

## From Bermondsey to Margate: A British post-war ontological journey in graham Swift's *Last Orders* to find new orders

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### Abstract

Graham Swift's 1996 novel *Last Orders* has been a set text on the English literature syllabi in British schools since it was published. It is in fact, one of the most outstanding post-war British novels and many studies up to now have been done in case of its thematic significances as well as the post-modern techniques or strategies adopted by the novelist. Yet, a reader must not ignore that one of Swift's main purposes in writing such a novel in such a manner has been to represent the different post-war British generations, the existing conflicts they face in life, their search for the meaning of being and the existing barriers blocking their way for achieving a new life perspective. To be more specific, the present article intends to focus on how Graham Swift is to depict the ontological symbolic journey of the different characters in this novel – Ray, Lenny, Vic, and Vince– as they are affected by the death of a friend Jack Dodds and are on a detour from Bermondsey to Margate to fulfill his will, that is spreading his ashes at the ocean in Margate.

**Keywords:** barrier, journey, ontology, order

### 1. Introduction

“That’s why we’re here, aint we? To remember the dead”<sup>[1]</sup>. In Graham Swift's *Last Orders* and in the twenty fifth Chapter titled ‘Rochester’, the reader finds that the four friends – Ray, Lenny, Vic, and Vince –are at a bar and as they are conversing about their dead friend Jack and how it has acted as a force for bringing them to that place, they suddenly decide to start a detour on their way to Margate – that is going to include visiting the War Memorial at Chatham, Wakefield Farm and the Canterbury Cathedral before arrival at Margate. As a matter of fact, it is a sign that their friend's death, the memory of his life and also the act of discussing the necessity of fulfilling his will itself, have acted as stimuli and what in consequence have given them the idea of starting to go on a detour or better to say a symbolic journey: a journey to past in order to reconsider the meaning of their being and life, the way they can know themselves better and how they can find more valid orders for their future lives. In other words, Graham Swift is to provide the reader with a novel dealing with the ontological journey of these figures at late 20<sup>th</sup> century by trying to give a pathological reading of what have shaped the world view of these members of the lower middle class, their mentality, the foundation of their family and social life and their understanding of the British culture and history.

### 2. Discussion

Dealing with British Culture and History, the reader at the first instance must not ignore the fact that the Second World War – which is undoubtedly one of most important incidents of the world history– has been highlighted to a great extent Graham Swift's *Last Orders* so as to reflect on the degree to which the lives of the twentieth century British people at the post-War time have been influenced by the phenomenon. Actually, in this novel, Swift is to project the idea that those

figures are not quite aware of the way their post-War lives have been affected the by the War and how for years they have not been able to come up with its traumas and the restricting ontological barriers it has brought about. As a critic asserts, *Last Orders* is a novel to draw on the “post-War Englishness” and how the characters in the novel are to escape from the psychological “melancholia” outliving the Second World War by starting to mourn it<sup>[3]</sup> because of the fact that “the experience of the war is present and pervasive”<sup>[7]</sup> and they cannot escape it. Thus, the act of mourning for the loss of Jack Dodds by his friends– who would consider him a hero of the War – is a turning point and the journey started toward Margate by them in order to fulfill his will that is spreading his ashes at the ocean is very symbolic from that point of view. The reader must also have in mind that Margate is the very place Jack longed to go before hospitalization so as to start a new life with Amy after buying a bungalow. Thus, their journey can be credited as a struggle to break with old orders and barriers that from the time of war up to the time of Jack's death have hold them from a dynamic life: a life Jack Dodds was not successful to grasp because of his inability to establish a perfect relation with his wife, his adopted son, his disabled daughter as well as the changing world orders before his death. But how can Jack's inability or his unsuccessful post-War life give his friends food for thought and act as a cause for the beginning of an ontological journey? To find an answer, one must have in mind that because of the shared experience of the War all these figures have faced more or less the same existential dilemmas and their friend Jack who is now dead is no exception. Thus, Jack's death, as a member of their community, despite the existing differences between them creates a strong sense of empathy in them and makes them go back in time in an attempt to resolve those dilemmas with a new emerging anxiety. According to a

critic, Jack's death is like a "a definite caesura", and in order to overcome with Jack's death or the psychic absence they feel in result of that, they find it necessary to study in a new light what has been "smoothed over in the course of daily life" in their community: "past severed links or loose ends and long dead lines in their lives [with Jack]" [9]. Looking differently, in the same way as what the readers find about Tom in *Waterland*, a previous novel by Graham Swift, and the way he needs to come to terms with his past through a story [8], by facing Jack's death, his friends feel the urgency of coming to terms with their past for another time; what might be taken to be deferred for long because of fear, ideological stagnancy or any other mental or ontological dilemmas. From this perspective, their physical journey that is moving from Bermondsey to Margate, necessitated by Jack's will, can be taken as a parallel to the journey that is psychological and its progress is exposed to the readers through the courses of the novel. Actually, this journey is a kind of ontological revolt and breaks the boundary between past and present and is the very factor which provides them with a new prospective for their future lives. To go on in this discussion it is then good to refer to Alice Mandricardo. This critic believes that these kinds of journeys that include shifts between present and past events in Swift's novels are to draw on this novelist's viewpoint about history. According to her:

The past is vitally unfinished as long as one continues to enter it [in Swift's novels]; all Swift's characters are involved in the enterprise of reliving and reconstructing it. They need to figure out the historical incidents that have made them what they are and which have brought them to their present, critical state [7].

Based on what was mentioned above, it can be put this way that these four characters feel the urgency of a psychological journey or better to say the exigency of breaking the temporal barriers as well as getting detached from a spatial stagnancy that their routine life for years at Bermondsey have generated. Actually, by Jack's death a kind of consciousness comes to them about all those matters and the necessity of an ontological refreshment to link them to the new world is felt by all of them – what has been belated for decades. Another way, this new feeling of need in them can be taken to be the result of figuring out the necessity of regaining a true as well as searching for new forms of "meaningful communication with others" if the matter is viewed from the standpoint of Habgood's philosophy [2]. They need to take a new dynamic position and communicate in a new light with their present day socio-psychological state. That is why by the time of deciding about taking that detour they are very eager to start reconsidering the past events and the way those events may be related to the present situation. The temporal infusion or the broken boundary between past and present is then the result of such a tendency and is highlighted by Swift at different points in the novel even on the textual level. For example, at the beginning of their journey on Vince's car Ray claims that time is somehow lost [11]. After all, it must be added that besides the blurred boundary between the past and present—the present tense narrative of the whole novel – there is not also a clear boundary between the voluntary and involuntary memory in Proustian terms in *Last Orders*. This makes the narrative of the novel too complicated and consequently the

study of the relation between the memory of the past events and what is going on in their minds at different moments very hard. In other words, there is no linear movement or better to say one to one correspondence between the past and present events and one cannot be quite sure about how a series of syntheses happening simultaneously in the minds of these characters at different levels are related to their physical journey that is in progress in the outside world. Yet, one can study that physical journey very thoroughly by trying to find the symbolic significance of the places they visit and the degree to which they may be interpretable in general based on the whole things which can be inferred from what is going to be revealed gradually about past in different chapters by these four friends as well as the parts narrated as if by the voice of the dead Jack or by his wife Amy. Such a study may be claimed to be very complex. However, this is a sign to bring testimony to the fact that in Swift's eyes the Post-War British world is the world of double complexities when it comes to ontological matters. Thus, even at the structural level, a novel like *Last Orders* must reflect that issue or as Wheeler believes must project "the new ways of being in the face of uncertainty" [1]. It is not then hard to find why such complexities are also to be traced in the narrative system of the novel. Actually Swift himself in an interview confirms the existence of such complexities by drawing on how the collaborative narrative of the novel has been constructed and additionally by emphasizing the fact that it has been intended to be a "tremendous challenge" to the readers [5]; a kind of complexity which can explain what the novelist asserts about this novel while talking about winning the Booker Prize: "If I had won it [for *Water Land*], it might have unbalanced me in my career [4].

To study the symbolic journey of these four friends on the symbolic level one must start by focusing on the first place those friends arrive at on their way to Margate: the War naval memorial at Chatham. This has a very important symbolic meaning because during the Second World War Vic was in navy and they stop at the memorial by his request for visiting the place. As a matter of fact, this is the first point at which through Vic's eyes – by taking into consideration his nostalgic view of his past experiences at the navy during the War and what he figures out at the memorial – the reader may by analogy get a clear picture of the syntheses that are taking place in the minds of these friends and the way they are in a struggle to achieve an ontological refreshment. Visiting the place and feeling the losses caused by War, Vic is able to contemplate on the notion of death. He also finds the fact that there is a great distance between the ideal picture for years they had of being killed at the War and what in reality the names inscribed on the bronze plates at a wall so as to commemorate those killed at navy during the War connotes. In fact, by that visit Vic is to confront the ontological bombast one may face when he or she is contemplating on the notion of death as it is an end and it can cause the loss of one's name and memory. That is why visiting the place he says:

A man is just a name. Which means something to him it attaches to, and to anyone who deals, same way, in the span of a human life, but it don't mean monkey beyond that. It don't mean a monkey's to things that live longer [11].

