

*The Representation of History
as Plastic:
The Search for the Real Thing in
Graham Swift's "Ever After"*

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RUNNING THROUGH *Ever After* is a strain of symbolic imagery which connects, in conventional fashion, all that is ersatz with plastic and other synthetic products and all that is genuine with naturally occurring substances such as rock. This symbolism—associated with the plastics business of Bill Unwin's stepfather, the caricatured American Sam Ellison, who lauds the utility of "substitoots" (10)—bears on Bill's need to uncover a source of fundamental meaning and purpose in life. In the wake of the anguish caused by the death of his beloved wife, Ruth, Bill tries to locate that bedrock of reality in the historical past, in the Victorian world of Matthew Pearce, from whom he is descended and whose notebooks he is planning to publish. But his mission is bedeviled by his awareness that the representation of history is itself a substitute for the real thing, the vanished past. The reality of that earlier time has been effaced by the ceaseless, often-radical change that denies permanence and renders history discontinuous. It is precisely his ancestor's nineteenth-century past, however, that Bill aims to reconstruct in its entirety; he wishes not merely to edit the notebooks in competent scholarly fashion, as his rival for the documents, Michael Potter, wishes to do, but "to take the skeletal remains of a single life and attempt to breathe into them their former actuality" (100). What gives him pause, though, is his knowledge that the result will be his own creation, at best one plausible version, not the objective truth. Bill must persevere without becoming psychologically paralysed (the book is full of parallels to *Hamlet*) by his recognition that substitutes are all that is available in a situation in which no representation of the truth has uncontested authority. "[W]ith

the idea of authority," says Swift in an interview, "goes the notion that things are explicable. That there is an explanation which will provide an authority for our perception of the world. And I'm challenging that [notion] all the time" (*Ever After* 28).

Both the desire for a historical link to a foundational reality and the anxiety born of the suspicion that it is not available are registered formally in *Ever After*. Swift may challenge the authority of explanations and perceptions of truth, but he obviously has a strong need for meaning and coherence. This need is shown in the attempt of Bill (who is very much Swift's proxy as novelist) to bestow upon his work clarity and an overriding narrative unity achieved through uniformity of theme, symbolism, tone, style, and point of view. Working against this goal is the fact that the experiences encompassed in the novel are diverse in nature and ambiguous in significance. In this essay, I analyze Swift's treatment of history as a potential source of stable personal identity as it relates to the conflict revealed in the novel's formal structure—between characteristics that suggest cohesion and those that bespeak fragmentation. Before I demonstrate the disjunctive, centrifugal pressure at work in the novel, I shall describe the components of the narrative and Bill's attempt to unify them.

The book contains nineteenth- and twentieth-century settings, the former embedded with seeming snugness in the latter. The twentieth-century setting involves several different time frames, as Bill's mind moves, in meandering, sometimes circling, Conradian fashion over emotionally charged events which occurred in several different stages of his life. Much as Tom Crick, in Swift's *Waterland*, repeatedly recalls the discovery of Freddie Parr's drowned body, Bill obsessively returns to the matter of his father's suicide. The question of what motivated it haunts him, as does, to take a second example, that of whether Ruth (who, dying of cancer, also committed suicide) was secretly adulterous, as his mother had been. In Bill's attempt to discover through reflection an overarching pattern of significance in this mix of plot strands and chronologies, the Unwin family history dovetails with that of the nation and the world at large. Bill links his father's suicide not only to his possible discovery of his wife's infidelity but also to the failure of the Allied victory over the

Nazis, which he had helped to achieve, to bring order and virtue to the world (27).

