

“All the Same Underneath”? Alterity and Ethics in Graham Swift’s *Last Orders*

STEF CRAPS

I’m remembering what Jack said, in the desert, that we’re all the same underneath, officers and ranks, all the same material. Pips on a man’s shoulders don’t mean a tuppenny toss.

—Graham Swift, *Last Orders* 27–28

The Class War is over.

—Tony Blair, Labour Party Conference, Bournemouth, 1999

What costs humanity very dearly is doubtless to believe that one can have done in history with a general essence of Man, on the pretext that it represents only a Hauptgespenst, arch-ghost, but also, what comes down to the same thing—at bottom—to still believe, no doubt, in this capital ghost. To believe in it as do the credulous or the dogmatic. Between the two beliefs, as always, the way remains narrow.

—Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 175

Last Orders (1996) was a new departure for Graham Swift, his first sustained attempt (except *The Sweet Shop Owner*, his debut novel in 1980) to represent a social milieu markedly different from the middle-class environment that he normally portrays. Whereas the protagonists and primary narrators in his previous books had tended to be educated, highly articulate middle-class men (an archivist, a history teacher, a photojournalist, a university don), *Last Orders* presents us with a retired insurance clerk, a grocer, an undertaker, a used-car salesman, and a butcher, all inhabitants of upper-lower-class Bermondsey.¹ Using multiple first-person narration, *Last Orders* tells the story of a group of old friends who are preparing to honor the last wishes of Jack Dodds, a deceased butcher, who has asked that his ashes be scattered off the end of Margate pier. In part, the book is

the story of the men's car journey from South London, through Kent, to the Kentish coast; in part, it is a collection of reminiscences by each of the characters. Critics and author alike have been dismissive of the class issue in *Last Orders*, which they see as a mere distraction from what they consider to be the novel's central preoccupation with the articulation of a humanist ethics of sympathy.² I take this failure to address properly the issue of class as a point of departure for a reflection on the ethical dimension of Swift's novel, and of literature at large, in which I take issue with some of the more established views on the subject.

I begin with a few words about the novel's reception. Almost unanimously, critics have praised Swift's "virtuoso facility for inhabiting other voices" (Quinn) and the overwhelming effect of realism and authenticity resulting from this act of ventriloquism, which is said inevitably to elicit an empathic response from the reader. In its insistence on "the essential dignity of humble people" (Banville), Swift's novel has been perceived as a warm plea for human interconnectedness and sympathy. Melissa Bennetts reads *Last Orders* as "a poignant set of variations on John Donne's theme 'No man is an island.' It is a novel redolent with hope, triumph, and promise, and despite its few drawbacks, it returns the warmth of humanity to the field of literature, which all too often is heartless and barren."³ Jay Parini, for his part, asserts that the novel is concerned with "inventing that most precious of things, a genuine community. As Ray [the main narrator of the novel] says, 'We're all part of each other.'" (13).

The critic who has made this point most forcefully, and with whom I disagree most strongly, is Susanne Mecklenburg, the author of the only full-length study of all of Swift's work to have been published to date. She finds one of the most noteworthy things about Swift's latest novel to be its effect on the reader, "who, in the course of the novel, without any moralist finger-wagging by the author, is instilled with values which are conceived as universal and timeless even in this day and age" (174).⁴ Mecklenburg depicts Swift as "a religiously anchored moralist" (181), a latter-day prophet with absolute faith⁵ in the mainly humanist values—centering round the spontaneous expression of feeling, open interhuman communication, and love⁶—that he is seeking to promote through literature. In all of Swift's works, with only one exception, she discerns one or more characters who display the author's forward-looking ethical attitude, and with each novel or story these "bearers of hope," increase in number. As a result, in *Last Orders*, Swift's conception of morality is rendered with maximum clarity: "In *Last Orders* all protagonists [. . .] turn into bearers of hope who live out Swift's still unchanged ethics in their personal lives, not only in their downs, but also in their ups" (180).

Mecklenburg argues that in the course of the narrative, all characters come to see the error of their ways, reestablish their priorities, and determine to resolve the conflicts that have marred their lives. All of them are said to manifest an "extreme desire to explore new territory on the one hand and to find interhuman love and harmony on the other" (174). For example, by the close of the novel,

Ray, Jack's best friend, overcomes his initial selfish impulse to hold on to the substantial amount of money that he has won for Jack, resolving instead to hand it over to Jack's stepson Vince, who is experiencing financial hardship, and to Jack's widow Amy, for whom it was originally intended. According to Mecklenburg, Ray's victory over his egotistical instincts is presented as a purifying and heroic act that removes all obstacles to the establishment of a harmonious love relationship between Amy and himself and to a reconciliation with his estranged daughter, who is living on the other side of the world. Thus, Ray allegedly comes to embody the ideals of love, interhuman contact, and hope for a better world that Mecklenburg finds at the heart of Swift's literary enterprise.

