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THE ANATOMY OF LOSS AND THE MAGIC OF FICTION: GRAHAM SWIFT'S *HERE WE ARE*

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Abstract

Here We Are (2020), Graham Swift's latest novel to date, tells the story of a love triangle between three young variety artists over a few weeks in the summer of 1959. As it is narrated from the present-day perspective fifty years later, when the last surviving member of the trio looks back on her life, remembering in particular the events of the fateful summer which culminated in the tragic loss of her ex-fiancé, the novel at first sight resembles Swift's immediately preceding piece, *Mothering Sunday* (2016), which employs a similar narrative strategy and revolves around a similar central theme. This paper, however, argues that besides these similarities, *Here We Are* differs from *Mothering Sunday* in a number of key regards, which is why it can be read as its precursor's loose duology which complements rather than replicates it. This paper demonstrates that the novel not only combines its author's idiosyncrasies with the narrative forms and perspectives to which he has turned to recently, but also allows him, through metacommentary, to indirectly express his ideas concerning the social, ethical and aesthetic aspects of fiction writing.

Key words

Graham Swift; *Here We Are*; loss; trauma; memory; fiction; magic

Graham Swift (b.1949) has ranked among the foremost contemporary British novelists for more than four decades. In spite of his occasional involvement in what may be labelled typical postmodernist narrative strategies, he is a writer who has always professed the importance of an elaborate storyline and well-drawn characters.¹ He has a strong notion of his audience and the dialogical nature of the writing-reading process, claiming that there is an “implicit bond, an embrace” (Swift 2017) in the telling of a story, which is “fundamentally an act of sharing, of intimate human communion” (Swift 2021). His protagonists are always lifelike and complex individuals facing plausible, realistic worries and conundrums as he considers providing such authentic insight into another's mind to be the true “magical quality of good literature”, which can serve as a “means of rising above one's own experience to become enriched by a greater understanding” (RNZ 2020) without having to live through the given situations. This is the reason why immediacy is the lifeblood of fiction for Swift. This immediacy, which is beyond speed, duration or chronology, is in his view closely linked with intimacy, the

utmost “fusion of the corporeal and the mental” (Swift 2017). Yet, while he believes that the aim of writing should be “to grab the very stuff of life” (Swift 2017), he humbly admits to its impossibility as many things in life remain “intrinsically mysterious [...] and beyond unravelling and explanation” (RNZ 2020). The task, or challenge, of a writer, then, is to attempt to do so, nevertheless.

Generally, Swift’s novels mostly feature elderly, or at least middle-aged, characters who find themselves in a difficult or uncomfortable life situation and seek to disclose the roots of their predicament. This search forces them to look back into their past, very often to one specific event – loss, failure, wounding, betrayal – which they have tried to displace from their consciousness and/or forget. However, it turns out that the experience was more burdensome and intrusive than they have been willing to admit and has had long-term and far-reaching consequences for their present state of mind. Swift’s creative principle stems from his persuasion that even seemingly mundane lives open up potential for intriguing incidents, from his belief in “discovering the extraordinary in the ordinary” (Craps 2009: 652). Accordingly, his protagonists tend to be ordinary, mediocre individuals of various social backgrounds and occupations, without any remarkable traits or achievements, and the problems which they face are those of broken interpersonal relationships, usually within families or intimate bonds, leading to a crisis “in which their accepted versions of themselves or the world around them are called into question” (Lea 2021). Therefore, the realm which they inhabit and move within is, both literally and metaphorically, rather small-scale, with its “localness” given by a narrow social community and the limited environment of village, small town or suburban life. Swift affirms his “penchant for the parochial, the drab, and the unremarkable” (Dobrogoszcz and Goszczyńska 2020: vii) by insisting that “[h]owever ‘global’ we like to think we’ve become, it remains true that life is about our little corner, our little nook, our little niche, our little territory. It’s a small world, but that small world opens up to the big world, and that’s simply the way I go about things” (Craps 2009: 652). It is precisely the almost claustrophobically detailed psychological exploration of the varied nuances of this parochial life that infuses his writing with the desired immediacy.

