrast, ethics is simply not an issue: the accent here falls "unambiguously on the function of cognitive reflection" (1999, 37). As an in-between category, metahistorical fiction, the third type of postmodern historical fiction that Nünning distinguishes, occupies an intermediate position with regard to its ethical efficacy (1999, 15; see also Nünning 1995b, 393).

'world' depicted, a world determined as single and unitary" (Gibson 1999, 54-5). A literary text can only offer its readers a heuristic working through of ethical problems if it is a mere surface behind which there are real people enacting real events. According to this argument, the ethical power of a novel depends on its susceptibility to being treated as a transparent vehicle for meaning. The notion that ethics is incompatible with a questioning stance towards representation explains why critics exploring the anti-representational strategies of postmodern realist fiction for the most part remain silent about its ethical status.

The few academic critics who (claim to) have discovered some sort of ethical value in the self-reflexive, theoretically sophisticated fictions of the novelists referred to above are mostly liberal-humanists working in the Arnoldian-Leavisite tradition, who appear to be oblivious to specifically postmodern textual practices that block easy access to meaning. Indeed, they tend to disregard the metafictional characteristics of these works by treating them as straightforward realist texts promoting essentially humanist moral values. A good example of such an approach can be found in Susanne Mecklenburg's monograph on Martin Amis and Graham Swift, which aims to uncover the alleged moral undercurrents running through the work of these two writers – and of (British) postmodern literature more generally<sup>4</sup> – that advocates of postmodernism have so far failed to take account of. Mecklenburg considers both Swift and Amis as "didacticizing contemporary moralists with an ultimately forward-looking hope for a better world, to which they attempt to contribute with their works" (Mecklenburg 2000, 3). At the heart of their literary enterprise she locates an unwavering commitment to a traditional humanist morality; a morality which, notwithstanding the subtitle of her book (*Erfolg durch bodenlosen Moralismus im zeitgenössischen britischen Roman*), is anything but groundless. She detects a "never-changing humanist ethics" (2000, 186) in their work, revolving around sympathy, communication, understanding and hope, which furnishes the reader with "fixed standards" as an antidote to "contemporary alienation, mechanization, aggression and lovelessness" (2000, 3). Mecklenburg's defiantly traditional analysis, which betrays a clear impatience with postmodern shibboleths such as paradox, contradiction and aporia,<sup>5</sup> reduces the novels' postmodern textual strategies to the status of window dressing: they are seen to ensure a superficial compliance with the fashion of the times that has no other purpose than to seduce a sceptical and incredulous contemporary reading public into imbibing the "underlying ethical framework" (2000, 111); that is, an unreconstructed humanism which it might otherwise have little taste for.

Taking its cue from the deconstructive type of ethical criticism that came to the fore in the 1990s as one manifestation of the so-called ethical turn in the

<sup>4</sup> "The purpose of this study is also to demand a broader perspective on postmodern literature, to which the aforementioned writers [Martin Amis and Graham Swift] unquestionably belong" (Mecklenburg 2000, 2).

<sup>5</sup> "However, with this endless contradictoriness, which she [Linda Hutcheon] hypothetically posits as a uniting banner for postmodern and historiographic metafiction, she cannot fully grasp Swift's more complex basic attitude" (Mecklenburg 2000, 109).

humanities, this article will suggest an alternative to both the textualist neglect and the liberal-humanist misrecognition of the ethics of British postmodern realism, particularly its historiographic-metafictional variant. Through a reading of Graham Swift's 1992 novel *Ever After*, it will show that postmodern realist fiction has an ethical dimension *qua* postmodern realist fiction; an ethical dimension that cannot be reduced to the promulgation of traditional moral values but rather has to be conceived as the elaboration of a post-humanist, non-foundational ethics of alterity. Such an ethics is revealed not through the apparent success but through the faltering or failing of the representational project: the ethical significance of postmodern realist fiction lies in its function, not as "a form of unitary cognition," but as "a form which works radically to surpass and, indeed, dissolve any given set of cognitive horizons" (Gibson 1999, 91).

