GRAHAM SWIFT'S ENGLAND AND OTHER STORIES: A COHERENT WHOLE?

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyse Swift's collection of short stories as he had suggested in one of the first interviews given shortly after the book was published: as a coherent whole. Swift's collection of short stories refers to the contemporary issues of England and their impact on the characters' inner lives. The 2014 volume deals with a theme Swift had not used until now: that of the external reality of the English nation as a mixture of nations. "I'm as British as you are" begins a story of war and love in Saving Grace. This paper will use narratological theories to show that this collection is built from several stories within a larger story, similar to the structure of Virginia Woolf's novel Mrs Dalloway. Swift experiments with the narrative structure of a collection of short stories which can function like a novel. This experiment occurs within the context of fragmentation and narrative experiments done by the Modernists and Postmodernists. The paper will also use Swift's understanding of story, history, and fairy-tales to compare them with their use in his previous works.

Keywords: story, narratology, novel, Modernism, lyricism.

Graham Swift admits that he has given deep thought to the order in which the short stories appear in *England and Other Stories* in an interview for Foyles.co.uk:

"Yes, I gave a lot of thought to the order in which the stories appear. I wanted it to be the sequence that would best serve reading the book as a whole. People who've already read the book have told me that it works in that way: that one story somehow flows into another, that there are echoes across them, that the whole experience is even rather like reading a novel." (http://www.foyles.co.uk/graham-swift)

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This paper will give a text analysis of this collection of short stories, finding evidence in the text of a structure similar to that of the lyrical novel.

Swift uses themes such as isolation of the hero, travelling, moments of vision, concern with personal and public history, self-expression, and the use of imagination to understand the world. All these are, in turn, associated with common tropes in Romantic lyric poetry. The use of previously known texts, such as Romantic lyric poetry and references to Woolf's novels, are used to create a collection of short stories that resembles a lyrical novel. As with Woolf's novels, we notice that this collection focuses on inner reality, the use of language and the use of external reality to complete the inner reality, as well as the use of other texts and the use of traditional elements or innovations in terms of the way the story is told. Swift, however, takes the innovation to the extreme, going well beyond Woolf in order to create a completely innovative type of novel made up of a collection of short stories. The title, *England and Other Stories*, suggests to readers that they are reading a collection of distinct short stories. Yet they are made to question their expectations when they begin to find connections among the short stories, then doubt the connections when at some point they stop, then appear again. What is more, the motto introduces readers to the mood of *Tristram Shandy*, an experimental novel which was unexpected for its time: "L-d! said my mother, what is all this story about? Laurence Sterne, *Tristam Shandy*". The question in the motto will be asked by any reader going through the present volume by Swift. The author sets the mood for experimentalism and fragmentation. We ask ourselves: is this a collection of short stories or a novel? Does it differ much from the way *Tristram Shandy* was structured? The way we understand a story has been subject to many definitions and many experiments with narration. Swift is about to present us with a narrative experiment, just like *Tristram Shandy*. He uses free associations and plays with the readers, challenging their perception of the way a story should be told and arranged. The short stories' titles could well be chapters in an incoherent narrative like *Tristram Shandy*. The titles are created by using carefully chosen words and phrases that will strike the reader and function like keywords. For instance, *People are Life*, *Remember This, Tragedy, Tragedy*, and so on, suggest Swiftian themes such as memory, trauma, and reflective narrators.

The first short story, *Going Up in the World*, contains the phrase "My city, my London." repeated twice. The first time (p. 2), the character of the short story is "sitting there now" (p. 2), while the second time on page 8, what follows is "He wouldn't be able to point and say, 'See –

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over there.'" This repetition confirms the idea behind the book, that England itself could be regarded as a story, as Swift stated in the interview for Foyles.co.uk. The concept of story can be seen as similar to Swift's novel *Waterland*, where personal life stories hide past deeds leading to present consequences and personal traumatic incidents. His novels tell of real-life or imaginary happenings and are sometimes unclear which are which, such as in the novel *Shuttlecock*. A story can be a real incident as well as an illusion embodying a subjective perspective on the world, which itself can be an illusion or the truth. In *Waterland*, story can also be synonymous with fairy-tale, since fairy-tale elements, seemingly magical incidents, habits and persons were commonplace during Tom and Mary's childhood in the Fens. "Story" is thus an ambiguous term in Swift's work, and it is used so here. The overarching story is made up of several other stories, just like in all of Swift's novels. We can draw a line between stories belonging to the present and to the past, between stories told by certain characters and stories told by other characters. The same concept applies to this collection of short stories. England could be seen as the main character, and we have before us multiple points of view of its personality, one with every short story.

