

*Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere e Culture Moderne
dell'Università degli Studi di Torino*

Contemporary Vulnerabilities



Edited by Pier Paolo Piciucco
With an afterword by Erinn Cunniff Gilson

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FOCUS ON THE INEXPLICABLE:
AN ANALYSIS OF JOHN BURNSIDE'S
A SUMMER OF DROWNING
AND GRAHAM SWIFT'S *HERE WE ARE*

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In many respects, John Burnside's *A Summer of Drowning* (2011) and Graham Swift's *Here We Are* (2020) may seem to be disparate and dissimilar fictional works. After all, in my research I have not found any critical work which examines the two novels together in a comparative study. Whilst, in fact, Burnside's novel has been defined a "horror-suspense-mystery with added elements drawn from fairytale, teen-angst novel and bildungsroman", (Kavenna 2011: n.p.) "ecological thriller", (James 2012: 660) or a rewriting "of folkloric narratives", (Binney 2018: 4) Swift's has been classified as an "intricate novella" (Preston 2020: n.p.) or, alternatively, as "part rural idyll, part 1950s show-biz romance", (Kaczvinsky 2020: 99) showing that the developments of the respective narratives are significantly divergent.

Even so, *A Summer of Drowning* and *Here We Are* also tread a common path and share such a remarkable number of affinities that a comparative analysis seems viable. To start with, a female perspective—if not a narrator—is present in the two narrations. This acquires significance in that these works were written by male authors, who, at least in their earlier works, were criticised for always resorting to male speaking voices.¹ Then, fatherlessness is increasingly central in both tales, affecting a significant number of characters; far from being a casual connecting element, this loss is instrumental in always creating relationships across genders in those subjects who went through this traumatic experience. Thirdly, a female agency, a sort of *femme fatale*, may be seen in direct relationship with the death—or disappearance—of men who were in love with, or simply attracted, to her. Indeed,

¹ Discussing the density of male voices in Swift's first novels, Malcom in 2003 wrote: "Swift's choice of characters, however, has been criticized on two accounts. It is clear that female characters play lesser and often quite specific roles in his texts. Very few of Swift's narrators are female". (Malcom 2003: 18) On the other hand, Bracke welcomed the news of a female narrator in Burnside's *A Summer of Drowning* in these words: "Up until the most recent novel, all of Burnside's fiction, including the short story collection *Burning Elvis* (2000), have male main characters and, with the exception of a few isolated passages or chapters, all of these works are focalized through men". (Bracke 2014: 422)

the nightmarish tale of *A Summer of Drowning* turns around a portrayal of a mischievously evil girl, whereas in *Here We Are* the loss of the man cannot in any way be traced back to the woman's ill intentions. Nonetheless, the cause-to-effect remains unchanged. In addition, the storylines of both *A Summer of Drowning* and *Here We Are* develop on two distinct timelines—one concerning the past, and the other the present; the former relates to the time in which the events unfolded, whereas the latter to the time of the narration. The gap of time between the two timelines is substantial—ten years in Burnside's novel, as many as fifty in Swift's—and corresponds to the time needed for the narrating conscience to be able and tell the story; in other words, the two plots are anything but the result of cold blood storytelling. However, the accounts of the two stories call into question the consequences of traumatic effects on the narrating conscience, resulting in narrations that alternate stretches of sharp clarity with somewhat obfuscated descriptions, pervaded as they are by a suffused bewilderment—when not utter incoherency—that avoids a direct confrontation with the notion of death. As a consequence, the deaths are invariably referred to as 'disappearances' in both narratives. Still, if the speaking voices show various degrees of hesitancy in coping with the idea of death, a betrayal—generating a creeping sense of guilt—is always acutely felt, to the extent that in some cases this notion reaches obsessional proportions. The mystifying atmosphere hovering over the two stories is also responsible for creating issues with identity around some characters who may find their selfhood increasingly indistinct in various circumstances. Significantly, another shared component which comes to the fore in these two parallel narrations leads me to deal with the world described in the two fictional texts, depicted as polarised between two distant and opposite realms—possibly identified as Reality and Magic—each often struggling in order to affirm its validity over the other. This creates a confusing, at times disorienting, effect on the reader, who is either called on to make a choice as to which of the two to prioritize in interpreting the text, or else forced to accommodate both dimensions by mitigating their contrasting influences toward a compromise solution. Ultimately—and most crucially—the pervading mayhem characterizing these narrations drives the narrators toward a painful confrontation with a past that unrelentingly exerts its power on them, and prevents them from being in full command of the events in the narrated story. The speaking voices, in fact, still cannot cope with parts of their narrations, parts of which, much against their own will, remain blank to them. It is these sections of the storytelling that remain forcefully silenced in the texts that I refer to as the 'inexplicable', and that will be discussed.

