THE PERPETUAL DIFFÉRANCE IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S TOMORROW

Alexandra Roxana MĂRGINEAN*

***Abstract**: Our paper analyses the way the postponement of a confession, or discussion, and the main character's torment regarding it can create doubt and ambivalences to very fine levels of meaning. The aspects touched by ambivalence are analysed one by one, showing how the personalities and opinions of Graham Swift's characters – in other words, identities – are made elusive in this way. The approach is cultural studies.*

***Keywords:** différance, ambivalence, identity.*

Introduction

The connection with the concept of the imaginary is perhaps all the more evident in our paper since it deals with a novel whose core idea is a possibility, a potential development in the course of events – a would-be confession. The title of this modern masterpiece by Graham Swift is, suggestively, *Tomorrow*. It bears on the future and what it may or might bring, instead of what is. Uncertainty lies at the very core of events right from the beginning. Matter-of-factness is elusive, being engulfed in a constellation of dilemmas – whether the confession is due, how it should look like, the righteousness of the argument, potentially diverse perspectives on the truth, and, consequently, on the real meaning of it all. A multitude of aspects fall under the mark of doubt or ambivalence: the characters' roles and relationships, their nature, but also the attitude to civilisation and to the idea of a universal order. All the above are contained in the notion of *différance* (Derrida, 2005: 202) which is ultimately, in our context, another word for the deferral or plurality of meaning.

People as products of history

In *Tomorrow*, people are products of history, bearing the imprint of a certain age and set of mentalities that shape their destinies. Paula calls herself and her husband Mike "war babies", because they are both born in 1945 – "1945: how weird it sounds now to give it as your date of birth, like saying 1789 or 1492" (Swift, 2007: 52). Their encounter is favoured by the sexual escapades of the sixties. In the eighties, Mike becomes the deputy editor of an obscure publication: "it was the Eighties and there was a publishing boom" (*ibidem* 99). This "boom" triggers the ascent of "Living World Magazine, Living World Publishing, Living World Books" (*ibidem*).

Paula explains her children's boredom and blasé attitude towards her stories of sexual gratification of the sixties as the influence of the nineties, when abstention is the new trend. In opposition to the sixties, in the nineties the new general feeling is "weirdly the opposite reaction. Why rush into something so patently available?" (*ibidem* 14). The twins are marked by a "sex-fatigue before it's even started, a sort of purity or just stubborn sensibleness" (*ibidem*). To them, the sixties are merely "oh-so-yawn-making" (*ibidem* 15). The two teenagers may react that way because of the opposite

* Romanian-American University, alexandra.marginean05@yahoo.com

feeling, of excessive stress, caused by life unfolding at a(n unnaturally) rapid pace: "The world doesn't feel to me more relaxed and better adjusted, it has this way of suddenly racing." (Swift, *op. cit.*: 15)

This new generation appears to be stronger in ways that have been forced upon them by the changes happening in a "tougher world": "you are part of some new steely generation whose future is going to require stern stuff of you, in ways that even you don't know yet" (*ibidem* 133). There is a double meaning to this statement. Paula refers to the transformations that the twins will need to undergo in order to adapt to a tougher reality. She also wonders at the extraordinary versatility and strength that they already possess, which she feels she cannot entirely grasp. Therefore, she contradicts herself, saying that these qualities are already in their nature, and yet have to be learned.

Paula's comments may be just the outburst of nostalgia of a parent trying to postpone the moment of separation from her children, who are growing up and becoming more independent. Her thoughts may merely represent evidence of the generation gap. However, Paula may as well be a thorough, objective observer of the times, not just a subjective mother speaking. In her monologues, she has already pinpointed a characteristic feature for each decade she has lived through: the frivolous sixties, the "parsimonious Seventies" (*ibidem* 114), the editorial eighties. Thus, she has proved to be a fine-tuned witness. The ambivalence of her position is again preserved.

Paula's outlook on the nineties also foregrounds contradictory attitudes to civilisation. On the one hand, progress is seen as "magic" – a word often used to replace it in the text (*ibidem* 161). Some breakthroughs, such as ultrasounds, or the discovery of DNA in 1953, Paula views with a feeling of awe. Other developments, such as war, are envisaged from a negative standpoint: "They've dropped an atom bomb, on Japan. Should we try to explain it to the kids?" (*ibidem* 162) Doubt as to the fate of humankind, as to what "civilisation" is headed for, results in reluctance to have children. These would be brought into a world that may be headed for self-destruction: "Is it such a good, safe world to bring them into? Is it going to be?"; "it ought to be called the Perishing World" (*ibidem* 231). The children born into it (Kate and Nick included) are "cold-war babies" (*ibidem* 232).