As is the case with many of Swift's novels, critics have mostly limited their focus to the epistemological problematic which *Ever After* – the author's most self-consciously literary work – foregrounds. Nünning, for example, asserts that "Also in Swift's novel [*Ever After*] the references to the specific discourses of historiography, evolutionary biology and psychology serve primarily as a means for epistemological self-reflection" (Nünning 1995a, 86). In a sensitive reading of *Ever After* in *Understanding Graham Swift*, David Malcolm points out that the self-referentiality of the narration, the open inventing of scenes and motives, the convoluted chronology and the pervasive intertextuality conspire to reveal the text's own fiction-making processes and to highlight the problems of giving a narrative account of past events. Along the same lines, Frederick Holmes argues that *Ever After* seeks to achieve a rapprochement between autobiographical and historical writing on the one hand and fiction on the other: "What is eradicated [...] is the distinction between historiography [...] and literature" (Holmes 1996, 37). Insightful as these various readings are, they all maintain a conspicuous silence on the text's engagement with ethics.

Interestingly, even Mecklenburg, who has no qualms about assimilating Swift's other novels to a traditional humanist morality, fails to find any ethical content in *Ever After*. Utterly confounded by the novel's principled refusal simply to overcome loss and to embrace wholeness and unity, Mecklenburg admits that she remains in the dark as to the exact "purpose" (2000, 181) of the book. *Ever After* tells the story of Bill Unwin, an English literature professor at what appears to be Cambridge University. Having lost his wife, his mother and his stepfather in eighteen months, Bill is recovering from a failed suicide attempt. Paralysed with grief ever since his wife's death, he cannot seem to muster the strength to put his losses behind him. To Mecklenburg's dismay, Bill fails to transcend his state of bereavement and to move on to live a fulfilled and fulfilling life. Another (but related) type of loss that she bemoans is that of the transparency or innocence of representation; the text's flaunting of its textuality and its concomitant refusal to recognize any kind of stability in representation. Mecklenburg complains that "this consistent negative foil for his [Swift's] ethical concept" is "too far removed from 'the real thing' and 'the Here and Now' with

which he is explicitly concerned in this book as well" (2000, 171) for moral instruction to be gained from it.

The reason why Mecklenburg fails to detect any positive ethical relevance in the novel is that she is looking in the wrong places. Ethics, in *Ever After*, is not a matter of self-realization through the repression of loss, but rather of dissolution of the presumptuous, narcissistic self in the face of the irreducible otherness of a reality that exceeds our cognitive grasp. From what the narrator-protagonist tells us, we can infer that his main problem is – and has always been – a radical refusal or inability to acknowledge the fact of loss. Bill responds to loss by taking recourse to narcissistic fantasies of plenitude and self-completion which effectively deny the fact of loss and preclude any possibility of personal renewal and ethical growth. His inability as a child to come to terms with the shattering experience of his father's suicide has led him throughout his life to embrace a succession of redemptive discourses – Literature, Romantic Love and History – which have allowed him to ignore loss as a constitutive dimension of the human condition. Eventually, however, Bill comes to realize the impossibility of capturing "the real thing," the self-completing object which he has continually attempted to seize hold of in this way. Time and again, his appropriative strategies turn out to leave him with no more than a substitute for the real stuff, which itself remains forever out of reach. The ultimate demise of Bill's narcissistic self-conception is signalled by his botched suicide bid, a dramatic experience that appears to have liberated the narrator from his sinister solipsistic fantasies and to have returned him to the world he had forsaken. Whereas his "former self" (Swift 1992, 3) displayed a disturbing degree of unconcern for others, in his "quasi-afterlife" (Swift 1992, 239) Bill may yet learn to see through his self-intoxication and to enter into non-totalizing relations with other people. Though such an evolution is intimated rather than fully stated in the novel, Bill does record his experience of having "*moved on*, in some critical but indefinable way, from what I was before" (Swift 1992, 3). His recent brush with death having "changed" him, he feels "as though I have become someone else" (Swift 1992, 3). His new self shows tentative signs of a readiness to abandon the principle of self-sameness which may lead to the assumption of ethical responsibility.