Charlie's job of cleaning the windows can symbolically mean a new understanding of England, a new perspective, which opens up through the following stories. The last moment in the story refers to a memory of Charlie jogging when he was a teenager.

The following short story, *Wonders will Never Cease*, continues the idea, though with different characters: "When Aaron and I were younger we used to chase women." (p. 13) The idea of jogging in the first story is continued by the idea of running and competitions, which are then rapidly turned into their figurative meaning, that of chasing women. The first short story takes place in the present, with the character reflecting over the present time, then a brief turn towards the past takes the following short story into the realm of memory. Swift has used this technique before, as *Waterland*, *Ever After*, *Shuttlecock*, and *Wish You Were Here* all have characters whose reflection on their present situations leads them to remember past incidents.

The ending of the second short story: […] "Patti just said, 'You mean they're not here, they're not right below us? We've got the place to ourselves?'" (p. 21), is continued in the third short story, titled *People are Life*: "'But you have friends,' I said." (p. 23). The theme of isolation of the hero runs throughout Swift's work. In this short story we hear a philosophical discussion of the meaning of friendship. The main character meets lots of people who confide in him. Readers

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would expect him to be a therapist, and are surprised when it is revealed that he is a barber. The idea expressed in the title and the ending words, "Now go and live your life." (p. 29), which could well be uttered by a therapist, are continued as in a train of free association in the following short story, titled *Haematology*. The story is in the form of a letter where the main character expresses his thoughts on the idea of life. He thinks about royal blood and claims, "I have dissected criminals and examined kings. Does it need any special statute to claim the one might be the other?" (p. 32) Between these two stories, two occupations run parallel, each is a job where one deals with people, analyses them, and dissects them figuratively then literally. The image of the physician is completed by a psychological view of patients, just as is that of the barber, a concrete and seemingly superficial job having to do with looks. Both physician and barber are very reflective, a general trait of Swift's narrators. The ending of the letter, "We should sit and be at peace, Ned, and talk, as old men are given to talk. And remember. What times we have seen." (p. 42), harmoniously slides into the next short story, titled *Remember This*, and begins with the following sentence, suggesting a continuation of the previous thoughts: "They were married now and had been told they should make their wills, as if that was the next step in life, so one day they went together to see a solicitor, Mr Reeves." (p. 43)

The lyrical aspect is found in the repetition of the motif of people living their lives. Preparing their wills causes the young couple to think of death and in doing so, to imagine their own ending as a couple in love and as human beings. The young couple separates, but before that, without knowing what would happen, Nick writes a letter to Lisa to confess his love. He never shows her the letter; he keeps it to himself. As an invitation for us to remember, the next short story is titled *The Best Days*, and begins "Sean and Andy found themselves standing to one side of the steps up to the church, on the edge of the broad sweep of driveway." (p. 59) The love story, ending with an affair, closes with the words: "So let it be a lesson to you" (p. 73), echoing the way history has so many lessons to teach in the novel *Waterland*.

The following short story continues smoothly over the same ideas, using the same props with lovers, and seems to offer an answer, in a poetic, symbolic way, to the last sentence of the previous story: "Half a loaf. Not even that." (p. 75) Afterwards, the idea of life repeats itself: "Half a loaf? But isn't this life, the whole of it? Shouldn't I be thanking, praising heaven?" (p. 76). The heaven motif will be continued in the following short story, suggested by the title, *Saving Grace*. The narrator in *Half a Loaf* also has a job dealing with people: "I'm an osteopath.

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It's my business to lay hands on people, to manipulate them, both men and women." (p. 77). Words and storytelling link the end of this short story to the following, *Saving Grace*. The ending, "I won't feel her presence, won't hear her voice in my ear. I'll be just another lost, dutiful man going once a week to mutter words to a stone and getting no words back." (p. 84), forms a contrast with the next beginning, in the sense that it is about a story that is told: "Dr Shah had never ceased to tell the story." (p. 85) The similarity of people, a philosophy echoed in the thoughts of the professions and in the life moments in the preceding stories is also a theme here, and it develops into the greater theme of nationality: "'I'm as British as you are,' he might begin. 'I was born in Battersea.'" (p. 85) Once again, we deal with a professional that works with people; the narrator is a cardiologist. However, here, this word does not move from its literal meaning, any connections with its figurative meaning being denied: "Cardiology, back in his days at medical school, had certainly become the glamour field. Everyone wanted to be a heart surgeon, in spite of the fact that the heart is only an organ like any other. No one gets worked up about a liver or a lung or a lower intestine. Or even perhaps a leg." (p. 93)

