The Pitfalls of Dispensing with Teleology: Feeling and Justice, Evil and Nature in Graham Swift’s *The Light of Day* (and *Waterland*)

Abstract: The present article tries to find answers for a lack of narrative tension in Graham Swift’s *The Light of Day*. Taking its cue from recent theological approaches to Swift’s work, the article starts by analysing the way the novel expresses parental figures as representations of the Biblical God. The analysis yields a separation of feeling and truth/justice in both the representations and the novel as a whole. The article argues that this separation entails the naturalisation of guilt and evil, which has a deflating effect on the narrative tension of the novel. Through a comparison with *Waterland*, the article shows that *The Light of Day* lacks a problematic but seemingly necessary dimension of nature: its teleological dimension. The article concludes by showing how the absence of any teleological dimension in the novel leads to what I call poietic suicide.

1. Introduction

After an unenthusiastic first reviewing phase,¹ the afterlife of Graham Swift’s *The Light of Day* has entered its second stage in the form of three extensive articles. In a way, these articles seek to redress the judgement of reviewers, which consign *The Light of Day* to the category of minor, crafty novels, reserving the place for outstanding novels for Swift’s *Waterland* and *Last Orders*.² Thoughtful academia has taken up the gauntlet of instinctive reviewing and unearthed the hidden riches and complexities of the novel.³ Yet I believe nigglers still have a point, for the novel does want “dramatic urgency” and is “somewhat underpowered” (Quinn 2003, 6). The flatness of the novel is, however, not “mysterious” (Quinn 2003, 6), firstly

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¹ Notwithstanding occasional praise, the first reviewing phase was not marked by love. Reviewers’ niggles included the reduced geography of the novel, its reductive approach to characters and their feelings, limited social range, restriction to one narrative point of view, lack of exciting events and seemingly simple language (see Malcolm 2003, 187-9, and Logothethi 2010).

² Several critics divide Graham Swift’s work into the masterpieces, *Last Orders* and especially *Waterland* (Bényei 2003, 49; Malcolm 2003, 6-7; Kaczvinsky 2005, 519), and “The minor novels,” including *The Light of Day* by omission (Malcolm 2003, 6-7; Kaczvinsky 2005, 516).

³ These riches include the novel’s uneasy relationship with detective fiction, images of light versus notions of falling, and George as a case study in pathology (Malcolm 2003), the ambiguous religious commitment of Swift (Craps 2005), and insights into the religious significance of names, the behavioural pattern of the female characters, or the connotations of the epigraph (Logotheti 2010).
because the reviewers’ objections do partly hold. Secondly, however, and at the very heart of the novel, is a more fundamental problem, which, as this article will prove, has a theological, and ultimately teleological edge to it.

There has been a conditional entrée of theology in academic society which has proved fruitful in Swift’s case. While most critics seem to believe in an agnostic Swift (Malcolm 2003, 191-2; Kacvinsky 2005, 519; or Logotheti 2010), lately a sort of religious turn in Graham Swift studies has focussed on Christian, religious and redemptive elements in his work. Cooper (2002) and Wells (2003) have led the way, while Craps (2005) has qualified this approach. Craps’s tellingly subtitled “No Short-Cuts to Salvation” has done so via Derridean deconstruction (175), Malcolm’s equally telling “The Narrow Way” through George’s pathological behaviour (203-7), and Logotheti through George’s need to feel needed (14).

Two conclusions emerge from this quick review of current work on The Light of Day: firstly, theological appraisals of Swift’s work have ceased to be incursions into no man’s land. Secondly, critics agree that Swift masterfully opens and closes doors to redemption. The present article participates of the theological outlook on Swift’s work, but questions the articulation of qualified redemption in The Light of Day. Instead, it claims that Swift is indeed taking “short-cuts to salvation” by artificially side-stepping guilt and justice. To prove this, I will proceed in four steps: I will analyse Swift’s understandable, but biblically problematic use of two central images of God to show that Swift is separating feeling from justice (part 2). I will explore how this separation crucially affects the build-up of tension in the novel by naturalising guilt and evil out of its horizon (part 3). I will argue that Swift’s novel lacks a concept of nature which is as problematic as it seems to be necessary: teleology (part 4). I will show how the novel commits poietic suicide by avoiding teleology (part 5).

