

**TRAUMATISED SELVES. IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF CRISIS AND TRAUMA
IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S NOVELS**

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Abstract: Our paper approaches the analysis of trauma and traumatised characters in Graham Swift's novelistic work. It does not dwell on the causes of trauma, which are nevertheless stated at the beginning, but on the mechanism of this phenomenon and the effects that it engenders. What we highlight is not the negative aspects of trauma, simply deploring the condition of individuals that find themselves at a loss in a world that for them lacks narratives they can rely on to give meaning to their small existences (as we are dealing with ordinary people). What we are most interested in is the versatility of trauma as a stance in discourse, the advantages that it offers as a vantage point in the construction of identity. We show the way a character that assumes the perspective of a traumatised victim enters in fact, and paradoxically, a potent stand wherefrom (s)he can baffle the reader, become more credible by attracting attention and/or compassion, claim to be a witness, express scandalous opinions without being judged too harshly etc. All these attitudes lead to what we call "use and abuse" of positions, namely an ambivalent and subversive attitude. In the first part of the paper, we dwell on some intricate aspects of the mechanism of trauma that show it to be a paradoxical event and thus prolific for the (ab)use of stands. Illustrations of these features are given by resort to Swift's characters and the contexts that they live in. The second part goes into the consideration that history is trauma, justifying this outlook and outlining its consequences for the construction of identity and ambivalent roles in the novels. The conclusions sum up and add to the already-announced aspects, always correlating the outcome with discourse and identity construction.

Keywords: *identity, trauma, (ab)use, history, ambivalence.*

Introduction

In Swift's novels, most characters may be considered traumatised in a broader sense, (which will be explained as "secondary trauma") (Douglass and Vogler 2003: 9), due to their incapacity to cope with destabilising historical and social contexts. They experience a passage from a society that supports the individual, on the model of the welfare state, towards a Thatcherite, individualistic one, and the loss of guiding lines, narratives (*grands récits*) and values against this background. These aspects have a negative impact on their world views, and on their capacity to integrate and establish relationships. Also, war is depicted as a particularly traumatising macro-scale experience.

Moreover, some characters are traumatised by specific incidents in their personal histories as well. In their case, we may speak of victims of a post-traumatic shock syndrome (PTSS). For instance, Irene Chapman is sexually abused, and Sophie Beech sees her grandfather being killed before her eyes in an explosion.

Here we are interested in highlighting trauma as an invaluable instrument in the construction of identity and discourse. To Swift's characters, trauma is both a scourge and a tool. It both handicaps and empowers, because it favours a special outlook that generates discourse, with the effect of creating identity. Due to its ambivalences as a phenomenon, trauma enables the mechanism of use and abuse – the traumatised character (ab)uses event(s), ideology, himself/herself (by playing opposite roles), and other individuals.

The empowerment of a traumatised victim arises from the ambivalence of two aspects. One is the claim that trauma leads to objectivity and a more sensitive, magnified and accurate

vision. This claim can be supported by recourse to “anti-mimetic theories”, which perpetrate the idea that trauma victims do not lose the integrity of their judgement. In other words, they are reliable as witnesses: “For the anti-mimetic theories trauma may severely damage a subject’s psyche, but it does not necessarily interfere with the ability to remember the event or with the reliability and accuracy of recovering the actual past experience.” (*Ibidem*: 11)

The other aspect concerns the (ab)use of trauma as an excuse to express (scandalous) difference of opinion with respect to the dominant discourse. Assuming the condition of the traumatised in Swift resembles, from this point of view, taking the candid mask of the foreigner in Britain’s literary productions dating two centuries back. Under the pretext of his/her naïve perspective, the stranger travelling to foreign cultures makes the most outrageous statements without any repercussions. The same benevolence and sympathy directed at the foreign traveller is granted to a victim of trauma, as (s)he cannot be suspected of deliberate lying. This point is made very clearly by Ana Douglass, who calls it a Western bias – a traumatised witness is “necessarily innocent, truthful, and above conscious manipulation in the telling of his or her story” (Douglass 2003: 56).

Trauma and Ambivalence

It is essential to understand how trauma is ambivalent and paradoxical, and thus serves the character-narrator so well. In what follows, we will see what features and clinical symptoms make it such a perfect device for use and abuse of positions. For that, we need to look at the mechanism of trauma.