The very first loss that Bill is confronted with, and which is to have a lasting influence on his life, is that of his father, a military officer who kills himself when his son is only nine. Colonel Unwin's suicide puts an abrupt end to his family's stay in Paris, the city to which he had been sent in November 1945 on a military or diplomatic mission whose exact nature remains unclear. It is during this period that Bill begins to perceive a collusion between "Reality and Romance" (Swift 1992, 13), a notion of which he will not be disabused until several decades later. As a child in Paris, Bill is unaware of any gap between representation and the reality it purports to embody. He believes the world in which he moves to be saturated with meaning, an experience best captured by his sense of things being "divine." This outlook on life is planted and nurtured in him by his charismatic

mother: "And, yes, that word [*divine*] had only to spring from her lips and I believed it to be so" (Swift 1992, 17).

His father's suicide having cast him out of his childhood paradise, Bill will devote the rest of his life to recovering this prelapsarian state of Parisian plenitude. It should be noted, however, that the meaningfulness or divinity which as a child Bill was taught to recognize in all things is exposed as an illusion by Bill in the narrative present. The conflict between these two opposed perceptions is played out in the novel's second chapter, which tells the story of Bill's Paris days by alternating internal and external focalization, with the latter serving as a constant corrective to the former: "now I know, in any case, that certain things were not as they once seemed" (Swift 1992, 13). Thus, his mother's way of divinizing the world and emphasizing the bond between them is revealed as a crude strategy of self-aggrandizement and egotistical projection: "But isn't it just *heavenly*, darling? I could have lived for, lived in that squeeze. Until I grew up and realized it was almost entirely selfish. She might as well have been hugging herself, or a handy cushion or spaniel" (Swift 1992, 16). What Bill realizes from his vantage point in the narrative present is that the pre-Oedipal unity with the mother and the sense of wholeness and identity associated with it – which, in Lacan, are explicitly situated in the Imaginary – are not an objective reality but a mere fiction. The issue, therefore, is not one of attempting to regain a supposedly lost golden or paradisiac age but of acknowledging and affirming its radical absence.

The benefit of hindsight being unavailable to him as a child in the thick of the action, however, Bill sets out to recover the sense of fullness lost with his father's suicide. His objective is to restore the former integrity of a world which has "fallen apart" (Swift 1992, 114) as a result of the drastic course of action taken by his father. One major way in which he attempts to do this – after his reassuring Hamlet identification has proved untenable and the redemptive discourse of Romantic Love has lost its credibility – is by enlisting the support of History. Having inherited the notebooks of his Victorian ancestor Matthew Pearce after his mother's death, he begins to study these historically significant documents – "a testimony to the effects on a private life of ideas that shook the world" (Swift 1992, 48) – with an apparent view to publishing them. The actual reason for Bill's interest in Matthew, however, is to be looked for elsewhere: "You see, it is the personal thing that matters" (Swift 1992, 49). Indeed, his research has "nothing of the academic" about it and is "rather more germane to *me* than the notebooks of Matthew Pearce" (Swift 1992, 147). Rather than simply edit a scholarly edition of Matthew's writings, as Michael Potter (his rival for the documents) wishes to do, Bill wants nothing less than to bring Matthew back to life: "to take the skeletal remains of a single life and attempt to breathe into them their former actuality" (Swift 1992, 90). In so doing, he hopes to be able to turn the past into a source of stable personal identity. As Frederick Holmes points out, Bill is driven by the desire to establish "a historical link to a foundational reality" (Holmes 1996, 26) which is supposed to give meaning and purpose to his life. This mission, however, is "bedeviled by his awareness that the representation of history is it-

self a substitute for the real thing, the vanished past" (Holmes 1996, 25) whose reality cannot be captured. The apparent inevitability of substitution thwarts the fulfilment of Bill's desire for a source of fundamental meaning.