The scene where he holds his father gently opens the way to the words of the following title: *Tragedy, Tragedy*, which begins: "'Tragedy, tragedy,' Mick says. 'Ever feel there's too much tragedy about?'" (p. 95). This title functions as one of the keywords for the book. There are lots of tragedies, at a personal and at a historical scale, just as suggested by the teacher in the novel *Waterland*. The series of associations seems to stop with the apparent lack of connection through words with the beginning of the short story *As Much Love as Possible*. The narration seems to break down. However, again we deal with a story about love, and then *Yorkshire* is a short story about love, memories, the dead, and trauma, reminding the reader once more of *Waterland*.

Motifs of love, uncertainty and trauma repeat themselves throughout, with stories having an apparent, sometimes illusory connection with each other, such as the ending of *Knife*, where the character takes a knife from the drawer, then we feel like we jump up like in a crime fiction story when, in the short story that follows, titled Mrs. Kaminski, we read the following dialogue: "'Mrs. Kaminski?' 'That's me, dear.'" What follows seems to contradict and play with our expectations as readers. We expect something like a crime to happen, instead we find ourselves in a different story, though, like in free association, "knife" leads to "blood": "'I'm Dr Somerfeld. I need to take some blood.'" (p. 185). The story is about an old Polish lady who brings to mind

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Woolf's character Septimus, and his shellshock. The ending, especially, reminds us of Septimus' suicide in the hospital: "Just think about it, dear, just think. If one of them dropped right now on this hospital. I think it's a hospital. You must have a boiler room somewhere. But I'm not here for long, I'm on my way to Poland. Just imagine. If one of them drops we'll all be gone. You, me, doctors, nurses, all gone in a flash." (p. 189) Again we notice the blurring of lines in the passage from concrete, physical body and medicine to psychology. Readers get an image of the old lady as being sick physically, only to see the psychological side of her issues underlined later.

The following short story, *Dog*, again breaks the narrative continuity, since there is no association among words or apparent continuation of the previous story. The beginning is abrupt, with a father saying that money cannot buy happiness. Yet we notice a continuation at a symbolic, interpretable level: physical health can go hand in hand with psychological health, ruining one ruins the other. Superficial issues are linked to deep issues. Concrete and abstract are also connected. Reflections are part of life. Life, a motif constantly repeated, can be both abstract, as something we imagine and philosophize about, and something we actually live. Money, as a concrete noun, cannot ensure something as abstract as happiness. The end of the story titled *Dog* contains the reflection: "You could replace a jacket. But the claw marks themselves […] he hadn't the slightest idea how he was going to explain these things to Julia." (p. 203). The jacket becomes a symbol for physical objects which contrast with a human life. The claw marks suggest something figurative and abstract, the issues we deal with in life. Those can be psychological, emotional scars, trauma he is left with from the experience.

Fusilli continues the play upon literal and figurative meaning, concrete and abstract. The story suggests *A Supermarket in California* by Ginsberg, bringing associations with Waitrose, a supermarket, and buying. Buying cannot bring back the memories of Christmas Day from the past. Here we find a contrast between abstract and concrete, which before have been seen as compatible.

Four other short stories follow, leading to the final one, *England*. It is about discovering and helping a black man who had an accident trying to avoid a deer. The narrator, a coastguard, expresses in the end his wish to bring a lady to the lighthouse, making readers recall Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. The lighthouse no longer functions. It becomes a symbol of the uncertainties over what England is. England is now a mixture of nations, and our understanding of England is quite uncertain, quite vague. Since it is no longer the England we know from

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history, we must deal with these changes. Swift's way of building and organizing the short stories suggest a trip, trying to get to know various persons' lives, in order to get at the heart of the matter, and of the understanding of the mixture of nations. This is the unifying idea that holds the short stories together. Just like the idea suggested to us through the term "short stories", England is fragmented, no longer coherent, or is it? Swift seems to wonder at this question. The motifs and moments in the characters' lives are the same as in his previous works and universal across nations. The lady in *Haematology* is Polish, but she reminds the reader of the English Septimus Smith. The characters who work with people share similar dilemmas. Swift tries to show that, on the one hand, humans share something universal in their psychology, through their reflections and ways of life, and on the other hand, to show the changes brought about in England by the mixture of nations. These changes prove to be superficial, at the level of appearances, since psychology unites various human natures. Swift does not explore cultural mindsets in his collection of short stories. At the end of reading this volume, readers have the feeling that they have read another one of Swift's writings, dealing with reflections, dilemmas, traumas, lyrical touches, and references to Virginia Woolf's work.