Van der Kolk and van der Hart refer to Janet to explain “traumatic memory” (Janet qtd. in van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 160) as an experience that cannot be assimilated or integrated by the psyche under normal conditions. Traumatic memory comes in contrast with “narrative memory”, which can be integrated easily within mental patterns (*Ibidem*). Besides the fact that it “takes too long” to recount, (if that is possible at all), and that it is “inflexible and invariable”, traumatic memory “has no social component”; it is “a solitary activity”, as it has no addressee (*Ibidem*: 163). It can ultimately be triggered under special conditions, by elements that the environment has in common with the original site of trauma – a mechanism called “*restitutio ad integrum*” (*Ibidem*). In *Out of This World*, we witness Sophie’s traumatic experience of her grandfather’s death. We are allowed inside her mind while she thinks to herself. Her non-social stream of thoughts is made to bear a social function, because it becomes subversive of war policies, war-making, and of the society that promotes these. Since Sophie’s trauma is also linked with her father (whom she perceives as cruel because he photographs the scene), this stream of thoughts also gives information on the family cell, and on the human capacity for interrelatedness, which is flawed in modern times. It reveals a haunting nostalgia for emotional ties, fellow-feeling, and the pursuit of “being-for the other” (Bauman 1998: 51; Lévinas 2002: 105-6). In her case, traumatic memory creates subversive discourse and social satire, and reveals various types of identities.

The very traumatic event is double in itself. A hyper-arousal, an agglomeration of stimuli and their immediacy paradoxically take the form of a de-sensitisation to the event, and of a delay of its perception: “in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness” (Caruth 1995: 6). Simultaneously, we have overexposure or overstimulation,

as well as numbing; nearness and postponement. Doctor Dori Laub remarked a paradoxical consequence: “the inability fully to witness the event as it occurs, or the ability to witness the *event* fully only at the cost of witnessing oneself” (Laub qtd. in Caruth 1995: 7). What Freud referred to as “latency” (Freud qtd. in Caruth 1995: 7) is the impossibility of describing the event subsequent to its occurrence, i.e. amnesia. But it also takes the form of a lack of awareness of the occurrence *during* its unfolding (Caruth 1995: 8). The victims are unable to process what is happening and they develop a split, or schizoid outlook; i.e., a schism of self occurs.

Trauma is experienced only “in and through its inherent forgetting”, “the space of unconsciousness is paradoxically what precisely preserves the event in its literality” (*Ibidem*). In other words, the event’s imprinted totality is possible only through unconsciousness of it. The individual may know – at a later date, as well as come to terms with – what has happened, only and precisely because (s)he does not know. Knowledge and minute preservation of fact is ensured by lack of knowledge of it. The way the event is encoded in one’s mind is by elision and absence, which are a guarantee of the “*precision* of recall” (*Ibidem*: 153). Thus, truth is conditioned by a “crisis of truth” (*Ibidem*: 6); absence conditions presence.

Further paradoxes and ambivalences follow. Trauma is seen as a “*possession by the past*” which, however, is “not yet fully owned” (*Ibidem*: 151). That means that the person is the victim of an enemy that (s)he does not know, and which is part of him/her. This symbolical enemy is both same and other at the same time. Also, it belongs to the individual, yet it possesses the individual. Within the enactment of the traumatic event, “historical awareness” is “urgently” required from the individual, yet “access to it” is denied (*Ibidem*). In the aftermath of trauma, the person experiences loss of memory, as well as vivid intrusions of accurate details, in the form of flashbacks or nightmares (*Ibidem*: 152). Amnesia may be partial, and traumatic details are sometimes converted by the mind into various symbols that become obsessive. Truth of the event is both existent and inexistent. In *The Light of Day*, George Webb is haunted by nightmares, in which a common ingredient is the sensation of falling, suggestive of a fear to relinquish control. He is obsessed with light and slabs (which he connects with tanning beds, the furniture in his office, grave stones, and prison bars). He repetitively compares human beings to withering plants. These fixations are a manifestation of trauma, mainly caused by the murder committed by Sarah. In *The Sweet-Shop Owner*, Will Chapman’s obsession with repetitive “clomp” sounds, and with images of wedding cakes, (associated with tombs), emerge from a lingering war trauma. The way that he is repetitively thinking of “bubbles” and printing “patterns” is proof of the trauma of his inadaptability to the world. In *Out of This World*, there is a lot of reference to Sophie’s amnesia in relation to the Hyfield traumatic explosion scene. On the other hand, the character confesses to being haunted by details of it. Sophie keeps seeing with her mind’s eye how her grandfather was blown up just outside his own home. Therefore, characters-narrators tend to deepen their ambivalence using a strategy. They state that they are oblivious of the events, but at the same time provide us with a profusion of minute imagery, in flashbacks.