2. Swift’s God and the Biblical God: Feeling versus Justice

Through the interior monologue of its main character, George Webb, an ex-cop turned private dick whose present leads him to unravel his past, The Light of Day confronts readers with the dazzling cross-referencing we can find in both Dickens’s art of analogy and Swift’s previous novels. The cross-references centre on issues of guilt, fall and restoration, which the novel describes as holding out the net for those who fall. George Webb is guilty because as a policeman, he unduly forces a confession to commit another man stained with guilt, a murderer called Dyson. As a result, George is expelled from the police and left by his wife Rachel. He

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4 I am grateful to Anastasia Logotheti for having let me use the chapter on The Light of Day from the manuscript of her book From History to Storytelling: Confession and Redemption in the Novels of Graham Swift, which will be published in 2010.

5 He finds good support in Swift’s acknowledgement that he is not a religious writer, and bad company in Swift’s admission that this is his most optimistic novel to date (D’hoker 2002, 23).

6 George had himself held out the net for Rachel when they first met, as he protected her from her employer.
falls, and his daughter Helen, once afraid of her father’s constabulary authority because of her lesbianism, holds out the net for him and helps him recover. In turn, George – now a private detective – holds the net for a client he falls in love with, Sarah, guilty of killing her husband Bob. Bob is, however, also to blame because of his affair with Kristina, a Croatian refugee to whom Sarah offered her net, and who finally leaves Bob to return home. To this constellation around George the adult we have to add the net that George the child was forced to hold when he discovered an affair his father was having, and kept silent about it to his mother.

In these cross-references parental images and relations prevail. This is on the one hand unsurprising, given that Swift’s focus on family life increases the probability of vertical relationships (Malcolm 2003, 17), and on the other hand because the notions of guilt and fall turn characters into children by marking their loss of authority, while the notion of net-holding makes other characters assume a parental function. One can say that in The Light of Day, everybody becomes father or mother of everybody else at some point, be it biologically, morally or affectively.7

But while paternity looms large in the novel, conceptually it is restricted to two traditional images of the biblical God, the centrality of which has already been noted by Craps (2005, 168). The first image is that of the forbidding, righteous and judging God, an image linked to Rachel and her decision to leave George for good. Rachel’s God is “up there, even higher, glaring down” (90);8 defined by “righteousness” […] A sense of what’s right and what’s wrong” (91), he is shown “looking down on her, and her looking up, being obedient and scared” (136). Swift is careful to qualify this God as probably “her family’s version of him” (91), “the big stern daddy part of him” (136), so Swift does not play his agnostic card too hard. This God makes Rachel judge and abandon George after he has employed dubious methods in his attempt to (en)force the law.

The other image of God is the nemesis of this first forbidding one – linked first of all to George, but also to Helen – the image of a loving, forgiving God:

I remember some passage being read out somewhere, that there’s no sinner so bad, so worthless, that God will ever let him slip through the net of his love […]. And whether he’s up there or not, and whether he’s got a net, I don’t know. But I think it’s how it ought to be just among us. There ought to be at least one other person who won’t let us slip through their net. No matter what we do, no matter what we’ve done. It’s not a question of right or wrong. It’s not a question of justice […]. No matter what we do, no matter how bad. If we’re found to be corrupt. Even if we do the worst thing ever, even if we do what we never thought it was in us to do, and kill another person. Even if that other person was once the person for whom we were holding out a net. (136)

This God does not judge, is not interested in right or wrong; he forgives “No matter what we do, no matter how bad.” This is the yardstick used to measure humanity in the novel, and it is as an imago Dei that George holds out his net for Sarah, just as Helen has held out hers for him.

