THE ROLE OF GREEK MYTHOLOGY IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S POEM PRIAM

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyse the role of Greek mythology in Graham Swift's poem Priam. Priam was, in Greek mythology, the King of Troy. In his poem, Swift creates a contemporary tale based on a parallelism with the old story, thus showing the universality of the myth of Priam. Swift manages to show how, even today, we can still identify with the Greek heroes' experience. We owe a great debt to Ancient Greek culture: in architecture and science, for instance. The myths they created and which we still read today have often been reinterpreted and used as symbols in the literature of other ages. Swift has some personal connections with Greece. In Making an Elephant: Writing from Within, Swift talks about his trips to Greece (1967, 1974). These trips were related to his wish to become a writer: when he was a PhD student, he left for Greece in the hope of learning to write and returned home with a manuscript. In so doing, he emulates the tradition of the ancient Greek poets who were travelers. Swift's novels link symbolically to ancient Greek culture (the trip in Last Orders, Wish You Were Here). This paper will analyse the symbol of Priam and of the Trojan horse. There is some modern irony in Swift's poem. Priam is regarded not as a hero, but as a father whose son "steals a wife and starts a war". This is "The usual wretched soap-opera story" (Swift 2009: 255).

Keywords: Postmodernism, Hellenism, lyricism, myths, symbols.

Writers have been referring to ancient Greek culture since as early as the Romantic or Victorian era. Critics have noticed interest in ancient Greece and have discussed both Romantic Hellenism and Victorian Hellenism. However, interest in ancient Greece is not restricted to the Romantics and Victorians. Modernists and Postmodernists also drew heavily from the themes of Ancient Greece. Jennifer Wallace and Stefano Evangelista believe that writers return to ancient Greek themes because they consider this era to be perfect. Wallace draws our attention to the fact that "Again and again, the ancient Greeks are portrayed as an exemplary race" (2001: 1). Wallace believes in the enduring and beneficial effects of ancient Greek culture on later cultures: "Without Greece, 'our civilization' becomes 'much thinner, more fragmentary, less thoughtful, more materialistic'. With Greece, civilization is 'renewed', made more 'valuable'." (2001: 1) Ancient Greece becomes a symbol of a rich culture, a culture which has given us heroes who continue to resonate, even with more modern themes. We owe much of our current culture to Ancient Greece; much of architecture and science, as we know them today, were built on foundations laid by the Ancient Greeks.

Similarly, if we did not have the Greek story of the Trojan horse and Priam, we would lack the frame of mind it offers us for the interpretation of present-day reality. Swift uses two symbols in his poem, that of Priam and that of the Trojan horse, to pass judgement on his own epoch. He does so while interpreting the old story from a different, and less heroic angle. In this element, Swift belongs to his own times: "the interest in Greece during the Romantic and Victorian periods was far less questioning and far more adulatory than it is today" (Wallace 2001: 2). Swift does not regard Priam as a hero, and even in the *Iliad*, Priam was often presented as a wise old king rather than another hero such as Hector or Achilles. Instead, Swift portrays Priam as a father whose son "steals a wife and starts a war" and refers to the myth as "The usual wretched soap-opera story". Here Swift sides with critics who "depicted Greece as a violent and primitive world" (Wallace 2001: 2). It is true, however, that Priam is king. This makes him stand out as the main protagonist of the story which Swift analyses and

creates anew through reinterpretation, reimagining it in a way that demonstrates a need for us to reassess our preconceptions.

Swift uses the poetic form to analyse Priam's story. Although Swift uses the lyric form, he is doing so in order to refer to a story, just as the ancient Greeks used verse form to pass stories down orally. Both Homer and Swift cross the border between poetry and narration. Homer's *Iliad* was a very long story written in verse. Swift's story is shorter, on the one hand because in the contemporary world we feel that both life and stories go at a faster pace, on the other hand because we already know the story of Homer's *Iliad* and we only focus on Swift's interpretation of Priam's story.