Judging from an interview conducted shortly before the publication of *Last Orders*, Swift appears to endorse the notion that underlies Mecklenburg's reading of his novel: that literature may serve to inculcate sympathy in people. Asked whether he would define himself as a moralist, Swift at first rejected this label, which he associated with "rules and discipline," but then he claimed that his business as a writer was in fact "deeply moral" because "all morality, all real morality, rests on doing what a novelist makes a speciality of—that is, attempting to get inside the experience of others." Pressed to elaborate, he added that "empathy is the beginning of sympathy, sympathy is the beginning of compassion, and compassion is where morality really accrues" (Bernard 224).

Some years earlier, in a rare piece of criticism in the *Times* (London), Swift contended that "the fundamental task of literature is to enable us to enter, imaginatively, experiences other than our own," something he conceived of as a difficult but necessary task: "The hardest task in the world, against which consciousness stacks insuperable obstacles, is to understand what it is like to be someone else. But if we cannot even attempt that vital mental act, what hope do we have as the social, political and cultural animals we claim to be?" ("Throwing Off" 20). Class differences do not seem to give him pause in his endeavor to expand the limits of sympathy. Asked, in another interview, "whether he'd found it hard to go from his customary middle-class voice to that of salt-of-the-earth working man Ray 'Lucky' Johnson," Swift answered in the negative: "No, and I should probably say from the outset that I don't think of class and classification. The characters are human beings—what you have to do as a writer is to get close to them. That's as true whatever the sociology might be" (Quinn).

In this essay, I question the notion of an unproblematic cross-class identification on which the reading of the novel that I have just outlined is predicated. By analyzing moments when the text draws attention to its artificiality and to the forced nature of the construction of its characters, I will try to demonstrate the novel's awareness of the fact that a certain measure of violence is always involved in any sympathetic attempt to represent the other, in this case the lower-class other. Indeed, in its desire for direct contact with the other, sympathy suspends the separation between self and other, thereby effectively stripping the other of his or her otherness and reducing him or her to the same. The process of

sympathetic identification with fictional characters enacts a scene of recognition in which the writer or reader discovers the “truth” of him- or herself reflected in the character. This recognition comes at the expense of the otherness of the other, which is denied in a move toward a sympathetic fusion that grants the self a position of security in its own identity. By pretending to know the other fully and comprehensibly, the self assures itself of its own truth and ordinary status and refuses the challenge that the other as other might put to such notions. I contend that Swift’s novel, although it solicits the sort of sympathetic reading that it has received from most critics, it, at the same time, ironically demystifies the basic assumption informing that reading, namely that sympathy as an ideal is a sufficient ground for the foundation of an ethical community.

As a way into the text, I consider a quotation from a 1988 videotaped interview with Swift, in which the author comments on his preference for first-person over third-person narration:

If you’re dealing with a particular narrator, then you can’t really give that one individual the authority to answer the big questions and to draw the conclusions; that must come from some kind of overview, and I don’t really want that overview. Wonderful things have of course been written in the third person, but it always seems to me that in the third person one is above the characters, looking down on them in a rather sort of chess-playing fashion, and I don’t want to have that elevated, omniscient role; I’d much rather feel that I am down on the ground with the characters in the sort of thick of things. (Profumo)

What interests me here is Swift’s assertion of his desire to be on the same level with his characters (i.e., not to be “elevated” “above the characters,” but to be “down on the ground” with them) and his concomitant renunciation of an authoritative gaze (“some sort of overview” allowing one to “[look] down” on the characters and to manipulate them like pawns in a game of chess). Swift is distancing himself from the so-called traditional novel in which the author behaves like an omniscient and omnipotent God who treats his characters like puppets. He, in contrast, wants to show maximum respect for his characters by trying to put himself in their place and taking on their experiences.

If the prevailing critical opinion is to be believed, Swift pulls this feat off brilliantly in *Last Orders*. Whereas, according to Oliver Reynolds, in Swift’s previous books one is occasionally aware of the novelist “attending to the nuts and bolts of the plot or buffing up his themes to the detriment of the independent life of his characters,” in *Last Orders* “the characters live their own lives and the novelist pays them (and his readers) the ultimate compliment: he disappears” (25). Using neither “an old-fashioned omniscient narrator” nor “the modish modern equivalent making an open-palmed avowal of unreliability,” Swift resorts instead to “the alternation of different characters’ points of view” (25). Reynolds praises the technical skill required by this disappearing trick as “a beautiful example of Swift’s integrity, of the way he grants autonomy to his own creations” (25).

Anthony Paul similarly connects “the absence of something like an authorial voice” in *Last Orders* with “the large-hearted sympathy and respect which Swift feels for his characters.”