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7 For a characterisation of Swift’s characters as perpetually yearning for parental security, see Schad (1992, 911) and especially Poole (1999, 153).
8 All references to The Light of Day are to the 2003 edition published by Hamish Hamilton.
Craps has noted that these images reflect certain tendencies of the Old and New Testament versions of God (2005, 169). The New Testament God is the loving and forgiving father, as in the parable of “The Return of the Prodigal Son” (Lk 15, 11-32). George embodies this image, his very name and actions recall fatherly behaviour. On the other hand, the Old Testament tends towards the warrior, king and judge, quick to anger, powerful and just, the God of Sodom and Gomorra. Rachel perfectly embodies this image: she is stronger than George (71-2) and takes decisions on the spur of the moment, whereas George, despite claims to being a man of action (79; 90), looks quite tame in comparison.

But these two images completely separate right and wrong from charity in the biblical sense of the word. Somehow, like Lear, Swift has “pared [his] wit o’both sides and left nothing i’t the middle” (Shakespeare 2005, I, 4). Forgiving, holding out a net, ultimately becomes the overriding human concern of the novel; issues of justice and morality, questions of right and wrong, fall into obscurity. The Bible, however, knows no such separation. While the Old Testament God “is most characteristically presented in political metaphor as king, judge, and warrior” (Brueggemann 2001, 241; emphasis in the original), this image is decisively complemented by “interest in distributive social justice” and “acute ethical resolve” in favour of the have-nots (Brueggemann 2001, 243). YHWH’s inexplicable commitment and fidelity towards Israel in the face of its unfaithfulness (Brueggemann 2001, 245-8), and his paternal, maternal (Brueggemann 2001, 250-2) and personalising (Tresmontant 1960, 95-8; Deissler 1985, 14) love for Israel. God appears as a figure of authority, but this authority is inseparably tied to affection, ethics and personalism, so that “the Wrath which has already shown itself as the Wrath of Holiness might be only the Wrath of Love” (Ricoeur 1969, 70). The God of the Old Testament does not let bygones be bygones, but he also loves and forgives.

In the New Testament, God first personally loves and cares like a father, rather than act as warrior, king and judge:

> Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten before God. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Lk 12, 6-7)

Seeing the Bible as a whole, the central identification of God and love is surely correct (Leonhardt 2004, 134), but the New Testament God is not just a lovesodden grandad who will not ask too many questions: Jesus’s focus on God as loving father exists against the Old Testament background that God is lord and ruler, that his forgiveness includes his justice, especially in the sinner’s repentance, his recognition of right and wrong (Deissler 1985, 60-2; Conzelmann / Lindemann 2000, 471). In the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15, 11-32), probably the most important expression of God’s fatherhood, the forgiving father may see his contrite

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9 Logotheti has pointed out how George acts as “Saint George” when he rescues his wife Helen from her employer, and how his surname “Web(b)” recalls the biblical net which he holds out to Sarah throughout the novel (2010).

10 In Swift’s novels women are, generally speaking, much stronger than men.

11 See also Deissler (1985, 35).
son “still a great way off” (29), but the son has already started on his return to the father. God will never impose himself – and that includes his forgiveness – on human freedom (Deissler 1985, 62).

3. Consequences: Naturalise Experience and Evil Disappears

Like most important things in life and books, biblical reality is thus more than separation based on binary opposition. Swift’s severing of forgiveness and the judging of right and wrong may be understandable as a representation of our cultural subconscious about Christianity, but is unwarranted from a biblical perspective. It also has important consequences in moral terms. The longish excerpt quoted above defines the moral yardstick of the novel as forgiveness of the “No-matter-what-we-do” kind (136), and testcases of such forgiveness as those when “we’re found to be corrupt” and when “we kill another person […] the person for whom we were holding out a net” (136). The first test applies to George within the Helen-George-Dyson/Rachel triangle, the second to Sarah within the George-Sarah-Bob triangle. These two triangles are also paradigmatic for the novel because they display the full sequence of evil or guilt, falling, and holding out the net.