What Vic expresses, is then a good sign which can help a critic to claim that by visiting this place for the first time after decades of living only with their own subjective history of the War, that is in fact the memory or the story of their War days' battles at the desert of Egypt and the British navy, these friends are connected to the history of their country [as it is intended to be narrated by the government] and start to respond it"<sup>[6]</sup>. In other words, when they start a struggle to find a way to get on top of the hill in order to take a more careful look at the memorial, they come to the understanding that it is very hard to find a path and that they are the only people there. They also perceive that: "It's like it got built then forgotten"<sup>[11]</sup>. Actually, what they express is metaphorically to speak of the fact that the War days have been forgotten by most people and that they are the only people who yet live with the memories of the War and have been somehow capitulated by them. It can then be inferred that at the end of their visit to the memorial they have achieved a new perspective as Ray speaks about the memorial in such terms:

It's an obelisk, that's the word, obelisk.  
The sun's shining on it. It's white and tall.  
It looks like it's"<sup>[1]</sup>.

The next place where they stop at for a while on their way to Margate is the Kentish country side. There, Vince suddenly decides to spread some of the ashes of Jack in the wind; what causes Lenny to get angry and to start to attack him. Vince's action may not seem interpretable at the beginning, but the reader would get aware of its significance when he or she reads the chapter related to Amy and her memory of hop picking at Wick's Farm. In that chapter it is revealed that Wick's Farm located in the Kentish country was the place where she and Jack came to fall in love with each other before the beginning of the Second World War. This pre-War context is of course of much significance and according to Malcom, the picture Amy gives to the reader of this farm is very close to the ideal of "the garden of England"<sup>[11]</sup>. To be precise, Wick's Farm can metaphorically be taken as a paradise or better to say the place where there is a balance between what goes inside one – human nature – and the outside physical nature. Thus, he or she can live there in full comfort and happiness and also free from any tensions. It is in fact because of such qualities of the farm that Amy and Jack soon fell in love with each other. Amy describes this place and the way it brought Jack and her together:

"I thought, What are you doing Amy Mitchell, what are you doing? You don't even know this boy. You don't even fancy him, not that much, not so much. But the air was soft and ripe and still. And there was that feeling inside of me, between me, like a bowl"<sup>[11]</sup>.

According to what Amy expresses, it can be concluded that by spreading some of Jack's ashes there in the wind Vince is symbolically commemorating the place and also the memory of a sweet past when his parents could live for once free from the restrictions of the urban routine life and any other distracting factors; what was suddenly ruined by the beginning of the Second World War. Actually, June's birth

as a mentally disabled girl is the fruit of that age and by analogy it can be taken as a sign of the destructive effects of the War and how it ruined that ideal life of Amy and Jack, because their daughter is sent to a mental hospital at birth and Amy can never convince Jack – who always tries to ignore her existence as his daughter – to take a visit to her. Consequently, the matter causes Amy's discontent and gradually they get far from each other. That is why Amy refuses to accompany others in the journey toward Margate. She gives her reason for refusing to do so in this manner:

My own journey to make. Their journey and mine. The living come first even the living who were as good as dead to him, so it'd be all one now, all the same, in his book"<sup>[11]</sup>.

Based on what was discussed above, it can be inferred that what Swift has intended by referring to Wick's Farm and the story of Jack and Amy is to reflect on important chunks of a couple's Pre-War and Post-War life and the discrepancy between the two and how not only their own future life but also the future life of their daughter is going to be controlled by the negative effects of the War. In fact, this part of the Journey toward Margate is important because of the hints it gives first of all to Vince – whose symbolic act of scattering some of the ashes at the farm portrays what is going on in him – and then to Ray who by observing the farm and what Vince does is to be reminded of his affair with Amy and how it can help him and her to escape from the boring routine mundane and routine life they are living"<sup>[11]</sup>. Additionally, Lenny's fight with Vince who do not understand the reason for what Vince has done and Vic's astonishment are signs to portray the fact that they see that action in disagreement with the main purpose of their journey that is to fulfill Jack's will to scatter his ashes at the ocean. Therefore, it can be claimed that the way Vic and Lenny react is to represent the fact that both of them see their journey as what is done with an important existential or better to say an ontological purpose and that Jack must have meant something by his will. This is a testimony to the fact that they are actively involved in the matter and that some syntheses are happening in their mind in the way of finding some answers for the question. All what was said here is then to shed light on how these four friend's stop at Wick's Farm is to be taken as a sign that they have gone through another stage in their psychological journey.

