

## **Feigning Reason: *Hamlet* and the Dynamics of Desire in Graham Swift's *Ever After***

For David Cowart, the fear of each new generation of writers is that all the stories, genres and means of expression have been ‘used up’, that ‘the very language available for artistic creation’ has been exhausted by the attentions of literary forebears (Cowart 1993, 1). Contemporary writing’s tendency towards self-consciousness and self-reflexivity has sought to make a virtue of this anxiety, articulating the extant text to a series of co-textual relationships that charge the ‘host’ text with a hermeneutic surplus that can be symbolically reinvigorated in any number of ways. Mapping one text onto another through appropriation, reinflection or wholesale rewriting has become an orthodox postmodern way out of the blind alley of invention, a means of circumventing the specter of originality by insisting on the always-already spoken status of the text. Postmodernism’s uptake of literary precursors comes closest to parasitism in that it ‘subverts myth or exposes the ideology behind the language of the precursor text’ (4), but as Cowart points out, parasitism is only one form of possible symbiosis. Drawing on biological discourse he isolates commensalism (in which ‘only a guest organism benefits but the host suffers no harm’ [4]) and mutualism (in which both host and guest benefit) as indicative of contemporary intertextual practice.

The work of Graham Swift evidences all three forms of Cowart’s symbiosis, but in *Ever After*’s (1992) installation of *Hamlet* as a precursive archetype, he demonstrates a sophisticated handling of textual dependency that is not present elsewhere in his writing. Though the more celebrated *Waterland* (1983) and *Last Orders* (1996) rely heavily on echoes of *Great Expectations* and *The Canterbury Tales* respectively, it is in *Ever After* that Swift situates an intertextual relation at the

very heart of his narrative and at the core of his narrator's affective landscaping. *Ever After*'s importance lies not in the opening up of the intertextual panorama of a postmodern text, but in the deployment of a prior narrative as a psychological analgesic. Bill Unwin, the principal protagonist, appropriates and manipulates *Hamlet* as a means of sedimenting his thoughts and actions in a preceding – albeit fictional – reality; he indulges in a form of textual subsumption by pulling on a fictional world to disguise an inner emptiness brought about by the loss of his familial network. What we have here is not a fetishization of text as artifact to reveal the textuality of reality, but the mobilization of a fixed ontological literariness to substantiate an unstable and asymbolic reality. In what follows, Unwin's self-proclaimed kinship with Hamlet will be explored as a misidentification through a psychoanalytical reading of his friable subjectivity that draws primarily on Lacan's consideration of mobilized libido in 'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*'. Lacan's essay is particularly useful in the analysis of *Ever After* for it situates the paralysis of subjective agency in the lack of the other and the impairment of desire in the confusion of the phallogocentric *logos*. As we shall see, Unwin's quest for the immutable fact of himself in a textual precursor derives primarily from his desperate need for a father-figure and more indirectly from his entrapment within the *jouissance* of his mother.

Though *Ever After* is by far the bleakest novel of a writer who specializes in jaundiced narratives of loss (the novel contains three suicides, two incurable cancers and one heart attack induced by sexual excess), it is, at the same time, a narrative about the redemptive potential of desire and the self-blinding hope for fulfillment and completion. For Unwin, a middle-aged academic and inveterate loser, the need to *be* is a need to be other than himself, to connect his libidinal energy to a totalizing fixity that would speak of his irrefutable place in the world, yet each *point de capiton* that he

painstakingly secures is gradually prised loose leaving him hanging in a subjective limbo. Having sustained within a short period the deaths of his wife, mother and stepfather, and having already been confronted at an early age with the suicide of his father, Unwin undergoes his own symbolic death, robbed of his place in a signifying chain that guarantees his tentacular grip on being and recognition. It is a symbolic negation that he ultimately strives to actualize through an exhausted suicide attempt, but because even this is unsuccessful, he is forced to live out an attenuated after-life on the fringes of a symbolia to which he no longer relates. How and why Unwin's affective atrophy occurs, relates not just to the disappearance in the material world of his objects in and of desire, but also to the processes of identification and introjection by which they are initially implanted within his unconscious. Unwin is a fantasist for whom the objective world is a screen upon which he projects complex narratives of his own importance, mediated through an imaginary realm teeming with literary forebears and fictional precedents that extend comforting taxonomies for a man lost in the no-space of his own abjected selfhood.