In the first triangle (Helen-George-Dyson/Rachel), evil is present, although not in the person who falls (George), but in Dyson and Rachel. Rachel abandons her husband by separating justice from mercy, and Dyson is a vicious criminal, as chapter 28 proves. This makes net-holding difficult in terms of forgiving, for the reader finds it hard not to sympathise with George. George may “still be shocked at [him]self” (110) for pushing somebody else into signing a statement to commit Dyson to prison. The reader, however, is not, and neither are the critics, for there is no doubt as to Dyson trying to kill in cold blood. George’s fault may technically speaking be moral, but can only with difficulty be felt as such by the reader. This impression hardens with the reasons offered for George’s misconduct, mainly Helen’s provocations as a teenager (110), and the fact that, while interrogating a suspect, George got “impatient, […] excited, […] near the edge. The scent of a quick kill under your nose” (112). George’s humanity is reduced to a minimum; we see a social animal under natural, instinctive stress, as the “scent of a quick kill” shows. Can animals be blamed for reacting like animals?

Initially, Sarah’s murder looks worse than George’s crime. This is motivated by Bob’s unfaithfulness – less evil than Dyson’s attempted murder – and Sarah having to “be giving [Bob] shelter” (169) after Kristina has left him – in the novel, giving shelter roughly amounts to holding out a net. Yet chapter 62 shows that in the end Sarah is not to blame: Bob is already dead before being

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12 George’s fault is variously seen as “a very simple error of judgement” (Malcolm 2003, 188); he is “the victim of a double scapegoating exercise” (Craps 2005, 169), and suffers “the accusation of corruption” (Logotheti 2010).

13 For example, his father’s affair leaves George feeling “shelterless” (102), he offers Marsh, the police officer who handled Sarah’s murder, a job and shelter from retirement (224), and the caves in his native Chislehurst were used as air raid shelter during World War II (238).
murdered, for he comes back a ghost (225), and as a result of his ghost-like presence, “something [came] over [Sarah]” (224) and him (226), and “They move[d] towards each other” (226). The text suggests Bob hoped to be brought back to life by some sort of magic when he turned up at home, but found he was “too far gone” (227). Not even the smell of the meal which represents their past love and which Sarah had prepared to remind him, could enter his stomach and reach his heartstrings (226), a metaphor carefully prepared by Swift much earlier in the novel (24).

Sarah’s murder and George’s mistake in pushing Kenny’s statement are thus similar in taking place independently of their perpetrators’ will. Both are thus victims of external forces, wherefore they suffer rather than sin. Things overcoming people, being too far gone to be brought back by magic, love reaching the heart via the stomach, all these elements amount to a naturalisation of experience, in this case the experience of murder. Such an experience can exist, but proves problematic as a means for expressing forgiveness and redemption in the face of “No-matter-what-we-do,-no-matter-how-bad.” It robs it of its dramatic tension by substituting suffering or physical evil for sin or moral evil, to use Leibniz’s terms (Leibniz 1996, 240). This deterministic naturalisation of experience into things happening because they have to happen, is reinforced earlier when George comments that as a private dick he’s seen matrimonial breakdown taking place “for no other reason [...] than that over the years of being safe and steady and settled, something’s got lost, something’s gone missing, they’ve got bored” (217). Again couples are presented as passive victims, this time of something looking very much like middle-class boredom.