Swift has some personal connections with Greece, due to his trips there (1967, 1974), related to his wish to become a writer, which he mentions in *Making an Elephant: Writing from Within*. He reminds the reader of the tradition of the wandering poets in ancient Greek culture. Traveling for the ancient Greek poets was related to innovation (Hunter and Rutherford, ed. 2009: 10). "As they travelled, poets of the archaic and classical periods carried many different kinds of poetry ('genres') with them, and such travel often led to innovation." (Hunter and Rutherford, ed. 2009: 10). Similarly, Swift's experiences served to expand his imagination. His experiences as a student and as a traveler must have given him some ideas to work into his novels. For instance, he uses his personal knowledge of Greece in his novel *Out of This World*. Anna, who has died in a plane crash in Greece, speaks to her husband, saying "Dear Harry. Dear husband Harry... I was born in Drama. But I was brought up in Paradise." (Swift 1988: 173) Readers may initially think of stories from ancient Greece as belonging to an idealistic world. However, such expectations are immediately contradicted in the poem: "Maybe we all end up like Priam,/ Not one of the heroes wreathed in glory" (Swift 2009: 255). Swift's poem suggests drama as soon as it references the war. The general setting of this poem does not identify ancient Greece with paradise but with tragedy. Our illusions about a heroic ancient Greek story are shattered. Similarly, Anna has seen Greece destroyed in World War II. She talks about a place that has been ruined:

> I was brought up in Paradise. Though they say that it's all spoilt now. Even Thassos. The tourists have come and invaded, each one of them wanting their piece of paradise, and you wouldn't it recognize now, as you wouldn't recognize a thousand places in Greece, the little bay. (Swift 1988: 173)

The journey appears in Swift's novels (especially in *Last Orders* and *Wish You Were Here*) as something both real and symbolic. Pamela Cooper writes about "the rich literary device of the journey" (2002: 31), which is a way to "foreground themes of growth and change, to show human psychology in process" (2002: 31). This device has its beginnings with the Greeks, in Homer's *Odyssey*. The journey is symbolic of a spiritual development of the hero.

The symbol of the circle in Eliot and Swift goes hand in hand with the idea of completion and of a spiritual quest:

> The idea of circularity and completion through spiritual questing, and the expression of love through art, are themes of modernist writing which Swift reworks in the late twentieth century. Furthermore, the circular motion described in Last Orders directly recalls T.S. Eliot's famous lines – implying a fundamentally religious attitude towards time – from Four Quartets: "In my

> end is my beginning." Among other things, the circle is the shape of spiritual comfort, of return and renewal, for Woolf, Eliot, and Swift. (Cooper 2002: 28)

Eliot suggests a pattern parallel to Swift's story in *Last Orders* which helps readers understand the spiritual significance of the journey of the four friends that leads to their final moment of transcendence. This parallel helps to build a poetic atmosphere as the reader draws from previous knowledge of the patterns of literature and themes associated with poetic symbolism.

Other themes in the poem that find their echo in Swift's novels are war and relationships. In Swift's novels, both war and the problems existing in relationships are occasions for change in the lives and personalities of the characters. During their journeys in *Last Orders* and *Wish You Were Here*, Swift's characters analyze their past and try to find the roots of their present-day problems in order to come to terms with them. They change their understanding of the way the people close to them behave and do their best to reconcile their own emotional responses with their newfound understanding of others. War and problematic relationships prompt reflections which lead the characters to analyse their own lives. In Swift's novels, conflictual relationships lead to his characters' isolation. The isolated characters talk to themselves or to the other characters, yet the others do not actually listen to them and do not connect with them. This isolation is a pretext for the characters to address their lyrical monologues directly to the reader. This allows Swift to structure his novels in order to clearly demonstrate that there is no real dialogue among most of the characters. The same problem arises in Swift's poem in the way the poetic persona addresses the reader and seems alone, lost in his thoughts. The relationships between Swift's characters are often conflictual and tense. Public events such as war allow the characters to hope that their lives might change for the better or to reflect on how their lives used to be and how they are now. In *Out of This World* the concept of "paradise" remains a nostalgic memory, just like Anna herself, who delivers her lyrical monologue after her death. The heroes of ancient Greek stories themselves remain a memory or an illusion for readers. Time passes, people die and things remain; yet even things can be ruined in time. Even places cannot escape the changes and destructions of historical events, as Daniel Lea notices. This is the case of the Paradise Anna references in her lyrical monologue, but also of the Greece Sophie idealizes in the same novel. For Sophie, Greece is no longer a place "out of this world" (Swift 1988: 126). Swift creates the same feeling of loss in his poem. In *Out of This World* historical conflict has made the characters' idea of Greece no longer a place of safety (Lea), just as the readers of the poem no longer feel safe with their illusions about the heroes of ancient Greek myths. Swift connects war to the passage of time, as well as to change: changes in the larger historical context and changes in the relationships between characters, as well as changes in characters' personalities

These public events also provide a backdrop which allows characters to reflect on the nature of their relationships with others. Swift's characters go on trips which are sometimes literal, sometimes figurative, sometimes both, and these trips allow them to reflect on their lives. The return to the past is the return to a tragic, problematic, and traumatic moment that continues to trouble the hero. Cooper has noticed the return to the "ancient Greek dramatists" (2002: 15), which is common to Thomas Hardy and Graham Swift and through which they

deal with "the universal resonance of the human figure caught up with life and death" (2002: 15). Hardy, like Swift, looked "to the ancient Greek dramatists" when he "sought the grandeur of tragic emotion and experience in the quotidian life of his times" (Cooper 2002: 15). Swift deals with this tragic theme through the perspective of the ancient Greeks, just as his characters must in order to understand themselves and others.