As betokens a Fellow of literature at an ancient university, Unwin is a sophisticated, dexterous narrator who consistently interprets the world around him and his intersubjective relationships through imaginary paradigms that dull his underlying sense of alienation, confusion and loneliness. He internalizes a host of textual precursors, employing texts in order to perform them so as to construct a framework for self-identifying that can sustain and explain his subjective freight.<sup>1</sup> He is, to use Christian Moraru's term 'rewriting-bound' in that (and here Moraru quotes Barthes) he rewrites 'the text of the work within the text of [his] own life' (Moraru 2001, 4). He reads 'merely to find a starter for [his] own performance' (4) but because he seeks in texts a personal authenticity that they do not intrinsically embody, he is effectively

performing without an audience and reflecting back upon himself only the insubstantiality of his own subjectivity. Stories provide him with workable formal parameters within which he can desensitize the painful engagements with the real and distressing stuff of his life. His dedication to the teleological trajectory of narrative emerges not only in the manipulation of his autobiographical confessions, but also in his struggle to come to terms with the desires of others and on the establishment of what they require of him. But what interests us here is the disjunction that is clearly indicated between his Imaginary and Symbolic Orders, a disjunction that has fundamentally disrupted any sense of his subjective coherence. Mobilizing the Lacanian framework for subject formation reveals a deeply entrenched conflict between Unwin's ego and his ego-ideal, one that is indicated in the very first pages of the novel. Here, having characteristically botched his suicide attempt, Unwin nevertheless declares himself a 'dead man' (1) and seconds that assertion with an appositely Lacanian moment of specular misrecognition: 'I recognize the face in the mirror. Or rather, I recognize that I have never truly recognized it ... I simply feel as though I have become someone else' (3). To all intents and purposes Unwin *has* become someone else; a spectral avatar of his former self, inhabiting a symbolic nether world in which his prior object relations have been disentangled and his own 'ex-sistence' doomed to a purely corporeal attenuation.

The failure to self-identify with his mirror image indicates both the inefficiency of his Imaginary ideal (being no longer able to accept the coherence of the image as his symbolic representation) and the collapse of the Symbolic Order against and through which he can define and declare himself. Throughout his narrative Unwin casts himself as an inauthentic individual, one for whom life has repeatedly reiterated his extrinsic status, first as a go-between in his mother's

adulterous relationship with the American plastics entrepreneur Sam Ellison, next as a largely redundant actor-manager to his wife's stellar talent and latterly as an ersatz academic and first recipient of the Ellison Fellowship at an ancient university. Unwin is, to use Ellison's colloquialism, a 'substitoot' (7), one whose significance consists solely in the reflected glory achieved by others and whose self-worth is intrinsically determined by the quality of others' desire for him. With such a voided subjective space it is unsurprising that he struggles to recognize his mirrored reflection. But of course the failure to recognize in the Imaginary, carries with it a failure to be recognized in the Symbolic; the loss in short order of all his remaining relatives withdraws not just the ostensible means of his livelihood, but also the guarantee of his place within a system of socially and affectively symbolic relations. Robbed of the frameworks through which he has always made himself meaningful, he is faced with the unpalatable fact of his irrelevance - a dinosaur to match those in the novel's nineteenth-century subplot. As he sits in the Fellows' garden fashioning his life story, he falls back on the romance of the word as a means of rescuing through illusionment the discarded fragments of his selfhood; in the process he attempts to transform himself into one of literature's most enduring losers.

Where the other intertextual affiliations that Unwin invokes solidify his errant memories around credible typological textualizations, his dependence on *Hamlet* functions in the narrative present to coalesce a series of traumatic losses into a comprehensible whole, and to valorize that whole with the veneer of epic. The mobilization of this intertext differs from the others in that it reveals not just a confusion of private and literary memory, but also a forcefully rhetorical voice that seeks to persuade both the implied reader and itself of the legitimacy of the parallel. David Malcolm suggests that there are at least twenty references to Shakespeare's

play in the novel (Malcolm 2003, 144), evidencing Unwin's landscaping of his narrative for a specific form of readerly consumption, but one that regardless of its privileging repeatedly fails to convince. From an early stage of his account the comparison is drawn, with Unwin claiming that for much of his life he has cast himself 'appropriately, perversely' (Swift 1992, 4) as Hamlet. The juxtaposition of the perverse appropriateness of this identification should prompt suspicion as to the spin that is deliberately applied for dramatic effect. It is a forced conjunction that is further highlighted in the succeeding pages where the outstanding parts are cast: Unwin's wife, Ruth, is likened to Ophelia (5), Sam becomes Claudius (6) and by inflection Sylvia assumes the role of Gertrude; the betrayed and cruelly cut-off father requires little invention. And yet, having painstakingly established a possible, if strained hypertextual consonance, Unwin immediately reveals his own conflicted faith in the model by confessing that far from detesting Sam as the Claudius substitute who threatens his accession to his rightful place, he has 'never been able to help liking him' (6). Though minor in itself, this admission deflates the ambition of the collocation and points the reader towards its metaphorical imprecision. That the internecine tensions of the original cannot be realistically sustained indicates Unwin's desperation for the validity of the correspondence and yet also his competing desire to accept its inappropriateness.

