

READING ETHICALLY *EVER AFTER*: HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION REVISITED

British postmodern realist fiction has typically been approached from a strictly epistemological perspective. Ever since 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” (5), critics have tended to limit their attention to the way in which the work of such writers as Peter Ackroyd, Martin Amis, Julian Barnes and Graham Swift undermines the truth claims of history by foregrounding its conceptual overlap with fiction. What is often eclipsed in such analyses is the ethical dimension of these works.¹

The 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. The widespread belief that ethics is incompatible with a questioning stance towards representation explains why critics exploring the anti-representational strategies of historiographic metafiction for the most part remain silent about its ethical status. Conversely, critics pressing a moral agenda tend to be oblivious to specifically postmodern textual practices that block easy access to meaning. Indeed, the few academic critics who (claim to) have discovered any kind of ethical value in the self-reflexive, theoretically sophisticated fictions of the aforementioned novelists are liberal-humanists working in the Arnoldian-Leavisite tradition who disregard the historiographic-metafictional characteristics of these works by treating them as straightforward realist texts promoting essentially humanist moral values.²

Taking my 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 humanities, I want to suggest an alternative to both the textualist neglect and the liberal-humanist misrecognition of the ethics of historiographic metafiction. Through a reading of Graham Swift’s 1992 novel *Ever After*, I hope to show that historiographic metafiction has an ethical dimension *qua* *historiographic metafiction*; 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.

¹ Examples are legion, but to name just two symptomatic cases: Ansgar Nünning, “Beyond the Great Story: Der postmoderne historische Roman als Medium revisionistischer Geschichtsdarstellung, kultureller Erinnerung und metahistoriographischer Reflexion,” *Anglia* 117 (1999): 14-48 and Elisabeth Wesseling, *History as a Prophet: Postmodern Innovations of the Historical Novel* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1991).

² A case in point is Susanne Mecklenburg, *Martin Amis und Graham Swift: Erfolg durch bodenlosen Moralismus im zeitgenössischen britischen Roman* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2000).

WHEN MOURNING COMES

As is the case with many of Swift's novels, critics have mostly limited their focus to the epistemological issues *Ever After* – the author's most self-consciously literary work – foregrounds. Ansgar Nünning, for example, asserts that "Auch in Swifts Roman [*Ever After*] dienen die Referenzen auf die Spezialdiskurse der Historiographie, Evolutionsbiologie und Psychologie primär als Medium epistemologischer Selbstreflexion" (*Von historischer Fiktion* 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" (37). Insightful as these various readings are, they all maintain a deafening silence on the text's engagement with ethics.

Interestingly, even the liberal-humanist critic Susanne 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 protagonist's – and the text's – principled refusal simply to overcome loss, Mecklenburg remains in the dark as to the exact "purpose" (181) of the novel. *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 solid ground for representation. Mecklenburg complains that "diese konsequente Negativfolie seines [Swift's] ethischen Konzeptes" is "zu weit entfernt von 'the real thing' und 'the Here and Now' um das es ihm erklärtermaßen ja auch in diesem Buch unverändert geht" for moral instruction to be gained from it (171).

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 and the repression of loss, but rather of dissolution of the presumptuous, narcissistic self and the acknowledgement of loss. 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. Framed in psychopathological terms, Bill's condition is one of melancholia, an affliction which can be succinctly described as unhealthy mourning and which, as Freud points out, is intimately bound up with narcissism (250). Mourning, according to Freud, consists in a withdrawal of affection from the lost object and a subsequent reattachment of affection to some substitute for that object. The melancholic, however, responds

to loss not by accepting this principle of substitution, but 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. Such, I will argue, is Bill's predicament: 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 is forced to recognize 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” (3) displayed a disturbing degree of unconcern for others, in his “quasi-afterlife” (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” (3). His recent brush with death having “changed” him, he feels “as though I have become someone else” (3). His new self shows tentative signs of a readiness to abandon the principle of self-sameness, to accept the inevitability of substitution, and thus to engage in a process of genuine mourning that may produce ethically desirable results.