In terms of size, none of Swift’s works can be considered a “loose and baggy monster”, but his latest ones, namely *Mothering Sunday* (2016) and *Here We Are* (2020), evince an apparent tendency towards brevity. He proposes two main reasons for this economy of writing, both linked with the fact of his ageing: first, as he gets older he knows he has less time ahead of him, which forces him to turn to concentrated and pared down forms of writing; and second, it is a virtue stemming from his rich experience which has taught him to express himself briefly and effectively whenever he feels greater verbosity is inappropriate (RNZ 2020).² From the artistic point of view, this turn to short novels bordering on the novella has been determined by Swift’s ambition to produce a narrative which, while focusing closely on a short period of time, opens out to capture a large part of the protagonist’s life, a narrative whose core lies in some specific moment(s) in the past which is, at the same time “projected into the future” (The Punch Editor 2017). Such a narrative inevitably switches between several time levels, which is why it needs to get quickly to the matter so as not to confuse the reader too

much, which naturally implies some degree of conciseness and swiftness. This brevity may allow a narrative to “grasp the fleeting, vanishing stuff of existence and make it always there” (Swift 2017), a quality of fiction he believes all serious novelists seek to attain.

Swift’s last two novels to date are related by much more than just this brevity of form and concentration on a specific short period in the past while simultaneously embracing a substantial portion of an individual’s life. This article argues that *Here We Are* can be understood as a kind of loose duology to *Mothering Sunday*, its more regarded and critically acclaimed predecessor, and that the two novels in many respects, both formally and on the level of subject matter, complement each other. The article also attempts to demonstrate that although *Here We Are* does not touch upon the theme of creative writing and the process of becoming a writer as does *Mothering Sunday*, it still distinctly resonates with its author’s most articulate ideas concerning the social, ethical and aesthetic dimensions of a work of art.

History, Identity, Loss and Memory

Here We Are tells the story of a love triangle between three young variety artists in Brighton over a period of a few weeks in the late summer of 1959. Ronnie, a promising magician and illusionist, and his charming assistant, Evie, join the summer holiday show held in a provisional theatre built at the end of Brighton pier at the invitation of Jack, a comedian, singer and the compere of the show, whom Ronnie had met and befriended during his military service. Soon after, Evie accepts Ronnie’s marriage proposal and the couple get engaged, planning to get married in September when the summer season is over. Their number is a great success from the start and gradually moves to the top of the show’s bill, drawing crowds of expectant spectators each night. However, while their act thrives and nears its perfection, their relationship moves in the opposite direction, especially after Jack, a charismatic and witty companion and womaniser, falls for Evie and discreetly starts courting her. And so, eventually, when Ronnie has to go to London to see his dying mother, not only does Evie not go with him, but she even ends up in bed with Jack the first night Ronnie is away. When Ronnie returns to Brighton after a couple of days, he immediately understands what has happened. However, the couple continue to perform their act in the show until the very last performance, during which Ronnie performs his best tricks and illusions before completing it with his farewell disappearing act, after which he is never found again. When the show closes, Evie throws her engagement ring into the sea and marries Jack, and the marriage turns out to be a happy one, lasting for almost half a century.

Here We Are can be read as a follow-up to *Mothering Sunday* as a number of similarities can be traced between them regarding their formal organisation, as well as their content. First of all, both are told using third-person limited omniscience, a type of narration Swift already employed in *Wish You Were Here*, which allows Swift subtle psychological probing into the minds of his protagonists. He

has striven to make this narration feel so close and intimate that “some readers have mistaken it for first person” (Liu 2016). As a result, the reader learns details about the characters’ motives, feelings and emotions without having to ponder the reliability of these pieces of information as is often the case with first-person narrators. Also, it allows him to keep some distance from the story and gives him the opportunity for metacommentary. The two novels are also structured in a similar manner: since their linear temporality collapses across almost a century, their narration is broken into short chapters taking place in several different time periods. The reader is thus provided with fragments of the plotline, from which they need to carefully compose a coherent whole. Yet, neither of the stories is meant to be a mystery whose shocking revelation is shifted to the ending as Swift scatters explicit foreshadowing hints throughout the narratives from their very beginnings. One of the time levels is the present, in which the elderly protagonists recollect their past and contemplate how a single event can have far-reaching ramifications for a whole life. Therefore, although the crucial action happened in the distant past, the narration gradually evolves in a retrospective whose essence rests in disclosing the interconnectedness between this past and what has followed it, including the very present. And in both novels the present-day narrative perspective is female, which can be viewed as Swift’s response to critiques condemning his narratives as inherently male discourses in which women characters’ voices are silenced “in and by the text”, “physically and/or institutionally” (Widdowson 2006: 4, 112).