As far as narratological theories are concerned, we can rely on the theory developed by Mieke Bal and Susanna Onega to explain the narrative structure of this collection of short stories in comparison with Swift's previous novels and Woolf's work. These critics provide us with the tools that can help in the analysis of the way the lyrical novel is structured, such as: narrative, plot, fabula and story. W. Bronzwaer (1981: 193) uses the following diagram to illustrate the narratological model proposed by Mieke Bal:

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Bronzwaer's diagram suggests that focalization creates a story out of a fable (in Bal's terms *fabula*). Afterwards, the story becomes a narrative text as a result of the existence of a narrator. Bronzwaer calls these changes "operations" that occur at various levels. The operation that causes the change refers to the way in which the story is told; thus, it can be told in words, any words, or even in a different system of signification, using images. For instance, once we read Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, we follow the story as written by Woolf. If the first impression of the reader is that it is not a story like those in other, more traditional, novels, such an impression is contradicted once the reader looks at the fabula. By looking at the fabula we find incidents in the life of a woman, from past and present. We follow the character of Clarissa Dalloway through incidents in her life and through her moments of vision. Some readers feel that nothing happens in Woolf's novels. Yet, if we consider the way *Orlando* was made into a film in 1992, we see the story right there, reconstructed in a different medium. This stands as proof that the fabula is there and that it can be made into a novel or into a film or whatever illustrates the readers' interpretation.

As we follow these theories we notice how Swift has been playing with them in this new experiment with narrative. Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* broke with tradition similarly to Swift's recent work. He confronts us with the same challenge to our perspectives as readers. We can also look at the fabula in this collection of short stories and notice that the main character is, in a totally experimental way, England. Not a person but a place, and a place which is referred to as a story, as it is implied from the title: *England and Other Stories*.

Woolf's novels also play with concepts that are usually taken for granted elsewhere, which has led to her novels being compared to poems. The novel *The Waves* is seen by Stella McNichol as a "playpoem"; *To the Lighthouse* is described as an "elegy"; *Between the Acts* as "pure poetry" (1990: 117, 91, 141). The narrator in *Jacob's Room* has an elegiac voice and

> poetic connections are made between the episodes as images and motifs become interwoven into the fabric of meaning. (1990: xii).

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, McNichol notices "poetic rhythms" (1990: xii). These observations are similar to those mentioned by Ali Güneş (2003) in his paper *William Wordsworth's 'Double Awareness' of Memory in Virginia Woolf's 'Mrs Dalloway'* (and which this thesis aims at taking

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further by extending the analysis of Woolf's novels in parallel with other tropes in Romantic poetry): Lytton Strachey views *Jacob's Room* as similar to poetry[1]; Woolf approves of his view on the Romantic aspect in this novel[2]. Woolf calls *Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* "serious poetic experimental books", while *Orlando* is an "escapade" (Woolf 1980: 131). G. Lowes Dickinson writes to Woolf about *The Waves*, telling her that it is a poem, and a very good one. According to Harold Bloom (1994: 406),

> Woolf is a lyrical novelist: *The Waves* is more prose poem than novel, and *Orlando* is best where it largely forsakes narrative.

According to Freedman (1963: 213), *Jacob's Room* is not yet a lyrical novel; however, it

> describes the act of cognition in which awareness unites with objects and other selves, or separates from them, to create a world of imagery that directs the flow of the novel. In her following two books, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf sought to reconcile this poetic insight with the novel's form, until in *The Waves* she found herself fully a poet in prose.

Graham Swift, like Virginia Woolf, is concerned in his novels and short story collection with issues of memory. Swift's famous narrators often return to the same traumatic memory. The keywords found in the short stories' titles and the repeated motifs can be seen as equivalents. Everything in the stories of the characters in his novels is centred around incidents which bring about memories which cannot stay forgotten. The keywords and repeated motifs take over this function. In the novels, one decision of the past brings about a whole range of dilemmas in the present, such as why and how these traumatic incidents happened. The answer to this question is missing in the collection of short stories. Instead, it ends with a moment of epiphany pointing to Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. The decisions are also missing in the short story collection; we never know who or what made England the way it is now. Like Woolf, Swift shows us in his novels the

[1] Lytton Strachey writes, in a letter to Woolf on 9 October 1922: "I finished Jacob [*Jacob's Room*] last night - a most wonderful achievement - more like poetry, it seems to me, than anything else...The technique of the narrative is astonishing - how you manage to leave out everything that's dreary, and yet retain enough string for your pearls I can hardly understand... Of course you're very romantic..." (Woolf 1975: 93).