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

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” (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” (17). At this stage Bill is completely spellbound by his mother and could hardly care less about his distant father, who is absent most of the time anyway: “if I had an allegiance, it was to her, not to him” (23). Bill's relationship with his mother has an important physical dimension, in the form of recurrent hugs and squeezes: “I could have lived for, lived in that squeeze” (16). This symbiosis is typical of the pre-Oedipal state of primary narcissism, in which the infant experiences a total fusion with the mother.

In the normal course of events, the dyadic unity between mother and child is split up by the father, whose intervention prompts the child to enter into the symbolic order. As Peter Sacks points out, the Oedipal resolution shares some crucial features

with the work of mourning: both procedures require “a detachment of affection from a prior object” and posit “the acceptance not just of a substitute, but of the very means and practice of substitution” as “the price of survival” (8). Just as the outcome of the Oedipal crisis is the child’s accession to the order of the sign, so the successful mourner eventually (re)submits to the constraints of language, turning from the object of his love to a sign of it. In Bill’s case, however, such an evolution is thwarted by his father’s dramatic suicide. Though there is another character present in the text who is more than eager to step into his role, he is not given a chance by Bill. It is his stepfather Sam Ellison, an American plastics manufacturer who has come to the Old World to spread the gospel of substitution, his goal being “nothing less than the polymerization of the world” (7), or so Bill tells us. “You gotta accept it, pal,” he is quoted as saying, “the real stuff is running out, it’s used up, it’s blown away, or it costs too much. You gotta have *substitoots*” (7). Bill, however, rejects Sam’s authority and refuses to be instructed by him. He obstinately clings to his conviction that the fulness of reality can be seized hold of and that plastic, as “the epitome of the false”(7), deserves to be treated with contempt. Holding Sam responsible for his father’s death, Bill foils his every attempt to take over the paternal role: “He failed, of course. . . . The more he strove, not being my father, to become my father, the more I resurrected, like a shield, my real–” (150). The dash at the end of this quotation highlights the supreme irony that Colonel Unwin, the man whom Bill believed to be his real father, was already a substitute, Bill being the product of an illicit affair between his mother and an anonymous engine driver.

The narrator’s failed Oedipal development can be recoded as the mother of his later melancholias, which see him trying to recover the prelapsarian state of Parisian plenitude by various means. 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” (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” (16). What Bill realizes from his hard-won post-Oedipal 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.

VERBAL ETERNITY

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 fulness lost with his father’s suicide. His objective is to restore the alleged former integrity of a world which has “fallen apart” (114) as a result of the drastic course of action taken by his

father. He seeks to do so, first, by turning his attention to “Literature” (5), and to one literary text in particular. Literature, variously described as a “redeeming balm,” a “lifelong refuge” (71), “verbal eternity,” the “divine spark” (233), is something which Bill firmly “believe[s] in” (5). His use of religious terminology in this connection is hardly accidental. After all, Bill has unusually high expectations of literature, attributing it the redemptive power traditionally associated with religion. His particular conception of literature – a curious mix of expressivism and aestheticism – leads him to assert that there is something about literature which makes us “better off than we were before” (71). His discussion of a poem by Sir Walter Raleigh reveals his love of literature to be predicated on the sense of stability it seems to provide (71). In a world which has collapsed following the death of his father, literature is seen by Bill as an instrument which may help him to recover his sense of balance.

Although enamoured of literature in general, Bill is particularly fascinated by *Hamlet*, the play to which he is introduced by his English master Tubby Baxter on returning from Paris to England. His infatuation with *Hamlet* stems from the “particularly acute rapport” (5) which he presumes to exist between the tragic prince of Denmark and himself. Both Hamlet’s mother and Bill’s have remarried with unseemly haste after the violent death of their respective husbands. These parallels are seized upon by Bill to imagine himself “surreptitiously, presumptuously, appropriately, perversely” (4) as a latter-day Hamlet. Shakespeare’s play thus furnishes Bill with an identity-model which allows him to make sense of his own life, a life which seems to have become meaningless and purposeless as a result of his father’s extreme action. Throughout the narrative, Bill persistently filters his own experience through the Shakespearean intertext, which, as Hannah Jacobmeyer points out, performs a “stabilizing and ordering function” in shoring up the narrator’s shaky sense of identity and counteracting the reader’s initial disorientation. The text suggests that Hamlet’s appeal as an identity-model for Bill lies in what has been perceived, by a critical tradition stretching at least as far back as H.D.F. Kitto, as the promise of redemption hovering over the play. Indeed, Bill’s “fixation” (5) with Hamlet appears to be due to the fact that Shakespeare’s hero, for all his despair, can be seen to find redemption in the end by submitting to divine providence and righting the wrong that has been committed against his father.