Both *A Summer of Drowning* and *Here We Are* in fact leave the impression that there may be some sort of discontinuity between the direct or indirect witnessing of the past episodes which form the material of the stories and their representations in the text bringing them back to life. Any reader will notice that the act of narration is not always faithful to the real progress of the described incidents, but is only verisimilar. The shock produced on the narrating conscience by having experienced

these traumatic episodes is still tangible and this is a confirmation that, even if both narrators have waited a long time before telling their stories, they are not free from the consequences of prolonged suffering and still remain gripped by the sway of a trauma that in various ways shuts down and numbs some crucial mental processes. Contrary therefore to the attitude seemingly adopted by the narrators, adumbrating control over the material of their narrations, the past is not yet over, driving the present towards a state of precariousness. This is the typical situation that, Butler stresses, produces

a series of paradoxes: the past is irrecoverable and the past is not past; the past is the resource for the future and the future is the redemption of the past; loss must be marked and it cannot be represented; loss fractures representation itself and loss precipitates its own modes of expression. (Butler 2003: 467)

I will move on by first shifting my attention to all those elements in the two novels that herald signs of crisis, or simply expose unusual ways of coping with the representations of critical situations: then, I will evaluate the ways in which states of vulnerability affect the narrations in these novels.

A Summer of Drowning

In an analysis of the elements in John Burnside's *A Summer of Drowning* that make this narration suspect about the truthfulness of the account, the unreliability of the narrator clearly stands in the forefront. Liv, still a teenager when the fatal summer took its toll of human lives, becomes the narrator of the story when she is 28 and she soon seems to take excessive ownership in her new task. In addition, her proud sense of isolation seems to be a further guarantee against external interference in her delicate decision "to explain the impossible". (Burnside 2011: 5) As the story moves on, however, it becomes clear that the topic under debate is not only a personal story, but is also a communal report, where myth and folklore often take the upper hand. Her misanthropic nature soon seems at odds with her need to collect data from her community and provide her narration with adequate corroboration to her theories. What further disorients the reader is the discovery that, according to Liv, asocial behaviour is described as a common trait for the inhabitants of Kvaløya—the small Norwegian island, in the Arctic Circle, which is theatre to much of the story—rather than simply characterizing her own personality. We may imagine though that for Liv a perfect model of self-isolation has always been her mother Angelika, described in this way by Bracke:

Angelika, Liv's mother, similarly came to the island to live apart, as Liv says. In fact, Angelika lives so much apart from other people that even though they share a house, there are times that Liv does not see her mother for days on end, particularly when Angelika is working on a painting in her studio. This

remoteness, her “gift for refusal”, Liv believes, is the secret behind her artistic success. (Bracke 2014: 429)

The most upright, and maybe even heroic character in this northern region is the elderly Kyrre Opdahl, the only person who at one time Liv ventures to recognise as “my only friend”; (Burnside 2011: 294) nonetheless, he too is described as a lone wolf: “Kyrre Opdahl had lived alone for a long time and, over the years, he had collected a vast array of strange and sometimes beautiful junk”. (Burnside 2011: 116) For quite a long time Ryvold, part of the group of three suitors who regularly visit Angelika in the vain hope of becoming her chosen one, seems to be the rare bird in this special selection of hermits. The reader’s surprise may be justified when, towards the end, Liv tells us that

I suddenly understood why he had never married. He was someone who *bad* to live alone, someone who found it difficult to be with others for any length of time, because he only had one mode—the discreet art of withdrawal which had, no doubt, taken him years to perfect”. (Burnside 2011: 156-57)

Of course, Lubkowitz is correct in connecting the concept of loneliness to the extreme northern setting of this fiction when she contends that “the idea of remoteness and isolation that the idealized view of the far north entails” (Lubkowitz 2020: 190) have a common origin. The doubt remains, however, that Liv’s reclusive stand is not a trait of her personality, nor is it due to the northern position of her island, but more simply a defence strategy adopted by a vaguely depressed girl who talks in negatives:

I have done nothing at all; or nothing other than to choose the life I am living now, a life someone else would think of as close to non-existent. No career, no husband, no lover, no friends, no children. I am not an artist, like Mother, or not in the usual way”. (Burnside 2011: 49)

In this sense, I thoroughly endorse Baker’s claim, as he summarizes the main points in the novel thus: “death remains a mystery, and grief is continually isolating”. (Baker 2014: 160) Whatever the reason behind Liv’s search for solitude, it sounds controversial, though, that so much effort (and time) is spent in order to gather elements for a story of a community that is basically made up of loners, when not of sociopaths.

Along with her more assertive stance, correctly leading Hyvärinen to write about Liv in terms of a “self-righteous girl”, (Hyvärinen 2015: 232) her tale also brings to the surface her defensive strategies. Quite regularly, when confronted with disturbing situations, Liv somewhat ostrich-like sticks her head in the sand and pretends not to have seen, not to have heard or, more simply, not to have been present. The use of this passive and elusive reaction becomes manifest in a number of situations, and I would like to recall a couple of instances to prove my point. Quite an alarming case is provoked by her receiving a letter from an

unknown woman summoning her to come and see her dying father in England. It is evident that this news hits a nerve, and it is curious to find her thinking: “I didn’t want that letter and, because I didn’t know what to do about it, I put it aside and tried to pretend that it had never arrived”. (Burnside 2011: 68) Later on, while spying in Martin Crosbie’s computer, she discovers that the English tourist kept a folder with images of girls—including some images of herself. These were not sexually explicit pictures but, deciding that they were “purely observational, after all”, (Burnside 2011: 138) even if she feels resentful by the find, she opts for an ostrich-like solution: “I did all I could not to think about Martin Crosbie”. (Burnside 2011: 138) Pretence and appearance are not merely of minor significance for Liv.

