

**Stef Craps**

## **“As if history could be circumvented”**

### **Undying memories in Graham Swift's *The Sweet Shop Owner***

Graham Swift's debut novel *The Sweet Shop Owner* recounts the final day in the life of an ageing shopkeeper whose wife has died and who is estranged from his daughter. It diagnoses the demise of a way of life based on the principles of predictability, immobility and economic circularity. This paper shows how the impasse in the narrative present is accounted for by the characters' failure seriously to engage with trauma. The mechanisms of denial to which they take recourse prove inimical to life, and yet remain in place right until the end of the novel. Tantalizing flashes of an alternative *modus vivendi* are offered through the rebellion of the protagonist's daughter against the oppressive regime imposed by her parents, but the suggestion that there is no possibility of achieving real change is at least equally prominent in the text. Envisaging the possibility of genuine renewal appears to be a deeply problematic undertaking. In exposing the ravages wreaked by a determined evasion of a catastrophic history, *The Sweet Shop Owner* inaugurates Swift's search for a way of coming to terms with trauma that would create the conditions for the invention of a more humane, just and less destructive future, a quest which is taken up and doggedly pursued in the author's later novels.

In a 1993 interview with Marc Porée, the contemporary British author Graham Swift speaks of his dedication to the business of debunking the “glorious myths” which dominated his childhood years: “Je suis né peu de temps après la fin de la deuxième guerre mondiale, et mes romans portent la marque de ces glorieux mythes que l'on agitait beaucoup autour de moi, dans les années 50 qui furent celles de mon enfance. Il nous est revenu, à nous romanciers, de faire exploser

ces mythes.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in novel after novel, Swift presents us with contemporary characters – mostly small, unheroic elderly men – who feel the foundations slipping away upon which they, and the society to which they belong, have built their existence. This process is generally triggered by a crisis situation in the protagonists’ personal lives, forcing them to face up to an often traumatic individual and collective past which their way of life had been specifically designed to repress or deny. In one way or another, all of Swift’s novels diagnose the failure of a mythical conception of the individual and the world in which he or she moves and explore the possibility of inventing a viable way out of the impasse in the narrative present, which usually involves a renewed and sustained engagement with the demands of a catastrophic history.

This novelistic programme finds its first articulation in *The Sweet Shop Owner*,<sup>2</sup> Swift’s debut novel and in many ways the founding text of his oeuvre. Paying quiet homage to Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*,<sup>3</sup> *The Sweet Shop Owner* depicts the final day in the life of Willy Chapman, the owner of a sweet shop in South London, interspersed with flashbacks to earlier events from his schoolboy days in 1931 to the fictional present, a sunny Friday in June 1974. As he goes about his daily routine in the usual manner (albeit with some variations), Willy’s mind is cast back to his courtship of and marriage to Irene Harrison, a beautiful and wealthy woman who bought him his shop and bore him a daughter on condition that he would never seek nor offer love. About a year after Irene’s death from a heart disorder, Willy receives a letter from Dorothy, his estranged daughter, thanking him for sending her £15,000 from her mother’s estate and apparently ruling out any prospect of a reunion. Four days later, lonely and deserted, he commits suicide by bringing on a fatal angina attack through undue physical exertion during the day.

While *The Sweet Shop Owner* establishes many of the themes and techniques that will dominate Swift’s later fictions, it is unique among his novels for several reasons. To begin with, unlike Swift’s other protagonists, Willy is singu-

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1. Marc Porée, “Entretien avec Graham Swift,” *La Quinzaine Littéraire* 621 (1993) 10–11, p. 10.

2. Graham Swift, *The Sweet Shop Owner* (London: Picador, 1997). All parenthetical references in the text are to this edition. The original edition was published by Allen Lane in 1980.

3. For a fairly comprehensive overview of formal and thematic similarities between *The Sweet Shop Owner* and these two modernist classics, see: John Lloyd Marsden, *After Modernism: Representations of the Past in the Novels of Graham Swift*, Diss. Ohio U, 1996 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 2000), pp. 52–58.

larly unaware of the source of all – or most of – his troubles. Right until the end, the traumatic sexual assault which his wife suffered as a teenager at the hands of a family friend remains hidden from him. This crucial incident, which Irene struggled to repress as best she could, has left an indelible mark on every aspect of their married life. It is related in a brief portion of the narrative given over to a deposition from Irene, a ghost testimony which serves to acquaint the reader with relevant facts of Irene's life before she met Willy. Whereas Swift's later protagonists are all in a position which allows them to account for the mess they are in and to find a measure of redemption, Willy has no idea as to what has hit him. Unable to figure out where things went wrong, he appears unable also to do anything about his predicament.

Moreover, whereas *Waterland's*<sup>4</sup> Tom Crick and *Ever After's*<sup>5</sup> Bill Unwin, for instance, achieve some form of relief by actively recalling the past and recounting their experiences, no such commitment is apparent on the part of the protagonist of *The Sweet Shop Owner*. Indeed, Willy's paralysis and passivity are reflected by the text's peculiar narrative situation: unlike Swift's other novels, all of which employ first-person narrators, *The Sweet Shop Owner* is primarily related in the third person, with the protagonist acting as the main focalizer.<sup>6</sup> While his prominence as a focalizer does of course imply that some form of men-

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4. Graham Swift, *Waterland* (London: Picador, 1992). Originally published by Heinemann in 1983.

5. Graham Swift, *Ever After* (London: Picador, 1992).

6. This particularity is also remarked upon by David Leon Higdon, who yet insists that the protagonist manages to arrive at "minimal enlightenment" by an alternative route (David Leon Higdon, "Unconfessed Confessions: The Narrators of Graham Swift and Julian Barnes," in *The British and Irish Novel since 1960*, ed. James Acheson [Houndmills: Macmillan, 1991], p. 184): "In most retrospective fiction, the act of looking back and telling the story in some way transforms the person doing the telling. Because he is not consciously telling his story, Willy Chapman's case is more problematic and open, depending as it does on the reader's comprehension of symbolic connections" (Higdon, p. 183). The one example of this procedure which he adduces is the juxtaposition, towards the end of the novel, of scenes from Willy's walk across the Common, which is instrumental in precipitating his death, and the 1931 mile run for his school, which Willy either narrowly won from or lost to Irene's brother Jack. It is not at all clear, however, how the connection suggested between these two events is indicative of Willy "finally understand[ing] the grotesque joke Irene has played upon him and on her family" and "wish[ing] to escape from the patterns she and life have imposed upon him" (Higdon, p. 183). What is clear, though, is that, for all the "heart trouble" (19) which his marriage has given him, Willy remains very assertive throughout the novel about the essential rightness of Irene's and his views and reproachful of Dorothy for having failed them.

tal activity is going on in Willy's mind, it is hardly the same level of engagement which could have been expected of a narrative agent.<sup>7</sup> Rather than critically reassessing the way of life responsible for his current state of desolation and abandonment, Willy continues to uphold the values and beliefs by which he has always been guided.<sup>8</sup> The notion of transformation or renewal is quite beyond him; in fact, the only possibility of genuine change which he can conceive lies in ending it all.<sup>9</sup> In *The Sweet Shop Owner*, it falls on Willy's daughter – who, born in 1949, is the author's exact contemporary – to unravel the glorious myths proliferated by her parents' generation and to envisage a different future. The odds, however, are stacked against her in this, Swift's most despairing novel.