In Swift's novels, the characters' dilemmas are expressed through the device of imagined stories about other fictional characters. They make reference to other literary texts which are, mostly, poems. The same device is at work in Swift's poem *Priam*. The narrator addresses the reader, and goes back to the past of ancient Greek myths. Priam the king becomes a symbol of personal tragedy and of the misunderstandings between fathers and sons, which is a recurrent theme in Swift's novels. With his line referring to Priam's son who "steals a wife and starts a war," Swift invites his readers to go a bit further from the actual story of Priam, and implies a certain misunderstanding caused by his son's decision. The war that results from this misunderstanding is symbolic of the tragedy characters feel due to misunderstandings and lack of true communication. The connections with the themes in Swift's novels become very clear: to personal relationships and wars, we can add the theme of history. Public history is interlinked with personal history in tragic terms. The war, a public event in history, has its roots in the private history of relationships. The personal conflict brings about a large scale conflict. From Priam the poem moves to the Trojan horse. Both are tragic symbols, yet the first is a symbol that stands for personal tragedy, while the other is a symbol of public tragedy and public history.

Here the connections with the novel *Waterland* become obvious. There, just as here, Swift focuses on the subject of personal and public history. In the novel, the young are resistant to history; they feel that they should live in the here and now. Thus, they do not take into account the larger historical context. They only believe that subjective time is what matters. This is similar to the belief held by King Priam's son, who "steals a wife and starts a war". With respect to his student's claims, "Your thesis," Tom says, "is that history, as such is a red-herring; the past is irrelevant. The present alone is vital" (Swift 2008: 143). Tom teaches his students that the past matters, that it influences the present greatly, as far as both personal and public history are concerned. In the poem as well, the son of King Priam believes that he can do as he pleases; yet the personal conflict leads to a larger and more tragic conflict: war. Tom tells his students the story of his own life, starting with when he was a pupil just like them; he illustrates, by means of his own history, the way that history works, the way that the past influences the present of both personal lives and within the larger context of official history. Tom Crick's reflections on history and on "the here and now" show that public history and personal history intersect, as they do in the poem. His reflections also show the existence of the time of the imagination and childhood fairy-tales as experienced in the context of personal time:

> My earliest acquaintance with history was thus, in a form issuing from my mother's lips, inseparable from her other bedtime make-believe--how Alfred burnt the cakes, how Canute commanded the waves, how King Charles hid in an oak tree--as if history were a pleasing invention. And even as a schoolboy, when introduced to history as an object of Study, when nursing indeed an unfledged lifetime's passion, it was still the fabulous idea of history that lured me, and I believed, perhaps like you, that history was a myth. Until a series of

> encounters with the Here and Now gave a sudden urgency to my studies. Until the Here and Now, gripping me by the arm, slapping my face and telling me to take a good look at the mess I was in, informed me that history was no invention but indeed existed--and I had become a part of it. (Swift 2008: 53)

Similarly, King Priam can be regarded as part of history, part of imagination, as part of myth, maybe even as part of a fairy-tale, or part of the times long-past, which we conceive of as fairy-tales since they are so far-away. Long ago events in public history can be, in a sense, mythologized: imagined or depicted in a way which may not necessarily be entirely based in reality. The same goes for the Trojan horse in the poem – it is also part of history and part of myth, and thereby part of literature. These symbols serve to reflect the reality of the characters' dilemmas. In order to reflect and analyse their problems from the multiple perspectives of Postmodernism, they resort to trying to understand reality through imagination, just like the Romantic lyric poets.

According to Crick's reflections, thus, private time may sometimes be part of the larger public, historical time. This is the insight he gets from analysing his own life from the perspective of fairy-tales and stories of all kinds, real or imagined. The "here and now" becomes an important time; it is the time of reality, both public and personal. Crick's student, Price, is only concerned with the present and with the future; he believes that the past is not significant. He does not see the influence the past has on the present and on the future, in both personal and public histories. Price believes that explaining the past is the equivalent of avoiding the present: "Explaining's a way of avoiding facts while you pretend to get near to them" (Swift 2008: 145). However, the poem, just as Tom Crick's story, proves him wrong. By using the story of Priam and the Trojan horse, the moment of revelation comes: "Was it for this you strove and pushed your luck,/ Just to get pulled back into the muck?" (Swift 2009: 255). The Trojan horse becomes a symbol for failure which follows the luck of having become a king. Being a king is felt at first, in Swift's poem, as a moment of personal success and of happiness. However, what follows after the luck is something that makes us wonder if it was luck indeed. "Aristotle's worries about Priam were prompted by a popular aphorism – attributed to the Athenian lawgiver Solon, no less – that we should 'count no man happy while he is alive' (NE 1.10, 1100a10-11), since we can never know whether a person is happy until he has lived out his whole life and escaped any very serious misfortunes." (Russell 2012: 87) After the time of fairy tales, after the time of happiness, comes the time of tragedy.