The naturalisation of action appears in other important passages of The Light of Day, as when Bob falls in love with Kristina:

There was a period at least, an initial stage, when he’d felt himself slipping, sliding, and tried to resist? [...] This new presence in the house, this new soft mood. The urge to protect. He should have been tougher perhaps, more callous – more clinical. Wasn’t he used to that? Pity and charity sliding, melting into something else. Or was it just a single moment? Maybe. One of those moments that turn everything upside down. [...] A moment, an opportunity. They were alone together in the house. The dead of winter. Curtains drawn. They caught each other like startled animals. A door left open. A look that passed between them [...]. If life puts something in your way, what do you do? Deny it? Close your eyes [...]. Pity crashing into something else. (57-8)

Unlike the path to Sarah’s murder, the one of Bob’s redirected love at first refers to the will, the attempt “to resist,” which is ultimately dismissed with the explanation that “[h]e should have been tougher perhaps, more callous – more clinical.” These three words – “tougher,” “callous” and “clinical” – emphasise a lack of feeling, and this absence tilts the balance against the will. Instead, nature is again invoked to justify Bob: in the process of falling in love, the human is absent; instead, animal-like behaviour – “[t]hey caught each other like startled animals” – and exonerating personifications predominate: “[p]ity and charity sliding, melting into something

14 He has tried to commit suicide once (178), maybe even twice, as his stay in the Fulham flat after Kristina’s departure suggests (180-1).
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As a result, Bob the human being is not responsible for what happens; Bob the animal has taken over, and so the question of the excerpt accepts only one answer: If life puts something in your way, take advantage of it. As in Sarah’s murder, then, feeling and nature join forces to expel a tough, callous and clinical will. When Bob therefore confesses to Sarah, “the strange thing was that he made it seem like he was the helpless victim, he was the one to be pitied” (57). Swift describes this presentation of reality as “the charitable case […] for Bob” (58), but stylistically, Swift is backing up this “charitable case” by making Bob the defenceless victim of nature, nature as feeling.

How does such a naturalisation come about? “You have to put yourself into the picture, into their shoes” (59), George claims, and this is what the narrator does. The novel assists him by endlessly mulling over only a few actions and issues, leaving plenty of time for a painstaking, even scientific, atomistic dissection of such meagre fare, decontextualising bits from wholes, laying them bare as facts. This tactic is, however, fraught with threats of naturalistic reduction:

The more the [scientific] thinking machinery subjects being to itself, the blinder it ministers to its reproduction. In doing so the Enlightenment collapses back into the mythology it was never able to escape from. For mythology had in its shapes the essence of that which was: circularity, fate, domination of the world reflected back as truth and dispossessed of hope. In the pithiness of the mythical picture as much as in the clarity of the scientific formula the permanence of what is is reasserted. (Adorno / Horkheimer 1988, 33; my translation)

By trying to analytically understand the murders, Swift breaks up mystery into ever smaller constituents which yield smaller-sized, progressively naturalistic versions of reality, decontextualised from their wholes. Being unfaithful to your wife is one thing, each small step leading to unfaithfulness another: the analytic language of The Light of Day makes morally laden ‘whys’ slide and crash into scientific, morally indifferent ‘hows.’

And yet, Swift is not naïve about morality and evil, and includes them in The Light of Day. The unfaithfulness of his father during George’s childhood is the moment in the novel in which we perceive a real, human sense of evil: it is human because less vicious than Dyson’s; because it is naturalised, unlike the evil committed by Sarah, George and Bob; and finally because it is the evil a child experiences when he sees his father do something wrong: “For the first time, words become scary and black and hard. The word ‘wrong’, for example. […] I’d never caught it, never felt the weight of the word ‘wrong’” (99). Evil is not naturalised here, since it is described in relation to the victim, not the agent, a child and the son of the wrong-doer to boot. The triple condition of victim, child, and son make the issue of right and wrong unbearable. Children in particular have no defence against evil: “I didn’t have any shelter, real shelter, any more. I was shelterless. […] I could slink off home now but I didn’t have any real home any more, just a pretend one” (102).