Against the majority of critics who share this view, I argue that Swift’s disappearing trick is not quite so successful as they make it out to be. If it is Swift’s program to promote fellow-feeling across class boundaries by absenting himself as an authorial presence from the novel, I suggest that *Last Orders* can be read as a record of resistance to the textual execution of this project. I make my case by closely examining the alleged absence of the author in the novel. By focussing on textual signs that suggest that the “absence” of the author has in fact led to a displacement of the author-function onto various other ordering and integrating principles, I argue that authorial control still haunts the novel as a ghostly presence. To be precise, I consider three different versions of the displaced author-function: the characters’ constant sense of being watched and determined by an invisible external authority, the section of *Last Orders* narrated by the ghost of Jack’s father and the injunction that it contains, and the web of linguistic connections established in the novel. Although Swift may have intended the “absence” of the author as a strategy enabling cross-class intimacy, my reading of this strategy as executed in the text recovers the class struggle as a struggle against representation.⁷

A first important feature of the novel to be noticed is the sense, shared by all the characters, of an all-powerful and all-seeing but invisible authority looking down on them from above and determining the course of their lives—exactly the sort of authority that Swift abdicated in the above quotation. Throughout the novel, various narrators record instances of seeing without being seen, and frequently an element of sadistic pleasure or depreciation on the part of the seer is in evidence, as is the case in the following comments by Ray about Canterbury Cathedral: “It’s a big building, long and tall, but it’s like it hasn’t stretched up yet to its full height, it’s still growing. It makes the cathedral at Rochester look like any old church and it makes you feel sort of cheap and titchy. Like it’s looking down at you, saying, I’m Canterbury Cathedral, who the hell are you?” (194). Another example is to be found in the passage recounting the aftermath of the fight between Lenny and Vince, which represents the absolute lowpoint of the journey to Margate. In this case, the subject of the gaze is the urn containing Jack’s ashes, which, Ray refers to as a “badge of authority” (108):

It’s like the reason we’re out here in this field is because the jar’s gone and made a bolt for it and we’ve had to run after it and catch it. It’s all the jar’s fault. Except we know it aint, it’s the other way round. It’s all our fault. Fighting over a man’s ashes. And the jar’s sitting there in Vince’s hands like it’s shaking its head at us all, like Jack’s inside there peeping out and sighing over us [. . .]. It’s as though we’re all wondering whether we should press on with this exercise or quit now on the grounds of not being up to it. Two detours, one fight, a piss-up and a near-wetting. (180)

The characters are pictured as object of the gaze, not as subject of perception. Jack, Ray, and Lenny all had dreams beyond the barriers of class or parental expectation but failed to realize their ambitions. Ray quotes Jack as having attributed this failure to a general lack of vision: “if we could all see and choose [. . .]. If we could choose. And you’d be riding Derby winners and Lenny’d be middleweight champ. And I’d be doctor Kildare. [. . .] If we could all see. [. . .] If we could all see and choose” (283–84). Instead, the characters feel as if they have been fixed in their places by a superior power. This becomes apparent, for example, in Lenny’s account of Jack’s homecoming after demobilization from the Second World War: “[W]hen it came to being back in Civvy Street, he didn’t know nothing better, like most of us, than to stick like glue to what he knew, like there was an order sent down from High Command that he couldn’t ever be nothing else but a butcher. That shop was his bleeding billet, it’s a fact” (132). Similarly, having disgraced himself by picking a fight with Vince over Jack’s ashes, Lenny himself reflects: “It’s the way you’re made. It’s hard fighting against your own nature when it’s in your nature to fight” (176). The alleged intimate authenticity of Swift’s portrayal of his characters thus appears to come at a price: authorial manipulation is no sooner abandoned than it reemerges as an extra-authorial authority naturalizing the author as its ghostwriter. Indeed, the author’s decision to withdraw from the text does not so much set the characters free as turn them into truly ideologized subjects, while the author himself is reduced to a passive mediator of ideology.

Another displaced return of the “absent” author can be witnessed in the one section of the novel narrated by the deceased, or rather the deceased’s father. Fatherhood is after all an ancient trope for authorship: the author as the progenitor of the fiction he creates. Several characters narrate *Last Orders*, and each in turn recounts events in the narrative present—mainly to do with the day’s outing to Margate—or recall moments in the past when their lives intersected. By this device, Swift manages to impress the reader with a sense of direct, immediate contact with the characters. As Michel Morel puts it:

the reader finds himself thrown before the fictional reality which seems to offer itself up with a kind of clinical immediacy: no more text, only action, action which pretends to be raw and non-interpreted. The result of this first procedure appears to be a kind of exacerbated voyeurism. (83)