The uncertainty of the future in the story of Priam is visible in Swift's poem. The poem begins with "Maybe": "Maybe we all end up like Priam" (Swift 2009: 255). The uncertainty of the changing fortunes of life is present throughout his poem: "So just when you've made your pile and settled down", "Was it for this you strove and pushed your luck". The Trojan horse becomes a symbol for the uncertainties in one's life, changing fortunes, doubts, and eventually, even tragedy, due to our foreknowledge of the ending of the myth of the Trojan horse and of the symbol of Priam as a tragic hero.

The lives of the characters in *Waterland* are not part of fairy-tales forever. The characters end up unhappy, like Priam, because their lives have been changed by tragic incidents. The lesson is the same. The same trajectory in and philosophy of life is suggested in Swift's poem.

In the poem, the reflections move from the story of Priam and of the Trojan horse to addressing the reader. When viewing the issue through the story of Priam, we gain a new perspective on reality: "Who, given the choice, would be a king?/ But you were, and you took it." Choices have their consequences. They have occurred in the past and have affected our present life – just as in *Waterland*. Taking a chance is discussed. Making the choice, whether right or wrong, is unavoidable. The Trojan horse becomes a symbol for taking a risk. This symbol is rethought in the end of the poem. It is not necessarily and clearly the symbol for tragedy and failure: "Maybe you had your glory all the time,/ And this is what it means: you win./ A horse. It's not your common sort of offering./ Maybe it stands for you, for Priam in his kingly prime./ Best take a look, best take it in." (Swift 2009: 255) In time, we begin to reconsider some symbols of the past. Even if the story repeats itself, we can never know anything for sure. These last lines refer to the analysis of the past which is so common with Swift's narrators, who are always wondering what might have happened if they had done something else, what might have been. Through their imaginings, Swift's narrators reveal their reflections, concerns, fears, and wishes.

Within the two categories of time, of personal and public histories, there is another kind of time. It is the time of the youth of Tom and Mary and the others. This time appears differently since they were living in a world of their own. They had their own illusions without any idea that something could go wrong; they had not yet been affected by trauma. They were innocent, and did not know what they would later learn. Swift associates that time with the time of the fairy-tales. Tom's parents used to tell him stories. He believed he lived in a "fairy-tale place" and the explanations for certain aspects in the world are given by using fairy-tale, not scientific, explanations: "Do you know what the stars are? They are the silver dust of God's blessing…" As Landow states,

> […] before the murder of Freddie Parr he and Mary lived outside of time and history, outside that stream of events he is trying to teach to his class. But with the discovery of Freddie's body floating in the canal lock, and with the discovery of a beer bottle, Tom and Mary fall into time and history. Previously, "when Mary was fifteen, and so was I, this was in prehistorical, pubescent times, when we drifted instinctively" (44). As Tom explains, "it is precisely these surprise attacks of the Here and Now which, far from launching us into the present tense, which they do, it is true, for a brief and giddy interval, announce that time has taken us prisoner" (52).

Mary and Tom realize that their past or present deeds have consequences on the present and the future. It is only then that they become aware of the time of history. Then, they also understand that their personal time becomes part of the larger historical time. Landow believes that Crick's view on time corresponds to the views of philosophical anthropologists, such as Mircea Eliade:

> who emphasize that until human beings leave tribal, agricultural existence they live in an eternal present in which time follows a cyclical pattern of days and seasons. One becomes an individual only by botching a ritual, a universal pattern. One differentiates oneself and becomes an individual in such societies only by sin and failure.

This is the moment when an individual becomes aware of consequences of his deeds, when something goes wrong and when he needs to understand the connections. Until then, he lives in his own personal time, unaware of larger historical context. He exists in a time of the imagination, isolated from the external world. From "The usual wretched soap-opera story" we are told that "But at your level it has to mean more", showing us that the poem deals with this same theme. The "soap-opera story" (Swift 2009: 255) makes reference to everyday life. The "war" after the son of Priam "steals a wife" is not just personal. It is this war and these events which are triggered by it that "mean more" (Swift 2009: 255), on a larger scale of history. From the story of Priam we make parallels between what the heroes do there and what we do in our every-day lives. While we read, we live in the time of imagination. But when we are told that "But at your level it has to mean more" (Swift 2009: 255), we begin to interpret the story.