So Swift is not naïve about wrong and evil, yet he has chosen to separate righteousness from forgiveness: the words “[n]o matter what we do, no matter how bad”
do not apply to Sarah, Bob, or George, although ultimately these characters’ actions are morally wrong. Real evil takes place in Dyson and in George’s father, and yet there is no holding out the net for them. George feels there should be somebody with a net for Dyson – he also says it is not going to be him (136) – but no such person appears. How could that happen, if it is nature which governs our behaviour? In whose nature lies it to forgive Dyson? As to George’s father, at the latter’s death-bed George feels he “could have throttled him” (201). Consequently in the cases where real evil is present and real net-holding is needed, nothing happens.

The extent of the naturalisation of evil in *The Light of Day* does not bear analysis with Paul Ricoeur’s developmental and three-tiered understanding of evil in his *The Symbolism of Evil*. Prior to sin and guilt, defilement is most primitive in symbolising evil, for it corresponds to the experience of evil as an infection from outside (Ricoeur 1969, 33), a primitive “moment of consciousness which we have left behind” (26). But not in Swift’s novel, where George’s fault is repeatedly referred to in external terms, as a “taint” (35), a “smell” (35; 135), in need of washing (135), just as purification is a necessary part of the experience of defilement (Ricoeur 1969, 25).

Interestingly, the very weakness of the novel is indistinguishable from some of the things for which the novel has rightly to be praised. After George’s crime has been detected,

\[ \text{[t]he word that got used was ‘corrupt.’} \]

A strangely physical word. A black taste welling in your throat, a thickness on your tongue, as if you have a disease. As if they’ve rooted out some foul stuff inside you and it’s you, it’s yours now, you’re stuck with it for good. (134)

The word “corruption” is here materialised in a beautiful way. Described not as far as its meaning, but as its effect on the body is concerned – “[a] black taste welling in your throat, a thickness on your tongue” – the material quality of the word gives it the force of a disease. Surely this is the way ethics gone wrong manifests itself, in our guts. The price to pay is, however, a heavy one, defilement via naturalisation, and not because of this fine passage, but because the novel offers no alternative. Ricoeur would not have disagreed to imagining defilement as the core of an onion in our developing experience of evil, not an expendable layer, but one which survives in our subsequent experience of evil as sin and guilt (Ricoeur 1969, 70-1). The problem is that Swift has peeled away the outer layers and only holds the core to make us cry. Now it’s the whole onion which makes you cry, not just the core. Why is only the core present in *The Light of Day*?

5. Problematic but Seemingly Necessary: Teleology

Two comparisons between *The Light of Day* and *Waterland* may help to provide an answer. Like *The Light of Day*, *Waterland* is told in intimate terms by Tom, a first-person narrator who also faces a personal crisis, this time related to his mentally handicapped brother Dick, who may be the result of an incestuous relationship
between his mother and his grandfather, and who may in turn have left the narrator’s wife pregnant, which led to an abortion and feelings of guilt on all sides. The first comparison starts with *Waterland* and Dick, an icon of nature, the Here and Now, for most of the novel (Janik 1989; Díaz Bild 1994, 34; Ingelbien 1999, 43). Being nature, Dick seems to lack reason, memory – particularly historical memory – and imagination; he may even be objectively mistaken when he sacrifices himself by committing suicide at the end of the novel. Yet Dick uses the little sense he has to think, and acts on a resolution he thinks is right and guided by his will. He may be more in touch with nature than other characters of the novel, especially Tom, but he is not the passive victim of nature, like Bob, Sarah or George. Dick’s nature is, at least partly, different from that of *The Light of Day*.

The second comparison starts with Bob falling in love with Kristina and his fatherly “urge to protect” (57), described as naturally sliding into something else. This is not unlike a similar scene in *Waterland*, in which Tom’s grandfather falls in love with Tom’s mother:

> Once upon a time there was a father who fell in love with a daughter (now let’s be clear, we’re not just talking about ordinary paternal affection). […] Now love, which always finds a way, has its stages. It begins with adoration. Then adoration turns into desire, and desire to cleaving, and cleaving to union. And all these stages it is possible, if not natural, for a father and daughter to undergo together. To all these stages the daughter assented, because indeed she adored her poor father and pitied his sorrows, and having been his close and only companion since she was his child, how should she know what was natural and what wasn’t? (Swift 1992, 226-7)