However, as Morel goes on to point out, the editing work that has gone into the production of the novel is not totally concealed; as a result, the reality effect is undermined. This is especially the case when, in one section, the reader is abruptly confronted with the voice of the ghost of Jack’s father, which does not fit into the novel’s established naturalizing framework, and hence raises serious questions about the status of the narrative:⁸

Inversely, a malaise remains, particularly when, from fragment to fragment, the break imposes itself of a montage which is no longer naturalized by the imitation of the real facts of visualization like in a film. Here, in contrast, and

especially when the fragment does not enter directly into the latent diegesis—as when the reader totally unexpectedly stumbles upon the voice of Jack’s father in the midst of narrative fragments related from near or from far to the immediate chronicle of the journey—the arbitrariness of this montage is in evidence. Suddenly the reader, who only a moment ago could rest assured that he could believe whatever he pleased, anxiously asks himself questions about the origin, the purpose, and the very possibility of the narrative construction. (Morel 83)

The inclusion of the impossible utterance of a dead man constitutes a radical departure from the verisimilitude that the novel had seemed to be so anxious to preserve. The novel calls the reader’s attention to the fact that what he or she is witnessing is not raw reality, but mediated reality, a representation carefully crafted by the author. The characters whom the reader is so eager to identify with are not authentic lower-class people, but the author’s imaginings of what such people might be and act like.

Looking at what is actually said in the section under analysis, we find that, in classic *Hamlet* style, the ghost of Jack’s father—who, like Jack, was a butcher—lays an injunction on his son. Once again, we have a character being restrained and kept in check by an extra-authorial authority filling the place left empty by the “absence” of the author. Jack is enjoined by his father to avoid wastage and warned that failure to do so would “cost [him]”: “Whole art of butchery’s in avoiding wastage. [. . .] You got to keep a constant eye on wastage, constant” (285). That passage lays down the guiding principle of a self-sufficient private economy, which needs no input from outside to keep going. Beyond the economic realm, however, it can be understood metaphorically as sanctioning an integrated, closed community with no use for outsiders.

Before developing this point further, I will bring in a third locus of the displacement of the author-function, namely the level of language. The fragmentation resulting from the absence of an authorial narrator is counteracted by the establishment of intertextual networks within and between the narratives of the various characters, linking them together in a seemingly organic whole. As Morel writes, “The echoes, correspondences, repetitions, and continuations which unite the characters without their knowing, establish a kind of network connecting everything with everything” (76). Elaborate metaphorical chains and clusters are set up in the course of the novel, accumulating ever more meanings, connotations, and associations through being taken up and further developed by different narrators. The integrative function traditionally associated with an authorial narrator is thus transferred to language. As John Marsden points out, “the world of *Last Orders* is tenuously held together by a shared language” (190). Nodal points in this shared language are words that function as badges of lower-class identity, such as “meat,” “motors,” and “beer.” This common language, shot through as it is with clichés, received expressions, and folk wisdom, constitutes a “collective *doxa*”⁹ that restricts the possibilities of thought for the

characters to the point of complete determination: "Ordinary thought cannot be conceived outside these repetitions of the collective discourse, language speaking the individual as much as the latter speaking language. Such is at least the impression one gets from reading *Last Orders*, which in this regard breaks new ground in the work of Graham Swift" (Morel 78). A good example of a passage in which the speaker derives the legitimacy of her speech from the collective discourse of the group is to be found in Amy's evocation of the moment of the conception of her mentally disturbed daughter June:

Things come together in this world to make things happen, that's all you can say. They come together.

But you'll never know, June, that that was how you came together. Or not quite together, not quite. Like Jack won't ever know it was the sight of that gypsy. The things that do and don't get told. You'll never know, you never had the chance, about warm August nights and colanders. You'll never know, you'll never need to and maybe you're better off as you are, how one thing leads to another. If you lead a horse to water, he'll drink. And there you are with your bellyful, trying to tell yourself that you're no more to blame than he is, but feeling anyhow, you can't help it, that you've got him on a rope, saying, I do, I will, in a borrowed suit, with the rest of them looking on like butter wouldn't melt. Hitched, they call it. (238)

The fact that individual voices can only express themselves by mimicking the language of the group leaves the reader with a "strong feeling of inevitability and irreversibility": "Recourse to sayings legitimates individual speech, revealing in the process that there is nothing left to invent in terms of conduct of life" (Morel 79).¹⁰ In this way, a closely integrated textual world is constructed on the level of language itself.

In fact, it can be argued that, read uncritically, all the displacement strategies that we have considered contribute to the creation of an integrated community. Not only does the language spoken by the characters bind them together as members of a tight, consensual community, but the voice of the ghost of Jack's father addressing his son and the various instances of an authoritative gaze surveilling the characters also constitute them as belonging to a particular class and consolidate the supposed integrity of their class identity. The vision of a unified community thus projected is naturalized by the delegation of authorial authority to a locus of impersonal power. The result of that operation is that the vision apparently cannot be attributed to anyone in particular but seems to coincide with the way things are, with the natural order of things. As we have seen, the majority of critics are completely enchanted by this vision. They commend the author for the alleged authenticity of the portrayal of his characters, who are seen to make up a "genuine community" (Parini 13), which they promote as a model worthy of imitation in the sociopolitical world of today.