The narrator’s reliability is further put to test as the reader gradually understands that Liv is not an independent thinker as in many situations she shows herself to be a pawn in her mother’s hands, because most of the decisions she takes result from the amount of pressure exerted on her by her mother; her decision to travel to England is a most blatant example of this negotiation. While her submissive attitude towards her mother is not explained in the text, I am inclined to think that the lack of a father-figure may have pushed Angelika, almost morbidly at times, towards her mother.

Additional contradictory elements which undermine the linearity and consistency of Liv’s discourse also emerge in other studies:² what most interests me at this stage, however, is that this knotty state of mind in which Liv finds herself inevitably produces an “instable style of narration” (Lubkowitz 2020: 208) that challenges rational expectations about how a story should be narrated and contravenes normative rules regarding conventional storytelling. This “chilling, eerie and hypnotic” (Bracke 2014: 422) story lays its foundation on an eccentric and outlandish mismatch between different dimensions around which the narrative is organized. Lubkowitz tackles this issue when she writes that “the ‘otherworld’ constantly corrodes the apparent stability of the ‘real’”. (Lubkowitz 2020: 205) Other critics, instead, explicitly refer to Liv’s somewhat ‘deranged’ state of mind, responsible for creating a representation of the story that verges on utter incoherency. Hyvärinen for example writes that “the novel is so confusing because the narrator herself is so confused and increasingly paranoid in the storyworld”, (Hyvärinen 2015: 237) whereas Binney claims that “the narrator is afflicted by a kind of madness [...]. Hers is clinical, a temporary insanity which is the result of witnessing what she believes to be a supernatural event”. (Binney 2018: 12) A trauma-induced misperception creates a clash between levels of the narration that evoke a true-to-life representation, in contrast with sections in which the supernatural dominates undisturbed. While in many cases the reader needs to mediate between these two irreconcilable realms, in others the narrator generates an in-

² See for instance Lubkowitz (2020) and Hyvärinen (2015) for more specific material.

between field, where elements from both the dimensions eerily converge simultaneously. This area may be identified as a sort of imaginary dreamland—storing many nightmarish images and situations, in order to tell the whole truth—where oneiric material accumulates with the aim of creating, or deconstructing, significance. The intertextual references to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, with its systematic challenge to the ordinary rules of logic and science, need to be placed in this context. A typical example of how Burnside employs this strategy of narration referring to a suspended and dreamy dimension in *A Summer of Drowning* may point to the recurrent use of the verb 'to picture' by Liv when describing all sorts of episodes. "I picture my mother on the day she decided to come north", (Burnside 2011: 22) for example, is one of those (numerous) situations when Liv decides to discontinue her realistic form of narration, in favour of morbid concessions to fictitious, visionary and subconscious sequences. Clearly enough, in these circumstances she seems to be favouring a form of subjective rather than objective reality.

In fact, the reclusive Liv privileges the individual and private dimension over the communal and public, a peculiar standpoint which produces all kind of reactions to forms of obligation towards collective formation and identity. Her almost exclusive attachment to the "lifelong storyteller" (Burnside 2011: 32) Kyrre can also be explained in this perspective. While in fact the old neighbour has the merit of filling the void left behind by the absence of a father, so that Liv even ventures to recognise that "[h]e was the father that this place had given me", (Burnside 2011: 294) throughout the story he also acquires strong abstract significance, making him a metaphor of the place, of the old tradition, as well as of an alternative force to normative social assumptions. One cannot overlook that fact that Liv learns the story about the *buldra* from him, so that her story is his story, too. The first time he appears in the text he is described as "that foolish old man", (Burnside 2011: 17) a description that is contradicted a little later: "[o]f course, Kyrre Opdahl was no fool", (Burnside 2011: 31) setting in motion a mode of narration where coherence and rationality are often offset. A bizarre mixture of an entertainer with a bard, Kyrre "with his ridiculous true stories about trolls and spirits" (Burnside 2011: 294) not only gives new life to old traditions but also clears the way for alternative forms of narration that might, if inappropriately understood, be categorised as pure foolishness. Liv's tale, nonsensical, scary and mesmeric at the same time is also modelled on the prototypical narrative pattern provided by Kyrre Opdahl, described thus in a revealing sequence: "[h]e was also my own personal storyteller, someone who charmed and frightened me, in more or less equal measure, all the time I was growing up". (Burnside 2011: 24) *A Summer of Drowning*, therefore, can also be read as an exegesis for a parallel dimension, in which Kyrre plays the part of the neglected prophet. In this perspective, I register my consensus with Lubkowitz as she claims that "Kyrre is presented as the warden of this repressed knowledge, the chronicler of an alternative, 'unre-

liable history”’. (Lubkowitz 2020: 210) Such assumptions seem to be in line with Childs’s theory about the elements “of the Gnostic tradition that Burnside incorporates into his writing”. (Childs 2020: 18) The English critic explains that