The basic tension that Holmes identifies in the novel is the one between totalizing and detotalizing forces familiar from Hutcheon's theorization of historiographic metafiction. On the one hand, there is Bill's attempt to "bestow upon his work clarity and an overriding narrative unity achieved through uniformity of theme, symbolism, tone, style, and point of view" (Holmes 1996, 26). On the other, there are various "pressures working against totalization" which "strain almost to the breaking point Bill's efforts to achieve narrative smoothness and unity" (Holmes 1996, 29). For example, though Bill positions himself as an omniscient narrator vis-à-vis his Victorian subject-matter, feigning to have full knowledge of the story's events and of the motives and unspoken thoughts of its characters, he fails to keep up this pretence. At various points in the text, Bill openly acknowledges his fallibility as a narrator. In the following passage, for instance, he interrupts the flow of the narrative to contemplate the strict limitations of his own point of view:

So, have I got it all wrong? I invent. I imagine. I want them to have been happy. How do I know they were ever happy? I make them fall in love at the very first meeting on a day full of radiant summer sunshine. How do I know it was ever like that? How do I know that the Notebooks, while they offer ample evidence for the collapse of Matthew's marriage, were not also a desperate attempt to keep alive its myth, and that, even when he seems most honest, Matthew, with much display of fine feeling, tender conscience and wishful thinking, only beats about the bush of an old, old story? (Swift 1992, 212)

Despite using every trick in the book to reproduce the life and times of his forefather, Bill eventually finds himself forced to confront the futility of his quest for stable meaning in the past.

Bill's manifest failure to achieve narrative unity has led several reviewers to call into question the soundness of the author's conception of his novel. Kirsty Milne, for one, complains that

*Ever After* has something disjointed about it. Swift's drive to yoke past and present seems misplaced in this case: the 20th-century widower and the 19th-century truth-seeker do not complement each other quite as they should. It is as if there are two fledgling novels struggling to get out. (Milne 1992, 40)

Similarly, Stephen Wall finds that "the two men don't really seem to have as much in common as the book's design seems to imply" (Wall 1992, 26). In his opinion, "the different areas of narrative interest disperse rather than concentrate attention. Although its varying strands are conscientiously knitted together [...] they don't seem significantly to cohere" (1992, 26). These critics are certainly right to draw attention to the marked absence of coherence in *Ever After*. However, by explaining it away as a grievous technical error on the part of the novelist, they ignore its significance as an integral aspect of the novel's ethical project, which sees the abandonment of the quest for unity and coherence as opening up a space for the emergence of alterity.

Bill defends his initial possessiveness about the Pearce manuscripts – which he refuses to share with Potter, an expert in the history of Victorian ideas who smells an opportunity to revitalize his somewhat flagging academic career – by invoking a duty he feels he has to perform towards Matthew: “I have to revive him” (Swift 1992, 132); “I owe Matthew nothing less” (Swift 1992, 90). Though he casts himself as a man of duty pursuing a higher purpose than mere egotism, what he actually does is enlist his nineteenth-century ancestor in a narcissistic project of self-glorification. Trying to recognize himself in Matthew, Bill shamelessly projects his own desires onto him, showing little respect for the singularity of his existence in the process. Regardless of the available evidence, which leaves open the possibility that his wife was cheating on him, Bill makes Matthew live the dream of perfect marital bliss, as if this putative historical precedent could somehow lend credibility to the narrator’s grand claims for his own marriage and take away his nagging suspicion of his own wife’s infidelity: “I want them to have been happy” (Swift 1992, 212). Bill turns Matthew into a character in a self-serving fantasy scenario: “Let Matthew be my creation” (Swift 1992, 90). Thus, Matthew seems destined to fall victim to the imperialism of Bill’s voracious self, which seeks to reduce the outside world to its own solipsistic terms.