Some critics, however, have expressed reservations about the vision that the novel puts forward. Adrian Poole, in his review of *Last Orders* in *The Guardian*,

registers a certain claustrophobic quality in the novel, which, however, does not disturb him in the least—in fact, he considers it as a credit. Yet Poole's description of the community that *Last Orders* depicts as a "tribal milieu" and of the reader's response to the novel as a "sense of a tightening embrace, with no easy exits or escape-routes" leads one to suspect that something more sinister may be involved. This sinister element, which, although obvious, seems to escape the reader's notice, is the almost complete absence of outsiders, of people of a different race, culture, sexuality, or class, in a text purporting to be an authentic representation of contemporary London life. Ruth Pavey makes this point most perceptively, in a passage that deserves quoting in full:

Swift is justly celebrated for his ability to create an encompassing feeling, a sense of his novels existing in their own special air. His Bermondsey is certainly a hermetic place; a tight community of small tradesmen, some struggling, but with scarcely a hint of what they are struggling against. The supermarket that is driving Jack out of business gets a mention. But it's almost inconceivable that such a group of oldies would not have attributed blame to another factor: the incursion of outsiders.

During the 1980s, the ex-docking community of Bermondsey, with its back against the wall, showed a marked distaste for incomers of the wrong colour, the wrong class, or the wrong sexual orientation. That none of this shows up in *Last Orders* is a choice that Swift is perfectly entitled to make in a novel. But it is fair to say that, without it, this view of Bermondsey is a very partial one in both senses of the word. Yes, Swift has again created a bewitching impression of place, but it is an imaginary one. If it ever existed, this old, tough, wise-cracking, united, fathers-and-sons community has long been more a Bermondsey of the heart than of actual experience. (37)

The multicultural other is blatantly repressed from the celebrated vision of an integrated community that *Last Orders* projects. Apparently, sympathy, which binds the lower-class community of Bermondsey together in a sense of a shared identity, does not extend to others. Indeed, what the multicultural other, through invisibility, makes visible are the limits of sympathy as an ethical ideal. Sympathy is driven by a yearning for unity, which can harden into a denial of what escapes that unity. Confronted with unassimilable otherness, the sympathetic imagination turns into an aggressive rejection and exclusion of the other.

The few encounters with the multicultural other that the novel records—and that appear to have escaped Pavey's notice—are in fact cases in point. The section of the text in which Vince reveals the virulent hostility that he feels toward Mr. Hussein, the wealthy Arab whose custom he desperately needs to ward off bankruptcy, provides a clear example of rejection of alterity. Not only does Vince greatly resent this dependence, but he is especially distressed by the fact that his daughter Kath, whom he had dangled as bait before Mr. Hussein when the latter first appeared, has gone to live with Mr. Hussein and might soon be abandoned by him. The caricatured portrayal of Mr. Hussein as a deceitful, lecherous, calculating interloper taps into a long-standing orientalist tradition

that, as Menno Spiering argues, gained new ground in Britain in the 1970s, a decade of oil embargoes, dramatic Palestinian attacks on Western and Israeli targets, and high-profile Arab purchases of Western properties: “[I]t is undeniable that to some extent a sense of menace and fear strongly coloured British sentiments towards ‘the Arabs’ when, in the course of the postwar period, Middle Eastern petro-dollars began to flow into the failing British economy. Consequently, an image caught on of blackmailing oil sheikhs who were out to buy up, and probably Islamize, all that was dear and native” (37). Mr. Hussein is seen to thwart the establishment of a self-contained communal identity enacted in the novel, which is why Vince silently threatens him with physical violence and wishes him back to “that stinking, flyblown heat-trap he’d be at home in” (165).

No less of a challenge to the vision of a consensual, homogeneous community evoked by the novel is posed by “Romany Jim,” the gypsy to whom Amy felt sexually attracted as a young woman picking hops in Kent. Amy’s view of “Romany Jim,” whom she never actually met—is equally overlaid with a tradition of projection, prejudice, longing, and suspicion. Indeed, Amy portrays Romany Jim—to whom she never speaks a word—as an exoticized figure of mystery, adventure, and romance and attributes to him a carefree existence transcending social and institutional constraints:

The gypsies came with their caravans and horses, needing the hopping just like us, but made their camp separately, over by the wood, eyeing us like we were the ones who’d pitched up where we shouldn’t, and I used to envy them because they were a stage further at being outlaws than us and because they were professionals at it and we were just amateurs and when we were back again in Bermondsey, all bricked up and boxed in, they’d still be wandering the woods and lanes. (235)