However, the precariousness of the Hamlet connection becomes increasingly apparent as the story progresses. Though Bill’s narrative is crammed with quotations from and allusions to *Hamlet*, the connection to Shakespeare’s play – which seemed spurious from the start – becomes altogether untenable following revelations made by Sam shortly before his death. When Sam comes to see Bill in his college quarters after the death of Bill’s mother, the latter absurdly expects the former to apologize for the suffering he has supposedly inflicted: “He is here (Claudius at his prayers) to atone for his part in my father’s death” (154). The real purpose of Sam’s visit, however, is to disclose to Bill the secret of his paternity. Sam’s contribution to the death of Bill’s father turns out to have been fairly minimal: what drove Colonel Unwin over the edge, we are told, was not so much the fact that his wife was having an affair as his discovery that he was not Bill’s father. At this point, Bill’s conspiracy theory founders, as does his Hamlet identification. He admits as much by declaring Sam’s subsequent death – of natural causes – to have removed “one of the main shaping factors, one of the plots of my life” (6). To Bill’s consternation and despair, the revenge plot that has given meaning to his life by holding out the promise of

fulfilment is finally exposed as a fanciful projection. No Hamlet, he: at best a poor and somewhat laughable substitute for the real thing.

SAVING LOVE

Another redemptive narrative that has sustained Bill for the best part of his life and whose validity is finally called into question is that of romantic love. As a pattern of love which attempts to combine sexual release, affectionate friendship and family functions in a single, life-long relationship, romantic love carries the promise of salvation: once you have found romance, so the story goes, you are saved. Everything will be smooth sailing from now on; or, to quote the traditional fairy-tale ending which gives the novel its title, you will live happily ever after. That this is what is ultimately at stake for Bill is apparent from his evocation of Matthew's love for his wife Elizabeth, which is represented as quelling his Victorian ancestor's incipient religious doubts and providing him with "a sense of miraculous, restoring gravitation": "I choose to believe that at the very first meeting Matthew would have had the overwhelming perception that here, when his thoughts had already shown him how terribly you could go adrift, was the true, sure ground of his life" (103). Bill imagines that Matthew's love for Elizabeth leads him to rediscover the divinity in all things which he had lately begun to doubt – "Things fit, things have a purpose" – and hence to consider himself a saved man: "He sees himself, indeed, as 'saved' – returned to the sweet, palpable goodness of the world" (108).

The same is true of Bill himself, who finds romantic love while working in a nightclub to finance his studies. He strikes up a relationship with one of the dancers, Ruth Vaughan, a first-year drama student on her way to becoming a famous actress. They get married and live happily ever after – or so we are told – till death does them part: some quarter of a century later, Ruth commits suicide while dying of lung cancer. It is Bill's firm conviction that he has come upon "the substance of love"; that Ruth and he are "the real thing" (76), as distinct from the "substitoot" (149) marriage of Sam and his mother. The narrator's insistence on the originality and the reality of his love appears to be at variance, however, with his awareness that romantic love is basically a cultural construct: "Romantic love. A made-up thing. A concoction of the poets. Jack shall have Jill. *Amor vincit omnia*" (111). Ironically, the real McCoy in the sphere of love – true romance – is real only to the extent that it successfully imitates an artificial literary model. This paradoxical logic can also be seen at work in Bill's assertion that he did not recognize the reality of his love for Ruth until he had been satisfied as to its compliance with an illusory model: "And I didn't know I loved her till I'd dreamt of her. I didn't know it was the real thing until an illusion had signalled it" (251). Rather than providing a safe haven from substitution, the text seems to suggest, the phenomenon of romantic love is a prime example of this practice.