*Waterland* is here talking about incest, whereas *The Light of Day* is obviously not. Yet there is something similar in the movement from a parent-sibling relationship – since the father “fell in love,” there must have been a fatherly before – which modulates into “adoration” followed by “desire,” “cleaving,” and finally “union.” As in *The Light of Day*, we are talking about a natural affective slide. The perception of this event is, however, different: “And all these stages it is possible, if not natural, for a father and daughter to undergo together” (my emphasis). As in *The Light of Day*, affective slides take place, yet they are labelled unnatural. Why?

These two examples show that the notion of nature Swift employs in *Waterland* sometimes differs from the one *The Light of Day* uses. Nature does not reduce human beings to passivity, things happening may be different from things natural. Such a nature is teleological nature. It is understood as part of

> a threefold scheme in which human-nature-as-its-happens-to-be (human nature in its untutored state) is initially discrepant and discordant with the precepts of ethics and needs to be transformed by the instruction of practical reason and experience into human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-telos [i.e. teleological nature]. (MacIntyre 1986, 53)

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15 Here the similarities end, for in his capacity as a history teacher, the narrator digresses much more widely than George on historical and metahistorical issues, discusses Thatcherite educational politics – the novel was published in 1983 – traces the rise-and-fall pattern of English history through the more local one of the Atkinson family, one of the families from which he issues, and devotes time to a history of the Cambridgeshire Fen area in which he lives, which leads to a fascinating relationship between nature and history.
The formula behind this quote is ‘nature-as-it-is transformed by practical reason and experience into nature-as-it-should-be.’ MacIntyre’s “experience” is of Greek origin, “will” would be more Christian and serve our purpose better, for it implies human agency. In Waterland, teleological nature is present in the evaluation of a father’s infatuation for his daughter as possible because it conforms to affective logic, i.e. “nature-as-it-is,” as unnatural because it does not conform to the standards of “nature-as-it-should-be.” It is also present in Dick: representing nature-as-it-is, he nevertheless acts guided by his will, informed by what little reason he has.

The problems inherent in a teleology of human behaviour are old; nowadays even an eminent conservative thinker like Robert Spaemann holds that, at least from a legislative point of view, it implies the surrender of the Modern concept of subjectivity (Spaemann 1994, 74). Paradoxically, neither can simple naturalism be the answer, for it has been shown that it is impossible to understand even non-human nature and instinct without recourse to teleology. Spaemann argues the same for human nature: whatever follows on a natural urge can not be nature, for nature exhausts itself in the creation of the urge. Instead, the individual has to act, and actions are always purposeful and socially mediated (1994, 32-3).

This leaves us in a fix: teleological nature makes no legislative sense in contemporary society, yet remains indispensable to understand right and wrong in animal and human behaviour, the former in biological, the latter in biological and moral terms. This is not to say that things which happen in The Light of Day like a married man falling in love with another person, or killing the person one loves most cannot take place in the real world, or to oneself. However, while these things do happen, it is not moral to simply naturalise them, as Swift programmatically does in The Light of Day, and as he does not do in Waterland. This results in poietic suicide, as I will now show.

6. Conclusion: Teleological Void and Poietic Suicide

In The Light of Day, the dangers of non-teleological nature are also present in the images which accompany the absolute interchangeability governing parent-child relations, and more generally relations of authority. Mostly, this interchangeability is interesting whenever it takes place between adults, in horizontal relationships. In the case of George and Marsh (224), George and Helen (49, 50), George and Sarah (131), or Bob and Kristina (57, 149), exchange goes both ways and provides