As Katie Trumpener points out, this utopian invocation of a gypsy life seemingly beyond the reach of the authorities echoes a traditional Western gypsy fantasy:

Decades after the persecution of the Gypsies under the Third Reich, Gypsy life remains in the popular imagination as a carefree, defiant, disruptive alternative to a Western culture at once humanized by its history and restrained by the discipline of its own civilization. Moving through civil society, the Gypsies apparently remain beyond reach of everything that constitutes Western identity [. . .]: outside of historical record and historical time, outside of Western law, the Western nation state, and Western economic orders, outside of writing and discursivity itself. [. . .] Despite their self-containment, paradoxically, the Gypsies’ wildness is highly contagious, as their arrival in a new place initiates and figures a crisis for Enlightenment definitions of civilization and nationalist definitions of culture. (860)

Trumpener also calls attention, however, to “the historical reality of Gypsy life, a story over the last millennium of persecution, expulsion, and prison sentences

as much as carefree wandering” (853). This sort of treatment is indicative of the other of “the two halves of the post-Enlightenment ideology of Gypsy alterity—feared as deviance, idealized as autonomy” (854). Beyond any social integration, the gypsy has often been perceived as posing a dangerous threat to the existing social order, to be contained by all possible means, including violence. The tension between the two moments constitutive of the mythology of gypsy life—“exemplary autonomy, feared alterity” (Trumpener 857)—can also be detected in Amy’s narrative. Amy, although fascinated by the spirit of freedom and transgression that the gypsies seem to embody, resists the temptation to become romantically involved with Romany Jim, resolving instead to stay on more familiar ground. Repressing her desire for the gypsy, she begins a relationship with a boy from Bermondsey: “And I didn’t, though I might’ve. I played with Jack Dodds instead, Jack Dodds from the other end of Bermondsey” (235), even though she did not “fancy him, not that much, not so much” (237). Catching sight of Romany Jim during a walk with Jack, Amy suddenly agrees to make love to Jack, as if to seal their union in the face of an uncanny power that might disrupt the bond between them and unsettle the secure sense of identity that it provides. Amy and Jack’s union, which is at the center of the web of relationships woven in the novel, is thus founded on an originary act of exclusion of a supposedly frightening alterity. In the integrated community projected by *Last Orders*, there is simply no place for otherness.

Rather than associating Swift’s novel with a dubious reactionary politics sanctioning such exclusions, as Pavey seems to do in the above quotation, I suggest that *Last Orders* may be read precisely as a critique of any sympathy-based and hence exclusionary ideology. A critical reading of the authorial displacement passages that we have considered shows that, instead of naturalizing a vision of a fully integrated community, *Last Orders* exposes such naturalization as the ultimate ruse of ideology. Whereas a naive or innocent reading sees a sympathetically portrayed, authentic organic community, a critical reading reveals ruthless determination, violence, and exclusion trying to hide from view. That procedure is in evidence in the displacement of the author-function onto an impersonal external gaze that locks the characters up in an essential class identity. It can also be seen at work in the delegation of authorial authority to the voice of the ghost of Jack’s father. The unifying and integrating impulse behind the injunction that it lays on Jack is undermined by the very spectrality of the speaker, whose incongruity shocks the reader into an awareness of the artificiality and arbitrariness of a narrative construction passing itself off as an authentic representation of the lower-class other. The integration achieved by the linguistic connections binding the characters together is subverted on the one hand by the arbitrary and excessive nature of these connections but also by the literary associations evoked by the final destination of *Last Orders*’ journey toward interconnectedness—the town of Margate. After all, Margate owes its—admittedly marginal—claim to symbolic status to T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, which includes the following

lines: "On Margate Sands. / I can connect / Nothing with nothing" (300–02). So much for integration then.¹¹

On this reading, Swift's novel does not promote but rather critiques the noble gospel of sympathy, revealing the unholy assumptions on which it is founded. As a reproductive, mimetic faculty, the sympathetic imagination tends to subsume alterity within traditional categories of knowledge, reducing it to an already familiar truth. Otherness is refused a chance to interrupt or disturb the discursive patterns within which the self is at home. This counterreading of *Last Orders* exposes sympathy as a self-serving strategy with little or no concern for the singularity of the other: "sympathy acts as an incentive to egoism, rather than as its corrective" (During 77). It is concerned with shoring up the self and confirming it in its identity in an essentially self-fulfilling gesture. The self is closed off for and unaffected by the otherness of the other and the claim that he or she makes on the self. The ability of alterity to alter the self and render it responsible for the other is flatly denied in sympathy's unchecked drive for self-realization.