The novel focuses on a short period in the past so as to expand its narrative to cover whole decades of a person’s life, which is actually an idiosyncratic strategy of all Swift’s novels. These two novels, however, differ in the role they assign to grand historical events. Most of Swift’s novels revolve around the personal and local histories of their protagonists and the communities they belong to, while the “official” historical moments and happenings are sidelined as framework background.³ In *Mothering Sunday* and *Here We Are*, in contrast, grand historical events, namely the two World Wars, play a cardinal part in shaping the principal characters’ identities and destinies. As a result, these novels explore the diverse manners in which personal and collective histories intertwine, and how the life of an individual who is not directly involved in certain historical events gets inevitably, though mostly indirectly, affected by their larger consequences. The key plotline of *Mothering Sunday* takes place in 1924, in a Britain whose atmosphere was determined by the economic and social changes brought about by the destructive war that had ended six years earlier. Many families had lost at least some of their male members in the trenches, but the higher classes were also stricken by the country’s high post-war inflation and indebtedness due to which they lost much of their property and could no longer afford the affluent way of life they had been used to during the Edwardian period. As a result, they were forced to cut their expenses which, among other things, meant that the number of their domestic staff was reduced to two or three people only. These changes consequently accelerated the ongoing democratising tendencies in British society, in particular those concerning the permeability of formerly rigid social class hierarchies and the emancipation of women.

In *Here We Are*, the identity-shaping and life-affecting historical background is the Second World War, namely the circumstances surrounding the Blitz in London. The event the novel touches upon most forcefully is the evacuation of children from cities threatened by German bombing to rural parts of the country that took place in September 1939. This “Operation Pied Piper” was initiated by the British government on 1 September, and its first wave resulted in the evacuation of some 1.5 million people from potential “target” urban areas of whom more than half were children.⁴ The experience of these children in their new, temporary surrogate families was varied, ranging from pleasure and enjoyment in kind and caring communities to resentment and misery at the hands of indifferent and inconsiderate foster parents. Therefore, while the first category remembered their wartime exile fondly and in some cases even retained contact with their hosts after the war was over, many of the latter refused to remain in their reception families and soon returned to their homes in spite of the life-threatening conditions.⁵

Jane Fairchild, the protagonist of *Mothering Sunday*, works as a maid for the upper-class Niven family, whose fate is exemplary of the above mentioned impacts of WWI: not only had both their sons been killed in the war, but they had also lost much of their wealth during the post-war years and now live relatively “modestly” with only two servants – a maid and a cook. As a result, they often treat Jane almost like a family member; she is free to use their late sons’ bicycles and borrow books from their library. They are magnanimous enough to support Jane’s attempts at self-improvement by doing more than allowing her to read their books – when she has the chance to get a job as a bookshop assistant, Mr Niven does not impede her choice of career and even gives her some money to start off with. In *Here We Are*, the eight-year-old Ronnie is walked by his mother, the dauntless charwoman Agnes Deane, with whom he lives in a small and dingy house in the East End, to the railway station to be taken to Oxfordshire to live with Mr and Mrs Lawrence in their country house called Evergrene “one day in 1939” as part of a “great national plan” (*Here We Are*⁶ 25–26). Although it pains Agnes very much to see her only son depart from her for an unspecified, but presumably long, period of time, her motherly love and instinct tell her she is doing the best for her son and that such a separation will prove better than incessantly exposing him to uncertain refuge in air raid shelters.