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7. Though third-person narration clearly predominates, first-person narration is not completely absent from the novel. Passages in which the third-person narrator uses Willy as a focalizer often alternate with first-person passages in which Willy directly addresses his absent daughter. Another first-person narrator who puts in a brief appearance is Irene, in the passage referred to above. Nor is it the case that the extradiegetic narrator focalizes exclusively through Willy: some passages are focalized through Mrs Cooper and Sandra, his employees at the sweet shop.

8. The assumption which I make here, namely that Willy's way of life is in need of some critical reassessment, is not shared by Alan Hickman, who concludes his otherwise incisive close reading of the novel with the curious assertion that Willy's way of life is vindicated in the end: "The third part of the novel . . . vindicates him for both his treatment of Dorry and his subservience to Irene" (Alan Forrest Hickman, *Wedded to the World: Natural and Artificial History in the Novels of Graham Swift*, Diss. U of Arkansas, 1990 [Ann Arbor: UMI, 2000], p. 49). Hickman maintains that "the picture" is "complete" for Willy, the only character in the novel to "[stand] in a correct relation to the past," and that "salvation" awaits him (despite "the many ways he may be judged to have failed his obligations to others") – though why this should be so is not quite made clear (Hickman, p. 52).

9. It can be argued that, in some ways, *Ever After* begins where *The Sweet Shop Owner* leaves off. Telling the story of a failed suicide, *Ever After* can be read as a prolonged, tortuous attempt by the narrator to break free from the unreflective, narcissistic way of life which led up to his desperate act and to move towards a more viable and sustainable ethos. The protagonist of *The Sweet Shop Owner*, however, appears to be stuck in a state of incomprehension and frustration with no possibility of redemption this side of the grave. The relationship between the two texts is construed in a similar fashion by Wendy Jayne Wheeler in *From the Sublime to the Domestic: Postmodernism and the Novels of Graham Swift and Peter Ackroyd*, Diss. U of Sussex, 1994 (Boston Spa: British Library Document Supply Centre [British Thesis Service], 2002). Having argued that *The Sweet Shop Owner* offers a diagnosis of "Romantic 'failure'" (Wheeler, p. 114), Wheeler goes on to suggest that "the question which *Ever After* will ask is what forms of symbolization are appropriate, or can be formulated, in order to acknowledge the impossibility of the Romantic notion of fully, transcendently, seizing hold of reality" (Wheeler, p. 116).

My reading of this text will address some of the interpretative difficulties which the novel's critics have encountered. In particular, I will attempt to clear some of the confusion surrounding Irene's and Dorothy's motivation for behaving the way they do. Michael Gorra, in his review for *The New York Times Book Review*, identifies "the novel's main weakness" as "its defective analysis of the emotional web within Willy's family, which leaves Irene and Dorry's motives obscure."<sup>10</sup> It seems to me that we may be able to lift at least some of the fog by reading the text against a background of trauma, both personal and national, which, in one way or another, has affected the lives of all the characters. Irene's maniacal obsession with stasis, control and predictability, for example, can be explained as a reaction formation to the trauma of her rape by Frank Hancock, a brash young estate agent whose attentions were encouraged by her parents and brothers, and – insofar as these preoccupations are shared by the wider community – as a response to the collective trauma of the First World War, which left an entire nation reeling.

Born in 1915, Irene remembers being told as a young girl about her three maternal uncles who got killed in the Great War. In her mind, she pictured them like "skittles" which had been "suddenly knocked down (it said in the Book of Remembrance they were 'fallen')" (50). Only later did she become aware of the full scale of the disaster: "And later I learnt – it was a common fact so nobody mentioned it – that everywhere there had been knocking down, great gaps and holes everywhere, families with only one or two skittles left standing" (50). Nobody mentioned it – possibly because loss was indeed a very common experience at the time, but more likely, perhaps, because the nation was actively engaged in a process of collective denial. Indeed, Irene goes on: "But that was in the past. They talked of Trade and Opportunity, Recovery, the Fruits of Peace. They wanted to forget history. They wanted new life" (50). New life – a recurring concern in Swift's work – is not to be bought, however, by covering over the disquieting reality of a death-ridden past. This attitude is epitomized by the Harrison family, who established a laundry business with the fortune Irene's mother inherited, her brothers all having died during the war. Anxious to put the past behind them, they devote themselves to the task of whitewashing history. Irene's beauty is used by her family as evidence vindicating their way of life: "They set me up into a little emblem, carried me before them like a banner, so they could

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10. Michael Gorra, "When Life Closes In," review of *The Sweet Shop Owner* by Graham Swift, *New York Times Book Review* (23 June 1985) 11.

say, Look, even beauty is on our side” (50). Irene makes the picture complete for them – literally, during a family photo shoot in Aunt Madeleine’s garden, but figuratively as well. However, the viability of this collective cover-up operation is put into question by the unpunished rape suffered by Irene, which may be seen as symptomatic of the contradictions embedded in the social order, which, in the aftermath of the First World War, no one has had the courage to challenge.

Indeed, the senseless death of hundreds of thousands of young men in the trenches of the First World War revealed that a political system which promises safety, security and meaning can actually produce the worst forms of abuse, control and coercion. If the violence inherent in the system which the war has exposed is deliberately ignored rather than confronted head-on, this can only lead to a resumption or continuation of practices of oppression, subjection and victimization – as evidenced in the novel by the sexual assault upon Irene.<sup>11</sup> Irene finds that what has happened to her is beyond the possibility of communication, in the sense that there is no language for it. Trying to talk about the rape, all Irene manages to bring out is that Hancock “was not good to [her]” (52), a statement which is immediately dismissed as “nonsense” by her family, who are anxious to strengthen their ties with an up-and-coming estate agent who could help further their business interests (52, 53). No infusion of non-sense is allowed to disturb the carefully orchestrated patterns of meaning by means of which the Harrisons have resolved to keep history at bay. When Irene smashes her bedroom mirror to signal her rejection of the fraudulent notion which she has been made to represent – namely, that all is well with the post-war world of denial – she is carted off to a mental institution, as if to be disabused of this scandalous suggestion.

When Willy appears upon the scene, Irene’s family are relieved to see her go: “She has let us down once, she may let us down again; we cannot afford that embarrassment” (55). Though under normal circumstances they might have

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11. Or, to quote Jenny Edkins: “States abuse citizens on the battlefield, in captivity, in concentration camps. The modern state cannot be assumed to be a place of safety, any more than the patriarchal family can. Political abuse in one parallels sexual abuse in the other. Both give rise to what we call symptoms of trauma” (Jenny Edkins, “Trauma, Memory and Sovereign Power,” paper presented on the panel “Mediating Internationals” at the International Studies Association 42nd Annual Convention, Chicago, Illinois, 20–24 February 2001; 15 December 2002 <<http://www.isanet.org/archive/edkins1.doc>>). The connection between militarism and sexual oppression is of course familiar from Virginia Woolf’s famous essay “Three Guineas.”

been expected to object to the marriage on account of Willy's lowly background, they now jump at this opportunity to wash their hands of a renegade scioness. Willy is said to be "as simple as she's cracked," which makes their union seem "the perfect solution" (55). Indeed, the Harrisons are quick to turn their back when they see "cracks" appear in their symbolic universe which threaten to expose its claim to being a closed, self-contained structure as a sham. After all, the glorious myth of Trade and Opportunity sustaining their sense of reality was designed precisely to cover up the "great gaps and holes everywhere" which the war had left. The fatal cracks in the system which the war had brought to light were repressed rather than acknowledged.