If this second reading can be seen to deliver a fundamental critique of the notion of sympathy as the ultimate ethical ideal, I do not suggest that the first, sympathetic reading is thereby simply invalidated. Both readings, although they cancel each other out, are simultaneously valid. I would argue in conclusion that the ethical moment in *Last Orders*, and perhaps in literature at large, is to be situated precisely in the experience of undecidability between these two mutually exclusive readings. This means that the novel continues to advocate sympathy as an ideal worth pursuing, but at the same time it urges the reader to adopt a critical attitude toward this ideal by exposing its limits. Despite the violence that is shown to be one of its constitutive features, sympathy is not simply eliminated. After all, the violence inherent in sympathy, which must constantly be acknowledged, can never be completely avoided in an encounter with the other. As Derrida observes in "Violence and Metaphysics," the absolute alterity of the other, which puts the other beyond the reach of my cognitive powers, can only be respected as an intentional phenomenon, that is, as a representation. The fact that the other has to appear to me, that respect for the other cannot circumvent intentionality, is the necessary violence—called "transcendental violence" by Derrida—from which no encounter with the other can free itself.¹² The suggestion, then, is not that there is an alternative for sympathy that would not do violence to the other but that an unproblematic valorization of sympathy ignores this violence and in so doing disavows responsibility for the other who calls on the self to open itself up to alterity and change.

Critics like Mecklenburg, who in their search for moral content and values in literature repress the element of undecidability complicating any such endeavor, miss precisely what it is that literature *as literature* can contribute to our political and ethical thinking and acting. Mecklenburg's reading practice relies on a notion of expression in which the verbal component of the text is a means of access, but also a barrier, to a stable, autonomous core of meaning. The aim of

literary reading as she sees it is to overcome the materiality of the sign so as to reach a prediscursive essence of meaning. In the case of *Last Orders*, this essence of meaning, the ultimate truth of the novel, would be the moral value system that the author is seen to promote—a value system, moreover, which, as Mecklenburg readily admits, has nothing peculiarly literary about it: “the disposition which is labelled moralism here never goes beyond a fixed ethical concept consisting of the values—mostly rooted in Christian thought—of charity, considerateness and human dignity” (3). This solid moral core comes dressed in a fancy postmodern narrative outfit: “This literary representation of his doctrine which is of an as yet unsurpassed clarity” is achieved “through an impressively superior application of the postmodern technique of an enumerative juxtaposition of set pieces” (180). Thanks to the putatively postmodern¹³ narrative strategies that the novel employs, the author’s “very straight moral message” is “embedded cautiously enough [. . .] to be accepted as instructive by a large reading public” (183). In Mecklenburg’s view, then, the formal properties of the text are nothing but ornaments, means to get across a message that leaves the message itself intact. They are mere pieces of trickery needed to sugarcoat a moralist pill that a skeptical and incredulous contemporary reading public would otherwise find hard to swallow.

By establishing such a rigid separation between form and content of a literary text and locating the ethical dimension of literature solely in the latter aspect, Mecklenburg not only misconstrues the specific nature of the literary work as a textual object but also disregards the distinctive contribution that it can make to ethical thought. As Derek Attridge usefully points out,

form is always already meaning; as an act of signification a literary work is meaning in motion, and there is no moment, not even a theoretical one, at which it is possible to isolate a purely formal property—at least not without turning the literary text into something else. [. . .] The effect of this mobilization of meaning by formal properties is that it can never close down on a represented world, can never become solely the reflection of or pointer to a set of existents outside language. The question of meaning and reference is kept alive as a question; referentiality is enacted—but not simply endorsed—in every literary act. [. . .] Literary form therefore produces (in conjunction, of course, with the assumptions and conventions of the literary institution which governs reading) a suspension of linguistic instrumentality, which we can think of as *blocking* the aesthetic urge to separate form from content and to assign content alone to the domain of ethics and politics. (247–48; italics in original)

In my reading of *Last Orders*, the opposition between form and content is suspended and replaced by a friction between the understanding of the text as a gospel preaching universal sympathy and the reading of the textual constellation as a crisis of foundational meaning. By analyzing instances of textual resistance to the assignment of determinate meaning, I have attempted to highlight the permanent, irresolvable tension between these two strictly incompatible interpreta-

tions. In closing, I suggest that the intimation of a critical ethics, which a literary work offers through the undecidability at its very heart, may be the most valuable contribution that literature as literature can make to ethical theory and practice.

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NOTES

1. Delineating class boundaries is, of course, a notoriously murky business. I employ the term upper-lower class here as a sort of in-between category, to avoid having to use either of the equally unsatisfactory alternatives, namely working class, which suggests wage labor and as such would seem to exclude Swift's shopkeepers, and lower middle class, which implies a degree of financial security and a relatively uncomplicated lifestyle unavailable to most inhabitants of the deprived London borough in which the novel is set. In light of the fact (which I will argue later on) that sympathy is more easily felt toward people resembling ourselves than toward complete strangers or outsiders, Swift's choosing to portray upper-lower-class people—who aspire to middle-class respectability—rather than lower-lower-class characters is not without significance.