Bill associates his own autobiography with a public event that, for him, stands in contrast to the darkness of much twentieth-century history, the abdication of King Edward VIII: "I was born in December 1936, in the very week that a King of England gave up his crown in order to marry the woman he loved" (63). He interprets the abdication not as a political crisis but "as a welcome intrusion of Romance, allowing [the populace] to forget for a moment Hitler, Mussolini and Franco. All for Love" (63). Bill clearly sees the conjunction of his birth with Edward's famous deed as a favourable omen foreshadowing his own sustaining passion for Ruth. If, he thinks, his father, at least indirectly, had been a casualty of history's destructive might, his own life might be given meaning by a counterbalancing force which also had an effect, however small, on history: love. In his own mind, what connects his circumstances to the Victorian narrative is Matthew Pearce's identical reliance (after Christian doctrine had been discredited for him) on his love for his wife as a stabilizing faith (119). For both men, that faith is rocked by encounters with the grim fact of mortality; Ruth's death has an effect parallel in this regard to the demise of Matthew's son Felix. The difference between the two men is that Matthew ultimately is willing to sacrifice his relationship with his wife, Elizabeth, for what he sees as a higher principle than love—the honesty which impels him to challenge openly his clergyman father-in-law with the science of Darwin. According to Swift, in choosing truth over love and happiness, Matthew does something that Bill would not be disposed to do, "and yet [Bill is] attracted to the opposite of himself" (*Ever After* 26).

The point that I would emphasize about Bill's plotting is that his efforts are intended to make out of the disparate elements a single, totalizing, didactic narrative, one which makes sense of his own life in the larger context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century history. He views the Victorian story as an integral aspect of that overall narrative, since Matthew's tragic, perhaps stupidly obstinate, sacrifice of his marriage can be read as a contrast illustrating the rightness of Bill's own total commitment to Ruth

and of his marriage to her as the most basic and important value in life. Moreover, he sees the nineteenth-century story as supplying the resolution to the dilemma which he faces in the narrative present: the failure of the love between him and Ruth to sustain him after her death. What I mean is that the re-animation or resurrection of Matthew through the narrative that Bill creates from the journal is intended to be his consolation for the loss of Ruth. Paradoxically, the more recent past cannot be of help in this way. Although he has a trove of memories, photographs, and movies in which Ruth acted at his disposal, Bill cannot in any sense restore her to life: "You see, nothing else will do. No simulations, fabrications, biographical conjurations" (270). However, he can, he affirms, play the traditional role of the author-god and bring the long-dead Matthew back to life, at least within the confines of his own imaginative narrative script (100).

While the structure resulting from Bill's play of mind seems somewhat rambling and amorphous, the characters and events form an intricately wrought, prominent schematic. The novel's highly visible, interrelated themes encompass such binaries as faith and disbelief, reality and illusion, the past and the present, progress and loss, mortality and immortality. They are supported by a rather elaborate network of symbols constituted by concrete entities and activities such as the theatre, plastic, base and precious metals, alchemy, geology, mining, surveying, clocks and clock-making, bridges and their construction, reptiles, and fossils. Moreover, while the novel contains entries from Matthew's notebooks and a certain amount of dramatization and dialogue, the effect of cohesive design is strengthened by the characterization of Bill: he is essentially a monologist, given to Hamlet-like soliloquizing, who has assimilated a diverse, fragmentary outer reality into a more unified interior one. Readers may conclude at certain points that the chief importance for Bill of his experiences and the people he has known is that they have come to define his inner world. He is not egocentrically oblivious to the independent reality of others, but he tends to focus on how they have shaped his own self-image. In his narrations about them, his own reactions—especially in relation to his own constructive role as author (and, by implication, as Swift's surrogate)—tend to come to the fore.

As I have suggested, however, the pressures working against totalization strain almost to the breaking point Bill's efforts to achieve narrative smoothness and unity. If he is a monologist at heart, he is nevertheless forced to inhabit a dialogic text. Or, perhaps more accurately, Bill is anxiously aware that other voices should counter and supplement his own, but he also knows that, beyond the faint traces which they have left in the historical record, the dead cannot speak. The difficulty shows itself, for example, in the novel's many self-reflexive moments in which Bill interrupts the narrative to contemplate the strict limitations of his own point of view. "So, have I got it all wrong?" he asks, while considering the possibility that the marriage of Matthew and Elizabeth was shattered *before* Matthew's crisis of faith, not, as Bill had confidently propounded, because of it:

I invent. I imagine. I want them to have been happy. How do I know they were ever happy? I make them fall in love at the very first meeting, on a day full of radiant summer sunshine. How do I know it was ever like that? How do I know that the Notebooks, while they offer ample evidence for the collapse of Matthew's marriage, were not also a desperate attempt to keep alive its myth, and that even when he seems most honest, Matthew, with much display of fine feeling, tender conscience and wishful thinking, only beats about the bush of an old, old story? (226-27)

The "old, old story" in question here is adultery; Bill does not rule out the chance that Elizabeth, who married Matthew's friend James Neale scandalously soon (for Victorian times) after her divorce, secretly was having an affair with Neale during her marriage.