In 1945, however, plenty of new gaps and holes are in evidence, leading Willy to suspect that the appearance of fixity and security produced by the pre-war social order had always been just that: an appearance. Surveying the damage done to shops and other buildings during the Second World War, Willy reflects that "you seemed to walk (but perhaps you always had) through a world in which holes might open, surfaces prove unsolid – like the paving-stones over which the children picked their way, returning to re-opened classrooms, dodging the fatal cracks" (96–97). However, Willy also notices that, along the bomb-scarred High Street, his fellow shopkeepers are "resuming their old ploys as if history could be circumvented and the war (what war?) veiled by the allurements of their windows" (98). In fact, he had already sensed that another cover-up was under way while witnessing the victory celebrations. The cathartic message which the bonfire around which people were dancing was meant to convey was neatly captured in a comment by Hancock: "Well – there goes the war. . . . There it goes, there it goes. All over. Forgive and forget, eh?" (86). Willy's thoughts, however, were drawn to the dead soldiers, whose memory could not simply be consumed by the fire:

Burn it all. Burn away the memories of five years, the 'sacrifice' and 'endeavour,' the headlines, the photographs, the odour of barrack huts, the names of foreign battlefields, the 39,000 helmets, the 81,000 packs. But it wouldn't burn. For, look, behind the flames, objects immune to fire, heroes of bronze and stone, too rigid and fixed ever to dance, and black names on marble, gold names on bronze, 'undying memory,' 'their name liveth'; and one of the names under the chestnut trees by the railings, on the white school memorial, where boys born after the war would be herded on Remembrance Day, was Harrison. No, it doesn't burn, it doesn't perish. Undying memories. (85–86)

The “undying memories” at the centre of *The Sweet Shop Owner* can be re-described as instances of trauma, involving “the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind . . . by an event that it cannot control.”<sup>12</sup> The reason why traumatic memories cannot die or be forgotten is that they were never fully known in the first place. Constituted, in part, by their lack of integration into consciousness, traumatic memories are not a possessed knowledge, but themselves repeatedly possess the one they inhabit.

The haunting nature of trauma is clearly evinced by another undying memory – besides the massive loss of life inflicted by the two world wars – which will turn out to play a crucial role in the novel, namely that of Irene’s rape. Irene recalls the incident in the following way:

And when he pulled me into the hedge on the way back from a drive to Brighton (how sickly the grass smelt and the stems of cow-parsley) I did not assume it was wickedness at first. He looked at me as if I should have expected this. He pulled up my clothes like a man unwrapping a parcel. ‘All right,’ he said, ‘all right, now,’ as if we had both been anticipating. I struggled. The sun was in my face. This was like a performance in which people were really stabbed and wounded. He needed his victory. . . . I only knew I wasn’t prepared. Life, life. (52)

Throughout her life, Irene suffers severe and frequent asthma attacks during which she seems to relive the assault, which, in its unexpectedness and horror, she could not fully assimilate as it occurred.<sup>13</sup> These attacks are triggered by

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12. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), p. 58.

13. The traumatic event is designated by the words “all right, now,” which are frequently invoked in the novel to mark key climactic moments, such as the instant of Willy’s death (222), the decisive moment in the mile race (198) and the taking of a picture during the Harrison family’s photo shoot (74). In each case, someone is struck, in one way or another, by the overwhelming force of the present; he or she is either “stabbed,” “wounded,” killed or “captured by the moment.” It is tempting, of course, to read the phrase “all right, now” as a prefiguration of *Waterland*’s more fully theorized notion of the “Here and Now,” which is defined as “that which we seldom glimpse unscathed – for it appears more often . . . dressed in terror” (Swift, *Waterland*, p. 51); a “knife blade” which punctures the “thin garment” of history (Swift, *Waterland*, p. 36) and whose “surprise attacks” announce that “time has taken us prisoner” (Swift, *Waterland*, p. 61). Indeed, according to Wheeler, “The ‘Now’ in *The Sweet Shop Owner* is clearly, like the ‘Here and Now’ in *Waterland*, the moment of danger in which the Real erupts” (Wheeler, p. 115). The relationship between photography and trauma cau-



stimuli such as grass and blazing sunlight which recall the original event: “I couldn’t go near the grass or lounge in the sunlight without suffering” (52). The element of struggle is apparent in a vision which Willy has of his wife on their honeymoon in Dorset. During an evening walk along the cliff tops, Willy suddenly sees Irene “flailing in the current,” “struggling in the gold water, beating her arms to be free of it, though her face was as golden as the waves” (31). This vision becomes reality (or just about) later the same evening, when Irene is seized with a fit of asthma, brought on, it seems, by the fatal combination of grass, cow-parsley and sunlight: “her chest was heaving, long jagged breaths came from her throat, and she tore at the stem he held out to her, as if she were really drowning, clutching the straw, as if it were closing in to suffocate her, that golden summer-time” (32–33). Willy will never be able to shake off the vision of “arms lifted in a golden sea” (39), his wife’s “drowning expression” and “the silent cry on her lips – Save me, save me” (102), which, many years later, he realizes “[he]’d never stopped hearing” (183). At some point, he is struck by the possibility that, contrary to what he had initially assumed to be the case, Irene is not so much drowning and reaching out for help during her asthma attacks as frantically fending off some forcible intrusion from without: “Was it to be saved she gasped and clawed, or to be left alone? For sometimes she clutched with those flailing hands, sometimes fended. And it was never, it seemed, against the illness she struggled but against something else” (128).<sup>14</sup> This “something else” is the closest Willy will ever come to understanding his wife’s predicament. Unlike the reader, he has hardly any knowledge of Irene’s past: “She never did say much about the time before we met” (150).<sup>15</sup> Deprived of this vital information, he remains in the dark as to the exact nature of her symptoms, which the

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tiously suggested in *The Sweet Shop Owner* is pursued at some length in *Out of this World* (Graham Swift, *Out of this World* [London: Picador, 1997; originally published by Viking in 1988]). As “an instant which occurs once and once only” and yet “remains permanently visible” (Swift, *Out of this World*, p. 205), the photograph can be seen to condense the particular temporality of trauma, which is described in the following terms: “what is over in an instant just goes on happening” (Swift, *Out of this World*, p. 109).

14. The same ambivalence is apparent in another comment Willy makes on the nature of his wife’s illness. Having posited that “She could never get enough air,” he goes on to voice a suspicion that the opposite was the case: “Or was it that air assailed her?” (218).

15. In fact, Willy specifies later on that the only thing Irene ever divulged to him about her past was where the money which had allowed her family to start up the laundry business came from: “She never talked about the past, but she told me about the money . . .” (222).

reader, however, has no difficulty recognizing as traumatic re-enactments of the rape incident which Irene experienced as a young woman.