Though he may well be sensitive to the necessary suspensions of disbelief that he is demanding, he strives energetically to substantiate the link through the appropriation of any serendipitous similarities: the coincidence of the Denmark Hotel being the venue for his first night with Ruth is not lost on him; the Elsinorian cloisters of the college provide an appealingly Ruritanian stage-set within which Unwin can enact his parodic ruminations on revenge, indecisiveness and the existential isolation

of the incompletely seized life. Direct quotations, suitably personalized, are taken from the play such as ‘What is Darwin to him? What is Matthew to me? “What’s Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba?”’ (143), or the more comic ‘Alas poor ichthyosaur ...’ (144).<sup>2</sup> And if such barely concealed nods should prove too subtle, he finally shows his hand with the declamatory, if slightly confused ‘I am who I am. I am Bill Unwin (there, I declare myself!). I am Hamlet the Dane’ (160).

So openly identifying himself with a protagonist whose cerebral, agonized passivity raises him to the level of the tragic hero, confirms for Unwin the nobility and therefore chivalric value of his own brand of excentricity. Like Hamlet, he sees himself as the victim of others’ intrigue, always excluded from stage center, confined instead to soliloquizing asides on the fringes of the action. Yet the luster of tragedy that he attempts to arrogate to himself is fundamentally tied to his fantasy structure and operates as a compensatory fiction for his failure to seize life in any decisive manner. If he is a Hamlet *manqué* then he is an etiolated and waspish imitation, even less capable of self-determined action than the original: Hamlet is finally brought to his act of revenge (albeit in the knowledge of his impending death), whilst Unwin has failed even in his attempt at self-annihilation. Any consanguinity between the two protagonists is thus a fantastical projection that masks Unwin’s acknowledgement of his insufficiencies. Despite the creative efforts which he brings to bear on the identification, its unraveling is inevitable and largely the product of his own lack of conviction in it. Ultimately he fails to believe in his own potential for tragedy and cannot as a consequence turn his life into the stuff of epic.

The extended Oedipal drama at the core of *Hamlet* depends on the conflictual nature of the relationship between Hamlet and his stepfather, and Hamlet can only conceivably achieve mastery of his ego in the literal and metaphorical eradication of

the superfluous father-figure. But in *Ever After* such a dynamic of intense hatred moving through revenge, symbolic usurpation and subjective coalescence is not enacted. The suicide of Unwin's father (which may or may not have been prompted by the discovery of his wife's affair) leaves the way open for Sam, and try as he might, Unwin cannot convince himself of the latter's malevolence. He would like to be able to avenge his father, but for what he is unsure. His father had always been (as is the wont of Swiftian fathers) a distant, emotionally continent peripheral figure in Unwin's world, whereas Sam consistently aspires to an inclusive familial relationship that is sympathetic and nurturing to both wife and stepson. Rail as he might against the injustice of such security, Unwin cannot persuasively portray Sam as the destructive outsider. His attempts to recreate a Claudius/Hamlet agonism are continuously undercut by his affection for the older man, an affection that emerges from the recognition that, like him, his stepfather is a fellow sufferer, one who has sustained loss and never fully recovered (Sam's adored brother has been killed during the Second World War). So when, on one of Sam's occasional visits to the college, Unwin tries to transform the scene into a playing out of an overdue remorse ('Here he is (Claudius at his prayers) to atone for his part in my father's death' [154]) the analogy fails spectacularly for not only is Sam not in search of forgiveness, but he furnishes Unwin with the distracting news that, as a result of his mother's previous infidelities, his father may not actually have been the time-serving diplomat seeking to put right the geo-political mess created by the Second World War, but an engine driver on the Western Railway. Without any justifiable cause to persecute Sam any longer, the framework of the Hamletian identification collapses and with it Unwin's claim to heroic status.<sup>3</sup>