Bill's acknowledged fallibility as a narrator leads him to adopt the rather desperate expedient of assuming points of view other than his own, in the full knowledge that he cannot do so with any confidence or authority. Just before speculating about Elizabeth's possible infidelity, for instance, he attempts to describe from her perspective the disintegration of the marriage. The profile that emerges from that effort is of a woman who would be incapable of the sexual and emotional duplicity of which Bill subsequently suspects her:

Who is Elizabeth? What is she? I see her as a warm-hearted, trusting, perhaps rather brittle girl, emerging suddenly from the chrysalis of

life at the Rectory into the full bloom of womanhood. . . . She has soft brown eyes and the smile of newly awakened, newly indulged instincts; the clear conscience and undissipated emotions of a clergyman's daughter. (222)

This description suggests the stereotypically virtuous heroine of a Victorian novel and, perhaps, helps to undercut Bill's capacity to believe that this portrait is accurate and impels him to conjure up an opposite one, the fallen woman. If Thackeray's Amelia Sedley is one imaginative possibility, then Becky Sharp is another, but, as Bill has asked, who was Elizabeth, really? Readers may deduce from his shifting presentation of her that he does not know the answer and that he has no way of ever knowing.

Bill's Victorian subject matter does not confer on him the omniscience of the Victorian novelist. The absence of this authority is all the more apparent when he tries to use some of the conventions of Victorian fiction, such as the brief synopsis of what will befall the characters in the future beyond the time-frame of the narrative proper. Bill's account of Matthew's life after he has left his family and has stopped writing in the notebooks is so replete with questions and highly tentative speculations that it fails to perform the traditionally reassuring function that such passages once had, namely, to satisfy readers' desires for finality and closure (233-34).

The epistemological difficulties that strain Swift's chosen form do not quite result in the sort of textual splintering or fragmentation that is common in postmodernist novels. Despite the presence of Matthew's notebook entries and letter to Elizabeth, written in a pastiche of Victorian prose style, *Ever After* is dominated by Bill's much less formal writing, with its distinctive texture and rhythms. As I have suggested, however, the fact of this dominance alone does not mean that the form is finally adequate to the task at hand. However loose and elastic the organizational strategy might be, it cannot comfortably hold together all of the narrative's diverse experiences and points of time. Kirsty Milne, for one, is not convinced by Bill's commentary that the Victorian documents shed much light on his situation: "*Ever After* has something disjointed about it. Swift's drive to yoke past and present seems misplaced in this case: the 20th-century widower and the 19th-century truth-seeker do not complement each

other quite as they should. It is as if there are two fledgling novels struggling to get out" (40). Stephen Wall agrees that "the two men don't really seem to have as much in common as the book's design seems to imply," and he concludes that "the different areas of narrative interest disperse rather than concentrate attention. Although its varying strands are conscientiously knitted together . . . they don't seem significantly to cohere" (26). Lorna Sage observes that even on the small level of the sentence, Bill's writing style, with its frequent digressions and parentheses, expresses "the ambition to hold things together, but sketchily, as though they are also always falling apart" (6). At one point, as if to acknowledge the inadequacy of his chosen form, Bill briefly experiments with another—the television script—in trying to dramatize the confrontation between Matthew and his father-in-law. This proves even less satisfactory, however, and Bill breaks off in midstream with the following remark: "But I do not know, I cannot even invent, what the Rector said. I falter in my script-writing, just as the Rector himself, perhaps, faltered on the verge of his imprecation" (199).

There is a direct correlation between Bill's failure to compose a satisfyingly integrated, authoritatively accurate, complete narrative and the psychological trauma that results in his suicide attempt and continues to afflict him during the time in which he writes. As I have suggested, his historical activities are intended to fill the inner void left by Ruth's death. They are intended to tell him who he is, but his inability to unify and render unambiguous the documents and memories which give access to the past only reinforces his sense of psychological disarray.