Irene's way of handling the trauma of her rape closely resembles the survival strategy which her family adopted in the face of the terrible losses sustained during the First World War. At the home in Surrey to which her parents had sent her, Irene devises a coping mechanism – "I had found my balance, struck my bargain" – which bows to the family tradition of evasion and denial: "I was a skittle, Willy, but I wouldn't fall" (54). The plan for stabilizing her life which she conceives there, and which she will never veer from, invests heavily in a fictitious sense of fixity and security. Irene dedicates herself to the pursuit of peace – or, at least, a particular version thereof: "That was Irene's word: Peace" (88). The novel presents Irene's conception of peace by setting it in opposition to notions such as "action," "excitement," "change," "newness," "things happening," "non-sense," "falling," "touching," encountering "the real thing" and, ultimately, to life itself. As Willy points out, peace, for Irene, amounts to "a kind of not acting" (77). She seeks to bring life to a halt, to achieve an ideal steady state in which everything would be fixed so that a skittle would run no risk of falling. What seems to have given her this idea is a scene at the home in which she imagined, sitting in an easy chair by the window, that by "concentrating hard" she could somehow ensure that "the orderly wouldn't sink through his shiny floor and the gardener wouldn't slip from his ladder. I was responsible" (54). Just as she was made to feel responsible for upholding her family's mythical vision of the world after the First World War, so Irene, after her rape, assumes responsibility for maintaining all things in a perpetual state of balance. The ambition to create a zero-risk environment, in which the self would be immune to anything that might adversely affect its supposed integrity, inspires the various pieces of advice which Irene dispenses to Willy, and which resonate throughout the text: "Don't move, keep still" (72); "Nothing must be touched, nothing must be changed" (55); "Let nothing happen" (43).<sup>16</sup> Unsurprisingly, Irene sets great

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16. It may be noted that the meaning of this notion of "nothing happening" undergoes a radical change in the transition from *The Sweet Shop Owner* to *Waterland*. Whereas in the former it is used to characterize a life of routine and habit at a deliberate remove from the chaos of the outside world, in the latter it functions as a figure for the intrusive traumatic reality which both invites and defies such forms of evasion. *The Light of Day* again reverts to the earlier model (Graham Swift, *The Light of Day* [London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003]). As in *The Sweet Shop Owner*, the notion of nothing happening is invoked there to describe the ostensibly safe, peaceful and unexciting world of affluent suburbia: "This home-and-garden

store by “unmoving objects,” filling her house with “frozen items of stock” (220), mostly crystal and porcelain. After all, such “lifeless, lasting things” (221), which not only “remain” (218) or “endure” (83) but also “keep their value” (148), fully exemplify the ideal of immobility and permanent stasis to which she aspires.

If the world cannot be brought to a standstill altogether, its movement must at least be seen to conform to general rules or predictable patterns. Irene’s yearning for pattern<sup>17</sup> manifests itself both in the way in which she organizes her domestic life and in the attitude which she adopts towards world-historical events. In both areas, she can rely on the support of her husband, who has always been attracted to the notion of “regularity and order” (24). As a printer’s apprentice, Willy “liked the daily routine, the taking of orders” (25). His predisposition to docility and passivity goes hand in hand with a deterministic conception of history, leading him to believe that history is “only a pattern” which leaves no room for individual agency or “action” (197). He remembers thinking, as a schoolboy sitting in a history class, that “Henry VIII and his wives were like characters in costume. They weren’t real, but they didn’t know it. History fitted them into patterns” (44). In the same vein, he once wrote a contentious essay arguing that “Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries because he’d have done so anyway” (190). History, for Willy, is something that “came to meet you” (32): “things would come to you anyway, and when they did they would already be turned into history” (189). The course of his own life he believes to have been similarly predetermined, “set out like a map” (189), so that as a young man he might in principle already have known his older self: “Perhaps I knew him then, perhaps I was already his memory . . .” (189). Seen from this perspective, making

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land, this never-never land where nothing much is ever meant to happen. These Wimbletons and Chislehursts” (Swift, *The Light of Day*, p. 19); “The lights of houses through trees, quiet streets where nothing happens” (Swift, *The Light of Day*, p. 215). Like Swift’s debut novel, *The Light of Day* highlights the discomfiting fact that this peace, however carefully maintained, can suddenly be disturbed by an eruption of violence: “Something happens” (Swift, *The Light of Day*, p. 3); “It happened here” (Swift, *The Light of Day*, p. 203). Irrespective of the terminology in which it is couched, however, the basic tension between the forces of order and disorder, of trauma and post-traumatic defence, is a constant concern in all of Swift’s novels.

17. The notion of pattern-making in *The Sweet Shop Owner* anticipates that of story-telling in *Waterland*, which serves roughly the same purpose, namely “making sense of madness” (Swift, *Waterland*, p. 225) and thus throwing up a bulwark against an essentially unbearable reality: “As long as there’s a story, it’s all right” (Swift, *Waterland*, p. 63). Moreover, in both texts a naive investment in the redemptive power of pattern-making or story-telling is exposed as a recipe for personal and historical disaster.

plans for the future appears as a rather pointless occupation: “He had planned nothing. Not for himself. And yet he knew: plans emerged. You stepped into them” (24). This outlook on life makes him an ideal partner for Irene, who, “meant to command, not obey” (25), is eager enough to give him new patterns, first the predictable formulas of courtship, then the routine of the shopkeeper: “Yes, that was pattern. That was not adventuring. She had said, Why don’t you? And he did. And afterwards it was precisely the predictable formula that pleased him” (28). Life becomes a series of patterns for Irene and Willy; patterns, moreover, which are perfectly in line with social norms and expectations. A shopkeeper in a nation of shopkeepers, Willy easily blends in with the crowd, as does his wife, who “sheltered behind that same disguise” (99). Always and only doing “the thing to do” (47), and doing it “properly” (12), Irene and Willy conspire to lead a neatly arranged life of respectable conventionality.

The sheer uneventfulness and predictability of their own lives they expect to see reflected in the world at large. One way in which grand history enters the novel is through the medium of newspapers, which both Willy and Irene have a peculiar fascination with. Willy only ever scans the headlines of the papers which he sells at his shop, so as not to appear totally ignorant in front of his customers, but he does take genuine pleasure in them: “He didn’t read them, but he liked them. Their columns, captions and neat gradations of print. The world’s events were gathered into those patterns” (17). What appeals to Willy, then, is not so much the actual “content” of the newspapers, which he dismisses as “unimportant,” but the reassuring sense of order and direction which their particular “layout” creates (24). Irene, who, unlike her husband, is a voracious newspaper reader, is interested ultimately in the same effect. Keeping up with the papers is a way for her to “keep abreast of the facts” (31), to “tak[e] note of the facts, as if the course of things was predictable and she had only to observe its fulfilment” (60). It even seems to Willy that Irene has a way of speaking “as if she’d already arranged for what she said to happen” (78). More than her husband, however, Irene is aware that adherence to pattern and form does not come naturally to the world but has to be forcefully imposed upon it. Indeed, by reading the papers she attempts to “hold sway over the array of facts and regard them all with cold passivity. And sometimes, indeed, it was as if she didn’t read at all, her head hidden behind the outspread page, but peered through it, as through a veil, at a world which might default or run amok if it once suspected her gaze was not upon it” (17). Irene’s self-assumed responsibility for establishing stability thus appears to

extend far beyond the bounds of her domestic life to include the world of public affairs and international politics.

The precarious balance of the interbellum period is thoroughly upset, however, by the onset of the Second World War. While the entire world runs amok, Irene and Willy manage to remain essentially untouched by the upheaval. Having incurred an injury in trying to fix a sign above his shop, Willy is exempted from active service, and works instead in the Royal Engineer Stores. The duty which he is required to perform as a quartermaster's clerk, namely the issue of equipment to new recruits who will face combat overseas, is merely an extension of his work at the sweet shop. Indeed, his new job actually allows him to carry on in much the same manner as before. Just as he used to keep track of the stock in his own shop, so he now keeps a running count of the helmets and side-packs he hands out. These numbers he duly records in his letters to Irene, who, having found employment at the Food Office, replies by quoting the number of ration books that she has counted. Willy is struck, for the very first time, by the discrepancy which he perceives to exist between the soothing routine which thus establishes itself and the rampant chaos of the war to which it is supposed to bear some relationship: "And here suddenly was the real thing. And yet how did it express itself? In barrack huts and wire fencing, in numbers, inventories, lists? 360 capes, 360 helmets, 720 side-packs. What was the connection?" (59). Willy is haunted by this question as he ponders the strictly regulated environment of the camp in Hampshire where he carries out his counting and accounting tasks. There appears to yawn a gulf between the reality of war and the careless "pattern making" (57) in which both he and the soldiers whom he sees marching in drill formation are engaged: "Left, right. The patterns shifted, the figures grouped, regrouped over the gravel. '42, '43, '44: while the headlines spoke (what was the connection?) of faraway action" (78). Once taken for granted, the connection between reality and the various patterns in which it is framed comes under some strain during the war.