The typological misidentification that is at the heart of *Ever After* clearly emerges from and through the confused operations of paternal legacy that the novel presents. Unwin's specious introjection of Hamlet with its concomitant rejection of the interloping Sam, compensates imaginatively for the spatial absence of the father-figure that he feels would locate him within a symbolically efficient social framework. By internalizing the heroic failure of his textual precursor, he not only reifies the fictional as a model of paternal example, but also reveals his desperation for a quantifiable fathering. It is no coincidence that Unwin locates in the literary text a phallogocentric residuum that resists its rationalization to cultural-historical object; his passion for the sublime potential of words elevates them to an intensity that speaks of an intrinsic beauty. His love of the literary is a romanticization of its authentic fixity and connection to a realm beyond the immediate, but when he seeks in *Hamlet* a form of transcendental signifier, he finds only the echo of his own interrogation. His willingness to substantiate his own existence by reference to a network of unstable and contingent identifications, indicates his rudderless search for a transcending authority. The literary text – more broadly interpreted as the Western canon – is installed in *Ever After* in place of a patriarchal center, symbolically representing the Lacanian Law of predominantly masculine meaning-making in default of Unwin's own fatherly lack. Or rather, the proliferation of father-figures ironically brings about an authoritarian vacuum at the core of his life, for where Hamlet has only the sepulchral voice of his father to confront, Unwin has three competing ghosts demanding his loyalty. The loss of the patriarchal signifier in *Hamlet* thus represents a desirable simplification for Unwin but in installing the text in the place of fatherly presence he emphatically disempowers himself because the father/text is not one that can ultimately be pleased or placated. The intertextual becomes for him a form of

aporia, a means not of connecting to a greater or more authentic literary whole, but of painfully isolating himself outside the phallic realm of the Symbolic Order.

That the displacement of paternal authority onto the literary canon fails, evidences both the implied patriarchalism of that canon and its contested status in the contemporary moment. What is certain is that for Swift the notion of cultural tradition that is synonymous with canonicity is coterminous with patriarchal transmission and that one of the primary effects of modernity has been the disruption of that transmission. Broken familial and generational relationships are a feature of Swift's writing from his first novel - *The Sweet Shop Owner* (1980) – and the ineffective, emotionally tormented father figure has been an equally abiding trope. As Wendy Wheeler has argued, men are seen as the transmitters of knowledge, value and standards in Swift's texts, but they are universally incapable of fulfilling the roles which they take upon themselves (Wheeler 1999, 66). Masculinity is identified by failure, compromise and inarticulacy and fathering by ignorance, evasiveness and desperation. In those texts which focus on the raising of sons (*Shuttlecock* [1981], *Waterland* [1983], *Ever After* and *Last Orders* [1996]) the impossibility of passing on a consciousness of maleness is represented by unbreakable silences and secrecies between generations, often exacerbated by things left unsaid on the deaths of protagonists. For Swift, the condition of modernity (which *Ever After* locates as developing from a nexus of cultural and epistemological crises around the mid-nineteenth century) has had a profoundly disabling impact on masculinity both as a self-understood engendering and as a collective, socially symbolic force. Masculinity, but particularly fathering, has been robbed of its traditional markers and directions and the result is a placelessness, an androexcentrism that leads to the dissociated and desperate search for authority that is evidenced in *Ever After*.

The failure of Unwin's self-construction as tragic hero reflects usefully back on Cowart's notion of symbiotic relations, for though Unwin would seek to elevate his tribulations to a mutualistic exposition of life's tragic potential, it is clear that his appropriation of the text comes closest to a commensalism, but actually, even fails to achieve that proximity. *Hamlet* remains unaffected by Unwin's attention, silent in its monolithic archetypalism and as symbolically ineffective as the other sources of masculine authority with which he tries to identify. What we have here as a result is a breakdown of Cowart's postmodern textual symbiosis in which the guest text is unable to summon up a sufficient consanguinity with the host to proclaim the textuality of its own ontology. In its connection to the literary past, as in its connections to the familial past and to the historical past (through the Matthew Pearce notebooks of the sub-plot), *Ever After* speaks of an unbridgeable distance; the past is incommensurable with the present and its evocation is met only with silence. For Swift, this hiatus is always explainable by the transmissional breakdown of communal values, social identities and historical teleologies that characterizes (post)modernity's episteme. The ineffectiveness of *Hamlet* as a trans-temporal ur-intertext is due less to its own hermetic signifying systems and more to the wholesale collapse of transmissible knowledge that severs the present from workable models of pastness. Modernity's suspicion of continuities has resulted, for Swift, in a radical disjunctional with the gone before that isolates the postmodern subject in a condition of epistemological, affective and identificatory insecurity.