Interestingly, Bill can be seen as trying with great difficulty to use the representation of history to repair the damage of history, for his identity crisis is causally linked to the historical forces that have shaped his family. Bill associates his father's suicide with the man's disillusionment about the state of the world after the war. It is Ruth's death which destabilizes Bill's sense of self, but we must bear in mind that his relationship with her had salvaged the even earlier emotional wound brought on by his father's death: "It was she . . . who held things together for me, who held my world together. I mean the world that had fallen apart (it did, you

see) with my own father's death" (125). "I am my father's son," Bill tells us, "by whose death my life has been so irreversibly moulded" (172). Hilary Mantel rightly sees that Bill's predicament is at bottom a form of historical determinism:

So inheritance and its nature—the inheritance of one generation filtered down to the next—is an essential Swifitian theme: explored in *Waterland*, explored again here. . . . [Bill] Unwin cannot thrive, for he has no power to invent himself, no power to tear himself free from the pattern into which he is bound. It is a profoundly pessimistic thesis. (23)

I would argue, however, that Bill's thinking about his own identity in relation to his historical activities is initially hopeful, not pessimistic. In highly paradoxical fashion, he gives himself over to history in an endeavour to free himself from it. Rather than trying to invent himself afresh, Bill looks for the seed of a true self in the past before the time in which the damage to his psyche had been done. In seeking the foundation for a stable identity in the past, Bill is trying to answer the question that he poses at the beginning of the novel, in response to his feeling of self-alienation: "I am not me. Therefore was I ever me?" (6). In framing his task as he does, he posits the existence of a hidden, original, essential core of selfhood. "And maybe it's not posterity I seek at all," he opines, speculating that his brush with death, in a sense, already had granted him that goal by rendering his life in the present somewhat posthumous. "Maybe this *is* posterity. Maybe for me it is the other way round. Maybe it's anteriority (if such a thing exists) I'm looking for. To know who I was" (249). This desire expresses a Wordsworthian primitivism, a hope that "The Child is the Father of the Man" (Wordsworth 186), since Bill's earliest memories of "the glorious, the marvellous, the lost and luminous city of Paris" (15) conjure up a vanished paradise. He remembers one day in particular when he "seemed to see that the sunshine was made up of countless particles of irreducible, indestructible, eternal gold" (27). Unlike Wordsworth, however, Bill discounts the trustworthiness of those memories. He sees them as distortions of bitter truths that he learned growing up: his beloved, radiant mother was selfish and perfidious and his remote, inscrutable father would abandon him by taking his own life.

Bill's response to this disillusionment is not to abandon the quest to discover his original identity but to push the search even further back into the past. The notion that the paradigm of his authentic self can be found in the lives of his forebears is what fuels his interest in his family's history, just as it accounts for the ludicrous (and ironic, given his celebration of substitutes) attempt by the deracinated Sam to transform himself into "a Real English Gentleman" descended from a seventeenth-century scholar (10). Bill's genealogical information takes him back even farther, to the sixteenth century and Sir Walter Raleigh (Raleigh), owing to the dubious claim of his great-uncle Ratty that the Elizabethan adventurer was his ancestor (33-34). Far from cementing Bill's identity, though, this fraudulent association with Raleigh (Raleigh) only diminishes it further. In contrast to "the one-and-only Renaissance man" who was "*everybody*" because he was successful at such a variety of activities (247), Bill feels himself to be "nobody. An heirless nonentity. What's more—a bastard" (246). What Bill is referring to with the epithet "bastard" is his belated discovery that his real, biological father was not the decorated veteran who shot himself but a nameless engine driver about whom he knows nothing, except that he was killed in the war.

It is to Matthew, his great-great-grandfather that Bill turns in his quest for a ground of identity, not to his anonymous real father nor to the man whom he thought to be his father: "I summon up Matthew, but I do not try to know my own father. My nameless, engine-driving, killed-in-the-war father. And why should I, when I never got to know the living, breathing man whom I took to be—?" (219). The murkiness and confusion surrounding the circumstances of his mother's relationship with the engine driver and of the suicide of his mother's husband leave Bill with a catalogue of unanswered questions that fills an entire page (208). By contrast, Matthew, whose documentary record of his joys and tribulations seems both heartfelt and frank, strikes Bill initially as both straightforwardly comprehensible and honourable. Moreover, both the previously mentioned parallels and the differences between their situations convince Bill not just of Matthew's relevance to his own case but of his

ancestor's critical role in his own search for identity. Like Bill, Matthew had a vexed relationship with his father, and, again like Bill, he had the good fortune to experience an inspiring, sustaining love for his wife. But Bill believes that, as a Victorian, Matthew inhabited a far more stable world than his own late-twentieth-century one, and this accounts for a good deal of Matthew's appeal as an identity model.