There is a clear suggestion, at this point, that the practice of pattern-making amounts to a strategy of reality-denial which works to keep the self in a state of aloofness and disengagement. For one thing, the obsessive phrase "What was the connection?" becomes associated with the words "What war?" (79), which are repeatedly used in regard of people's attempts, in the wake of the Second World War, to turn their back on a traumatic past by reverting to business as usual. Not only do they crop up in the description of the shopkeepers "resuming their old

plots as if history could be circumvented and the war (what war?) veiled by the allurements of their windows" (98), but they are also invoked to denounce the anaesthetization of society through the commodification of history as entertainment: "John Mills and Kenneth More in cheerful re-enactments of the war. History enshrined in make-believe. Like the lurid stories in the boys' comics he sold in the shop: grim-jawed fighter-pilots and ogreish Germans. What war? A packet of gum please, and another card in the series 'Great Battles of World War Two'" (131). That fitting the world into patterns carries similar connotations of detachment and disinvolvement is implied, also, by Willy's reflection that the drive to absorb an unsettling event into an existing scheme, such as the annals of history, can be linked to an underlying desire not to become implicated in it: "So Private Rees said, smacking his lips over a newspaper bearing the news of the occupation of Paris: 'History, that's what it is.' As if the statement would save him, immune as a rock, from an invasion of Germans and all the outrages of war" (59). The immunity of a rock is, of course, exactly the condition aspired to by Irene, the master pattern-maker.

Willy's awareness of cracks in the system is never of such a kind, though, as to pose any real threat to the hard-fought stability of his married life. Whenever he has any doubts or misgivings concerning the viability of the principles by which he and his wife have chosen to live their lives, Irene's commanding gaze stops him from putting these into words, let alone acting upon them and disturbing the balance: "But such mutinies could never have occurred, for her glance would have caught him before he slipped and fell: 'Play your part.'" (136). The power of Irene's gaze is mobilized, then, not only to prevent an impetuous world from running amok, but also – and more successfully – to hold an occasionally unruly husband in check. Another aspect of their marital arrangement which Willy sometimes seems to want to reconsider – though again to no avail – is its lovelessness. Besides reducing the outside world to a set of predictable patterns, Irene also conceives human relationships according to a strictly controllable economic model within which there is no place for any kind of emotional involvement. Intersubjectivity is reduced to a simple trade-off in this novel, crammed as it is with references to exchange, deals, bargains, agreements, prices, investments, return, debts, forfeits, rewards and bribes. Irene's marriage to Willy in particular is presented throughout the text as a bargain whose terms Irene established right from the beginning. It is a contractual agreement which excludes conjugal love from the marital equation for the "gifts" of the shop and a

daughter: “And all I ask in return for this is that there be no question of love” (22); “No, that was not included, not part of the bargain. Wasn’t the rest enough?” (31). A fairly typical example of the economic dynamic on which their marriage is based can be found in the following passage, which shows Irene and Willy striving to pay off the respective debts they owe each other: “Her face showed only the pinched look of someone labouring to pay a debt. So that he felt, through that lean winter of ’48, while her womb swelled, that he’d inflicted some penalty upon her for which he, in turn, must make amends by never showing gladness; taking her hint, leaving the house at six, standing obediently behind his counter: counting, counting the endless change so as to pay his own debt” (101). The reason why Irene is so anxious to keep love out of the picture is that such an uncontrollable force would disrupt the strict economy of exchange, of give and take and of settling scores. Indeed, in Willy’s mind, love is closely associated with the notion of “action,” which is, of course, complete anathema to Irene: “But he didn’t add – perhaps that was only for the heroes, writing from the field of action – ‘I love you’” (62). Willy realizes all too well that a declaration of love “would alarm her, more than war, more than bombs and blackness. No, she would say, that wouldn’t be a good plan” (65).

Despite occasional reservations about the businesslike nature of his marriage, Willy ends up conducting his relations with other people according to the same economic logic. “They were paid” is his silent farewell to his shop assistants and paper boys as he slips them generous bonuses on the last day of his life (16). Even his relationship with Smithy the barber, the closest thing he has to a friend, Willy fails to conceive as anything other than some sort of commercial transaction: “It was a bargain: he got his shave, Smithy got a pinch of tobacco and free magazines for his customers” (36). In fact, almost all forms of interaction between any two characters in the novel turn out to be governed by economic principles. The friendship between Irene’s brother Paul and Hancock, which leads the latter to offer the former a job, is ultimately a matter of business interests: “the two friends struck their terms, made their bargain” (150). Mrs Cooper secretly hopes that her attempts to ingratiate herself with Willy will earn her the “reward” of a life of leisure (93). She wants Willy to marry her, not (primarily) because she loves him, but in order that “[she] will no longer have to work” (33).<sup>18</sup> Yet another character who lives by the principle of “[s]ervice ren-

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18. Though this sentence is taken from a passage focalized through Willy, Mrs Cooper herself later confirms the accuracy of Willy’s assessment of her. Daydreaming about marrying her

dered; reward given” is Sandra Pearce, an attractive sixteen-year-old whose dealings with the other sex are described in starkly economic terms: “she had something to offer. And she’d calculate in return *his* assets and give, or not give (though, usually, she gave) the appropriate favour. But all this had become a kind of business. All predictable; nothing new” (105).

The novel subtly but unmistakably intimates that the rigid immobility and monotonous predictability of the characters’ lives amounts to a kind of death-in-life, a condition of sterile stagnation but little removed from death. An adherence to a strictly regulated economy of exchange which reduces all relations to questions of barter appears to turn people into lifeless objects. Reading *The Sweet Shop Owner*, one is struck by the frequency with which the novel’s characters – and especially its protagonist – get compared to toys, puppets, pins, skittles, statues, machines and dummies. Willy’s body even seems to undergo a literal stiffening process over the course of the narrative. The accident with the ladder leaves him with a stiff leg, and in the following years and decades the stiffness gradually spreads to the rest of his body: “And in the shop I felt my face, over the counter, go hard like a shell. I thought, this is what happens: you harden, you set in your mould” (187). The climax of this development is reached when Willy is finally transfixed into “a cold, stone statue” by death (10). In fact, his marriage had already been placed under the sign of death by the remarkable simile in the following sentence: “The sun shone at both their funerals, making the white graves in the cemetery sparkle like wedding cakes” (46). The novel also sets up a revealing parallel between Willy and the lilac tree in the garden which he is repeatedly said to be watching intently from the chair by the living-room window. While Willy sits waiting for life to end and death to come, the lilac tree, the only part of the garden to catch some sun, is gradually enveloped in shade: “The shadow had crept further up the lilac tree” (220). Significantly, however, the lilac’s sunlit crown, with which Willy’s life becomes identified, is described as being dead already: “The lilac was half within the shadow of the house, but its upper leaves, where the mauve cones had already bloomed and died, fluttered in the sunshine” (218). The implication is that Willy has been in a state of lifelessness all along: death caught up with him long before his heart actually stops beating.