The novels thus explore the inherent interconnectedness of collective and individual, or personal, histories and identities as they show how larger historical circumstances shape the protagonists’ identity formation. In both cases, interestingly, the protagonists do not perceive these circumstances negatively and rather benefit from them, and, in both cases, the period during which the foundations of their identity transformation are laid takes about six years. As a foundling raised in an orphanage, Jane is later given opportunities unthinkable for a person of her social background in pre-WWI times, no matter how bright, tenacious and hard-working they may have been: she goes from being a bookworm maid to working as an assistant in an Oxford bookshop, where she meets her husband, who teaches philosophy at Oxford University, and, eventually, she becomes a full-time writer. Similarly, Ronnie’s stay at the Lawrences’ proves

absolutely determining for his future life, in part because he spends some of the most formative years of his childhood and early adolescence there. His father being frequently absent, Ronnie is destined to live with his destitute and, by force of circumstances, hardened and unyielding mother in Bethnal Green, thus perceiving his early childhood as joyless since his mother's principal concern is to do everything to increase her son's chances for a better life than she has had. That is why he does not feel so dejected when he is about to leave for Oxfordshire, as the place represents more than just safety from air raids for him, providing the prospect of a welcome change from his dull daily routine. And indeed, Ronnie turns out to be one of the luckier child evacuees and his expectations are more than met in Evergreene since he finds there not only undreamed of comfort and spaciousness, but also warm-hearted and understanding people who encourage their foster child's inquisitiveness and desire for knowledge beyond the school curriculum.

Feeling supported and appreciated, Ronnie quickly gets used to his new life, wishing that he could stay at Evergreene for ever, concluding that his previous existence "must have been the result of some mix-up or misunderstanding" (*HWA* 30), which is only underscored by the childless⁷ Lawrences' unconcealed delight in having him around. Although he subconsciously understands that his mother loves and misses him, and at times he even feels ashamed of his current happiness, he still cherishes the blasphemous hope that the war will not end quickly. The house and its garden are for Ronnie a plentiful source of mysteries and adventures, but what truly sparks his interest and imagination is the revelation that Eric Lawrence is a variety magician by profession. And so the later part of his sojourn in Evergreene gradually transforms from innocent, carefree childhood holidays into an adolescent training camp, his "sorcerer's apprenticeship" (*HWA* 51), during which he is shown and taught the basics of Eric Lawrence's craft. For Ronnie, this schooling means the beginning of his professional career since he is captivated by magic to such an extent that he discovers in it the purpose of his life, being firmly determined to become an accomplished magician himself one day. This, however, estranges him even more from his mother who, when the war is over and he returns home, expresses her grave disappointment mixed with annoyance at his decision to throw away his education and pursue such a dubious and volatile vocation. The little house in Bethnal Green thus feels for him like a prison, physically as well as mentally and emotionally, and two years later he leaves it again, this time of his own volition and for good, to try his luck in the world of entertainment.

Another notable parallel between the novels is that of their protagonists' social and character profiles. Both novels are dominated by characters of very lowly origin who, in their distinct ways, aspire to achieve something which could take them well beyond the realm of their social and economic background. Swift claims that he does not like the concept of a social hierarchy, which only separates people from one another, preferring to "be an individual rather than a member of any class" (RNZ 2020). Accordingly, Jane and Ronnie (but also Jack and Evie to some extent), are given a number of capacities, qualities and character traits that make them distinctive individualities capable of naturally transcending the

limits and restraints of conventional social divisions. On the one hand, they possess remarkable inner strength, vigour, stamina and determination to surmount obstacles and difficulties; yet, on the other, they are also likeable personalities – kind, agreeable, helpful and optimistic. And it is as if they were “rewarded” by fate for this combination of resolve, eagerness and amiability: Jane first becomes a beneficiary of Mr Niven’s generosity, and later, is presented with an old typewriter from the observant bookshop owner when he learns about her writing ambitions; Ronnie not only receives his training from the Lawrences in magic, the entertainment business and life in general, first during his wartime stay and later in the “refresher courses” (*HWA* 62) of his free weekends during his service in the army, but he is also bequeathed a “windfall” in Erick Lawrence’s will, which enables him to hire an assistant and launch his career as a freelance magician. Moreover, thanks to their nature, both of the characters are successful in life: they get on well with other people – colleagues, superiors, customers, audiences – and their diligence and perfectionism make them true professionals in their respective enterprises. And lastly, they are both artists, which is why they need to excel in unrestrained creativity and inventiveness: Jane’s books are full of mischievous and nasty acts she would never think of carrying out in her real life, and the humble and introverted Ronnie is very unlike his confident and mesmerising stage personality, *The Great Pablo*.