Thus far Unwin has been presented as an inveterate and irredeemable loser, a man whose failings are spelled out in his name, but little account has so far been offered *for* his trepidatious and unfortunate tendencies. Certainly he is the least forceful of Swift's narrators and though he shares Tom Crick's (*Waterland*)

intellectual agility, he lacks the desire or belief to employ that in the cause of an egoistical ballasting. His self-immurement within models of fantastical identification may be symptomatic of his pusillanimity, and his Hamlet fantasy in particular, an hubristic wish-fulfillment, but in order fully to comprehend his retreat from the material world it is necessary to explore the origins of this neurotic pathology. It is here that Lacan's reading of *Hamlet* becomes an enlightening, as well as propitious, co-text.

Delivered in 1959, 'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*' focuses primarily on the ways in which Hamlet is trapped by the desire of others (his father, mother, Ophelia) into psychic lacunae that inhibit the expression of his own desire and, as a consequence, his ability to act along self-determined and self-fulfilling lines. His father's edict that his murder must be avenged directly contravenes his mother's desire for Claudius which, though a passion he cannot understand, offers a compelling interdiction to his father's order. Caught in a collision of irreconcilable injunctions, Hamlet fails to elect a specific path and remains passively incapable of articulating his own desires in what is effectively a tortuously unnegotiated Oedipal quadrangle. Lacan's reading of Freud positions the father as the giver of the Law, progenitor of the Symbolic Order, and the Other against which the infant and embryonic subject must define her/himself. The father is thus initially possessor of the phallus which, in Lacanian terminology, relates not specifically to an object but to the network of immanent power relations that normalize a symbolic economy of dominance. The fear and/or recognition of castration derives from the awareness of the phallus' presence but in the child's recognition of her/his parents' desire for each other – a desire that necessarily excludes the infant – s/he locates in the phallus the object of a lost narcissism. No longer the complete center of the m/other's attention, and in fear of the

father's retributive wrath, the child installs in the phallus the sum of its lost completeness, conscious for the first time of a profound lack at the core of her/his being.

In Lacan's rendition of the phallus, it is not something that is quintessentially possessed by an individual therefore, but represents the symbolic condensation of the abstract object of fulfillment; the thing that will complete us through its plenitude. The phallus in this stage of Lacan's thinking is thus the object of desire around which the fantasy is created and elsewhere takes the concrete form of the *objet a*. The interpretation of *Hamlet* that develops from this reading of desire could be crudely reduced to a game of hunt the phallus, for with the untimely death of Hamlet's father, the phallus becomes relocated onto Gertrude – and yet not unproblematically. The apparition of his father with its order to avenge Claudius' presumption, complicates Hamlet's mourning, for it re-enforces the Symbolic Law of the Other from beyond the grave. Hamlet is thus trapped within the phallic desire of his father at the same time that he experiences his mother's desire for another, a desire that excludes him for a second time. Paralyzed between these competing phallic imperatives, Hamlet cannot disentangle himself sufficiently to express his own desire or even, as Lacan declares, to find 'the way of his desire' (Lacan 1982, 12). He cannot therefore attain a subjective cartography because he cannot effectively resolve the demands that are placed upon him. Only at the point at which his being is negated (that is in the realization of his impending death) is he able to throw off the moils of dependency and mark an active expression of selfhood through the killing of Claudius.

The trajectory of desire as outlined in Lacan's *Hamlet* can productively assist a reading of Unwin's subjective instability in *Ever After* in that it reveals a possible source for his self-inhibiting judgments. Just as Hamlet has lost the way of his desire,

so Unwin struggles against a nullifying sense of the worthlessness and irrelevance of his desire. And like Hamlet, he is brought to his act (the attempted suicide) as a gesture of self-liberation from the ubiquity of others' demands, but in his case, failure reveals only the inadequacy of his fantasy and the vulnerability of his egoistical boundaries in the absence of others' needs. But whereas Hamlet has the stentorian diktats of a domineering patriarch reverberating in his ears, reminding him of his duty not only as son but to the nation, Unwin has only the white noise of paternal absence to motivate him.