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employer, she imagines that “they’d sell the shop. They wouldn’t need it anyway, with all the money (she’d find out how much it really was) Mrs Chapman had left. They’d simply stop work. And they’d take, at last, that holiday. That long, long holiday . . .” (157–158).



Physical death occurs when Willy is forced to confront the illusory nature of the fantasy of a reunion with his daughter which has sustained him ever since his wife died. The realization that Dorothy will not return home despite the money which he has sent her – “She will not come” (222) – disrupts the symbolic universe in which he lives. The old economic logic of exchange, according to which a gift is always expected to be reciprocated (in this case, by the daughter’s return), appears to have lost its validity. Seeing his long-held beliefs contradicted, Willy hastens towards death.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the situation in which Willy finds himself at the end of his life is structurally analogous to that of Irene’s father, who dies on the eve of victory in the Second World War. A workaholic like Willy, who also came into money through marriage, suffers from a heart condition<sup>20</sup> and ignores doctor’s orders to take it easy, Mr Harrison is crushed by the death of his son Jack – or, more likely, by the realization that “Money won’t bring Jack back” (81). Money always having been his guiding principle (81), Mr Harrison breaks down when faced with the incontrovertible fact of a loss which no amount of money can compensate. Like Willy, who becomes aware that money will not bring Dorothy back, Mr Harrison can no longer connect his mythical, utilitarian way of life with the distressing reality at hand: “His face was grey and dumb and held in suspense as if he couldn’t make some connection” (80). For Willy, too, the purportedly self-evident connection between pattern and reality, whose precariousness he had already sensed during the Second World War, has become altogether untenable.

Even so, his death appears to be specifically intended as a punishment to his daughter for violating the terms of the agreement which he believes her to be inescapably bound by. As such, it constitutes an attempt posthumously to reinstate the rules of exchange which Dorothy has transgressed by accepting his money and yet refusing to honour the obligation that came with it. Indeed, the circumstances of Willy’s suicide are carefully orchestrated to inflict maximum devastation on his daughter’s life. For one thing, he has planned his death day to coincide with Dorothy’s twenty-fifth birthday: “And today, Dorry, is your birth-

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19. As the narrator of *Ever After*, another suicide (albeit failed), well knows: “People die when their world will no longer sustain them” (Swift, *Ever After*, p. 24).

20. The fact that Mr Harrison, Willy and Irene all die from a heart condition is of course highly significant. Often disavowed by their owners – Mr Harrison, for instance, “swears there’s nothing wrong with him” (82) – defective hearts can be seen to function as a metaphor for the sheer heartlessness of the characters’ utilitarian way of life, i.e. its failure to create a healthy sense of self and community.

day. He could almost smile at the neatness of it" (11). What is more, Willy makes sure that he will be found sitting in the chair by the window in exactly the same pose in which his daughter last saw him when, two months earlier, she had come back unannounced to rob her parents' house. As Catherine Miquel points out, "En faisant en sorte que sa fille le trouve mort dans l'exacte position où elle l'avait quitté et 'trahi,' deux mois auparavant, Chapman l'accuse implicitement de l'avoir tué, et la condamne à rester hantée par le souvenir du Père symboliquement assassiné, transformé en 'cold statue,' c'est-à-dire en Commandeur accusateur, plein de reproches amers envers l'Ingrate, sinon l'Impie."<sup>21</sup> Willy's apparent vindictiveness towards his daughter finds a counterpart in Mr Harrison's fanaticism about the war, which boils down to a perverse attempt to reinstall a compensatory mechanism allowing him to make at least some sense of the loss of his son. Though he realizes all too well that "money won't bring Jack back," Mr Harrison yet insists on the need to make the enemy pay for his son's death: "Jack's killed, we must win and wipe all the Germans off the map" (82). Defeated by a situation of irredeemable loss which gives the lie to their utilitarian principles, both Willy and Mr Harrison in the final stage of their life resort to a vicious fantasy of retribution which only reiterates the discredited logic of exchange.

The only character in the novel to show a serious determination to challenge the pervasive economy of exchange governing the world of the text is Dorothy, whose very name connotes resistance to the hegemony of economic idolatry. Whereas names such as "Chapman" and "Irene," meaning "merchant" and "peace" respectively, have an obvious relationship to their respective bearers, Dorothy's name cannot be so readily explained from inside the novelistic universe. Yet it is the only name whose meaning is made explicit in the text: "'Dorothy': we called you 'Dorothy.' . . . But it was only years later that you yourself, coming home from school (how quick you were to learn things) explained what it meant. Dorothea: God's gift" (112). In her parents' scheme of things, however, Dorothy is Irene's "gift" to Willy, i.e. "[her] side of the bargain" (10): "You were her gift" (186). Like all other gifts in the novel, Dorothy is made to serve a function in a narrowly contractual relationship governed by a principle of self-

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21. Catherine Miquel, "Immortal Longings: La mort en représentation dans l'oeuvre de Graham Swift," *Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines* 17 (1999) 131–148, p. 143.

interest.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the only type of gift thinkable within the utilitarian discourse prevalent in the novel reduces to a form of calculation: it obligates the recipient to offer some counter-gift in return.<sup>23</sup> However, apparently unbeknownst to her parents, Dorothy's name exceeds this limited and limiting vision by introducing a transcendent principle into the text which interrupts the immanent logic of reciprocal and symmetrical exchange.

Interestingly, the notion of "God's gift" is central to Derrida's recent inquiry into the nature of responsibility and justice, which presents itself as a deliberate attempt to formulate an alternative to dominant conceptualizations steeped in an economy of exchange. Derrida finds inspiration in the Christian tradition, which, in his reading, announces a new way of acceding to responsibility that "comes from a gift received from the other, from the one who, in absolute transcendence, sees me without my seeing, holds me in his hands while remaining inaccessible."<sup>24</sup> The *mysterium tremendum*, as this experience is called, rouses one to the responsibility of making a gift of death, i.e. of sacrificing oneself for the wholly other – which Christianity represents by the name of God – without any hope of return: "The gift made to me by God as he holds me in his gaze and in his hand while remaining inaccessible to me, the terribly dissymmetrical gift of the *mysterium tremendum* only allows me to respond and only rouses me to the responsibility it gives me by making a gift of death [*en me donnant la mort*], giving the secret of death, a new experience of death."<sup>25</sup> Such a sacrificial self-offering, which expects no benefit in return, would be a true, "aneconomic" gift, i.e. a gift which "interrupts economy" in that it "suspend[s] economic calcula-

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22. In a way, Irene's traumatic experience of being reduced to a sexual object by Hancock is mirrored by the objectification suffered by Dorothy, who is treated as a commodity in an essentially economic exchange between her parents. Both characters are perceived as presents waiting to be unwrapped: in assaulting Irene, Hancock acts like "a man unwrapping a parcel" (52), and as a newborn baby, Dorothy strikes Willy as "a little thing, wrapped like a gift" when he comes to visit his wife in hospital (10).

23. On her wedding night, for example, Irene undresses "as if she were unwrapping a gift, as much as to say: 'There, see the reward you have got. And do you think such a reward will not ask certain things in return?'" (30). Even her smiles she only ever gives to her husband as a form of payment for services rendered: "She only took and squeezed his hand now and then and gave him those short, quick smiles that were like small coins thrown without fuss to someone who has done a service" (29).

24. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995), p. 40.

25. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 33.

tion” and thus “no longer gives rise to exchange.”<sup>26</sup> It would lead me too far to enter further into the details of this argument; for my purposes, the important point is that, in Derrida’s thinking, the notion of “God’s gift” is closely associated with a conception of ethics as radical non-reciprocal generosity which represents a decisive break with the hegemonic system of economic circularity.