In this connection, it is quite striking that, for all his talk about duty, the one thing that Bill cannot seem to understand is the call of conscience by which Matthew claims to have been guided. Indeed, *conscience* is a word that figures prominently in Matthew’s writings, where it is invoked to explain the author’s crisis of faith and its dramatic outcome, namely his abandonment of his wife and children. It is his conscience which causes Matthew to question his faith on the basis of his readings of Lyell and Darwin and to face the consequences of his apostasy. Bemused by Matthew’s chosen course of action – “I don’t understand him” (Swift 1992, 132) – Bill inadvertently reveals himself to be a stranger to the call of conscience: “Who lets a Big Question upset his small, safe world?” (Swift 1992, 143). Further evidence of Bill’s inability to grasp the fact that people can let their world be upset by a “Big Question” is provided by his reflection on the reasons for his father’s suicide, which he cannot conceive to have been anything other than personal: “And ‘personal’ – his motives for suicide ‘were personal.’ What the hell else should they have been?” (Swift 1992, 177). Soon afterwards, however, Bill learns that his father, who appears to have been involved in the development of the atomic bomb, is likely to have killed himself at least in part because of a guilty conscience about Hiroshima. In reply to his request for clarification about the circumstances surrounding his father’s death, Bill is informed by a certain Major Pilkington that Colonel Unwin “may have harboured, since the final months of the war, a growing aversion, on conscientious grounds, to the nature of his special duties, which, conflicting intolerably with his considerable dedication and ambition, may ultimately have contributed to his suicide” (Swift 1992, 192).

In contrast with Matthew and his father, Bill cannot be suspected of any moral soul-searching. Too busy nursing his private melancholias to care about anyone else’s predicament, Bill appears to be supremely unconcerned about the



exigencies of the world he inhabits. Whereas Matthew is profoundly shaken not only by the scientific discoveries of his time but also by the appalling living conditions of the English working classes,<sup>6</sup> and whereas Colonel Unwin is shocked by the unprecedented havoc wreaked by weapons of mass destruction to whose production he has contributed, Bill is completely unaffected by the "Big Questions" of his era, such as the Cold War threat of nuclear annihilation: "When the first Aldermaston marchers set out in the late 1950s on their pilgrimage of protest, what were Ruth and I doing? We were sharing our new-found love-nest [...]. Too happy, too busy being happy, to worry about the Bomb" (Swift 1992, 249). Bill's philosophy of life may be summed up as follows: "Forget the other stuff. Stick to the love-interest" (Swift 1992, 220). His adherence to this general rule is explained with reference to the Abdication Crisis, which coincided with the moment of his birth. This concurrent event, which is alleged to have had a lasting effect on Bill's life, imbuing it with "a sort of fairy-tale propensity," must have been viewed by many, so Bill surmises, as "a welcome intrusion of Romance, allowing them fondly to forget for a moment Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco. All for Love. Or, The World Well Lost" (Swift 1992, 57). In fact, Bill's entire life can be conceived as one long drawn-out attempt to make the intrusion of Romance into an enduring reality, entailing permanent oblivion and indifference to the woes of the "lost" and "doomed" world "out there" (Swift 1992, 256).

And yet there are signs that Bill, by the end of his narrative, is not quite comfortable with the path he has chosen. Especially with regard to Matthew, he seems to have some qualms about the selfish schemes to which he has devoted the best part of his life. For one thing, he keeps questioning the exact nature of his duty towards Matthew: "Why should I hug Matthew Pearce to me and not want to let him go? What is he to me?" (Swift 1992, 49). Bill is haunted by the question "why he should matter so much to me. And why things mattered so much to him, when [...] he might have gone on living happily ever after" (Swift 1992, 49). Just as Matthew is shaken to the root of his being by the sight of the fossilized remains of an ichthyosaur, which upsets his customary frame of reference, so Bill is singularly affected by the encounter with a fellow man whom he has to admit he cannot finally make sense of. While he can easily relate to the younger Matthew, to whom he imputes an instinct for "not looking too far about him, or looking only at what he wishes to see" (Swift 1992, 98), the later Matthew, who sacrifices his personal happiness for his conscience, totally eludes him. In Matthew, Bill's previously unchecked drive towards narcissistic self-completion runs up against an insurmountable obstacle, a radical alterity putting into question the spontaneous dogmatism of the self which insists on reducing exteriority to its own terms. As a result of the fact that Matthew overflows the frame in which Bill seeks to enclose him, the frame itself disintegrates: the possibility of possession of the other is exposed as a delusion.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew expresses his concern about this issue as follows: "These toiling masses of our mine-workers trouble me. [...] by what perverted definition of common humanity do we pronounce that they are brutes and not we?" (Swift 1992, 218).