The traumatised need to acknowledge two incompatible truths simultaneously: of the painful event, and “*of its incomprehensibility*” (*Ibidem*: 153). The person cannot accept the traumatic event because it seems absurd, cruel, unjust, unexpected etc. – in a word,

incomprehensible. Nevertheless, in order to be cured, (s)he has to acknowledge the event and integrate it. Since the mind tends to reject everything incomprehensible as illusory, the event's incomprehensibility undermines the belief in its reality. Consequently, the retrieval of the event resides precisely in loss of it. In order to remember it or cope with it, one has to be able to elide, distort, forget, miss, and let go. Besides the initial loss, of conscious memory of the facts (caused by latency), there are other types of loss. For instance, the subject needs to accept having at some point lost control (over oneself and reality), in order to heal and gain insight. Various types of loss represent, in simpler words, gain. If the patient cannot accept these things and learn to deal with their combination as representing reality, (s)he may further develop an incapacity to assimilate other experiences (Janet qtd. in van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 164). Thus, a blockage of the normal development of one's personality ensues. This manifestation is called fixation (in Freud's terms), or attachment (in Janet's).

One of the manifestations of fixation is helplessness – “physical or emotional paralysis” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 175). In *The Sweet-Shop Owner*, Will Chapman is experiencing inability to take action, as he is traumatised by both the historical, war context and his wife's refusal to love him. His fear of “action” is seen in an obsessive repetition of the word. Irene, on the other hand, suffers from emotional paralysis, as a result of having been physically abused (raped), and as a result of her parents' abuse of her by objectification.

The question may arise why characters that have not been directly subjected to a shocking event, such as war, should be traumatised by it. It is important to understand that there need not be physical injury or direct witnessing to cause trauma. The “mental experiencing of it” suffices (Micale qtd. in Douglass and Vogler 2003: 10). The syndrome of “secondary trauma” (Douglass and Vogler 2003: 9) refers to witnessing it in a mediated way. This is possible through the media, or by contagion, after coming in contact with the eye witness and his/her story. There are so-called “witnesses” with a “False Memory Syndrome”, who speak of the event from the accounts of eyewitnesses, as if they had been present themselves (*Ibidem*). Stressing that they are liars is not a correct stand, as, from their perspective, there may be no intention of deception. The trauma may be as real to them as if it had been experienced directly. Bearing on Freud's observations, Douglass and Vogler make other two points – “that where many subjects experience the same event, only some may develop a trauma linked to it, and that trauma can be experienced when the event did not happen” (Freud qtd. in Douglass and Vogler 2003: 11). In the latter case, the person is under the vivid impression that the traumatic event occurred, which makes his/her trauma genuine even if the event is in fact absent.

A “*phobia for the traumatic memory*” (Janet qtd. in van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 176) may make the victims live in “two different worlds” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 176) – that of trauma, and that of their daily existence. These worlds mix. They are “not a sequence but a simultaneity” (Langer qtd. in van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 177), until a “place” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 176) is given to each in the person's autobiography. In *Waterland*, after her head injury, Sarah Atkinson is aphasic and catatonic, spending her days in an armchair by the window – but is revered for this by the community as having paranormal, premonitory abilities. In *The Sweet-Shop Owner*, Irene Chapman's speechlessness and asthma are evidence of trauma phobia. Both conditions – incapacity to use

words and lack of air – disable communicative abilities. Impairment of verbal transmission functions as a defence against telling, because telling means remembering.

The loneliness and isolation caused by trauma may ambivalently lead to communion, based precisely on this shared condition. Also, when trauma gets recounted to another, both its healing and its transmission may take place (Caruth 1995: 10-11). Recounting trauma presupposes taking distance from the occurrence, in the sense of relating to it and to oneself more objectively. Implicitly, it is an evolution of the traumatised victim into empowered self-awareness. It is also an understanding of the past, a “naming” of it that gives meaning to events, and identity to their protagonists. Still, the story of the event may be contagious, infecting receivers with secondary trauma. In *Out of This World*, Sophie is advised by her psychiatrist to leave the protective cocoon of oblivion and to tell the story of her tragedy to her children.