Dorothy is a dissenter not only in name but also in character and in deed. In many respects, she is the exact antithesis of her parents, especially her mother. Whereas Irene is frequently depicted as being in a state of drowning, Dorothy surprises Willy by not being afraid of water (119). As a young child, she does not “flail [her] arms” while being baptized (108), nor does she “scream and struggle” when her father gives her a bath (114) – all this in marked contrast to her mother, who does of course display such behaviour during her asthma attacks. Later, Dorothy even becomes “a good swimmer,” with a particular talent for back-stroke, diving and – significantly – life-saving (119). While her parents “don’t dance” (75, 87), preferring to remain static and immobile, Dorothy “had that lightness and deftness of step as if [she]’d have liked to dance – if only someone had let [her]” (117). She challenges the status quo maintained by her parents on the family holidays, which are invariably spent in Dorset, in a town Irene and Willy are familiar with from their honeymoon: “We might have gone elsewhere, to Wales, to Norfolk, but (since we had to go) she was against anywhere new. Nothing new” (117). However, Dorothy makes Willy realize that Irene’s stipulation cannot possibly be fulfilled: “Yet (how could you defy her?) everything was eternally new; the old cry of the sea-gulls, the old tingle of the breeze, the old mystery of the rock-pools – how you loved to squat and explore those delicate little worlds” (117). From Irene’s point of view, the choice of Dorset as holiday destination is particularly apt. Very set in her ways herself, Irene hopes to impose the same fate upon her daughter: “Dor-set,” i.e. Dorothy set in her mother’s ways. Willy appears to confirm this derivation when he wonders: “And did you sense how that scene in which you stood for the first time had already been encountered before and its limits fixed?” (117).<sup>27</sup> However, Dorothy

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26. Jacques Derrida, “Given Time: The Time of the King,” trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Winter 1992) 161–187, p. 166.

27. A similar sentiment informs another question which Willy puts to his absent daughter: “And did you feel: whatever I do, she will have predicted it; whatever I do, it will not be my own?” (116). Having first given birth to Dorothy in fulfilment of a contractual obligation, Irene now seems to expect her daughter’s life to unfold according to a predictable pattern.

refuses to be boxed in by her mother's expectations.<sup>28</sup> One such summer, knowing her parents' eyes to be upon her and her head "set in defiance," she walks along the top of the breakwater, not on the horizontal planks, but on the narrow, seven or eight feet high uprights, leaping from one to the next (191). Her willingness to take risks – "how you needed to run risks," Willy muses – scares her mother witless but is secretly admired by her father, who watches her progress with open mouth (119).

Dorothy has little patience with the patterns established by her parents. After school, she sometimes drops in on Willy at the shop, disrupting his daily routine and rekindling his long-suppressed desire for excitement rather than peace: "Why did you have to come into the shop? To disturb those patterns? To see my look of disguised excitement, faint apology, as I greeted you from behind the counter?" (138). Moreover, she defies her parents' motto "Nothing touches you, you touch nothing" (44) not only with her adolescent determination to "make [her] mark" (140) but even with her sleeping pose: "Hair tumbled, one arm raised on the pillow, as though to touch someone" (13). Irene's yearning for uneventfulness – "Let nothing happen" (43) – is also completely alien to Dorothy, who takes a keen interest in things happening in the world around her, both locally and globally. Sitting at the dinner table with her parents, she insists on bringing up for discussion momentous events which upset some long-maintained balance, much to the consternation of her mother. For example, Dorothy announces, with an offence-giving "note of adventure" in her voice, that her uncle Paul has run off with Hancock's wife: "Something has happened" (152). On another occasion, having read the papers, she provokes Irene's anger by raising the subject of the Cuban missile crisis, then in full swing: "Doesn't it bother you – that there might be a war?" (140). However, Irene "refused to be

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28. Images of imprisonment and confinement abound in *The Sweet Shop Owner*, underlining the characters' immobility and isolation. As a teenager, Irene "cowered inside [her] looks like a captive" (50), a simile which recurs in the description of a picture which Mr Harrison took of his three children: "The developed photograph would show her like some captive between two vigilant sentinels" (69). Many years later, Irene strikes Phil the paper boy as "someone trapped in a glass case" the one time he sees her, standing behind the window of her house as he comes round to deliver her papers (185). Irene's brothers, for their part, are said to "have the looks of statues, trapped in immovable poses" (51), and Mrs Cooper is pictured as "an animal in a cage" (158), as is Willy (214). Moreover, lying in bed, Willy is compared to "a toy in its box" (11), and going out of his shop, he only walks into "the hot envelope of the street" (160).

drawn”: “All this excitement, this nonsense. I won’t have it. I won’t suffer it” (17).<sup>29</sup> The 1962 missile crisis, the climax of the Cold War and the closest the world ever came to nuclear Armageddon, represents an eruption of non-sense which exposes the fragility of the equilibrium established by Irene and Willy’s generation. Dorothy accuses her parents of irresponsibly repressing this unsettling event, which not only threatens to disturb the meaningful patterns into which Irene habitually fits world events, but might well spell the end of the world as such: “Neither of you care! What do you read the papers for if you don’t care what happens? It’s not something you can just ignore –” (141).<sup>30</sup>

Her desire to break with the stifling and oppressive milieu of her family is apparent from her ominous decision, against her teachers’ wishes, to play the part of Shylock’s daughter Jessica rather than that of Portia in her school’s staging of *The Merchant of Venice*.<sup>31</sup> Jessica has, of course, a very different relationship with her father than Portia with hers. Whereas the latter obeys her father’s commands to the letter, the former runs away from her father’s house with her lover, taking some bags of ducats and precious stones, and converts to Christianity. The Shakespearean intertext thus anticipates both Dorothy’s desertion of Willy and the brief return visit on which she loots her father’s house.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, *The Merchant of Venice* is commonly seen to celebrate the triumph of the Christian concepts of mercy, love and self-sacrifice over the narrowly materialist worldview and the unyielding, legalistic conception of justice associated with Jewishness. The reference to Shakespeare thus seems to afford further proof of

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29. It may be noted that Irene’s out-of-hand dismissal of Dorothy’s attempt to discuss this explosive topic with her parents recalls the reaction of Irene’s family to her suggestion that Hancock “was not good to [her]” (52): “What nonsense” (52, 53).

30. Clearly, this scene contains the germs of the obsession with the prospect of nuclear annihilation which haunts Tom Crick’s students in *Waterland*.

31. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, in *The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988).

32. Though Willy might have smelt a rat after seeing the play, he comes away from it none the wiser, as he “didn’t understand” the lines spoken by the actors (145). Nor does he recognize his own predicament in a line from Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” which he reads over Dorothy’s shoulder: “Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss . . .” (147). Though the connection between Keats’s “cold pastoral” – or, for that matter, the china shepherd and shepherdess on the dressing-table who, being “for ever on the point of flying into each other’s arms” (10), faithfully re-enact this Keatsian scene – and his own loveless marriage is fairly obvious, Willy is totally bewildered by these “lines of verse . . . which I didn’t understand” (147).

the aspiration to a different, aneconomic ethics implicit in Dorothy's name.<sup>33</sup> Modern accounts of the play, however, tend to focus on the issue of anti-Semitism and draw attention to the way in which values like mercy and charity are abused by the play's Christian characters, who are exposed as power-hungry, unscrupulous and vengeful hypocrites.<sup>34</sup> Jessica's position is thus rendered deeply ambiguous, the apparent success of her escape from the restrictive parental regime of relentless commercialism, self-interest and vindictiveness being compromised by the duplicity and expedience of her fellow Christians, who are revealed to be no strangers to these supposedly Jewish vices.