There is one more central theme that *Mothering Sunday* and *Here We Are* share – that of loss and memory. Swift’s novels typically abound with fatal losses, mostly of close and beloved people, and portray the diverse manners in which people try to come to terms with them, such as denial, displacement and compensation. As these losses befall his protagonists in a distant past; the stories also explore the convoluted process of recollecting these unpleasant and potentially traumatising events, as well as rendering the long-term impacts such past incidents can have on the psyche. The major loss Jane returns to in her memory takes place on 30th March 1924 when she twice loses her upper-class lover and friend, Paul Sheringham: first she loses him metaphorically since he is about to enter an arranged marriage with a young lady from a neighbouring rich family and must therefore terminate their affair, and later that day, she “loses” him literally when he dies in a car accident on his way to lunch with his fiancée. Although both these losses are painful for Jane and she keeps recollecting the incidents of this fateful day over and over for the rest of her long life, they in fact turn out to be a stepping stone to her identity transformation, which gives her confidence to “cross an impossible barrier” (*Mothering Sunday* 146) and strive for “a unique status as one who has risen above class divides” (Negrepointi 2016). Yet, her narration reveals another loss – that of her husband, whose untimely death is caused by a brain tumour, leaving her widowed and childless at the age of forty-three. This loss of a beloved person, her only soulmate, and the firm point of her emotional, spiritual and intellectual life proves to be far more tormenting and she eventually manages to cope with only through her writing.⁸

The story of *Here We Are* also centres on two major losses which occur within the period of just a few days. During a single day, Ronnie loses both his mother and his fiancée – the first dies unexpectedly and, to his frustration and despair,

before he can be reconciled with her, and the latter lets herself be effortlessly seduced by his friend and colleague Jack. While it seems that Ronnie gets over the loss of Evie quite easily since he shows no apparent signs of dejection or bitterness, in reality he is deeply and irrecoverably wounded, which is only manifested when he ceremonially kisses Evie's wrist and makes himself vanish without a trace at the end of their final performance. Therefore, the second loss, which proves determining for the novel's present-day plotline, is Evie's (and to a much lesser extent Jack's) stunning experience of Ronnie's sudden disappearance. Although at that time she responded to the incident quite rationally and without any turbulent emotional reaction – she simply throws her engagement ring into the sea and marries Jack – the fact that Ronnie has been a recurrent image in her memory over the year following her husband's death suggests that the void in her life after her ex-fiancé's disappearance, in spite of her long-lasting and happy marriage with Jack, has been greater and more devastating than she has ever been willing to admit.

Trauma, Mothering Wrongs and Fiction's Magic

Despite all these similarities, *Here We Are* differs from *Mothering Sunday* in several respects, again, both formally and content-wise. One of these relates to the novels' narrative perspectives. In *Mothering Sunday*, the main and only narrative perspective is that of Jane Fairchild, as the whole story and all the plotlines set in different historical periods are directly related to her personal and professional life. By contrast, *Here We Are* provides the perspectives of all the three characters involved. In the first half of the book, Ronnie's perspective dominates, occasionally complemented by Jack's and Evie's, and the reader learns in detail about his childhood, wartime stay in Evergrene, military service and how he met Jack and, later, Evie. Over the second half, in which the present-day plotline is introduced, the narrative perspective gradually shifts to Evie's as she is the only one of the characters who is still alive. However, it is Ronnie whose story still occupies most of the narrative, although he had already vanished in 1959 at the age of twenty-eight, while the current plotline is set half a century later, exactly one year after Jack's death. It is as if in *Mothering Sunday* Paul Sheringham were given his perspective on the fateful day in March 1924, and perhaps also on his childhood and adolescence and being brought up in the shadow of his two brothers, heroically fallen in combat. Interesting though this could be, it would utterly alter the effect, and consequently the meaning, of the novel. Thus, *Here We Are* does not read as a testimony of one person's life, but rather presents a "three sides of the coin" story. Such a narrative strategy makes it more difficult for the reader to identify or side with one of the characters as each of them has their share of truth as well as of blame.