Van der Kolk and van der Hart seem to contest that in the case of trauma the incident can be repressed (in Freud’s view of the concept). Namely, the person cannot intentionally avoid remembering the event. The two psycho-sociologists believe that the term repression is better used in the context of “defence against primitive, forbidden, Id-impulses, especially of a sexual nature” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 168). Instead, they suggest “dissociation” as the more appropriate word in the context of trauma, stressing that the person does not willingly push memories away from consciousness, but that (s)he is literally incapable of remembering. They also point out that, if we were to nevertheless consider repression as applicable to trauma, the main distinction between repression and dissociation would not be that between a conscious blockage of memory and an automatic one. The difference would rather lie in a different perspective on their relation to the structure of the psyche. Repression “reflects a vertically layered model of mind”, in which the repressed material “is pushed downward, into the unconscious” (Janet qtd. in van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 168). Dissociation reflects the horizontal view, in which the traumatic incident is “contained in an alternate stream of consciousness, which may be subconscious or dominate consciousness, e.g. during traumatic reenactments” (*Ibidem*). However, van der Kolk and van der Hart admit that conclusive differences could not be clearly delineated in practice between the two concepts. Therefore, here we will consider repression as representing the way in which the victim of trauma is intentionally avoiding to bring the event to memory. Dissociation will be treated as the distance taken by the person from the event *during* its occurrence. It is a type of schizoid witnessing of oneself as part of the event, with repression of affective involvement. A type of dissociative behaviour, when the witness affectively removes himself from the sought-for scene, is war photography. In *Out of This World*, Harry Beech records events from the front.

War photography and trauma have some features in common. The lens ensures both a type of distance and a proximity that are not possible otherwise. Distance refers to a few things. Firstly, since the person behind the camera is only doing his/her job, (s)he is on nobody’s side. The photographer is just an observer who can, under this cover, avoid being targeted by either side at war. Secondly, maintaining focus is of the essence. One cannot afford to be distracted by feelings, which could induce failure to carry out the task. Thirdly, overexposure and the rapid succession of horrific scenes delay the actual experiencing of the traumatic event. On the other hand, proximity refers to how the lens can zoom in on the object

and thus increase its immediacy. The way in which the camera interposes between the person and what is filmed makes him/her both a witness and a non-participant, so it renders a unique type of ambivalence.

The insensitivity, numbness and belatedness mentioned above are the “crisis of truth” (Caruth 1995: 6) that nevertheless keep the person calm and permit the recording, i.e. the truth. However, trauma is always double. Besides the event itself, the subject needs to bear the awareness of having survived it, which is known as the crisis of “survival” (*Ibidem*: 9). In war, this crisis is threefold. One of its aspects refers to the feeling of having been through trauma, regardless of its type. A second aspect expresses guilt towards the comrades who have not come out of the same experience alive. Thirdly, the protection given in the field to the photographer, by the fact that (s)he is there as a result of his/her occupation, may feel as an unfair advantage. The impossibility of telling the events is substituted by camera recording, which is in fact the equivalent of traumatic memory. It plays out what it has “seen”, instead of reproducing it via a logical, intentional account, as one does by means of language. The tape stands for both the unaccountability and the truth of the event. It represents both amnesia and excessive detail in one.

History as Trauma

Caruth reveals, by reference to Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, his interpretation of history as trauma (Caruth 1996: 13-15). This outlook on history is particularly prominent in *Waterland*. The Jews’ departure from Egypt is also a return home, led by Moses (*Ibidem*: 14). Freud describes this act, of both return and departure, as intermingled with trauma. In his account, Moses was killed by the Jews whom he was guiding through the desert, who then “repressed the deed”; so, a story of “return to [...] freedom” is also one of “repression of a murder” (*Ibidem*). One of Freud’s points is to question the truth of historical reference (*Ibidem*: 15). He achieves that in two ways. Firstly, he suggests that the Jews altered their own history so as to be able to cope with the murder (and, in other words, their account of past events is unreliable) (*Ibidem*). Secondly, his own interpretation of the same reality in a new way proves the alterability of events in records (*Ibidem*). His insights show that, in order to write history, one has to figuratively kill the haunting past. History is both trauma – by symbolical murder of the past, and a therapeutic telling that involves departure and liberation from it – “a kind of freedom” (*Ibidem*: 22). History is also both departure and return, which are mutually made possible.