Unwin's only clear recollection of his father is of him standing proprietorially in front of a fire awaiting his wife and imparting to his son the following advice: 'when you are out on an adventure you want to be home by the fire, and when you are at home by the fire, you want to be out on an adventure' (15). This rather gnomic hand-me-down on the eternal frustration of desire comes to stand metonymically for his father throughout Unwin's text and its repetition in abbreviated form (most commonly as 'when you are out on an adventure') intimates both the father's own abbreviation and the senselessness of the advice, for the aphorism only has tangible import in its entirety. This display of patrimonial endorsement is a purely parodic gesture towards the central space of Symbolic Law, he neither gives the law as the Other, nor controls the phallus as the object of Sylvia's desire. To all intents and purposes therefore, Unwin's father is a vacated symbolic space and an ineffective Other from whom Unwin will not learn about the parameters and tolerances of his subjective being. Given this lack, it is unsurprising that on his rather banal death at his own hand, Unwin should fantasize about the possibility of an undercover identity as a spy and, by extension, a masculine potency emerging through an agency – albeit self-destructive – in the symbolic realm. So if, like Hamlet, Unwin seeks the word of the

Other in the apparationless space of his father, he will find no order and no demand for revenge; but though he may not be trapped in the desire of his father, the same cannot be said of his mother.

From an early age Unwin is complicit with the rebelliousness of Sylvia; he is drawn into the glamour of her excessive material enjoyment firstly as an ingenuous confidant and latterly as a compromised *aide-de-camp* in her illicit assignations with Sam. The companionate confidentialities of their mutual infatuation with Paris are transformed by the affair into the tools of an emotional blackmail designed to ensnare Unwin's loyalty within the guilt of his deceit. Sylvia's callous maneuvering of her child between herself and his father confirms a reprehensible narcissism that situates herself as the cornerstone of need and everyone else as satellites of her desire. Yet despite this flagrant egotism, Unwin cannot bring himself completely to condemn her or to distance himself from her desire of him. Instead, he jealously installs Sam as his sibling opponent for the attention of the mother, a competition that takes on a justifiable edge when he overhears Sylvia's infantilizing propitiation of her lover: "Come on Sammy, come to Mummy ..." (22). It is clear that Sylvia, though far more shallow and brazen than Gertrude, functions in the same role as object of Unwin's repressed desire, but because the symbolic interdict of the father's castrating vengefulness has been ineffectually internalized, that desire is explicitly sexual. The way to the mother's body that has been cleared by his father's death is blocked for Unwin only by the figure of Sam whom he therefore appositely renders as Claudius. Where Hamlet is forbidden sexual access to the mother by the patriarchal prohibition of the ghost, Unwin is subject to no such primal forbidding. Yet it is perhaps the shock of this license, its appalling possibility, that moves him to position Sam as the Claudian cordon and himself as the self-disempowered Hamlet, for only in recreating

the Other's interdict can he comfortably deal with the discomfoting tendency of his errant desires. Ultimately he copes with the problem of desire by denying desire itself.

Undoubtedly, that desire for the body of the mother remains as an unconscious drive and his relationship with his wife evidences a displaced libidinal bottleneck. The narrative associations between Sylvia and Ruth are consequently strong: both are performers (Sylvia a singer, Ruth an actor), both are temperamental in character, both have been, or may have been unfaithful, and both die of cancer in distressing proximity. Evidently Ruth becomes for Unwin a surrogate just as for Hamlet, Ophelia assumes the mantle of substitute in and of desire. For Lacan, Ophelia is the *objet a* of Hamlet's fantasy, that is to say that she represents for him the lost object in the Imaginary register, the thing for which he searches for fulfillment and thus the thing that is forever out of his grasp. The lost object is 'exteriorised and rejected by the subject as a symbol signifying life' (sic) (Lacan 1982, 23), implying that the object of desire interiorized as the fantasy *objet a* is, as the fantasy collapses, cast out from the subject to become the symbol of that of which the subject is deprived: the phallus. So Ophelia is the phallus at the point at which she is rejected by Hamlet for her supposed licentiousness. Ophelia's rejection can only be remedied after her death when she can once again become the object of Hamlet's fantasy because she is no longer attainable and therefore can be safely desired. Such a complex conjunction of lack and desire opens up *Ever After*, if we consider the way Unwin's desire for his mother is cauterized through inhibition and subsequently displaced into the fantasy of his relationship with Ruth.