For most of his life, however, Bill has been able to ignore this state of affairs and its far-reaching implications. While his representation of Ruth is greatly indebted to traditional descriptions of romantic heroines, he confidently asserts that their love-relationship was exempt from substitution. Yet, Bill's claims always to have been attracted to the "real" Ruth rather than to any of the parts she played – "It was *her*, it was *her*, you see, never those roles she dressed in" (76) – are undermined by suggestions in the text that what he takes to be the real Ruth is already an

insubstantial semblance. From Bill's perspective, Ruth appears first and foremost as a guarantor of the meaningfulness of life. Indeed, the notions of presence, plenitude and life are central to his representation of her. However, there are clear hints that this appearance of meaningfulness is no more than a superficial mask behind which lurk absence, emptiness and chaos:

she proved, not exactly that she could sing, but that she could disguise impeccably the fact that she couldn't sing, could act impeccably the part of a singer; and that she had, moreover, that indefinable, spell-casting quality called (but why don't we all have it, since we are all present?) 'presence'.

I think I saw – and perhaps only I saw – just for a moment, the terror in her eyes, the hidden absence out of which the presence emerged. Then it was gone, she had overcome it, a little internal victory, and I was caught in the spell. (74–75)

In addition to the fact that she cannot sing, Ruth can disguise impeccably the fact that she does not possess presence as an innate quality. Under Ruth's spell, though, Bill tends to forget this state of affairs. He comes to regard her as the embodiment of the fulness of life which he so craves. It is in such terms, for example, that her face is described: "There was no other word for it: it was full of *life*. So full of life" (118). Again, however, there is some confusion as to the exact status of this fulness. Having asserted its substantial existence as an inherent feature of the "real" Ruth, the narrator raises the possibility that the fulness of life which he attributes to her is a mere role which she puts on: "She represented life to me. I know that, now she is dead. She was life to me. And that isn't just vain hyperbole, is it? She was an actress, wasn't she? It was her job: to represent life to people" (120). This passage hinges on the indeterminacy of the verb *represent*, which, in this context, can denote both a substantial relationship (Ruth "is" life) and a more contingent, substitutive one (Ruth only "stands in for" life). The question, then, is whether Ruth coincides with what she signifies for Bill, or whether she stands in an arbitrary relationship to the meaning he ascribes to her.

The latter possibility is consonant with the distinctly unromantic view of love offered by Sam: "You see, I don't believe in this there's-a-girl-for-every-boy-and-a-boy-for-every-girl stuff. It's just who you get thrown against in the trolley-car, and there's more than one trolley-car and more than one ride" (157). Though Bill rejects this view, which undermines his cherished belief that "the real thing" (i.e. his own relationship with Ruth) is categorically distinct from "substitoot" love (as exemplified by Sam and Bill's mother), he does not cease to be haunted by it. Indeed, Bill's suicide attempt, which is usually interpreted as a final confirmation of the impossibility of substitution, may have been prompted by the insight that there is actually no outside to substitution. While Katherine Potter's vain bid to seduce Bill – which immediately precedes his suicide attempt – may have deepened his despair by instilling in him a heightened awareness of his wife's essential irreplaceability, the text leaves open the possibility that what drives Bill over the edge is rather the insight, triggered by the same incident, that his wife *can* be replaced. After all, his attraction to Katherine, which raises doubts about Ruth's uniqueness and irreplaceability, effectively undermines the redemptive romantic ideology that has sustained him for so long. Though Bill rejects Katherine's advances, he can no longer escape the realization that the function that Ruth performed for him – namely to sanctify his life – can be taken over by another woman. This suggests that Ruth never really coincided with or embodied the meaning he attributed to her, and that the sanctity

supposedly conferred by the beloved woman is no more than a groundless romantic fantasy. Ruth is basically a cipher, a mere placeholder in an artificial scenario serving the illusory purpose of masculine self-aggrandizement. Hence, Bill has never really had what he thinks he has lost: the fullness of life to which he believed his love for Ruth gave access. It turns out that there is no redemption to be had through romantic love, which sees the logic of substitution reign supreme, giving the lie to all notions of presence and plenitude.