Stability, in fact, is the hallmark of Bill's initial presentation of Matthew. This is made explicit, as is the symbolic significance in this connection of Matthew's profession: "Stability . . . an intuitive sense that all things must have their basis, might be called his tacit watchword. He will become a surveyor. . . . [W]hat, in essence, was the surveyor's task? It was to establish the true ground of things; to provide a *basis*, a sure foundation on which the works of others might be raised. Was it not, literally, fundamental?" (101-02). Of course, for the young Matthew that Bill conjures, that sure foundation, the bedrock of the world's meaning and the source of his own being, his immortal soul, is the Christian God: "And the surface of the world only brought you back to the central fact: nature's handiwork, and man's too, since it exploited the unchanging laws that were part of nature's design, was evidence of God's" (103). The Book of Nature is complemented by Revelation as a master narrative, an authoritative record of God's purpose; Bill speculates that, upon leaving Oxford in 1840, Matthew "would not have relinquished the belief that every word [the Bible] contained was the literal and immutable truth" (102).

Since in both scholarly literature and the popular imagination the Victorian period is closely associated with the growth of religious doubt, it should come as no surprise to readers that Swift shows, as John Fowles had done before him, that under the surface the ostensible solidity of the Victorian world was crumbling: "By the 1860s," states Fowles in his essay on the writing of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, "the great iron structures of [the Victorians'] philosophies, religions and social stratifications were beginning to look dangerously corroded to the more perspicacious" (140-41). Matthew's domestic tragedy results from the fact that by the 1860s, under the influence of the geologist

Lyell and the biologist Darwin, he had become one of those perspicacious individuals. Geology, which Matthew ironically saw at first as the "science of solidity" (103), actually erodes the substance of his biblical foundation and teaches him that "the entire record of human history is as a wink in the world's duration. And if the world existed so long without Man upon it, why should we suppose that futurity holds for us any guaranteed estate and that we occupy any special and permanent place in Creation?" (146). Matthew's exposure at Lyme Regis to the fossil record yielded by the earth's crust, like that of Fowles's Charles Smithson, is compelling evidence for him that the account of Creation set out in Genesis is false.

With the shattering of Matthew's religious faith comes the destruction of his conception of his own identity, which had been founded on that faith. In response to his wife's entreaty to "call upon [his] better nature and 'be [himself] again,'" he thinks: "'Better nature'? What, in any of us, is our 'better nature'? And what does it mean . . . to 'be oneself'?" (225). The death of Felix has made painfully real for Matthew the lessons of Darwin's theory pertaining to the contingency and inherent meaninglessness of existence, both individual and collective, and the wastefulness of the struggle for survival:

But I cannot believe that in this prodigious arbitrariness there is any *purpose* that grants life to a child only to withdraw it after two years; that it is not the case, rather, that he might as well not have existed; that he holds, in truth, in the great course of things, no place, value or identity compatible with the vain fabric of loving recognition that I, that we all, have built around him. . . . (113)

It is highly ironic that Bill looks to such an angst-ridden figure to firm up his own precarious sense of self, and this irony highlights what is problematic in Bill's effort to use history to compensate for the barrenness of the present. Matthew and his Victorian milieu attract Bill because he can see his own troubled situation in their mirror, but that very similarity militates against his being able to discover in the past the stability which he craves. The latter part of the nineteenth century, as Matthew's emotional crisis shows, was the very time in which a world of order and meaning was stood on its head. It was a time when apocalyptic

forces analogous to modern ones were unleashed. As Fowles suggests, “[j]ust as we ‘live with the bomb’ the Victorians lived with the theory of evolution” (140), and Swift highlights this parallel. He locates Bill’s mother’s birthday on the day before the destruction of Hiroshima, thus emphasizing the significance of the divide separating the pre- and post-nuclear worlds (244), just as he stresses in his presentation of Matthew’s development the unbridgeable gulf which divided the pre- and post-Darwinian worlds. Bill’s course in life had been particularly affected by the atomic bomb, since his father’s suicide may have been related to the clandestine role which he played in its production. Feeling a slave to the destructive social forces that have made him who he is, Bill turns for liberation, ironically, to a figure who was equally shaped by history, for Matthew’s crisis of faith was a typical, even clichéd, experience for an educated Victorian, not one which set him apart as unique and self-directing.