These remarks remind one quite faithfully of the comments made on history by the narrator of *Waterland*, Tom Crick. Crick sees history as a trauma that people cannot run away from through amnesia. Oblivion would be a “gift” (Swift 1992: 108). History haunts people with a complexity of detail. People also try to seek explanations of past events (and thus learn their lessons), but are always bound to relive them, as history is cyclical: “No wonder we are moving in circles” (*Ibidem*: 136). Instead of learning from mistakes, people end up reenacting them: “Why is it that every so often history demands a bloodbath, a holocaust, an Armageddon? And why is it that every time the time before has taught us nothing?” (*Ibidem*: 141). History is an endless sequence of violent changes and overthrows of regimes: “In July 1940 Hitler contemplates – as in 1805 Napoleon had contemplated – the invasion of England. Only to put it off and go marching off to Russia. Just as Napoleon once did” (*Ibidem*: 180).

Crick suggests that events are connected, that there may be a karma for the choices people make. Since history is a series of revolutions, which are violent and allegedly progressive, it is a trauma that involves both departure from the past – a “categorical change” (*Ibidem*: 137) – and its revisitation: “a turning around, a completing of a cycle”, a “reaffirmation”, a “return to a new beginning” (*Ibidem*: 138).

The two movements highlighted by the narrator – departure and return – re-compose the mechanism of trauma. In psychoanalysis, it is common knowledge that one cannot heal without the truth, which is in the past. However, the understanding of that truth is painful and potentially harmful, as it can be traumatic in itself. The recollection of events needs to go hand in hand with their partial oblivion, and it necessarily implies having forgotten, having let go, in order to re-compose, re-member, or put together in new ways. Forgetting is thus a creative act. In *Waterland*, the inability to learn from the flow of history resembles the blockage that prevents development and meaningful assimilation of new experiences. Nevertheless, this inability is also interpretable as the oblivion that is necessary to surpass crisis. Thus, it is, itself, ambivalent. We have seen above that “refusal of understanding” appears as a “creative act” (Caruth 1995: 155). Being able to accept incomprehensibility, rather than remain blocked inside the event, helps the victim move on and find strategies to cope with reality. It also brings about fresh vision and discourse, or meaning-making. Caruth goes as far as to extrapolate this mechanism to the way history and story-telling can be achieved. Historical truth may begin with a refusal of previous modes of telling, or discourses. This denial should not be a bitter rejection of these, or of the possibility that there may be some truth to them, but a search for a fresh outlook. Forgetting the past is necessary indeed, in order to emerge towards the future, but it may be the case that *knowledgeable oblivion* is needed (if one can see beyond the oxymoron), in order to gain perspective.

In his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud explained the reason for repetition of trauma. The violent event – also called the “stimulus” – causes “fright”; the acknowledgement of the event occurs later, the experience is initially missed (Freud qtd. in Caruth 1996: 62). This deficiency of direct experience engenders repetition – either literal, or in one’s mind – as a form of retrospective attempt to “master the stimulus” (*Ibidem*). It is a return to it in order to compensate for what the person lacked at the time of its initial occurrence – control over it. That is why trauma implies a paradoxical move – of continuous departure from the site of trauma, but also an eternal return to it: “a repeated suffering of the event, but [...] also a continual leaving of its site” (Caruth 1995: 10). Going away from the traumatic locus occurs through the incomplete acknowledgement of the event (the “latency”). Going back to it is done through its reenactment. The two movements seem inescapable and are paradoxically simultaneous.

History as trauma also engenders a crisis of survival. For the traumatised, survival is not a lucky leaving behind of the event, but a repetitive compulsion which damages the individual further (Caruth 1996: 63). In this light, repetition appears as a “struggle to die”: “The postulation of a drive to death which Freud ultimately introduces in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, would seem only to recognise the reality of the destructive force that the violence of history imposes on the human psyche, the formation of history as the endless repetition of previous violence.” (*Ibidem*) The “waking into consciousness” (*Ibidem*: 64), of having been confronted with a horrible event and of having survived it, is so traumatic that this survival

cannot be grasped and accepted. This happens because survival occurred in a life-threatening situation that the person was unaware of. This situation engenders repetition, read as a death drive: “Life itself, Freud says, is an awakening out of a ‘death’ for which there was no preparation. The origin of the drive is thus precisely the experience of having passed beyond death without knowing it.” (*Ibidem*: 65) Ambivalently, repetition is a “*claim [to] one’s own survival*” (*Ibidem*: 64) as well: an effort to prove victory over death. The awakening to life equals a turn towards a death drive, which ultimately seeks to prove life. In most of Swift’s novels life and death are separated by blurred lines, and sometimes overlap and engender each other. In *Last Orders*, the creation of identity for all the characters is occasioned by and due to the death of their friend and the fulfilment of his last wish. In *The Light of Day*, the love between Sarah and George grows stronger in limit circumstances that involve murder and imprisonment, seen as a type of symbolical death itself. In *Waterland*, the death of Tom Crick’s mother makes him take up new roles, like that of a cook; also, Dick’s death redeems the community of waterpeople by symbolically ridding it from evil and deviance.