2. This dismissal of class-based analysis as irrelevant to an understanding of *Last Orders* is symptomatic of the critical neglect that the concept of class has suffered following the collapse of communist and socialist regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe. Attention within literary studies seems to have shifted to the social markers of gender, sexuality, and race, although there are indications—such as the special issues of *PMLA* (Jan. 2000) and *Modern Fiction Studies* (Spring 2001) devoted to class—that the tide is turning again and that class may be regaining some of the ground it had lost.

3. Significantly, in terms of my argument, one of the novel's alleged drawbacks is "the impression," which Bennetts calls "[s]omewhat disconcerting," "that this is how an intellectual writer imagines the working class perceives things—how they think, talk and act—rather than an accurate representation of their speech and lives."

4. I have made the English translations of all of the quotations from Mecklenburg, Morel, and Paul that appear in this article.

5. "Swift does not however represent such a value system as a mere illusion, but deploys it as a Lyotardian 'metanarrative'" (Mecklenburg 115–16).

6. "By dint of the constant, mutually presupposing triad of the spontaneous display of emotion, open interhuman communication and love, the author shows his characters and readers a way out of possible difficulties which is always similar" (Mecklenburg 181).

7. Parenthetically, it may be noted that Swift's criticisms of the traditional novel and the problems he runs into trying to supersede it strongly recall the work of Jean-Paul Sartre. In his essay "M. Mauriac et la liberté," Sartre lambastes François Mauriac's novel *La Fin de la nuit*—and the complete literary output of most other French writers—for violating the freedom of its characters, a defect that he traces back to Mauriac's use of an omniscient, Godlike narrator. Sartre sees Mauriac's arrogation of divine authority to be at odds with the essence of the novelistic genre, which he constructs as the absence of an omniscient perspective. However, Sartre's own novels, in which he seeks to put his literary-theoretical ideas into textual practice, only reveal the reluctance of literature to being forced into any theoretical straitjacket. This is borne out—*malgré lui*—by Gerald Prince's dissertation *Métaphysique et technique dans l'oeuvre romanesque de Sartre*, which endeavors to demonstrate a perfect match between Sartre's literary techniques and his philosophical and literary-theoretical notions, but only does so by making light of a plethora of textual evidence that seems to contradict his premise. Apparently, literature does not lend itself willingly to the sort of cleansing project promoted by Sartre. Nor—as I show—is it quite at ease with the aims that Swift has set himself.

8. Although Morel and I are in full agreement on this point, we part company when he suggests

that the reader, by returning to a willing suspension of disbelief, can ultimately resolve the contradiction revealed by the disconcerting insertion of Jack's father voice:

at the end of the day our desire to believe anyway that these creatures, whom we know full well to be fictitious, are somehow made more reliable by being thus fragmented carries the day. Here, at least, no narrator, we would be tempted to say. And I am not sure that it is not this second position of return to the ordinary fictional contract which carries the day, despite all the contradictions, so strong is our desire to believe. (83)

Pace Morel, I suggest that a critical reading of the novel should not attempt to cover over this contradiction but rather explore its interpretative possibilities.

9. "[T]he interior monologues are legitimated by their dependence on the collective *doxa*, particularly on received expressions" (Morel 78).

10. The conclusion arrived at here would seem to leave little or no space for "the sense of the characters gaily speaking their own minds and leading their own lives," which Reynolds attributes to the novel in his thoroughly sympathetic reading of it (25).

11. As if to add to the irony, Margate, in the year 2000, became the scene of several far-right National Front demonstrations against asylum-seekers.

12. To quote Derrida: "To return, as to the only possible point of departure, to the intentional phenomenon in which the other appears as other, and lends itself to language, to every possible language, is perhaps to give oneself over to violence, or to make oneself its accomplice at least, and to acquiesce—in the critical sense—to the violence of the fact; but in question, then, is an irreducible zone of factuality, an original, transcendental violence, previous to every ethical choice, even supposed by ethical nonviolence" ("Violence" 125).

13. The alleged postmodern nature of the narrative technique in *Last Orders* is a questionable point. Indeed, as John Marsden points out, "In its shifting perspectives and its provision of information whose meaning and relevance is illuminated elsewhere in the text, the structure obviously owes a debt to the modernism not only—*pace* John Frow—of Faulkner, but of Joyce, Woolf, T. S. Eliot and others" (189). John Frow is an English professor at the University of Queensland who, in March 1997, caused something of a stir in the British press by suggesting that the (numerous and obvious) thematic and technical similarities between Swift's Booker Prize-winning novel and Faulkner's modernist classic *As I Lay Dying* were just a little too apparent.

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