The ironies I have outlined suggest that Swift expects us to view as quixotic Bill’s search for an original core of identity located in the past. The notion, supported by the novel’s symbolism of mining, that identity can be found, excavated, and refined like metal gives way to the idea—equally implied by symbolism, in this case of alchemy—that it must be manufactured, even if the process by which this must happen is dubious at best. Bill reflects on his forebears’ mining ventures as follows: “This search for buried treasure. This fever of mines. . . . This alchemical quest to turn base metals into pocketable gold. This search, if not for the real thing, then for the substitute thing, the thing that, perhaps, will do just as well” (233). The point which I would adduce is that Bill cannot discover a precious, original identity more real than the dross-laden, base-metal self which history has shaped. His only option is to transform that self, through the alchemy of his own imagination, into something more valuable, more meaningful, however much of a substitute it is for the immortal soul that he would prefer to discover (200). Unlike his actress wife, he does not effect this metamorphosis directly through performance; rather, he does so at second hand, in fabricating the identity of his alter ego, Matthew, and in affirming the validity of that invention, despite his deep skepticism about

its ontological status: "Let Matthew be my creation. . . . And if I conjure out of the Notebooks a complete yet hybrid being, part truth, part fiction, is that so false? I only concur, surely, with the mind of the man himself, who must have asked, many a time: So what is real and what is not? And who am I? Am I this, or am I that?" (100).

Bill's justification, a familiar move in postmodernist fiction, is tantamount to saying that, since even seemingly incontrovertible realities, in some sense, are human inventions, avowedly fictional representations are no less real or more illusory. He will neither repudiate his portrait of Matthew as false nor will he assert that it is true; the doubleness, which Linda Hutcheon argues to be typical of postmodernist fiction (147), will not be effaced. What is eradicated, though, is the distinction between historiography (at least as Bill practises it) and literature. On the evidence of *Ever After*, Swift is in accord with Hayden White's claim that historical narratives are "verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences" (82). Of the historical element in his novels, Swift says explicitly that "[i]n the end, it is all about imagination. Some research is necessary but the imagination is more important" ("*Ever After*" 25).

Bill's awareness that his own autobiographical and historical writing is, in effect, literary is interesting in light of his propensity to view literature along traditional lines as "verbal eternity" (247), a refuge of order and beauty that, if it cannot quite save us from death, can at least reconcile us to it by answering darkness with light and life (75). What I am suggesting is that Bill's historical endeavour is of this same order in being intended to free Matthew (and, by extension, Bill himself) from the obliterating sweep of time and change. Bill certainly views Matthew's own journal in just this way, as a "small plea, after all, for non-extinction. A life, after all, beyond life" (221).

The problem with Bill's account of the aims of his and Matthew's writing, and of literature in general, is that it ironically posits a separate realm of enduring reality exempt from the ongoing flux of history. The admission that the resurrected

Matthew is Bill's own creation, a fiction concocted at a particular juncture to answer a particular emotional need, would seem to have precluded the possibility of claiming for that creation the status of a literal, transcendent, universal truth. The character of Bill's imaginative activity in large part is determined by historical forces beyond his control that have shaped his subjectivity, so how can what results from his creative efforts stand outside history? Swift is aware of the basic contradiction involved in using the historical novel—which by its very nature entails a focus on the chronological context of human events—to counteract the movement of history.

This awareness is shown overtly when Bill narrates how, as a child, he assembled a scale model, given to him by Sam, of the fighter plane in which Sam's brother was killed in the war. Sam clearly views the building of the model as a commemoration of his brother's sacrifice and as an emblematic reversal of the destruction that took his life. Young Bill's fastidious, authentic bit of historical reconstruction, however, does not end when the parts have been painted and glued together. He next sets fire to the model, and, after he throws it from his upstairs window, the plane crashes on the lawn near his detested stepfather (73-74). In this paradigmatic action, the representation of history becomes not a way of denying or compensating for its ravages but a re-enactment of them. The representation of history becomes a part of history, not a refuge from it.