[t]he fundamental tenet of Gnosticism [...] is that the route to the divine truth is *the revelation of knowledge* and not through faith, and also that this gnosis is of a particular kind: a direct experimental awareness of the senses *rather than a rational understanding of the mind*. (Childs 2020: 18, emphasis added)

On the basis of this interpretation, John Burnside’s *A Summer of Drowning* can be read in terms of a due homage to the ‘disappeared’ Kyrre Opdahl, a construal evocative of a sort of a fictional funeral cortege, or of a requiem in literary form dedicated to the memory of the missed friend and father. Liv’s tortuous and mystifying narration would therefore be the expression of her last act of mourning, performed some ten years after losing him. I will analyse the possible meanings and repercussions of this reading in the last section of this paper.

Here We Are

Stating that Graham Swift’s *Here We Are* has a third-person narrator may seem to be an ordinary statement; however, in full consideration of the weight that subjectivity gains in Swift’s traditional storytelling, generally relying on a moody narrator who needs to track down his/her memories, this is quite a remarkable change in the whole system of his narration that has not escaped the critics: “Swift’s writing has become more overtly omnipotent in recent years, with the shift—in *Wish You Were Here* (2011) and *Mothering Sunday* (2016)—to a roving third-person narrator following decades of monologues”’. (Robson, 2020: n.p.) The trick performed by the magician Swift is that, even when abandoning the first-person narrator, this mode successfully manages to be emotionally gripping, demonstrating that in recent times Swift has further perfected his skills as a writer in full command of his material. However, while we start reading the novella believing that the narrator is omniscient, only towards the end of the tale do we discover instead that the whole story has been recounted from the point of view of Evie, “[t]he last surviving member of the love triangle”, (Logotheti, 2020: n.p.) and what we have read is not the whole story, but what Evie remembers—or is able to tell—about the whole story. In this way, Swift makes use of a third-person narration while employing the perspective of a first-person’s, endowing the whole plot with a peculiar ambivalence about the real agency of the speaking voice. On my part, I believe that on a lesser scale *Here We Are* is vaguely remindful of the technique employed by McEwan in *Atonement*, the fiction narrated by a third-person narrator for most of the plot, before the final surprising discovery that the story had actually been narrated by Briony Tallis.

Like *A Summer of Drowning* did, *Here We Are* also develops its narration by regularly fluctuating between different realms and modes of perception. The plot of Swift's novel mainly turns around a young magician's life and, as a consequence, the gap between realism and magic imbues the narrative. However, differently from what happened in *A Summer of Drowning*, where the edges of the various realms were not always clearly marked, the fissure between them in *Here We Are* is more sharply outlined, so that every time the narration shifts from one to another, the relocation into the new field is always neatly described. A clear example of this passage may be found in the description of the magician Ronnie rehearsing his number with his assistant—and girlfriend—Evie, where the two characters visibly cross the threshold from magic to ordinariness:

It was all rather odd. One moment they were doing magic—they really were—next, they were stopping for tea. She sometimes made it herself now, they took it in turns. And it must have looked very odd too, a woman sometimes in little more than sequins and plumes in that cubbyhole, with its stained and smelly sink, filling the kettle, warming the pot. (Swift 2020: 72-73)

A method used by the narrator to stress this passage from their identities as stage performers to ordinary individuals is to give distinct individual names to the three main characters in the story: Ronnie Dean becomes Pablo (or the Great Pablo in the final sequence) when he steps on the stage, Evie White turns into Eve, Jack Robbins transforms into Jack Robinson. Different approaches to life require different identities, it seems. However, as well as denoting a clear resettlement from one dimension to another, this need to create alternative identities also stresses the weight of transformations, which are at the very root of the art of wizardry.

However, magic should not only be understood at face value, since it has a vast array of possible uses and purposes in the story. To start with, it may be found in all those minor happenings in everyone's life that have an unexpectedly positive outcome and can accordingly be referred to as little bits of magic in our life. In the plot, magic may be interpreted in this light with regard to particularly favourable episodes which happened to Ronnie Dean, and to those included in his sphere of affection: Evie White and the Lawrences. Kucala is correct in highlighting that

[f]or a brief period, in parallel to the magic they create on stage, Ronnie's and Evie's private lives take a turn towards the wondrous and the enchanted. They fall in love and become engaged soon after starting to work together. By a happy coincidence, or a stroke of magic, the only candidate who answered his advertisement becomes Ronnie's special woman. (Kucala 2021: 70)

With Ronnie's arrival, the Lawrences too may claim to have grasped a touch of magic in their lives: "the magic which imbues the house is not limited to Eric Lawrence's profession as a magician, but is physically represented by Ronnie's presence, who has become the Lawrence's child by magic". (Mondo 2021: 11)