The ancient Greek myth framework provided by the tragic symbols of Priam and the Trojan horse offers the poet an occasion to view reality from a different perspective and to reflect on it in the hope of finding a solution. He is looking for a moment of revelation.

In *Making an Elephant*, Swift remembers the event of an inoculation, which he compares to fiction. Swift claims that "Fiction is also a kind of inoculation, a vaccine, preserving us from such plagues as reality can breed." (Swift 2009: 11). In *Sketch of the Past*, Woolf talks about moments of being and moments of non-being. Moments of being are very special for the person experiencing them, while moments of non-being are routine incidents. Woolf believes that there is some pattern hidden behind daily life. Swift also believes that "fiction – storytelling – is a magical thing." (Swift 2009: 11). Moments of being make a story seem special. Swift makes us recall the idea of "being under a story's 'spell'" (Swift 2009: 12), claiming that "the power of a good story is a primitive, irreducible mystery that answers to some need deep in human nature" (Swift 2009: 12). Like Woolf, Swift suggests that there are special moments in fiction which appeal to readers. Readers may experience certain stories as "magic" or as special. What Woolf calls "moments of being" are experienced intensely. For Swift, stories can express a hidden truth, a revelation:

> The real magic (if that expression is legitimate) of fiction goes much deeper than a few sprinklings of hocus-pocus, but we know when it's there and we feel its tingle in the spine. There can even be something magical about the perfectly judged and timed revelation on the page of an unanswerable truth we already inwardly acknowledge. In good fiction, without any trickery, truth and magic aren't incompatible at all. (Swift 2009:13)

According to Swift, therefore, stories draw attention to moments of vision which are experienced intensely as revelations or shocks. Such moments of vision are triggered by personal reflections. In the poem, moments of vision are achieved by viewing reality through a different frame of mind, that of the ancient Greeks.

The connections between this poem and Swift's novels is confirmed through Swift's own theory, which he explains in his autobiographical volume: "In the misty and often lengthy periods which I later come to realize are the preludes to my starting a new book, I've noticed that my reading can shift from novels, or anything large, to poetry, as if I'm aware

that whatever I do next will arise not from any grand design but from some small, insistent vibration; a blink of light through the fog" (Swift 2009: 227).

Postmodernism is preoccupied with mourning and grief, as discussed in Tammy Clewell's *Mourning, Modernism and Postmodernism* (2009). War is an occasion to induce the mood of mourning and to express it poetically by analogy with the elegy. Going back to the past, to ancient myths in this case, can be regarded as part of this context of preoccupation with the aesthetics of mourning. The mood is that of elegy, of mourning, and of grief, triggered by the loss of order and meaningfulness of the world. The poem tries to return meaning and order to personal experiences by using familiar myths and the patterns of their stories to understand one's own experience. Even so, in the last part of the poem, Swift questions the reliability of using these symbols and myths to bring insight into one's own experience.

One of the significant characteristics of Swift's novels is that it is not only unhappy incidents or moments that are depicted with aspects of sadness, grief or mourning:

> In Swift's novel, even the moments of happiness are told from the perspective of pain, so that any kind of lightness or playfulness can only be analeptic or anamnestic. The particular enunciative principle of this doubly traumatic narrative is based on a split temporality where the dystopian present of narration is entirely devoted to coming to terms with the events of the past: the present is the temporality of reflection, while the past is the temporality of experience. It is in these retro-active postures, in these perspectives of reappraisal, reconsideration and re-examination, in this logic of dejected projection in time that the novel most resembles its narrators and best embodies the neo-Victorian obsession with the need for constant reassessment and ceaseless investigation of the past. (Gutleben 2010: 146)

The turn towards the end of Swift's poem is towards questioning the course of events suggested by the Greek myths and stories (especially the Trojan horse, which symbolizes a choice, where the wrong decision will lead to tragedy). This can be seen as something sad, because it hints that history will repeat itself, with the same tragic results. The sadness also comes from the confusion of the present-day world, where it seems that we have lost the certainties of the ancient Greek myths and their symbols. Life cannot be brought to follow exactly the pattern of myths. The ending of our lives cannot be certain, nor can the meanings of the symbols. In Swift's writings we see the nostalgia for a past where everything made sense: a yearning for a past one could turn to for comfort.

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