Another significant difference is the nature of the loss the female protagonists experienced in the past. Although the loss of Paul is grievous for Jane, it can hardly be called devastating or even traumatic. The main reason is that she first loses him as a lover, something she had known would happen for some time

and thus something she could have prepared herself for. And indeed, after Paul departs to see his fiancée, Jane, in her nakedness and the solitude of the empty house, not only realises that one phase of her life is over, but discovers in herself the confidence and mettle to attempt to achieve things in life seemingly beyond the reach of a person of her social class. Therefore, when she hears the news about Paul's death, she has already come to terms with the fact that she would never see him again, which is why, though it does strike her strongly after the seven years of their affair, it does not cause her to break down, with life-long consequences. In Evie's case the situation is different since she is aware of her own responsibility for Ronnie's decision to vanish, and she feels guilty for her betrayal at the worst possible moment for him – when his mother was dying. The incident was traumatic for her for two reasons: first, it occurred unexpectedly and suddenly, too quickly to be fully understood and “experienced in time” (Caruth 1996: 69), which is why this “missing”, unresolved experience was banished into subconsciousness; and second, it roused a feeling of guilt in her, that she herself had been the true cause of Ronnie's disappearance, which can be seen in her pondering whether it was not meant as some kind of punishment or test (*HWA* 190). Indeed, the theme of guilt is treated in a very complex manner in the novel as almost all of its characters – Evie, Ronnie, Jack, Agnes, Penelope Lawrence – at some point admit to feeling guilty for having hurt or betrayed someone.

Jane and Evie also differ in the way in which they responded to this negative experience. Jane made it a part of her conscious mind, she deliberately kept trying to recall all the possible details of the day, and although she never used this experience in her books, she kept rehearsing its “written” version over and over in her mind for decades. Evie, in contrast, repressed the experience, buried it in her memory and chose not to speak about it again. In the course of her marriage, she and Jack only very seldom mentioned Ronnie's name and this “mutual silence about him, a guilty baffled honouring silence – was almost one of the glues – the secrets as they say – of their marriage” (*HWA* 170). Evie's reticence is a part of her denial, a typical but ineffective and in the long term harmful coping strategy, which she believes will protect her from the naked truth of what she really did. Her character thus joins the cast of Swift's “catatonic figures of silence” (Bényei 2003: 53), whose reluctance to verbalise their burdensome past prevents them from ever dealing with it effectively. Pascale Tollance observes that in Swift's fiction typically “silence resounds through the repetition of unanswered questions. But, equally, it expresses itself in the absence of questions one might have expected” (2009: 69). The fact that Ronnie's absence is tangible in Evie's marriage is underlined by several secrets she keeps from her husband: that when she threw the ring into the sea she was crying and whispering Ronnie's name, wishing the act might “have brought Ronnie back” (*HWA* 6), that she kept the costume in which she assisted Ronnie, and that she visited Evergreene under the pretext of looking for the lost Ronnie, while in reality she was hoping to find some key there to understanding his personality, something she had failed to do while they were engaged.

The present-day, seventy-five-year-old Evie evinces symptoms of trauma, such as recurrent memories of the incident and of what preceded it, and, more seriously,

daydreams and hallucinations in which she spots the spectral figure of Ronnie in his stage outfit as she remembers him from the summer of 1959. The event that triggered this traumatic reaction was Jack's decease as, once the space by her side became vacant, the image of the once betrayed fiancé immediately started to creep in. Consequently, the novel's narration employs some techniques that help to render these symptoms authentically, namely the confused and distorted psyche with its unstable states and irrational manifestations (Vickroy 2002: 27–29): the narration is recurrently disrupted by flashbacks in which Evie's memory returns to what occurred during the few last days of the holiday show, each time bringing up some new fact, detail or commentary; in the present-day plotline she repeatedly feels the urge to justify her choice of Jack over Ronnie, which she manages to do only with hindsight through the prism of her husband's successful career as an actor, director and producer, which is why she concludes "it had paid off" (HWA 158); and her fickle mind produces daydreams and hallucinations in which she first sees Ronnie in the mirror, and later also feels the presence of Jack, as if the two men were battling for her favour once again.

