

Reviews

David James

Stef Craps, *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift: No Short-Cuts to Salvation* (Brighton and Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), viii + 230pp., £45.00 (hbk), £15.95 (pbk)

Adam Phillips wrote in *The Guardian* earlier this year that '[u]nderstatement reminds us that there is something under our statements'. This canny if slightly terse conundrum joins a list of the many gems he retrieves from Freud's 'contagious writing'.¹ Phillips revives here a paradox that performs a dual purpose; cherished as a memento from Freud while paying homage to his legacy, it piques our vigilance to the duplicity of colloquial exchange. It's also a phrase whose crafty concision encapsulates Graham Swift's way of articulating the 'oddness of the ordinary', as Peter Ackroyd commends it, by 'stripping the veils of language'.² Understatements have certainly become Swift's speciality, resounding throughout his fictions of ethical consequence illuminated by Stef Craps in this valuable new study.

Craps's approach is far from pedestrian. Within its single-author format, what makes this book distinctive is that it proceeds chronologically while working hard to focus its thematic coverage, distinguishing itself from a standard text-by-text exposition. Each of the seven core chapters offers a self-sufficient discussion, devoted to individual works; together they sustain an overarching, meta-theoretical debate, giving a practical demonstration of hermeneutic ethics in action on a novelist whose compassionate register has consistently refused the dictates of conventional morality. Swift's parables of post-traumatic experience lead us on forays through the everyday as the *mise en scène* of self-inquisition. Against the backdrop of Craps's opening survey of literary-ethical thought, Swift emerges as a patient observer of the process of *working through* the aftermath of loss, that testing, ever-renewing process woven into workaday routines. In Swift's domestic universe, igniting events are themselves reopened to

inspection through recall. Complicating for the sufferer the notion that human traumas have single originating sources, his retrospective fictions dramatize the retrieval of familial pasts that refuse to be resolved by passive hindsight. *The Sweet Shop Owner* (1980), *Waterland* (1983), and *The Light of Day* (2003), epitomize the way he invites us down an altogether more uneven pathway to redemption. Craps portrays a shrewd and agile Swift: navigating between remembrance and the social, contemplation and conduct, his narratives of bereavement render the shallow comforts of self-insulation accountable to the material conditions of others. Outstanding obligations and attachments regularly protract the timescale of personal repair. Typically for Swiftian protagonists, redemption entails a renunciation of cherished delusions. Salvation, in this self-interrogative scheme, if indeed it seems possible at all, will have to exceed the solitary recollection of determining events; it will entail a more gradual, day-by-day realization of, and eventual commitment to, a 'just, non-violent future' for the community at large (p. 20).

Arguably Swift's early work didn't quite succeed in sustaining this equilibrium. Nevertheless, Craps makes a good case for revisiting the debut novel for that warning it issues about selectively recollecting the past. Staging the temptations of denial, *The Sweet Shop Owner* predicts Swift's later effort to 'diagnose the failure of a "mythical" conception of the individual and the world', and to 'explore the possibility of inventing a viable way out of the impasse in the narrative present, which usually involves a renewed and sustained engagement with the demands of a catastrophic history' (p. 25). Craps here sets the tone of discussion that prevails for each chapter of his book: an astutely exhaustive commentary on a single text, punctuated by meditative forays into philosophical ethics that defer to the likes of Blanchot, Derrida and Levinas. Sometimes these intervals clash with the tenor of Craps's textual analyses; in other instances, though, they broaden the implications of Swift's quotidian fabric, leading this prophet of provincialism (as he might be perceived from his settings since the 1990s) toward an audience unfamiliar with this subtly reflexive, ex-centric strain of localized English fiction.