The Canterbury Cathedral is the next destination in their Journey toward Margate because Lenny has never visited the place and likes to do so. It is quite clear that Swift has much in mind by making use of this symbol in his *Last Orders* as the cathedral which is founded in the sixth century and is one of the oldest cathedrals in England as well as the world can be taken as the representation of "national identity and history"<sup>[7]</sup> ace by Ray, Lenny, Vic, and Vince is therefore very symbolic and is to give the readers the impression that Swift has intended to introduce those four friends as pilgrims: like those pilgrims who would come from different part of England to the cathedral in Medieval Ages in order to visit the shrine of Thomas Becket. The reader may also be reminded of Jeffry Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and different stories narrated by Chaucer's characters as each chapter in *Last Orders* is

narrated in the same manner as Chaucer's work by a single character. But what is Graham Swift's purpose by such references as well as putting emphasis on each individual's story by making it appear like *The Canterbury Tale*? Actually, by such analogies Swift wants to highlight the fact that by their journey from Bermondsey to Margate, these four friends have started a struggle to review their memory of past and what has happened to them so as to make sense of the present situation and consequently future. Therefore, what in this context can be as illuminating as a religious pilgrimage to the Canterbury Cathedral for these four figures are the syntheses happening in their mind and their psychological pilgrimage toward new understandings. What they come to understand during their visit to the cathedral is then according to a critic the distance between the notion of "big history" <sup>[6]</sup> – or better to say the collective understanding and experience of the people of England – and their individual experiences in facing different historical events or incidents. To illuminate the matter it can then be referred to the way Ray describes his personal experience of the War and story of what happened to him in Libya as the story of a "small man at big history" <sup>[11]</sup>. What Ray expresses about the Cathedral during the visit can also be helpful in the way of clarifying the matter having in mind that it is to refer to big history:

It's a big building, long and tall, but it's like it hasn't stretched up yet to its full height, it's still growing. It makes the cathedral at Rochester look like any old church and it makes you feel sort of cheap and titchy. Like it's looking down at you, saying, I'm Canterbury Cathedral, who the hell are you? <sup>[11]</sup>

After leaving the Canterbury Cathedral, those four friends finally move toward Margate. As a critic believes this place is much significant and it has been chosen by Swift because of direct references to the end of the second book of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* <sup>[6]</sup>. In that part of the poem the speaker talks about the fact that as she is standing on Margate sands, she can connect nothing with nothing. This allusion is important because it helps the reader find that even though these four friends are at the final stage of their psychological journey and many mental syntheses have happened in them they are yet much doubtful about many ontological matters like death as an end, one's final achievements and the relation between one's private stories – of life – and others' stories when all of these stories' relevance to the big history and their reliability cannot easily be found. Actually, because of all these complexities and unresolved questions Ray, Lenny, Vic and Vince cannot be sure of how they must act and the way they must go forward. The open ended text of the novel does not give the reader many clues about the matter. Yet, it can be claimed that by the moment which they stand at the pier in the stormy Margate so as to fulfill Jack's will, at least they are quite aware of all the existing complexities in their way and also conscious of the matter that for years they have ignored the changing world and this has hold them from a dynamic life up to now. To grasp such a life in future and in order to avoid a life like that of Jack Dodds' they must then do something. What they must do is then symbolically represented by the act of spreading Jack's ashes at the ocean

because the ocean is the boundary between Britain and the wide world. Thus, these four friends are to break the barriers of old life orders so as to start a new one, through their multifarious reflections on the complex "universal premises" of the "intellectual and commune worlds" <sup>[10]</sup>, they come in terms with. It is not then hard to find how Jack Dodds' last order turns out to be a new order for them.

### 3. Conclusion

Dealing with the contemporary British literature, especially those produced in the early decades after The Second World War, up to the late 1990s, it can be traced how directly or by implication many writers have tried to highlight the effects of the war years and the way the life of the British people underwent a metamorphosis at different levels going through such an event. As a matter of fact, this so-called 'post-war' literature, is so rich not only because it focuses on the first generation of people who themselves experienced the war events as well as the beginning of a new age, but also because it tries to investigate the psychological outcomes of the war and the way that generation was later differentiated from the next ones in terms of their ontological view of matters or to be more specific their 'identity'. A novelist like Graham Swift, can be claimed to be one of the most outstanding figures who has been successful in providing a good account of the matter of 'identity' in post-war British literature. In a novel like *Last Orders* he approaches this matter in a very artistic way by relying on the story of dead Jack and his will which brings back together his friends after a long time. What makes this novel important is in fact the novelists' ability to foreground through the courses of the novel how Jack's death and his will or last order turns out to act as an ontological stimuli by bringing Jack's friends in term with their past, their present state of personal and social lives in order to find how they can go on to meet their future by adopting new suitable orders on the basis of a valid ontological refreshment; what can only be grasped through viewing their present day world in a new light and by reconsideration of their understanding of 'selfhood', 'identity' and 'communicative life'.

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