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16 Even though teleology has never been disproved scientifically, but merely rejected by a science that needed nature dead, devoid of a status as other with a will of its own (Jonas 1973, 54-5; Spaemann 1994, 42 and 44).
17 See Midgley’s argument originates in Konner (1982, 185-6), where it appears in a slightly different fashion. For a discussion of the validity and limits of teleology in non-human and human nature, see Fitzpatrick (2000).
18 Interchangeability of parental roles is firmly embedded in Swift’s very understanding of authority, which stems from his vulnerability: “vulnerability and authority are diametrical opposites, but there is some sort of authority which comes from someone saying, ‘Trust me because I am vulnerable’” (Bernard 1997, 229).
satisfying examples of life as a flux: you may find yourself playing mummy or daddy to somebody else as often as you become son or daughter. When it is extended to relationships between real parents and siblings, the results are more problematic. Swift gets it right when he suggests that the protective role forced on George vis-à-vis his parents – like Bob, George feels “the mysterious urge to protect” (102) and has to keep the secret of a father’s unfaithfulness in front of a woman (99) – is an unbearable weight for a child. Swift, however, also gets it wrong when, having found out about Helen’s lesbianism, George feels free to imagine her having sex with her partner, on the grounds that Helen has also fantasised about her father having sex with Rachel (96). Slightly paraphrasing King Lear’s fool, George is to blame here for unduly making

thy daughter thy mother; for when thou gav’st her the rod and putt’st down thine own breeches,
[Sings.] Then I for sorrow sung,
That such a king should play peeping Tom
And go the fools among.”

There is little to say against George with his own breeches down – i.e. in distress – returning to the womb and needing temporary mothering by whoever, his grown-up daughter included. However, in normal situations, and as long as old age does not impair one’s wits – neither is applicable to George or Lear – fathers remain fathers, not so much in terms of wielding the rod, but as regards their responsibility over their siblings. That, I would say, should also put limits to their imagination. George’s behaviour here is not incredibly enlightened, but incredibly adolescent.

The above example may look old-fashioned and moralistic, but proliferation of like cases have serious consequences in the novel. In the last instance, it is the very poiesis (Ricoeur 1984, 34) or fictional world proposed by the The Light of Day which proves the impossibility of indiscriminately reversing parent-sibling relations, as Swift presents a series of situations which, put together, amount to novelistic suicide. We have seen George imagining his daughter having sex with Clare, and by doing so freeing himself from parental responsibility. But George also gets to know Clare in the biblical “fullness of time” (96),20 and it just occurs to him Helen did not want him to meet Clare before because he “might fancy her” (216). He does indeed fancy her, although he also says that there is no danger involved, since “there was no possibility... On more than one count” (216).

The question is, on which count, given the absolute naturalisation that presides over so much of the novel? On the count of Clare’s lesbianism, on the count that Helen is George’s daughter, or on the count that George will always remain in love with a Sarah who may at best leave prison in eight years time – she has already

19 The real passage reads, “[thou mad’st] thy daughters thy mothers; for when thou gav’st them the rod and putt’st down thine own breeches,
[Sings.] Then they for sudden joy did weep
and I for sorrow sung,
That such a king should play bo-peep
And go the fools among” (1.4.163-9)

20 See Gal 4:4 and Ephes 1:10.
served two years (18) – be old by then (93), and whom George has never seen naked (243)? Ask Bob and Sarah whether they thought it was possible their love might end any day “On more than one count:” young, in France, over *coq au vin*? In a novel in which things just “come over you,” in which nature and feeling go hand in hand, and there is no reliance on will or reason to bridge the gap between right and wrong, anything can be overcome. In such a context, the ending of the novel, proclaiming that love “doesn’t fade” but “grows [and] blooms, the less time that’s left” (243–4) is a *deus ex machina*. Again, Swift seems aware of the paradox he has created, for the novel ends with unending love next to things coming over you, “what we have here inside us[, which] we might never know” (243). Whether the paradox is convincing is another matter. In my opinion, rather than convince, it testifies to a modern gap in our understanding of humanity. Since Swift does not want to try to bridge this gap, the quality of the novel suffers accordingly.

**Works Cited:**