In passing on to *Shuttlecock* (1981) in chapter three, Craps is concerned with environmental reception and symbolic unity. Swift's use of pathetic fallacy is correlated here with Kant's distinction between our phenomenal and noumenal conception of the world. This framework entails some considerable elucidation on Craps's part. Any allegiance to Swift's technique is abruptly suspended from what is a rigorous discussion of the role that literary responses play in achieving states of sublime synthesis. While moving adroitly through the critiques of aesthetic idealism from de Man and Žižek, Craps rehearses Marc Redfield's notion of the *Bildungsroman* as an enactment of aesthetic education. With this

model *Shuttlecock* holds a markedly self-referential allegiance, insofar as the novel 'shows clear signs of unease with the project of aesthetic totalization into whose service it finds itself pressed' (p. 53). Swift's own self-consciousness, as an orchestrator of conflicting narrative strata, is praised here for correcting a swathe of past commentators, especially those who have taken a cursory view of his unreliable narrators by neglecting *Shuttlecock's* 'emphatic foregrounding of the very performance of narration' (p. 59). Craps's focus on this device, however, does make one wonder whether there is any more mileage to be had in pursuing such issues of unreliability and their accompanying notions of performative recollection. Swift's nimble use of vocal timbre, provenance and stress demands that critics today move beyond this penchant for narratological dissection – or 'problem *dissolving*' as Craps's chapter heading coins it – which treads a fine line between deciphering the ethical ramifications of narratorial veracity and indulging in opportunities for critical self-congratulation. Avoiding this pitfall, Craps travels close to the plot. *Shuttlecock* is taken as representative of Swift's taste for memorial quests, quests whose introspective protagonists participate in 'an imaginative creative enterprise . . . eminently suited for this task of addressing and transmitting trauma' (p. 61).

This chapter concludes insightfully by allowing *Shuttlecock* to resonate with, and thereby anticipate, a similar treatment of narrative discourse in Swift's best-known novel. *Waterland* both modally and structurally *enacts*, in Craps's view, the 'topographical instability' it so lusciously describes (p. 69). This attentiveness to the mutual imbrication of setting and style offers a fresh interpretive line of inquiry, sorely needed for a text repeatedly beset in the 1980s and 90s by postmodern readings. In effect, by integrating physical space and confessional remembrance, Swift had formulated a poetics whose delicacy betrayed the limitations of its academic audience. In line with literary-theoretical fashion *Waterland* was reduced to the tenets of historiographic metafiction.³ Against this trend, Craps zeroes-in, really for the first time in his book, on the grammatical nitty-gritty of formal and syntactical innovation. Mindful of reiterating the customary verdict that *Waterland* holds a 'radical scepticism in relation to the referentiality of language' (p. 70), Craps suggests that it discloses the 'determination to bear witness to a traumatic reality . . . as a precondition for a new, post-humanist ethics that opens up the prospect of a different, more benign future' (p. 71). With its temporality organized piecemeal, unfurling through flashbacks that for Tom Crick appear poignant yet sinisterly portentous, *Waterland* turned its fenland milieu into a mnemonic patchwork smattered with auratic artefacts. And as Craps reveals, Swift enfolds through the very architectures of formal variance both the germination and 'murderous consequences of the belief that the human imagination can shape reality at will, strip

it of its violence and transform it once and for all into an ideal, utopian environment' (p. 68).

Among the best stylistic readings in Craps's book are indeed to be found in the wake of this 'middle period', as he defines it, when Swift's fiction of the 1990s amplified its commemorative timbre. In fact, if *Waterland's* structure, with all its mnemonic disruptions, invites us to complicate linear versions of historical progress, it embodies a logic running into Swift's later work, where characters learn that the restoration of intimate bonds cannot be achieved with established or programmatic aims in mind. Craps aptly pre-empts here his concerns with Swift's two latest novels by deducing in *Waterland* 'a continual interruption of the ordinary course of things which opens it up to an irreducible otherness' (p. 98). This principle of interruptive alterity is worth considering in stylistic terms alongside the ironic realism of *Out of this World* (1988), as well as in *Ever After* (1992), valued by Craps for the way it disrupts those illusions of self-authorized catharsis conjured by the narrator for confusing traumatic memories with his selective reminiscences. After these taxing, uncomfortably claustrophobic mid-texts, we reach the latest two novels: a far serener pair of exhibits, set just south of the Thames in proximity to Swift's own Sydenham youth.⁴ Here, though, Craps takes Swift himself to task for the way he ventriloquizes the working-class narrators of *Last Orders* (1996), this discursive feat of 'sympathetic identification' in effect flattening out the novel's aging cast into a group of social types. This degree of typicality, according to Craps, reduces Swift's soliloquists to mere ciphers: quaint ambassadors of Bermondsey idiolect, over whom the novel's authorial self remains sovereign of all he surveys. Dialectal replication is here judged as a conceit: simply a tactic of self-consolidation on Swift's part, a gesture of aesthetic mastery with which the curator 'assures' himself of his 'own truth and originary status' (p. 149).