What interests me most, however, are the repercussions of such a vision: if magic is associated with happy incidents, so is reality with sad and unfortunate ones. *Here We Are* therefore creates a system of signs in binary opposition, that prevents the two counterparts from overlapping with one another. This becomes particularly significant when we look at the transformation and the psychological implications that have driven little Ronnie towards the world of magic. After a dire childhood spent in hardship and without a father, the major turning point in his young existence occurs when he is sent to Oxfordshire as an evacuee in order to avoid the risk of living in London under the German bombings. In Evergreene he discovers a way out of his adversity through magic, and that transports him away from sufferings and loss—and his reality. It is very meaningful that the figure who introduces him to this way of life is Mr. Lawrence, called “the Wizard of Oxford”, (Swift 2020: 108) and destined to play the part of a father surrogate, but also that his natural mother, Agnes Deane, doomed to have a life of hardship, develops a mentality committed to uncompromising realism: not surprisingly, she forcefully resists any sort of abandonment to imagination—and illusion—and heatedly objects to Ronnie’s decision to become a magician. While magic is gradually related to positive endeavours, imagination and optimism, reality remains connected to sadness and a pessimistic disposition. So, whereas it seems that Ronnie’s decision to pursue a career as a magician may also be explained as a need to follow his (surrogate) father’s footsteps—much differently from Evie and Jack, Ronnie, in fact, needs to have his future forged by his father—it also becomes evident that the magic dimension, in his view, adds weight in that it becomes a shelter, and a sort of realistic dreamland, helping him to remove sadness and deprivation from his life. Eric Lawrence, as a personification of magic, and Agnes Deane, as a personification of reality, therefore constitute the horizon of the possible choices open to Ronnie for his future and this easily explains why the young wizard inevitably chooses the former. What is interesting to stress at this juncture is that it is not only Ronnie who opts for reality, but the man-of-the-world and down-to-earth Jack who, despite becoming the quintessence of a realistic approach to life throughout the story becomes the quintessence of a realistic approach to life, turns into the loudspeaker for an aversion to realism when he claims: “Fuck the real world. Who needs that?” (Swift 2020: 157) So, even a matter-of-fact person, who has dedicated his entire existence to material success, would rather choose magic and imagination because they are more rewarding, if they could only offer the same recompense. Furthermore, Kucala is correct when stressing that “[i]n *Here We Are*, the alignment of the relations between the palpably real and the illusory readjusts the balance in favour of the latter”, (Kucala 2021: 67) highlighting that Swift’s fiction in the first place endorses a clear favouritism for the world of magic.

Having discussed how a vision of reality and magic, intended as opposite elements, also invests a region of the psyche, I will now turn my attention to the

ways in which such an interpretive line may affect our understanding of Evie's actions and behaviour. Of course, I agree with Mondo as she argues that "Evie herself is a good example of a realist", (Mondo 2022: 12) but I also claim that the older Evie is enduring suffering and torment because she keeps swinging from the magic realm of imagination to reality. What particularly arouses my curiosity is to catch a glimpse of the central mystery around which the final part of the novel gravitates: I am interested to know more about "the whereabouts of the magician, who vanished without a trace back in 1959. Was it foul play? Suicide or flight spurred by a broken heart? A willful transformation?" (McAlpin, 2020: n.p.) In my personal interpretation, Ronnie's final—inexplicable and unexplained—disappearance is a single episode that can be described in two different ways, according to the perspective of the reader involved: if watching the incident from a magic viewpoint, it appears as a great act of wizardry, while the same scene appears as a death, or better still, a suicide, if it is being seen from a realistic perspective. A number of elements concur towards my making this point. First of all, elusive as it may be, a textual confirmation about the twin choice at Evie's hands describes a scene where the former magician's attendant looks at her image in the mirror:

Or, she thinks now, staring into her mirror, 'The Life and Death of Ronnie Deane'. If death was the word. Hadn't she just seen him, in this mirror? If 'death' was ever the right word. And 'gone' or 'missing' or 'not there', these were all, she knew by now, preferable words. Preferable, if more painful". (Swift 2020: 168-69)

In keeping with the general orientation offered in the story, magic is always the preferable choice—for Ronnie, for Jack, for Evie. As long as it provides an alternative option to surrendering to reality, it always remains the favourite option. Then, one can hardly be surprised at finding a suicide in a novel by Graham Swift, because they rather abound in his fiction. Dick Crick and Ernest Richard Atkinson in *Waterland*, Ruth Vaughan and Colonel Unwin in *Ever After*, Michael Luxton in *Wish You Were Here* and quite likely also Paul Sheringham from *Mothering Sunday*—not to mention the failed or attempted suicides—are all characters who ended their life with an extreme, rebellious act. After all, the situation in which Ronnie finds himself as he performs the final trick is desperate enough: he has lost the woman of his life and his best friend Jack, his mother has just died and the season is over. No future plans to keep his career as a magician seem open to him. As for my personal reading, I must also add that the idea of Ronnie's death by suicide immediately sprang to my mind on the base of an analogy with Dick Crick's suicide in *Waterland*, an act that I personally took for granted until I read the quite hesitant interpretation offered by Widdowson, writing that Dick "presumably drowns". (Widdowson 2006: 35) That is true; Tom's narrative never directly names it that way, nor does Evie remember Ronnie in those terms. I was therefore surprised to

discover that Logotheti too made reference to Dick's final solution to explain Ronnie's: "Like Dick at the end of Swift's *Waterland* (1983) who dives into the river in front of his brother's astonished eyes and never resurfaces, Ronnie dissolves into thin air, transformed through his own magic into the wizard he aspired to be". (Logotheti, 2020: n.p.)