Parent-child relationships

Parent-child relationships bring here an element of novelty. There is distance and emotional estrangement between sons and fathers. Mike's father, Pete, was away at war at the time of his son's birth. Throughout Michael's childhood, Pete was busy with his business. Consequently, Michael became close to Uncle Eddie instead. Pete is also estranged from his own father. He was born nine years before Eddie, and is one of those children that are called "accidents" (*ibidem* 92). We notice that whenever parental relationships are faulty, the flawed nature of the relationship is passed on.

The novelty appears in father-daughter relations, in which the father is no longer in an inferior position with respect to his daughter. Their connection remains as special as usual. As a child, Paula was intimidated by her father's presence in Court, as a judge. Ambivalence towards his person is preserved in her as a mature woman. The "teddy bear" (*ibidem* 71) side of his personality is hinted at, although it remains less visible than the authoritative one.

Paula reiterates the typical aversion of Swift's fictional daughters towards their mothers. She remembers that, in her childhood, she could still call her mother "mum" (Swift, *op. cit.*: 77). Mrs. Campbell "hadn't yet become just 'Fiona' – with now and

then an emphasis on that first, already hissy 'F'" (*ibidem*). Her mother fights her in court for the succession of the Craiginish estate – Paula's childhood home. Paula's resentment estranges the twins from their grandmother, who consequently becomes a "fairy grandmother" (*ibidem* 95), because they know her only from Paula's stories. As Paula's feelings grow bitter, at some point she refers to her mother as a "dog" person, then adds sarcastically: "perhaps in her case I just mean that there's another, more strictly correct word I still can't quite bring myself to use about my own mother" (*ibidem* 119). The way she presents this hostility is filled with ambivalence, as she suggests that it could just be the result of personal frustration for not being able to conceive at the time: "I'm harsh, I know. Perhaps it really stems from those days when I thought I'd never be a mother myself. I felt twice betrayed as a woman." (*ibidem*) In this case, she might in fact love her mother. Nevertheless, her words may well be what they seem – detestation.

Faith in master narratives

Among the many aspects that he discusses, Marcel Mauss points to the contractual nature of gifts, and to the fact that receiving a present means accepting some of the donor's essence, in spiritual terms (Mauss, 1993: 53). Along this line, we may understand that gifts are meant to compensate for substantial absences, such as of one's presence or/and feelings. They are intended to redeem guilt in relationships. Thus, Grandpa Pete tries to bridge the existing "gap" (Swift, *op. cit.*: 53) between him and his son Mike with a crate of the finest champagne given on his eighteenth birthday. Sometimes gifts are, however, signs of a benevolent fate. In such situations, they hint at the existence of an invisible master plan that arranges things to appear as "destined" to be. One such example is Paula and Mike's perfect day after their first night together: "how could he or either of us have known that day would unfold as it did, so perfectly? Some days are just gifts, some things are just gifts." (*ibidem* 51) This perspective counters the idea that life is a sum of accidents.

The characters' indecisiveness about faith in master narratives – more prominently the ultimate master narrative, that of divinity – is manifest in ambivalent references to key events in people's lives. These turning points are commented upon as, on the one hand, "accidents" or "coincidences", and, on the other, pre-destined arrangements. Fertility Doctor Chivers refers to the possibility that Mike could conceive as "about one chance every blue moon" (*ibidem* 109). Paula completes his remark, in order to emphasise how the unlikelihood became true in an utterly incredible way: "You were a chance – two chances – in a blue moon" (*ibidem*). She implies that incredible things happen, against all odds, if and when they are meant to. Paula gets pregnant in October 1978, upon a second attempt. A few months before, in July, veterinarian doctor Fraser makes his exit out of the novel. He is replaced by Myers, who takes care of Paula and Mike's cat. Due to Myers's lack of professionalism or skill, the cat dies, which Paula interprets as uncanny, as if the animal "knew he's served *his* purpose too" (*ibidem* 205), just as the animal doctor. The cat's "purpose" had been to fill the void caused by the absence of a child, a point made by Doctor Fraser. Fraser's purpose had been, since he was the instrument of Paula's adulterous encounter, to "put the whole fabric of what they [her and Mike] possess to the test" (*ibidem* 180). With the cat's disappearance, "a death was being exchanged for a birth" (Swift, *op. cit.*: 207) – another connection that proves the narrator's tendency to look for hidden meanings.