This approach is undoubtedly proficient as a cryptic tool, unearthing in Swift's career-wide commitment to the first-person mode a peculiarly stealthy motivation. But I'm not sure whether Craps's invasive, impersonal approach meets the criteria for interpretive ethics with which he affiliates in chapter one. Less interactive and open to indeterminacy as he would surely like to be, he relies for *Last Orders* on speculative conclusions, if not generalizations, about regional vernacular so as to excavate the novel's language for the ethical unconscious it disowns. And it's this conflation of speculation and inference which makes it uncertain how far this study considers important the critical question of particularity: why should we absolve Swift elsewhere in his career from Craps's charge of being 'closed off for and unaffected by the otherness of the other' (p. 163), when *Last Orders's* blend of confession and commemoration is the lifeblood of Swift's most reserved working-methods, traceable from the early 80s – that blend which still lends his

style such integrity? Hasn't Swift's distinction as a magus of the mundane always stemmed not simply from his vocalization of other minds, but from his obligation for us to listen again to the simplest of utterances, to dialogue pregnant with worried anticipation? Deployed all but insidiously, according to Craps, by an 'extra-authorial' agent, is the artificiality of dialectal mimesis evidence enough to indict Swift of that underhand measure of self-effacement? Why indeed Graham Swift, alone? For even if we accept the contention that *Last Orders*, thanks to its 'absenting' ventriloquist, inadvertently 'recovers the class struggle as a struggle over representation' (p. 150), we have to wonder to what extent Craps's opinion of 'the displaced author-function' (p. 154) could be transposed onto other, equally elusive technicians of diegetic authority such as Ishiguro and Coetzee. Ultimately, Swift is posited by this book on the fulcrum of undecidability, alternating between ventriloquism and violation. In the cumulative effect of *Last Orders*'s linguistic set-pieces, Craps applauds that 'friction between the understanding of the text as a gospel preaching universal sympathy and the reading of the textual constellation as a crisis of foundational meaning' (p. 165). Superiorly argued as this sounds, by this stage we've lost touch with the distinctiveness of Swift's testimonial register – its modal properties as well as its ethical import. Losing out to the intuitive critic, novelistic style in this penultimate chapter is subjected to the mediating precepts of a textual inquiry, one that removes from its findings any trace of the inquisitor's own interpretive preconceptions.

These are potentially rich topics for reflecting on how contemporary critical practice can do justice to contemporary writers, topics that acquire greater and lesser emphases throughout this book – and less so where issues of absorption and affect are concerned. The sources and entailments of hermeneutic *pleasure* figure infrequently in these readings of traumatic retrieval. Yet the intersection of ethics and aesthetics has still attracted some lively exchanges among the field's most established figures, namely Derek Attridge and Martha Nussbaum, to whose recent work Craps appeals.⁵ For Swift's fiction is replete with curious and exacting pleasures, often sparked by an unpredictable turn of phrase. These modest invitations to immersion mediate our capacity to relate ethically to the congress between action and form: mediating our ability to respond to the voices he so affectingly simulates, while taking responsibility for the way we detect his reliance on essentialist or derivative simulations. To Craps, vocal similitude is a neat stunt, enabling Swift 'to impress the reader with a sense of direct, immediate contact with the character' (p. 155). Yet it's this notion of direct involvement with a confiding speaker that summons Swift's reader most stringently to the position of implied respondent. This gesture of entreaty is reinforced in *The Light of Day*, where George frequently drops into the second person. (Lapsed from the police

force, now a freelance private-eye, 'You have to picture the scene' recurs as one of his more self-ironizing pleas.)⁶ Recursive would itself be an appropriate epithet in Craps's estimation for this novel's laconic mood. He finds something cute about its tone of mirthless recollection, the text's colloquial vocabulary 'mak[ing] a show of its compliance with Swift's trademark stylistics' (p. 178). Driven to the heights of self-parody, *The Light of Day* is nevertheless instructive for the tensions it sustains between prose and persona. For once again, the novel turns into an ethical dilemma the degree to which its reader's empathy is manipulated or diminished by its author's exteriorized repose.