In addition to all these observations that drive me to interpret Ronnie's spectacular trick in terms of a spectacular form of a suicide, I should mention one more, which enforces my interpretation. In this perspective, I will refer to the sense of guilt that, in keeping with what happens in many other novels by Swift is barely revealed, but whose effects are impossible to miss. Graham Swift's *Here We Are* records the memories of the 75 year-old Evie who became a widow the year before the narration starts, and after the loss of her dear husband Jack. They seem to have enjoyed a happy marital life together, for about 50 years. In her youth, Evie had been in another relationship, with Ronny: they had known each other for less than a year and presumably had a relationship that only lasted several months, before Evie transferred her affections to Jack and Ronnie disappeared. Now, despite the strong disparity in the length and the relevance of the two love-stories—she married Jack, not Ronnie—what is particularly striking is that the reconstruction of her reminiscences centre on Ronnie, leaving Jack on the outskirts of her narrative. Quite frankly, I do not doubt that she had stronger feelings for her deceased husband than for Ronnie, unless we are simply talking about a form of affection. What made the short-lived and remote love-story weigh more heavily than her long and happy marriage was an arcane form of awareness in her conscience, so profound and painful at the same time, that she was, directly or indirectly, implicated in what she keeps calling the disappearance of Ronnie. "Adultery runs like a scarlet thread through Swift's story materials", (Malcom 2003: 17) fittingly claims Malcom. In this specific case, however, the situation is further complicated by a twin source of the emerging remorsefulness. The sense of guilt for having betrayed Ronnie at a time when he most needed help and comfort is here amplified by the creeping thought that she contributed to creating the premise for his vanishing; again, this creates an analogy with the situation involving Tom Crick in *Waterland*, where the narrator clearly feels responsible for Dick's final suicide. Had Ronnie simply vanished, Evie would hardly have felt responsible for his disappearance and, some fifty years later maybe she would even have forgotten about him or, more simply, she would not have felt this burden of grief. Along these lines, Lea's contention about Swift's commitment to ethical choices demonstrates that this has been a major cause to which the English novelist has devoted great part of his literary career:

Swift's devotion to the disinterring of past traumas through a forensic excavation of the silences and secrets of private history reveals a conviction that

the experience of the present as ideologically and ethically fragmented and discontinuous lies in the hidden reaches of the past". (Lea 2006: 6)

My interpretation of Graham Swift's *Here We Are*, exactly as it was for John Burnside's *A Summer of Drowning*, is that this fictional text works as a literary mourning after the loss of a dear one. In this second case, however, quite an acute sense of guilt makes the suffering more unbearable.

The Acknowledgement of Melancholia

In Sigmund Freud's essay *Mourning and Melancholia* (originally, *Trauer und Melancholie*) the situation encountered by a subject who has experienced a loss and subsequently undergoes a period of bereavement is closely studied, since the mechanisms driving the subject towards an emotional reaction may take on different forms. Very succinctly,

[b]oth melancholia and mourning are triggered by the same thing—that is, by loss. The distinction often made is that mourning occurs after the death of a loved one, while in melancholia the object of love does not qualify as irretrievably lost. Melancholia is about a loss that is sometimes retrievable. (Person 2007: xxii)

Melancholic subjects, therefore, tended to gain a particular interest in Freud's studies, since they did not surrender to the idea of relinquishing the lost person, but remain attached to them "with consequent denial of the finality of the loss and unconscious fantasises of undoing and reunion". (Gaines 1997: 549) The substitution of a pleasing and suitable illusion, in place of the acceptance of reality, was crucial for Freud to regard melancholy as a form of a "pathological mourning", (Freud 1981: 250) and this can be easily connected to my point, since the ongoing mourning processes characterizing both Liv and Evie have not faded after ten, nor even fifty years. However, due to the presence of specific conditions, Liv and Evie are driven to accentuate their states of suffering. With particular reference to Liv's situation, her overconfident disposition, that has also earned her the definition of a "totally egocentric teenager" (Hyvärinen 2015: 231) by Hyvärinen, is clearly a mask that she makes use of, primarily in order to hide her vulnerable spots, not so much from her readers as from herself. Such an attitude is dictated by the awareness of a direct confrontation with her own fears, and it may be treacherous in that it blinds her from witnessing reality. Her mindset, almost arrogantly denying any form of weakness and covering instead these insecurities with an imprudent belief in having achieved some sort of invulnerability, has been the subject of analysis by Cuniff Gilson, who thus writes:

Prizing and pursuing invulnerability involves a set of dispositions and attitudes centered on fear, the threat of persecution, and anxiety about loss and harm. As both a theoretical and a practical goal, it produces the desire for control (of both self and others) and security so as to mitigate unpredictable and threatening changes. Accordingly, the pursuit of invulnerability relies on a reductively negative view of vulnerability that positions it as tantamount to harm and as that which must be eschewed at all costs. (Gilson 2016: 76)

In addition, Liv's case may be studied under the perspective of melancholia if we consider her reaction to Kyrre's death and not to the three other victims of the *buldra*, since their accidents created stress and trauma, but she did not care enough to mourn for them.