In *The Sweet Shop Owner*, too, the daughter's escape is surrounded by question marks. Like Jessica, Dorothy clearly succeeds in physically transcending the "narrow bounds" (184) of her parents' humdrum existence. Her decision to move to Bristol with her boyfriend even manages to catch her mother off guard: "She raised her face and said – she who'd always seemed able to predict things – 'What now? What happens now?'" (183). However, there are several indications in the text that Dorothy has absorbed her parents' values more thoroughly than she would presumably care to admit, so that mentally,

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33. As a matter of interest, Jessica's rejection of parental control, like Dorothy's, is inscribed in her name. "Jessica" has been traced back to Hebrew *Iscah*, which Elizabethan commentators glossed as meaning "she that looketh out" (Austin C. Dobbins and Roy W. Battenhouse, "Jessica's Morals: A Theological View," *Shakespeare Studies* 9 [1976] 107–120, p. 108). This meaning is reflected in Jessica's looking "out at window" (Shakespeare, II.v.40) for her lover's coming. In doing so, she disobeys her father's repressive decree that she stay inside the house and close the shutters on the outside world (Shakespeare, II.v.28–36). In a similar fashion, Dorothy attempts to look beyond the predictable bounds of immobility and economic exchange in which her parents seek to enclose her.

34. According to Gary Rosenshield, criticism of *The Merchant of Venice* has taken "three basic paths" in the last century (Gary Rosenshield, "Deconstructing the Christian Merchant: Antonio and *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 20.2 [Winter 2002] 28–51, p. 38n31). The first interprets the play as a "romantic comedy," seeing the Venetians as embodiments of "love, friendship, joy, and sacrifice." The second is "ironist" in that it interprets the values which the characters ostensibly embody as "superficial, more often than not the means to disguise more selfish motives." The third, finally, understands *The Merchant of Venice* as "a hybrid, combining significant romantic and ironic elements," which create the play's "many problems for interpretation." It seems to me that *The Sweet Shop Owner* allows for a similar variety of interpretations, due to the unresolved tension between economic/static and aneconomic/dynamic forces at play in the text.

at least, she has not quite broken free from the world of her upbringing.<sup>35</sup> For example, the double-edged letter of thanks with which the novel opens is so steeped in Irene's trademark rhetoric that it subtly belies its stated aim of establishing a definitive break with the past: "I should have thought you'd be glad to be finished with me at last" (9). In the same way as her mother, Dorothy reduces her relationship with Willy to a business transaction, which, to her mind, has been successfully concluded with his payment of £15,000: "I think we can call everything settled now" (9). This phrase recalls Irene's obsession with the settling of accounts: "Good. Then it's settled" (21); "I want things to be settled" (182). Dorothy also asserts her superior vision in her letter to Willy: "I'm sure this is for the best and how Mother would have wanted it. You will see in the end" (9). Again, she is only echoing a claim made by Irene: "And you will see, you will see it is for the best in the end" (103).<sup>36</sup> Dorothy's insistence on predictability and exchange thus shows the extent to which her thinking is still implicated in her parents' discourse.

Dorothy's letter thus seems to bear out Willy's assessment that his daughter's struggle "to escape history, to put it all behind you – me, her, those twenty-odd years in that house" is doomed to failure: "And have you escaped history, down there in Bristol? Found new life? Encumbered with all those things of hers, encumbered with the money I sent you (that money which was only converted history). Don't you see, you're no freer than before, no freer than I am?" (216–217). Throughout the narrative, Willy is at pains to stress that Dorothy is subject to the utter inevitability of historical patterns just like everyone else. In his view, the "new life" which awaits her as she leaves school to go to university – "Did you step away from it all, as you stepped out of your uniform, as if a new life beckoned?" (161) – is nothing but a continuation of her old life: "And why did it seem to me . . . that you wore your student's outfit as if it were only another uniform?" (161). Moreover,

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35. In this respect, Dorothy is the first in a line of characters in Swift's work who vainly try to get "away from it all" (Swift, *Out of this World*, p. 15) by putting geographical distance between their new and their old life. In particular, she seems to prefigure Sophie Beech, one of the protagonists in *Out of this World* who has moved to the New World but remains haunted by the traumas of her youth in England: "There isn't a point in the world where you can get away from the world, not any more, is there?" (Swift, *Out of this World*, p. 15).

36. In his silent address to his daughter, Willy confirms his faith in the validity of Irene's – as opposed to Dorothy's – foresight: "But you never looked closely at that face, into those blue-grey eyes, because if you had you would have seen how much more she knew than you" (116).



by continually drawing attention to the physical likeness which he observes between Dorothy and Irene, Willy seems to suggest that Dorothy has no choice but to become her mother. Among other things, she is said to “[have] her looks” (116), to move her hands “just like her” (139) and to be equally uncomfortable with her own beauty: “Dorry, at seventeen, had not known what to do with her beauty – she’d buried herself in books, as though to disown it” (95); “Other people noticed her [Irene], other people admired. Though she’d never known how to deal with their glances except by lowering her own eyes” (118).

Dorothy’s chances of escape hardly improve when we consider the analogy which the text sets up between Willy’s home life and his life at the sweet shop, where, as John Marsden points out, Mrs Cooper and Sandra are “ironic doubles” of Irene and Dorothy.<sup>37</sup> Though in physical appearance Mrs Cooper could not be more unlike Irene – having “never been beautiful, with that bird’s face” (35) –, she turns out to share the latter’s outlook on life: “she didn’t want action any more, only peace” (81). A similar relationship exists between Sandra and Dorothy. Whereas Dorothy, as we have just seen, did not know how to deal with her own beauty, Sandra “traded so much on her attractions . . . that they sometimes seemed to him [Willy] not to belong to her” (95). On a more fundamental level, however, Sandra, like Dorothy, is desperate to escape the economic logic in which she has become caught up. Bored with trading sex for cheap thrills, “[s]he’d give anything for something new” (105, 107). However, the text gives us no reason to believe that Sandra will ever find the newness she craves. On the contrary, we are told that “[s]he’d try anything. . . . But it seemed she’d already tried everything” (105). Moreover, the formulation of her desire for release from the economic order in which she is stuck bespeaks its sheer inescapability, depending as it does on the very notion of exchange which is supposed to be transcended: as the proper payment which Sandra hopes to receive in return for the “anything” she is willing to offer, “something new” has already been reduced to just another moment in the old economic cycle.

Bearing all this in mind, I think it is fair to conclude that envisaging the possibility of genuine renewal appears as a deeply problematic undertaking in *The Sweet Shop Owner*. The novel diagnoses the demise of a way of life based on the principles of predictability, arrested motion and economic circularity, but is extremely wary of endorsing a viable alternative. Though tantalizing flashes of a

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37. Marsden, p. 72.

future which would be truly otherwise are offered through the character of Dorothy, the suggestion that there is no possibility of achieving real change is at least equally prominent in the text. In my reading, the apparent impasse in the narrative present is largely accounted for by the succession of traumas with which the characters have failed seriously to engage, taking recourse instead to coping mechanisms which, in the long run, prove inimical to life and whose pernicious effects threaten to be transmitted across the generations. In exposing the ravages wreaked by a determined evasion of a catastrophic history, *The Sweet Shop Owner* inaugurates Swift's search for a way of coming to terms with trauma which would create the conditions for the construction of a more humane, just and less destructive future. Merely hinted at in this text, this crucial quest will be taken up and doggedly pursued in the author's later novels.