Here We Are also differs in terms of the role ascribed to mothers and mother figures. In spite of its title, *Mothering Sunday* does not feature any mothers – Jane as an orphan has no mother to visit on that Mothering Sunday of 1924 and so instead she has the final rendezvous with her lover, and, due to her childhood experience, later decides to remain childless, though after her husband's sudden death she comes to regret it. In *Here We Are*, mothers play determining roles in the lives of all three protagonists. Ronnie's mother envisions her son's future as that of an educated person with a respectable and well-paid job, which is why she vehemently opposes his passion for magic. Striving to steer her son clear of her own and his father's mistakes, in her small son's eyes she is too stern, uncompromising and unimaginative. Penny Lawrence, his surrogate mother, appears to be everything his biological mother is not – caring, attentive, genteel, encouraging and sympathetic. Moreover, she supports her husband's career and in some way even loves him for it, claiming that being married to a magician could get very demanding but was also exciting and wonderful (HWA 183). It is no wonder that Ronnie has a complicated relationship with his mother, preferring to confide in Penny Lawrence. It gets even more discordant when he comes back home from Evergrene, which is also the reason why he does not like to talk about his mother to other people. Evie never really explains why she grew attracted to Jack, save for the fact that he was a charismatic and entertaining companion, but it is very likely that their mothers played a part in their getting together. Both Jack's and Evie's mothers used to perform themselves and even brought their own children on stage. Neither of them thus objected to their offspring's decision to pursue a career in the theatre. Jack and Evie thus received a similar upbringing and had similar childhood experiences, being "two of a kind" (HWA 15), while Ronnie was a "different kettle of fish" (HWA 18), evasive and secretive when it came to his family background and upbringing. It is therefore unsurprising that after their first lovemaking Jack and Evie talk about their mothers.

Finally, the two novels differ in the thematic focus of their metacommentary. *Mothering Sunday*'s protagonist is a renowned writer with vast life and profes-

sional experience and an exceptional ability to reflect and self-reflect, and so its narration contemplates what it takes to become a writer, the writer's work with language, the relationship between reality and fiction, and the purpose, possibilities and limits of creative literature. The novel thus explicitly expresses many of Swift's own views on writing mentioned earlier, particularly the significance of discovering one's own voice, the ambition to be "true to the very stuff of life" (*Mothering Sunday* 149), and the fact that there are still many mysterious things in life that not even literature can explain. *Here We Are* seems to be less ambitious in this respect since its protagonists are variety artists and its rumination is primarily directed at the nature of magic and illusionism and their relationship with real life, and at the entertainment industry in general. Its primary thesis is that although such magic can produce fantastic things beyond the limits of our everyday experience and also beyond the limits of human comprehension, its effect is that of a momentary spark, an ephemeral illusion, rather than some lasting and practical alteration, in other words, that magic "could bring about extraordinary transformations, but not alter the fundamentals of life" (*HWA* 54). On several occasions, Ronnie realises that his magic cannot put the problems of daily life right, and when he is on the train to see his dying mother, even in his helpless despair he points out "the absurdity and uselessness of this thing that he had nonetheless chosen to make the object of his life" (*HWA* 126). The narration also muses on the relationship between the art of magic and the business of entertainment: while they do not always observe the same principles, they need be made compatible if a magician wants to be commercially successful. Therefore, the entertainment's imperative to "give people what they want" must be given precedence over what the magician would like to do or is capable of doing, but at the same time, a skilful performer should be able, at least in part, to convince the audience that what they want is precisely what he is about to give them.

This, of course, can be viewed as metacommentary on the nature of art in general, and literature in particular, since it reflects some of Swift's beliefs about fiction and the process of writing. Prominent among these are the importance of having a potential audience in mind while writing, taking the publishing of a book as a dialogical form of sharing ideas and experience, and believing that the task of literature is not to directly change the reality of the world, but to provide access to mental and physical realms beyond the readers' own experience to help them understand the experience of others and thus, potentially, equip them with the empathy and tolerance that might inspire them to make the world a better place. It also resonates with what Swift (2021) defines as the magic of fiction – the paradox that something wholly made up and unreal, if well-written, can come alive for the reader by suddenly ringing true and real for them, in other words, when the reader finds a story vital and authentic, they experience it as being relevant to their own life. Possessing an essential immediacy, such fiction, he believes, can offer joy, hope and solace, even if it deals with negative aspects of human existence.