Recurring tensions of this irresolvable, 'aporetic' kind are of course what Craps finally cherishes (p. 184). His persuasive conclusion uncovers at the core of Swift's work a thoroughgoing vacillation between perplexity and salvation. Taken diagrammatically as a whole, his *oeuvre* pivots between 'the principles irresolution of ethics (articulating confusion) and the precise prescriptions of morality (guiding the confused)' (p. 183). We leave this study, however, with a lingering suspicion not only that we're still no closer to the quintessence of Swift's style, but also that Craps's mode of reading might actually stem from a dependency on ethical discourse itself – the very dependency that he censures implicitly from the outset, taking issue with critics who have applied theoretical ethics in a deferential, predetermined or 'unmotivated' manner. It appears, for Craps, that Swift's eminence among his contemporaries derives less from the originality of his mode, than from his subject-matter's affiliation with recent theory. By the end of this book, it's not the *formal* qualities of Swift's craft that truly distinguishes him as a chronicler of post-traumatic experience, so much as his amenability to appropriation by current debates that are advancing trauma studies' engagement with the literary. Thus the portrait Swift finally receives here depicts him as an emblem rather than an innovator. For while it offers a scrupulous prolegomena on what it means to respond to fictions of recovery (rigorously aware, too, of how criticism's objectives might themselves be re-envisioned after the recent 'ethical turn'), Craps's study tends to privilege the thematics of trauma in Swift's work to an extent that precludes a more textured account of his evolving technique.

Over the past two decades, arguably no writer more forcefully than Swift has remained vigilant of the reciprocity of mode and morality, syntax and insight, in such a way that pronounces the reciprocal relationship between ethics and aesthetics as well. His readership today waits expectantly at a threshold, unable to apprehend how his next experiment will turn out. Yet if we now have this chance to pause, the chance to review Swift's *oeuvre* panoramically, it seems all the more necessary to stand back from his fictions if only to draw closer to what makes them

so idiomatic, retracing across them the development of that increasingly spare manner of address. By particularizing in this fashion the loaded nuances of Swift's style while surveying its wider affinities among contemporary novelists, a fuller picture might emerge of the standard he sets for a new generation of innovators who follow his cue – crafting on a local scale, their ardour veiled by understatement, forever aware that the novel's most discrete aesthetic properties are often what sustain its ethical weight.

University of Sussex

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Notes

- 1 Adam Phillips, 'The Sweet Smell of Excess', *The Guardian, Review*, 28 January 2006, p. 21. Repr. extract from Phillips's introduction to *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. Adam Phillips (London: Penguin, 2006).
- 2 Peter Ackroyd, 'The English Novel Now', *The Collection: Journalism, Reviews, Essays, Short Stories, Lectures* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2001), p. 326.
- 3 For a timely rethink of the use and wider relevance of such categories, see Ansgar Nünning, 'Where Historiographic Metafiction and Narratology Meet: Towards an Applied Cultural Narratology', *Style*, 38: 3 (Fall 2004), pp. 352–375.
- 4 See Swift's intimate memoir on an expanding Southeast after the war, 'Making an Elephant', *Granta* 87 (Autumn 2004), pp. 299–316.
- 5 See, for instance, Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); and the collection, deriving from *Paragraph*, Nicholas Harrison, ed., *The Idea of the Literary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).
- 6 Graham Swift, *The Light of Day* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), p. 101.

Trevor Burnard

Doris Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 2005), xvi + 412 pp., £67.00 (hbk), £16.95 (pbk)

Before it got swept away in a radical revolution, the society created by French colonists in Saint-Domingue was extraordinary in its wealth and its unabashed pursuit of pleasure. French planters harnessed the