HISTORICAL GROUND

One final metanarrative that Bill resorts to in the hope of recovering the sense of wholeness lost with his father's suicide – and not to be regained by means of either literature or romantic love – is history. Having inherited the notebooks of his Victorian ancestor Matthew Pearce after his mother's death, he sets out to study these historically significant documents – “a testimony to the effects on a private life of ideas that shook the world” (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” (49). Indeed, his research has “nothing of the academic” about it and is “rather more germane to *me* than the notebooks of Matthew Pearce” (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” (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 in his insightful reading of *Ever After*, Bill is driven by the desire to establish “a historical link to a foundational reality” (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 itself a substitute for the real thing, the vanished past” whose reality cannot be captured (Holmes 25). Once again, then, the principle of substitution emerges to prevent 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 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 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?” (212).

The narrator's failure to paint the full picture is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in his struggle to reconstruct the dramatic final confrontation between Matthew and his father-in-law Rector Hunt, who banishes Matthew from his parish when the latter refuses to "repeat [his] creed" (186) and retract his Darwinian criticism of the doctrine of natural theology. Having tried to capture the scene in a prose narrative focalized through the Rector's wife, Bill briefly experiments with another form – the television script – "as if to acknowledge the inadequacy of his chosen form" (Holmes 31). However, this new form proves even less satisfactory, and Bill suddenly throws in the towel, exclaiming: "But I do not know, I cannot even invent, what the Rector said. I falter in my script-writing, just as the Rector himself, perhaps, faltered on the verge of his imprecation" (187). 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: the living presence of the past remaining forever out of reach, substitutes are all that is available.

MORAL NARCISSISM

Bill defends his possessiveness about the Pearce manuscripts – which he refuses to share with his colleague Michael 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" (132); "I owe Matthew nothing less" (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" (212). In much the same way as he did with Ruth, Bill turns Matthew into a character in a self-serving fantasy scenario: "Let Matthew be my creation" (90). Thus, Matthew too 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 which 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" (132) – Bill inadvertently reveals himself to be a stranger to the call of conscience: "Who lets a Big Question upset his small, safe world?" (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?" (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 (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, 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" (249). Bill's philosophy of life may be summed up as follows: "Forget the other stuff. Stick to the love-interest" (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*" (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" (256).

Bill's moral narcissism also marks his relationship with his wife, who, as we have seen, is ruthlessly reduced to a prop for the enactment of his self-serving fantasies. It makes itself felt, moreover, in his conception of literature as a way of imposing order and stability on the world. As is apparent from his comments on Raleigh's poem, literature, for Bill, reabsorbs overwhelming, destabilizing experiences by way of the aesthetic, understood in terms of beauty, poise and equilibrium. It domesticates terror and anxiety, which threaten to disturb the subject's complacent self-enclosure, into a reassuring experience of aesthetic pleasure. If, according to Bill, literature thus construed is a way of "stat[ing] the obvious" (70), this is because it reduces the disquieting impact of the real: in making an unpalatable reality palatable, literature makes the world seem obvious, i.e. congenial to one's preset views. It defuses the threat posed to one's self-conception by a traumatic reality.

E THICALLY EVER AFTER

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 perceived duty towards Matthew: "Why should I hug Matthew Pearce to me and not want to let him go? What is he to me?" (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” (49). Just as Matthew is shaken to the root of his being by the sight of the fossilized remains of an ichtyosaur, 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” (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.

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?’” (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 (2.2.545-54). 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” (2.2.601) 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” (2.2.551) 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 Levinas, who uses it in *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence* to formulate the core question of his philosophy: “Pourquoi Autrui me concerne? Que m’est Hécube? Suis-je le gardien de mon frère?” (186). As Robert Eaglestone has pointed 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 (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” (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” (49) about. When Katherine 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?” (88). Bill can be seen to let go of the narcissistic fantasy that the self-completing object can be had and that

the real thing can be seized hold of. Whether pursued through literature, romantic love or history, 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 text's ethical import – and that of other representatives of historiographic metafiction, for which similar arguments can be made – 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.

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