Whether Unwin's love for Ruth is fully reciprocated is perhaps the novel's most deeply embedded anxiety and the one that his narrative works hardest to suppress. Unwin's account of his marriage describes a gauche flirtation, building



through an incandescent passion, to a comfortable but adoring mutuality. His narrative would have us believe that from its earliest manifestation in the Blue Moon Club in Soho, where she was a dancer and he a stage attendant, to the moment of her suicide to escape the effects of cancer, their love was a consensual and indissoluble fact that justified the novel's oft-repeated Virgilian motto '*Amor vincit omnia*' ('love conquers all'). And certainly to a considerable degree Unwin's account bears the marks of his unbearable pain at the loss of a constant companion. However, there is also sufficient evidence to suggest that the marriage was less of an exclusive club than he would like to remember, and that in order to disguise its true nature he purposefully manipulates the evidence under recollection. Unwin's residual romanticism cannot bear the possibility of his wife's adultery, but his narrative evinces a morbid suspicion of her friendships with fellow actors. At one point he troubles himself by pondering the subject of fidelity:

And Ruth. And Ruth? No, I don't believe that she ever – But suppose, suppose. In the days before I became her manager. Her minder ... The freedoms of these theatrical folk, the way they touch and kiss and hug and slip in and out of roles ... No, I don't believe she ever really – But what if she had? What if she had? (Swift 1992, 212)

Within a few pages this seed of doubt has blossomed into a welter of self-torture:

And can I really believe that in all this turning into other people, in all this promiscuity of personae, up there before the lights, she never, ever – ? (254)

Such self-indulgent fantasies do not, of course, prove anything more than the fissure in Unwin's rhetoric, but they certainly do parallel Hamlet's visceral defamations of Ophelia's character, accusations which self-evidently are displaced from his complex emotional reaction to his mother's conduct with Claudius. Ruth's death, like Ophelia's at her own hand, enables Unwin's recuperative fantasy to flourish however, for Ruth, like her *alter ego*, can become in after-life the phallic object of which he has been deprived by being excluded (twice) from his parents' desires. As Lacan points out, 'it is from the phallus that the object gets its function in the fantasy, and from the phallus that desire is constituted with the fantasy as its reference' (Lacan 1982, 15). By rejecting Ruth as his interiorized lost object (as a result of his suspicions of her fidelity) he is able to exteriorize her as the phallus and thereby finally reappropriate her in narrative fantasy as the 'good' wife of his idealization. What we are perhaps presented with in Unwin's narrative therefore is less a credible memory of Ruth and more a narrative fetish.

Unwin's indeterminacy is founded upon an epistemological lack in that he simply does not know, and can no longer verify, the degree of Ruth's fidelity, but it is also a symbolic crisis because the want of certainty evidences him again in a subordinate position to the desire of another and trapped in what Lacan terms the 'time of the other' (17). He is consequently forced into a form of symbolizing hiatus, divorced from the means to satisfy his own desire by the phallic insistence of an other. Once again we can trace a possible route back from this inferior position in relation to the Symbolic Order to his problematic relationship with his father. Unwin's lack – the 'un' is his name that explicitly points to a negation – is his lack of desire (suggested by the 'win' element of his name) and in turn that emerges from his equivocal position within the Symbolic. That he simply does not know what he wants is

indicative of his Hamletian indecisiveness only insofar as it reveals the fundamental incongruity that he experiences between his imaginary and material ontological interactions of the world. This incommensurability is the result of his instability and insubstantiality within the Symbolic but also because to find his place in desire would be to comprehend what it is that is required of him by others and by the Other of the Law. That his father proves a paper tiger when it comes to establishing a *de jure* patriarchal pre-eminence creates a vacuum in the Law that leaves Unwin adrift in the realm of the signifier, incapable of asserting his subjective status, nor of repelling the insistent demands of others on him. The metaphorical castration that is represented by his father's curtailed advice can only be compensated for by Unwin in his Imaginary arena through the fantastical projection of his father's double life as a spy or by convincing himself that his suicide was a courageous act of ethical protest against the post-war atomic project. Both fantasies imagine a father who reappropriates the phallus either by the assertion of a masculine 'right' or through a spectacular gesture of moral incorruptibility, but both are ultimately little more than idealizations in which Unwin has only the faith of his shaky convictions.