Sarcasm in commenting these occurrences as trifles blends therefore with a mystical tone. One example of ironical treatment of the idea of causality is the manner in which Mike comes into possession of his job at the Living World journal. Paula explains that, at Eddie's funeral, while watching the service, it occurs to her that one day she will also be lowered into the ground. By a strange and probably defensive trigger, this thought gives her a flirtatious disposition, which she manifests during a conversation with Tim Harvey, late Eddie's elderly friend. She implies that this state leads to Tim's future job offer to Mike. Paula's husband is invited to work for Tim's publishing house. Moreover, Paula's flirtation with Tim ultimately makes him leave them his fortune. Therefore, Mike's long-awaited success was "all down to luck", "To luck and to his "Uncle" Tim" (*ibidem* 18). Beyond her humour and sarcasm, Paula sees this chain of events as inevitable.

Love

All the themes above attest that characters exist as social beings whose identities are shaped by history. In the contexts mentioned before, love is used and abused, trusted and disbelieved. Paula and Mike's relationship starts under the auspices of the libertine sixties, and therefore bears the mark of superficiality. Nevertheless, there are signs of profundity, such as the existence of "pillow talk" (*ibidem* 25), instead of just "billow talk" (*ibidem* 29): "It's how you know, it's how you tell, that something is different, something special is happening" (*ibidem* 25). This argument may lead the reader to think that their romance is a "pure" relationship in Giddens's terms (Giddens, 1991: 88), i.e. a relationship based on no other external interests than real feelings of love. Ambiguity is preserved over their thirty years of wedlock, which could be perceived as anything between a happy marriage and one of convenience. The woman remarks that their time together can be characterised by the "funny expression" of "sleeping with" each other (Swift, *op. cit.*: 24). She explains "sleeping" as "mutual oblivion" (*ibidem*), so her suggestion is that this marriage may have been deprived of genuine feeling and communication.

Throughout the marriage, Paula's interest in social appearances, and her adultery cast doubt on the nature of their feelings. She lays great emphasis on the differences between her and Mike in terms of origin, social position, and financial status. Her tinge of snobbery is visible in her pride to be the bearer of the name Campbell. She believes that it inspires credibility to her clients, and that it is nobler than her husband's. Hence, she is sorry to change it to Hook (*ibidem* 83-4). Equally, she considers her job to be superior to Mike's, who "works on snails" (*ibidem* 99). She associates Mike with a mollusc (*ibidem* 60, 19-20), based on his inability to acquire a position of better economic means and higher prestige. All these point to her disrespect for Mike, and make their "love" ambiguous. The available interpretations are either that she does not really love him, or that she loves him despite all these so-called flaws, and that her feelings are profound. Paula intimates that there is no such thing as "meant to be", that she could have found "another Mikey" (*ibidem* 79). They would not have been "lost souls", "for ever searching for our missing other halves" if they had not met (*ibidem*). Later, she is sorry for these thoughts – "forgive me for thinking that's unthinkable" (*ibidem*), which makes what she really believes on the subject unclear.

The puns on Mike's family name, Hook, lead to ambivalence as to the truthfulness of their love, as well as to their own identities. Although Paula apparently minimises the importance of the name: "what's in a name?" (Swift, *op. cit.*: 83), she

also highlights the opposite. The allusion is that her name change *is* in fact relevant to identity. The "jokes" that "work both ways: I was hooked, or I was the lucky girl who hooked a Hook" may be innocent puns (*ibidem*). On the other hand, they may point to absence of love, to the fact that one of them tricked the other into marriage. Due to their connotations, they may also hint at absence of morality at the beginning of their relationship, and perhaps even now.

Paula may be seen as a villain from her parents' point of view, for having spoiled her lineage: "this made me the crooked and treacherous one, I suppose, trading in my proud Scottish name" (*ibidem* 84). However, if we consider her parents' attitude as snobbish, then, in "betraying" their beliefs, Paula proves to be more sensible than them, and capable of profound feelings. She vacillates between liking and disliking the name Hook herself. One moment she thinks that its resolute, one-syllable resonance inspires good will, while the next she says that it may point to crookedness. This explanation prefigures the way the couple can be viewed, as either good-natured or dishonest (or coarse) themselves, both individually and in relation to each other. The play upon possibilities is endless, as Paula's comments have plural interpretations, as, for instance, her conclusion: "I even like that little hint of crookedness" (*ibidem*).