As regards Evie, on the other hand, a scholarly study by a psychoanalyst has demonstrated that melancholic mourners may emphasise the intensity of their reaction to a loss, when the emotional connection is not stable in the first place. Keogh acutely observes that “[n]ot surprisingly, insecure attachment status [...] has been noted to be a significant risk factor for an individual to develop a melancholic reaction”. (Keogh 2019: 2)

However, what both the stories share is that neither Liv nor Evie thinks about Kyrre or Ronnie as dead. In addition, their respective accounts not only constantly bring back to life their dear ones on a narrative dimension, but also show how their fantasies of reuniting again counter their perceived irrevocability of the loss. At the end of her narration, Liv voices her desperate form of resistance to an unacceptable reality by creating this explanation of her predicament: “I don't think of him as gone, but I don't think of him as living any more, and I know, if I ever do see him, it will be something other than a man that I will see—which is odd, because I don't really believe in ghosts”. (Burnside 2011: 326) On the other hand, Evie's fantasies of a reunion for even just a brief moment drive her to overlay Jack's image with that of Ronnie, showing how wide-ranging and all-embracing her imagination is. This happens late one evening when, coming home after a tiring day, she tries to relax while looking at her reflection in the mirror.

Now she sat at her dressing table, wondering whether to remove her make-up and half expecting to see in the mirror Jack standing behind her, placing his hands softly on her shoulders.

‘Exhausted, darling? That's George for you. I know how you feel. I'd take a little nap if I were you’.

But it wasn't Jack that she saw. It was too brief a glimpse for every detail, but he was in his stage outfit, the last thing she'd seen him in, and she'd recognise those eyes anywhere. (Swift 2020: 156)

Accordingly, in her critique on vulnerability Butler discusses how forms of mourning produce emotional states that reverberate to the same mourner: “[m]ourning is likened to an “interior” region of clothing that is suddenly, and

perhaps with some embarrassment, exposed, not to the public eye, but to the flesh itself'. (Butler 2003: 470) In dealing with the wounded mental states that wrap the conscience of a mourner, she then focuses her attention on the lopsided awareness of temporal sequence, conditioned by the impossibility of getting rid of an overwhelming and inhibiting condition, to the extent that ordinary notions of time may go awry, or even be completely lost. In this perspective she comments that

[w]hat results is a melancholic agency who cannot know its history as the past, cannot capture its history through chronology, and does not know who it is except as the survival, the persistence of a certain unavowability that haunts the present. (Butler 2003: 468)

Appropriately, Butler's theory seems to account for the cloudy narrative produced by a narrating conscience that still finds itself under the spell of unresolved, upsetting experiences, and that intensely characterise both Burnside's *A Summer of Drowning* and Swift's *Here We Are*. Butler's study also focuses on the mental setting generated by a melancholic disposition in cases of loss, where a sort of a boomerang effect causes the energy used to counter suffering to backfire on the same mourner, in ways that may seem contradictory and paradoxical at the same time.

If suffering, if damage, if annihilation produces its own pleasure and persistence, it is one that takes place against the backdrop of a history that is over, that emerges now as a setting, a scene, a spatial configuration of bodies that move in pleasure or fail to move, that move and fail to move at the same time. (Butler 2003: 472)

Another important author who has studied the contradictory behaviour of the melancholic mourner is Žižek who, in his revitalization of Freud's work, has left a thought-provoking comment on "Mourning and Melancholy". His statement is instrumental for me to briefly touch on the implicit purposes of the two narratives under analysis. In his discourse, the Slovene academician claims that "the mourner mourns the lost object and kills it a second time through symbolizing its loss", (Žižek 2000: 662) a line of thought that, applied to *A Summer of Drowning* and *Here We Are*, would imply that if, on the one hand, the narrators are totally dedicated to mourning the loss of a crucial figure within their emotional circle, on the other hand, the reconstruction of significant events in their lives up to their disappearance—since they always eschew the use of the word 'death' in their report—is also, and prevalently, a reconstruction of their death via their loss. The jarring contradiction lies in the ambiguity of the purposes of the narrative itself, whereby experiencing the pleasure of bringing back to life someone who has been lost, is countered by experiencing the pain of the memory of the loss itself. Actually, the incongruity of such a complex psychological dynamic would deploy a perverse search for pleasure.