Bill is left to grapple with the need to understand the nature of his responsibility towards Matthew: "What is Matthew to me? 'What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba?'" (Swift 1992, 143). The latter question, on which the former is modelled, is a direct quotation from Hamlet's second soliloquy, in which the hero berates himself for not pursuing his father's revenge with as much passion as an actor has for something which, presumably, does not concern him in the least (*Hamlet* II.ii, 545-54). Hamlet's sceptical question about why the player would establish an ethical or emotional bond with Troy's legendary grieving mother sparks off a train of thought in Hamlet's mind which results in a plot to "catch the conscience of the King" (*Hamlet* II.ii, 601) by way of having the players re-enact his father's murder in front of Claudius. Apparently, the player's supposedly gratuitous concern for Hecuba is not "all for nothing" (*Hamlet* II.ii, 551) after all, but may serve to expose a guilty conscience. It is in just this way that Bill is affected by Matthew: Matthew trips up Bill's conscience, ruptures his self-complacency and makes him realize his responsibilities towards others which he has disregarded for so long.

Interestingly, Hamlet's question is also taken up by Emmanuel Lévinas, who uses it in *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* to formulate the core question of his philosophy: "Why does the Other concern me? What is Hecuba to me? Am I my brother's keeper?" (Lévinas 1996, 186). As Robert Eaglestone points out, Levinas inadvertently makes a case for the ethical significance of literature by articulating this key question in three different discourses – those of philosophy and religion as well as that of literature (Eaglestone 1997, 159). Literature, according to Eaglestone, opens up an ethical space in which alterity is registered as it persistently interrupts the closure of meaning: "It is in these moments when our sense of our selves and our relation to the *logos* is interrupted and put into question that the ethics of literature are at their clearest" (Eaglestone 1997, 175). Indeed, in dissolution, identity yields to the eminently ethical condition of being hostage, of being caught in a responsibility from which there is no release.

This ethically significant abasement of the presumptuous self is evidenced, or at least intimated, in *Ever After*. Instead of confirming the narrator in his identity, Bill's encounter with Matthew puts into question his sense of self and his totalizing tendencies. Relinquishing narcissism, Bill finally abandons his exclusive claim to the notebooks which he had previously been "so possessive" (Swift 1992, 49) about. When Katherine Potter, his colleague's wife, comes to see him in the college gardens, where he sits writing, he gives her a copy of the Pearce manuscripts and, with an uncharacteristic display of humility, silently adds: "Who am I to raise Matthew Pearce from the dead?" (Swift 1992, 88). Bill lets go of the narcissistic fantasy that the self-completing object can be had and that the real thing can be seized hold of. The promise of plenitudinous presence is exposed as a fallacy, and a harmful one at that. Substitutes being all that is available, the narcissistic search for completion turns out to be a futile and pernicious undertaking.

This vital insight appears to be lost, however, on liberal-humanists like Mecklenburg who object to the sense of artificiality in which the novel is steeped. The

ethical import of this text lies precisely in its critique of the notion that substitution can be circumvented and that the real thing can be possessed in its full presence. After all, the desire to lay hold of the real thing, which is a function of the will to a complete and self-sufficient identity, leads one to ignore one's responsibility to an irreducible alterity that resists comprehension and puts the self into question. The dissolution of Bill's narcissistic self-enclosure that is intimated in the novel carries a profound ethical significance: freed from the compulsions of its narcissistic fantasies, the self is ready to take up its place in a disenchanted world, to negotiate the constant demand of alterity, and to live ethically ever after. "Who lets a Big Question upset his small, safe world?" (Swift 1992, 143), Bill asked, uncomprehendingly, when confronted with the dramatic life-story of his nineteenth-century ancestor. In the end, however, he himself does exactly that. The journey made by *Ever After's* protagonist in turn serves as an instructive example for us, readers of British postmodern realist fiction, who may see in it a call for us to let our small, safe world – the world of (textualist or liberal-humanist) literary criticism – be upset by the "Big Question" of ethics.

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