Twins – the motif of the double

Not only relationships are ambivalent, but also characters. This situation is helped in *Tomorrow* by the frequent use of puns, and by the motif of the twins. The latter is a reminder of the diversity that lies in unity, of the fact that identity is always double, and that meaning is postponed. The fact that Mike is the children's father in a surrogate manner makes way for more puns. These insinuate ambivalence over whether a non-biological father can be better than a biological one: "Your dad was never your biological father. That disqualifies him? How many real fathers are qualified biologists?" (*ibidem* 228) These comments appear to require a (re)definition of fatherhood, as residing in a sum of qualities rather than in the biological side. Some of these, such as a protective attitude, courage, and self-sacrifice are manifested by Mike. One occasion, when he saved both children from drowning at Cornwall, made them particularly visible. On the other hand, since the whole book is written as a preamble to the big confession that Paula is about to make to the children concerning their father, biological fatherhood is actually an important issue. A good father is also a good provider, which Mike is not. In Paula's comments, this aspect is recurrent. Michael's role as a suitable father remains as ambivalent as that of a suitable husband, for the reasons that we have seen.

Life as theatre

The idea that people are actors in their lives blends with that of life as simulacrum, and with symbolically having more individuals inside. Life involves a certain amount of pretence on the social stage, i.e. Goffman's "performances" (Goffman, 1969: 26), made up of "parts" (*ibidem* 27) and "routines" (*ibidem*), which need to be harmoniously integrated. Otherwise, the individual ends up having Laing's "divided self" (Laing 1990), a disintegrated self that is incapable of keeping up Goffman's appearances in society. Paula discovers this difficulty as a little girl, when her mother does not come to see her perform in a play at school (Swift, *op. cit.*: 145). From her mother's absence, she knows that something is wrong with the family. In the play, Paula

is the Mustardseed fairy, a part that she resents, since she wants to be Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This situation is an allusion to how, in real life, people end up playing roles that do not represent them. Her conclusions are that "the show, of course, must go on", and that she would have to "polish and refine" her "acting skills" (*ibidem*). Both remarks have a double meaning and can be extrapolated to real life. The former implies that one needs to make do with the roles that one has. The latter can be applied to her adult existence and family. Mike is "an actor silently rehearsing" (*ibidem* 45), conducting himself with artificiality. In order to "mark, not celebrate" their wedding anniversary, he meets her for lunch in a park, after having discussed their divorce (*ibidem* 43). For a long time, the couple hide the truth about the conception of their children: "What starts out as the simple task – which isn't simple at all – of acquiring offspring becomes a task of reconstructing the world." (*ibidem* 168) The twins' natural conception is a lie that they will have to act out as well – "it will become your task too" (*ibidem*). Apparently, everyone is subject to acting.

Some events bring out contradictory sides of one's personality. Upon the death of their cat, Paula does not shed a tear, even though she thinks that she loved the animal. Because of this, she fears she resembles her mother: "a bit of a vixen [..] a touch of my own mother" (*ibidem* 208). At the other extreme, Mike, a "scientist by training", with "quite a canny head for business", is unusually emotional, weeping as he places the body of the animal in its grave (*ibidem*). All this makes Paula gather that people are plural in their identities: "We all have more than one creature inside us" (*ibidem*). Sometimes these "creatures" are contrasting.

Conclusions

The title of this section makes sense primarily in relation to the idea of (ab)use of positions by the characters, since this (ab)use may be considered a deferral of meaning. *Différance* appears in other aspects as well. Paula is trying to postpone the moment of truth, of breaking to her twins the news of their conception. Mike's career is always in embryo, forever emergent from a symbolical mollusc shell. Deferral prefigures the awaiting lapse of time previous to Paula's pregnancy, which was perhaps the most stressful time of the couple's life together. Delay is the solution embraced by the young twin adolescents with respect to their intimate lives, the fashionable attitude in the nineties. Belated explanations are required from Paula, (and any parent), in connection with catastrophes and breakthroughs of modern times. All these postponements accompany the central one – the deferral of the protagonist's confession.

References

Derrida, J., *Writing and Difference*, Translated by Alan Bass, Routledge, London, 2005.
Giddens, A., *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1991
Goffman, E., *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Penguin Books, London, 1969
Laing, R. D., *The Divided Self*, Penguin Books, London, 1990
Mauss, M., *Eseu despre dar*, Translated by Silvia Lupescu, Institutul European, Iaşi, 1993
Swift, G., *Tomorrow*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 2007.