An account of how the contradictions in the reaction of a melancholic mourner may materialize cannot be considered complete, unless I also take into consideration how Berlant's theory of cruel optimism impacts on the novels under scrutiny. Briefly, Berlant claims that

[a] relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. (Berlant 2011: 1)

Such a concise opening already comprises some of the central issues under consideration in my paper. The oxymoron in the title of Berlant's study *Cruel Optimism* alludes to the paradoxical situation where an intent is aborted after its main elements have short-circuited. It also clearly discusses how fantasies about an undisturbed existence grow in relation to desires of an attachment. She also explains the nature of the contradiction employed in her oxymoronic theory as a clash between the expectations about the yield from an attachment and the effective end product from the same attachment. This seems to me to be a detailed description of the modes of resistance to accepting reality found in both *A Summer of Drowning* and *Here We Are*. Berlant moves further, however, when she questions: "what happens when those fantasies start to fray—depression, dissociation, pragmatism, cynicism, optimism, activism, or an incoherent mash?" (Berlant 2011: 2) The centrality of the fantasies in this process cannot be overlooked, since their action generates what Berlant identifies as a type of optimism, the fuel in the unending resistance to the acceptance of reality. The paradoxical situation generated by the pursuit of 'the good life' by means of dominant forms of optimistic forces lies in the fact that this same optimistic boost ends up hindering that 'good life'. Seemingly appearing like dogs chasing their own tails, Liv and Evie have at least a psychological explanation for their obstinate self-torturing undercurrents: a guilty conscience. If, however, the sense of guilt in Evie has already been discussed, in Liv it would surface as her awareness of having remained passive, as a mere spectator, in the scene when Kyrre moves away along with the *buldra*, moments before "they *had* to have vanished". (Burnside 2011: 312) The ethical form of self-sacrifice—or, their masochistic choice—on the part of Liv and Evie needs to be contextualised into the wider spectre of the sense of guilt, requiring a self-punishing action enacted by the unconscious mind.

The ensuing sense of confusion resulting from the clash of opposite energies is also tackled by Berlant when she discusses the agency of the impasse.

Usually an "impasse" designates a time of dithering from which someone or some situation cannot move forward. [...] the impasse is a stretch of time in

which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic. (Berlant 2011: 4)

Indeed, *A Summer of Drowning* and *Here We Are* have various ways of presenting stalemates. My focus here will be on how these narratives find their action of storytelling literally impeded by the inexplicable. Liv's tale in *A Summer of Drowning* adopts a more dramatic strategy in exposing how wording is stuck, by repeatedly stressing how her undertaking as a narrator remains frustrated by the sheer impossibility of her task. Even if the examples of this strategy of narration available in the text are copious, I will limit my discussion to two of them, which seem to shed light on a particularly critical situation. In the first case, words fail Liv while speaking to Kyrre after having witnessed Martin Crosbie's disappearance on the lakeshore: "there was too much that I couldn't explain. The absence of a body. The missing car. Mother's disbelief. None of it made any sense". (Burnside 2011: 291) As for her witnessing Kyrre's vanishing act, a complete narrative system goes haywire. "There was no story, no explanation that I could offer, whether to her or to myself—or none, at least, that made any sense in the plain light of day". (Burnside 2011: 321) The maddening effects of these descriptions implicitly demonstrate how untruthful it is for Liv to proclaim herself detached from forms of involvement with the Other.

Shifting my focus to *Here We Are*, it soon becomes evident that the narrator never resorts to calls of alarm, or to remonstrations because of frustration with reporting properly. Swift's texts may be equated to musical scores, in which the musician is called on to pay attention to the pauses, as well to the notes: therefore, silences are of crucial importance in his narrative line. While discussing the importance of failed expressions by the narrator Tom in *Waterland*—Swift's recognised masterpiece that so well resonates in *Here We Are*—Bentley makes an acute observation: "One of the ways in which Tom's difficulty in expressing his guilt is shown in the number of ellipses or gaps used throughout his narrative". (Bentley 2008: 135) Along these lines, I would claim that the narrating voice in *Here We Are* also persists in the use of ellipses. It is no mystery that in this mysterious novel a number of crucial situations are left unexplained. Not only does the question 'what happened to Ronnie in the end?' echo in the reader's mind at the end of the novel, but also the questions 'why did Evie turn to Jack?' and 'what did Jack think about betraying his best friend?' have been left unanswered. A delicate mixture of discretion, restraint and embarrassment caused by Evie's sense of guilt possibly accounts for the absence of these relevant topics from the text. And—likewise—they also account for Swift's complete mastery in the art of storytelling. In this novel the loss and the sense of guilt make the story inexplicable—or magic.

In conclusion, the category of the inexplicable (sometimes also referred to as 'the unspeakable') is a by-product of the literary trauma theory and affect theory, an inner place of "conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim

them aloud”. (Herman 1997: 1) As a topic, it inevitably shows both its contradictory and iconoclastic nature, by challenging normative forms of narratives, as well as traditional expectations of literary products. The desperate struggle between the need to tell against the need to keep it silent in fact opens new paths for fresh and innovative forms of literary representations. El Nossery and Hubbell summarized succinctly when they claimed that “[t]raumatic experience may be unspeakable, but it is not necessarily unrepresentable”. (El Nossery and Hubbell 2013: 1)

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