The trauma brought by history determines a desire to return to a stage of protection. This return is like a regression to the womb, to a state of both inexistence and imminent birth: “How we yearn [...] to return to that time before history claimed us, before things went wrong. [...] How we pine for Paradise. For mother’s milk.” (Swift 1992: 136) Regression is a “defence process” (Rycroft 1972: 138) that helps the subject avoid anxiety (*Ibidem*: 139). However, this regression is, besides an instinctive defence, a search for the beginning, for a cause, and for the truth. It is an attempt to understand both the cause and the development. It is both flight from reality and an autodidactic move, a death drive and a claim to survival.

Freud is not the only one who perceives history as trauma. Douglass and Vogler point out that, according to Fredric Jameson, the historical event is an “always absent signified” (Jameson qtd. in Douglass and Vogler 2003: 5), (like Baudrillard’s real, which is always already reproduced). This is a feature that the historical event has in common with the traumatic event: “‘History is what hurts’, Fredric Jameson wrote in 1982, and the traumatic event, now the paradigm for the historical event, is what hurts by definition. The traumatic event bears a striking similarity to the always absent signified or referent of the poststructuralist discourse, an object that can by definition only be constructed retroactively, never observed directly.” (*Ibidem*) What the two events have in common is, therefore, being a second-handed experience. In that respect, they are simulacra of the direct, first-hand event. Hence, their seeming unreality.

On the other hand, this second-handed quality is caused, in the case of the traumatic event, precisely by its immediacy and impact – otherwise said, its aggressive first-handed quality. We again reach the paradox of truth and reality being guaranteed by their absence, which is a characteristic of trauma, but not only. In the case of historical events, the fact that they are traumatic may function as a guarantee of their credibility. In other words, based on the same quote from Jameson, who says that “History is what hurts”, the inference that “it is history only if it hurts” presents itself; trauma “provides a criterion of authenticity for the ‘real’” (Douglass and Vogler 2003: 16). What undermines the historical account (i.e. possible impairment) is what ultimately guarantees its validity. Thus, the concept of history as trauma leads to the double conclusion of both the authenticity and the counterfeit nature of history. This is exactly the kind of ambiguity that Swift’s characters like to convey. Jacques Derrida’s

“logic of the supplement” (Derrida qtd. in Douglass and Vogler 2003: 36) presents the witness as both outside the event, and essential to its verification. Erikson called this verification the “naming” of the event: “it is the *damage done* [...] that gives it its name” (Erikson qtd. in Douglass and Vogler 2003: 36). In other words, the event exists inasmuch as it has a traumatised witness, who is nevertheless both inside and outside it: “The event cannot be separated from the experience of the event” (Douglass and Vogler 2003: 36).

Conclusions

Let us sum up the paradoxes. The victim’s account is both exterior to the event, and what “makes” the event what it is, or what “names” it, i.e. part of it. The traumatised are both impaired individuals, and more coherent than non-traumatised individuals. What the victim says of the event is considered both altered perception (given his/her status as traumatised), and the only truth we have. History exists only insofar as it is a representation coming from a traumatised witness, but it remains a representation – thus, both truth and illusion. Trauma is real even when secondary, i.e. when it did not happen to the person directly. Telling, the transmission of the story of the traumatic event, may be both healthy and contagious. Trauma may engender both isolation and communion, functioning as a “social glue” (*Ibidem*: 12). It may even produce “trauma envy” (Flanzbaum qtd. in Douglass and Vogler 2003: 12) in those who were not part of it.

In the light of the ideas above, traumatic history is both real and a representation, an illusion. This paradox is valid for personal (hi)stories and discourse of Swift’s characters. Trauma and its ambivalence have creative potential. Deconstruction by oblivion and denial ultimately constructs. Contesting master narratives ultimately results in an appeal to find a surrogate one. The suffering caused by the absence of “being-for” makes characters try to live according to this principle. All these prove that, to Swift’s characters, trauma is not only an unpleasant, deplorable experience, but also a device to be capitalised upon, perfect for the attitude of use and abuse of positions.

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