Conclusion

Graham Swift's *Here We Are* is a deceptive novel, which requires attentive reading. It may appear analogous to its immediate predecessor, *Mothering Sunday*, since it is of comparable size, has an almost identical narrative structure and temporal organisation, and also has a similar span in which the narration expands from a short period in the past to cover almost the whole of the protagonist's life. Also, like *Mothering Sunday*, it explores the themes of the interweaving of individual and collective histories, loss and memory, and a person's ability to rise above the restraints of their social background. However, *Here We Are* differs from its precursor in several crucial aspects: it makes use of a multiple narrative perspective, and the protagonist whose perspective dominates the novel is the one who dies young half a century before the story's present-day time setting; the theme of loss is of a dual character as two of the protagonists experience distressing losses and, moreover, these losses are inherently linked when the disappearance of one becomes an irretrievable loss for the other; both these losses are highly depressing for their sufferers, and, rather than providing a stepping stone to a positive identity transformation, they become an intrusive psychic burden they find difficult to cope with, especially because they are haunted by feelings of guilt and personal failure; the present-day plotline reveals that the last surviving protagonist's life has been affected by the traumatic experience of this loss, the narrative of which bears some elements of trauma fiction; and, as its story does not involve a writer as a protagonist, the novel offers an indirect form of contemplation on writing through the theme of magic and illusionism.

Most of the above features are in fact idiosyncratic of Swift's fiction, and *Here We Are* combines some of them with the third-person narrative perspective and brevity of form to which he has turned to in his last three and last two novels respectively. It is therefore legitimate to read the novel as a loose duology or follow-up to *Mothering Sunday*, particularly as they are of a related narrative and stylistic stamp and both revolve around the painful losses of people close to the protagonists. Yet there is one more reason why *Here We Are* skilfully and aptly complements its predecessor – it employs similar devices, themes and phenomena, but uses different means, to different ends and from different perspectives. In terms of complexity of subject matter, it is inevitably at a disadvantage when compared to *Mothering Sunday*, which teems with metafictional commentaries and undoubtedly represents Swift's most self-reflective novel to date. However, *Here We Are* also contains an additional dimension of value that transcends the actual action as it draws parallels between magic and reality, and thus reflects its author's own ideas about the nature and role of art. By examining the psychological, social, ethical and aesthetic particularities of the human condition, both on the level of its story and its metacommentary, the novel exemplifies the communion and empathy inviting probes into the mind of the other which, in its author's opinion, distinguish quality fiction.

Notes

- ¹ His truly historiographic metafiction, *Waterland* (1983), appears in retrospect to be rather an exception within his oeuvre. Daniel Lea notes that Swift's style "more readily resembles a form of self-conscious social realism shot through with serious psychological investigation" (2005: 5). In a similar vein, David Malcolm asserts that Swift's novels "position themselves in relation to a Victorian tradition of novel writing" (2003: 22).
- ² In this regard, Swift is by no means a rarity among his peers – Ian McEwan and Julian Barnes, for instance, have also turned to shorter pieces in the later part of their career, namely in *The Children Act* (2014), *Nutshell* (2016), *The Cockroach* (2019) and *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), *The Noise of Time* (2016) and *The Only Story* (2018) respectively.
- ³ Swift's first novel to depart from this tendency is *Wish You Were Here*, where the story's tragic circumstances are caused by the devastating effects of the foot-and-mouth and mad cow diseases throughout the 1990s and 2000s, as well as by the consequences of British troops' participation in the Iraq War.
- ⁴ Although most of these people were from London, many others came from cities like Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow. Subsequent waves of evacuation followed during the war years, not only to rural areas in Britain but also overseas to the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (gov.uk, "Child Evacuees", 2019).
- ⁵ By the end of 1939, for instance, around 900.000 evacuees had returned to target areas, despite government calls to "leave the children where they are" (gov.uk, "Child Evacuees", 2019).
- ⁶ In references, henceforward abbreviated as *HWA*.
- ⁷ The theme and motif of childlessness permeates Swift's fiction: there are couples who would like to have children but cannot (e.g. *Waterland*, *Last Orders*, *Here We Are*), or people who do not want to have children due to their negative past experience, mostly from their childhood, or due to their psychic difficulties (e.g. *Ever After*, *Wish You Were Here*, *Mothering Sunday*, *Here We Are*). In addition, the story of *Tomorrow* revolves around the theme of children conceived by artificial insemination.
- ⁸ For a more thorough analysis of *Mothering Sunday's* treatment of this theme see the chapter "Loss, Memory and Writing in Graham Swift's *Mothering Sunday*".

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