The foregoing is one example of Swift's characteristic tendency to counter his desire to believe in the alchemical power of the imagination with a skeptical, modern suspicion that nothing can stand outside of history or render it unchanging. This conflict is crystallized in the novel in the heavily symbolic clock, made by Matthew's father and inherited by Bill as a wedding present, on which is inscribed the Virgilian motto *Amor Vincit Omnia*.¹ Bill acknowledges that the contest between love and time, represented in Swift's novel by the engraved clock, is made unequal by the imperfections of life and the fact of death; he quotes the following lines of Raleigh: "*Even such is time, which takes in trust /Our youth, our joys, and all we have, /And pays us but with age and dust*" (77). Moreover, Bill is quite capable of recognizing that

love itself actually may be a transient product of history rather than a timeless force with which to oppose it: "Romantic love. A made-up thing. A concoction of the poets" (121).

Since Bill describes the clock as having been handed down as a wedding present through the generations of his family, it is possible to formulate a more optimistic reading of its symbolic import than I have just done and to say, as Hilary Mantel does, that "[i]t represents continuity" (23). One could argue that if love has not prevented death or changed history, it has at least persisted throughout history, offering a happy oasis in its desert of misery. Such an interpretation assumes that love and time are complementary rather than conflicting, and it puts the emphasis on history as a medium which allows for meaningful continuities rather than as a congeries of disparate processes which alienate and dislocate people. Wall sees the novel in this hopeful way when he argues that Swift "insists, as he did in *Waterland*, on the essential continuum of feeling between ourselves and our forbears. . . . The emotions and circumstances that [Bill] Unwin infers from Matthew's diary are made possible by a belief in human community" (26).

Wall allows, however, that the historical continuum of which he writes is only a possibility, not a certainty (26). This qualification adverts to the epistemological conundrum which I have been stressing, the barrier against which Bill repeatedly butts his head: that is, the commonalities which comfort him might be nothing more than empty fictions of his own devising. In the face of ceaseless, often radically disruptive change, is it delusive to imagine that universal experiences or human qualities serve as links in an unbroken historical chain? Matthew's father's clock may have been passed down continuously for a century or more, but, even within that relatively brief time span, are historical differences between individuals and cultures so easily overcome? Can people significantly be connected to their predecessors in the absence of a shared conception of time as an environment in which a purposeful design involving humanity can be played out? Such a conception was no longer available to Matthew after his crisis of faith, but it had been to his father, who, to Matthew as a child (at least as Bill imagines him) seemed "to be engaged not

only in the making of clocks but in the manufacture of this vital stuff called Time, this stuff which Matthew still thought of as being essentially human in meaning, the companion and guardian of human affairs" (115). If there is no Time with a capital T, no transcendent History, can the histories that we devise knit our lives together into patterns that are other than contingent and inherently pointless? The terminology employed by Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending* describes this dilemma perfectly. Once *kairos*, or humanly significant duration "charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end" (47), becomes *chronos*, or "simple chronicity . . . humanly uninteresting successiveness" (46), then consensus about how histories cohere—or whether they do at all—will be lacking.

Bill certainly fears that a fundamental historical discontinuity renders precarious the bridges that we erect over the gap separating the present from the past. I use the metaphor of bridges deliberately, for Swift has employed it in the novel in a fashion which suggests that history is schismatic. Bill makes the following remarks about the Tamar railroad bridge designed by I. K. Brunel, the real historical figure whom Swift works into the narrative by making the fictional Matthew his assistant:

It still stands, it is still there, still bearing its designer's name, and still bearing the (diesel-powered, narrow-gauge) expresses into Cornwall. To build a bridge! To span a void! And what voids, what voids there were. He would never know. Need never know. These happy bridge-builders, these men of the solid world (these level-minded surveyors). He was safe. . . . Safe within the limits of an old, safe world. Only seven months after his bridge was opened and only two months after his death, Darwin would publish . . . his *Origin of Species*. (217)

The point to be inferred from this quotation is that, while the material bridge still exists, the world which it would attach to the future has vanished owing to revolutionary changes in knowledge, not the least of which was that effected by Darwin. The modern world which Darwin ushered in, Bill implies, was neither safe nor solid, but his emphasis on Brunel's own safety is surely ironic in view of Bill's awareness that the famous engineer would cross his bridge only when terminally ill, "pulled slowly, as if on a hearse" (217). The age of steam has passed—and with it the engines driven by Bill's biological father—and the Great West-

ern Railway, which Matthew helped to build, is no more (215). Death comes at last to everything and everyone: "My very own father. Dead and beyond recall. But Matthew is dead. Matthew is even deader . . ." (214). How can historical reconstruction, Swift seems to be asking rhetorically, possibly span the unbridgeable gulf of death?