The revelation by Sam, who, it should not be forgotten, is, in his Claudian incarnation, the surrogate father and illegitimate possessor of the phallus, that Unwin's father may actually have been an engine driver, forces a complicated rethink of his status in relation to the symbolic Law of the Other. If his father was not the Crown's agent working at the murkier extremes of international relations, and certainly not the time-serving diplomat who killed himself on the discovery of his betrayal, then maybe he could have been a pioneer of the industrial world, an agent of romance in a different way. Immediately an alternate fantasy springs up to replace the compromised version of the duped civil servant:

I cannot picture him. I see only this generic child's eye caricature: an engine driver, for God's sake! Work blue jacket, twisted neck-cloth and greasy cap with a flint black peak [...] he is mounted, appropriately enough for my surreptitious begetter, on a giant phallic symbol. I see him careering round the country-side, siring bastard after bastard. (Swift 1992, 200)

The potency of this mounted begetter is in stark contrast to the wan self-consciousness of the Parisian father; this 'knight of steam' (200) is synonymous with masculinity and importantly it is a masculinity that controls, powers and directs a symbolism which is phallic in both Freudian and Lacanian senses. The faceless and nameless begetter is thus endowed in Unwin's imagination with the phallus and with the key to unlocking his desire, but because this father has been killed during the war, he, and therefore his symbolic potential are as closed off to him as the emasculated insufficiencies of Sylvia's husband. Deprived of not just one symbolic register but two, and 'castrated' for his aberrant desire by not just two fathers but three (if one includes Sam), it is unsurprising that Unwin is confused as to the origin of the Law and the demands of the Other. How is he to acquire the fixity of the chain of signification that will enable him to position himself firmly within it and thereby establish workable symbolic relations with others? Two possible solutions present themselves: one, a radical renarrativization of his past through the framework of his private imaginary fantasies, the other, an escape into the asymbolia of death by suicide.

But of course, he fails even in this act of determination and having reached rock bottom and then having gone beyond it, he awakes to an undesirable limbo, alive

but with no desire to live. The specular disconnection of the first pages intimates his otherness both to himself and to the framework of socially symbolic ties that previously identified him. His after-life will involve the construction or uncovering of new imaginary connections that can root him in workable signifying paradigms. And here we are brought full circle to Lacan and the appropriation of Hamlet as metaphor. Loss and the trauma that it entails are described by Lacan as bringing about an irruption of the Real which consequently creates a hole in the Real. The appearance of this hole sets the signifier in motion and provides a place for the projection of the missing signifier which is crucial to an understanding of the other. Unwin's mourning, which is as much a mourning for a self that has died along with his relatives, creates a space of loss which is held open by his patchy knowledge of the facts of others' desires and therefore inhibits completion of the mourning process by detachment of the libidinal focus. That space is filled by the action of the signifier which projects a completion through narrativisation. Unwin's numerous forays into literary history for suitable prototypes to express his emotional turmoil are efforts at completion, teleological structures that obey a grammar of symbolic constancy and furnish Unwin a defined, circumscribed role through which he can assert his subjectivity and, in so doing, comprehend his performative relations with others.

The irony of Unwin's hopeful and ultimately hapless identification with Hamlet is that, notwithstanding his optimistic engineering of the analogy, their cases are not dissimilar. Certainly, read through the terms of Lacan's formulation of desire both evidence a clear paralysis induced by the desire of the other and the equally confusing demands of the Other. Whilst Hamlet displays a problematic negotiation of subjectivity in the face of an authoritarian Father of the Law, Unwin's plight offers an equally problematic coming to selfhood in the absence of a coherent symbolic

authority. For Swift the crises of patriarchy and passion that characterize (post)modernity's skepticism towards centralized authorities cuts adrift not just masculinity but subjectivity *per se* in a symbolic interspace. Establishing moorings becomes a matter thereafter of clinging to whatever seems stable in a dissolving world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unwin invokes a variety of nineteenth-century texts including Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), George Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cousin Phillis* (1863) Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). More broadly, and particularly through its sub-plot set around the mid-Victorian crisis of faith brought about by Darwinian notions of evolution, the novel echoes Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1818), John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990). For extended expositions and analyses of the novel's intertextual framework see Jacobmeyer (1998) and Lea (2005).

<sup>2</sup> The original quotations are taken from *Hamlet*, Act II Scene II Line 553 and Act V Scene I, Line 178.

<sup>3</sup> If Unwin cannot successfully manufacture a substantive connection with Hamlet, he does more naturally suit the role of Polonius, the ill-fated and ignored adviser. One other clear intertextual association is with another Hamlet *manqué*: J.Alfred Prufrock, and Unwin's cringing fear of commitment to a lived life frequently recalls the vacillating self-effacement of Eliot's wannabe.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase appears on Swift (1992) 24, 111, 194, 259 and in variation on 82.

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