[2] "Of course you put your infallible finger upon the spot - romanticism. How do I catch it?...some of it, I think, comes from the effort of breaking with complete representation. One flies into air" (Woolf 1975: 94).

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idea of the repetition of history which affects both private and public lives. In the short story collection we notice various references to various wars and the way they have affected people's lives.

In Swift's novels, the way memory works leads to a narrative text which is structured in a specific way. He challenges this perception of his novels in the short story collection, where we have brief memories of characters, from different periods of time, perhaps, yet we cannot establish one single character that unifies them except for the place called England. Some stories end on notes that take us into stories starting with remembering the past, yet the memories are of different characters, the continuation is a game the writer plays with us.

Critics have noticed similarities between Woolf and Swift as far as intertextuality is concerned, just as this paper has found similarities with Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. David Malcolm briefly mentions that there are similarities between Swift's work and that of other writers, including Virginia Woolf, in particular (2003: 10). Indeed, Sabina Draga (1999: 242)[3] mentions that the one-day duration of some of Swift's novels is common to Modernist novels such as Woolf's. The one-day duration seems, in the short story collection, to have been converted to one location, one place. In her article, Laura Marcus discusses the "legacy of the one-day novel" (2007: 85) and connects it with *To the Lighthouse*, where the opposition between day and night and the transition between sleep and awakening are emphasized in a typically Modernist way. According to Marcus, the chapter *Time Passes* "begins and ends with the process of going to sleep and awakening" (2007: 88). In such transitional states, "subjectivity is dispersed and the self has to be remade, every day" (2007: 88). Perhaps it was from this technique that Swift has developed his technique used in the short stories to end on a note and then to make a new beginning starting from the same motif.

It has been said about Graham Swift that he rewrites the Modernist stream-of-consciousness[4] novel, as practiced by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce (Draga 1999: 242). According to Catherine Pesso-Miquel (2007: 135), Swift's novels include "Not narration

[3] Sabina Draga, preface to *Ultima Comandă, Graham Swift: Postmodernism şi naratiuni alternative* (Graham Swift: Postmodernism and alternative narratives), translation of *Last Orders* by Petru Creţia and Cristina Poenaru, Univers Publishing House, 1999.

[4] This term has been subject to criticism. There are claims that it might not be a correct psychological theory or that it does not exist at all. The thesis will argue, however, in favour of the stream-of-consciousness since it favours the lyrical mode, not the narrative mode. According to Frederick Bauer, stream-of-consciousness is "nothing real" for the materialists (2009: 290).

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therefore, but a fictitious flow of thoughts sometimes close to the modernist 'stream of consciousness'". He takes this technique to the extreme in *England and Other Stories*. Here he almost literally illustrates the idea of no narration by breaking the narration in an extreme way through the technique of short story collection. The different short stories mark an extreme break in narration, while at the same time we wonder if there is really such a break. Swift seems to suggest that contemporary narration is like a collection of short stories, that experimental novels are dispersed in telling a story and playful, just like a collection of short stories. Malcolm mentions aspects of "fugitive lyricism" (2003: 189) in Swift's novels, claiming that Swift's language is "full of subtle linguistic effects". Stef Craps (2005: 177) states that Swift's language is "characterized by its attempts to improvise a fugitive lyricism out of the patterns of 'ordinary' speech". Both critics notice lyricism as well as other features that are found in his novels, namely the language games usually associated with Postmodernism and everyday speech. Everyday speech is, of course, connected to everyday life; aspects which also exist in Woolf both in style and content. In both Woolf and Swift, we notice the movement from everyday life to a deeper level, and this is also reflected in their use of multi-layered language. This play has been taken to extreme experimentalism as Swift plays with abstract and concrete, figurative and literal meaning in this short story collection.

Through his short story collection, Graham Swift engages in dialogue with his previous work, with that of other authors, with the novel's very form as well as with previous theories on how modern and contemporary novels work. He creates extreme illusions as regards form and illustrates the very idea of blurred boundaries between novel and poetry, novel and short story, narration and poetry in an unexpected and innovative way. He tries to be as innovative now as Woolf was for her time. He has indeed surprised and challenged his readers and their expectations.

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