Nevertheless, by concluding the novel with Bill's emotionally charged reminiscence of the night during which he and Ruth were sexually intimate for the first time, Swift does seem to be affirming the enduring, redemptive reality of love and the power of memory and imagination to breathe life into the dead. Although Bill tells us that "biographical conjurations" cannot substitute for the living woman whom he has lost (270), this gloomy, death-obsessed figure immediately offers us just such a conjuration in the hope that it will in some way stand in for Ruth and that it will provide a medium in which the love shared between them can continue to exist. Earlier Bill had said of Matthew's love for Elizabeth that "[t]here will always be what remains. He loved her. He wrote it down: that flimsy, romantic thing, a love letter" (236). Now Bill offers us the final instalment of his own effort to preserve in writing his love for his wife.

Swift could not conclude the novel as he does without the chronological dislocations that are in evidence throughout. *Ever After* recalls many modernist novels in its intention, if not quite to make time over into a spatial pattern, at least not to be enslaved by the linear unfolding of events in time. In affirming the power of the mind to order the sequence as desire dictates, Swift is trying, rather desperately, to rob time of its victory. He makes the sexual consummation of Bill's and Ruth's love the radiant meaning towards which the entire narrative has moved teleologically. Swift seems to want this terminus to have a transforming function similar to that discussed by Kermode in relation to the Christian Apocalypse: "the End changes all, and produces, in what in relation to it is the past, these seasons, *kairoi*, historical moments of intemporal significance. The divine plot is the pattern of *kairoi* in relation to the End" (47). The past event that Bill most wants to see transformed is his father's suicide, the news of which he discloses to Ruth on the magical night in question. The last two

sentences of the novel read as follows: "How impossible that either of these young people, whose lives, this night, have never been so richly possessed, so richly embraced, will ever come to such a pass. He took his life, he took his life" (276). As Sage notes, the attempt here is "to redeem a sterile, suicidal statement ('He took his own life') by turning it round into a creative act, a celebration of people's irreplaceableness: tragedy, not post-modern farce" (6). Bathed in the romantic glow of the feelings which Bill remembers, the nihilism of his father's suicide becomes a positive act, a seizing of life.

What undermines the novel's conclusion is precisely our knowledge that what it narrates is part of the ongoing flux and not the end point of a purposeful design larger than that which Swift himself has fashioned in the book. A divine plot is just what Bill, like Matthew before him, has been unable to persuade himself to believe in. Since we know that Ruth also eventually did "come to such a pass" as a suicide, we cannot help but see irony in the final statement, despite the lyrical passion and tenderness which infuse it. Their glorious night together was not the end of history but rather a transient experience, however centrally important it was to Bill's own sense of what gave his life meaning. That experience could not alter or terminate the course of history, a fact that the shape of the narrative paradoxically underscores. Making Bill's reminiscence of that special night the novel's denouement has the ironic effect of highlighting his loss. Bill's imaginative reconstruction provides solace, to be sure, but it is double-edged in painfully reminding him, and us, of what time and death have taken away from him. *Ever After* may be unorthodox as historical fiction in its treatment of time (and in other important respects), but, as I have already indicated, in being historical fiction of any stripe it sensitizes us to the chronological medium in which human events occur and in which change is constant. Ironically, because it immerses us in processes defined by mutability instead of lifting us above them, the historical imagination establishes a connection to the past only at the cost of reminding us that the effect of historical change is to sever connections.

NOTES

- ¹ Love and imagination, linked in *Ever After* as the two kinds of experience through which Bill tries to overcome the limits of mortality, of course, traditionally have been identified with each other, an association justified in down-to-earth terms by one of Julian Barnes's narrators in *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*: "You can't love someone without imaginative sympathy, without beginning to see the world from another point of view" (241).

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