

INSIGHTS INTO BEING SOCIAL AND/OR SOCIAL BEING IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S WORLD

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Abstract

This paper is part of a larger study that analyses, by resort to cultural studies, the way identity is constructed in relation to various spaces in Graham Swift's fiction. The social sphere, where people interact while embracing roles, is considered to be one such "space" or arena. The individual is not a monad, but the resultant of the surrounding realities. Concepts taken from Bourdieu's theory of social games and his habitus equation are relevant, along with those of Goffman's social stage theory. We can signal two types of influences on Swift's characters. One is a broader context, of mentalities, in which concepts such as "self-occultation" or "adiaphorization" express haunting worries, along with the problem of confronting death. The other is the social realities that characters deal with – the post-war welfare state and progressive individualism towards Thatcherism. Torn between opposite tendencies, towards estrangement, on the one hand, and relationships, on the other, the characters use and abuse the positions that they occupy.

Keywords: identity, social interaction, ambivalence

Introduction

This paper begins with aspects of the socio-historical background of the fictional worlds under discussion, as the ideology/ies at work influence the characters' world views. Then, the broader context, of mentalities and philosophical outlook(s) on life, will come to the fore. We will subsequently see how some theoreticians emphasize that all identity is social, and that no social interaction is performed in a *tabula rasa* milieu. Hence, an explanation of Bourdieu's fields and game theory is relevant. Also, as throughout history social interaction has often been likened to a representation on stage, and since Swift's characters often refer to their roles as theatrical, we will introduce working concepts from Goffman's performance theory.

The socio-historical background

The Sweet-Shop Owner covers a period of roughly four decades, from the 1930s to the 1970s. *Shuttlecock* focuses on the second half of the twentieth century, especially after the war. *Waterland* makes incursions into the nineteenth century, but the narrative standpoint is the Thatcherite present. In *Out of This World*, Harry and Sophie look back to the past from the eighties (1982): the violence of a series of wars and television shows culminating with that of the American president's discourse on the occasion of the 1969 landing on the

moon. *Last Orders* comes even closer to contemporary times. It depicts a journey taking place in 1990, but characters allow memory to wander in the past, mainly World War Two. Similarly, in *The Light of Day*, George Webb's monologues and thoughts occur during one single day, November 20, 1997 – two years after a murder. They refer to incidents belonging to decades before, as part of the lives of three generations. The vantage point in *Tomorrow* is still the nineties, looking back on the atmosphere of the sixties and the seventies. *Caribbean Dawn* reiterates the American dream, fulfilled by Graham, the main character.

In broad lines, the most discussed temporal segment in all the novels stretches from the forties to the eighties or nineties. The narrators focus on the social transformations until after Margaret Thatcher's governance, and on their effects on the individual. They sorrowfully denounce what in their opinion is a history of pseudo progress and false war heroism of Great Britain. As presented by mainstream productions and recordings, post-war ideology purported a politics of consensus and the welfare state, which ensured the support of human rights and provided for its citizens 'from cradle to grave'. The politics of consensus was followed by Thatcher's privatization and the discursive dissolution of the traditional concept of society. People faced the disappearance of the comfort, the safety net previously provided by society. The narrative of order and meaning faded. A marked individualism ensued in the eighties. However, this vein had existed since the sixties, and, as subdued tensions, even before that, due to frustrations emerging from the post-war struggle for survival. During the early seventies, Keynesian thought was declared to no longer represent economic reality. With Swift's characters, the emphasis falls on the estrangement and brutality of history, which negatively affect the individual.

Daniel Lea considers that the two generations in all of Graham Swift's novels are representative of two opposing sets of values – communality and stability, versus individualism and rootlessness: "The values of stability through continuity and of communal before personal responsibility are radicalized into a form of pre-Thatcherite free-market ethical economy that privileges individual freedom over the duties of the commonwealth and valorizes self-fulfillment as the ultimate goal of authentic being." (Lea 2005 177). These opposite tendencies create additional social tensions.

Ideology/ies at work

Characters become painfully aware of the mechanisms of modernity, namely "self-occultation" (Castoriadis qtd. in Bauman 1998 19) and "adiaphorization" (Bauman 1998 99). The first concept refers to an illusion entertained willingly by society: "denying or disguising the fact of self-constitution" (19). Self-creation is treated "as an outcome of a heteronomous command or the extraneous order of things". In other words, society justified its existence and mechanisms by recourse to God and His Order, relying upon grounds offered by Christianity. The advantage was that these grounds were much more difficult to fight, to expose as inadequate, or to resist, as the stake of what might be lost was higher. However, as God is later proclaimed dead, the motivations to do good and not evil disappear as well. "Adiaphorization" is the "exemption of a considerable part of human action from moral judgment" (99-100), i.e. the avoidance of moral responsibility. Responsibility is directed at "either [...] socially constructed and managed supra-individual

agencies or [...] a bureaucratic ‘rule of nobody’” (99). Deeds are no longer judged in terms of moral obligation.

Along with others, Bauman intimates that, after one disenchantment, with Divinity, humanity faced a second one, with Reason (75). This second disenchantment appears in the novels as references to war violence and the evil effects of technology. These are proof of a second type of adiaphorization: that of cruelty performed through “insensitization” (149). Desensitization appears as a result of massive exposure to violence through the media, and the creation of distance from the victims through advanced technology (151). Screens allow mass killing in war just by merely pressing buttons and targeting dots (150). Reason has engendered both progress and misery. This critical situation brings about an identity crisis and the chaos of fragmentariness. It also brings about the necessity of morality and moral choice (in the sense understood by Bauman). People’s most immediate imperative is to confront the “Abyss” (16), or death, in the context in which neither faith, nor Reason are there any longer. The human being is left with no explanation for the purpose of existence, and with no means of facing the futility of life. This atmosphere of the mind materializes in a particular obsession with death in the novels under analysis.

Graham Swift’s “people”

As a result of the socio-historical and philosophical contexts above, Swift’s characters vacillate between two contrasting tendencies. One is being moral, relating to the other in a meaningful manner that entails commitment, emotional involvement and the fulfillment of duty. Characters are in search of redemption by the creation of a context, of a “space” of sense-making. The other tendency is towards solitude and egotism, as a result of acute disenchantment with the ways of the world. Consequently, characters will relate, get emotionally involved, (sometimes because they cannot help themselves), but will also tend to subvert each position they are in, (ab)using it.

Swift’s characters are never simply superficial, meant to merely deconstruct and deceive. They are generally good people, as obsolete or nostalgic as this description may seem. They are tender-hearted and kind – sometimes despite themselves or without realizing it. These traits make their existence harder. It is because they are kind and sensitive that they seek meaning restlessly, and ultimately create a surrogate narrative at a more modest, personal, micro level. They get involved in “the generation of an artificial but satisfying *telos*” (Lea 2005 59). They need to be noble, and find nobility in the fulfillment of duty, or in sacrifice. It is their way of achieving the “being-for” the other (Bauman 1998 51), which is an authentic form of togetherness that comes in contradiction with Reason (52), as it presupposes emotions and love for another (53) (Lévinas 2002 105-6). It involves “commitment” (Bauman 1998 53), love, and fellow-feeling, as well as a form of “loneliness” (57). It is an act of courage, as it entails “shedding” any social “mask” (59). It goes against the conventionality of the “being-with” (50) – a less authentic form of togetherness. The “passage from being-with to being-for” (59), along with the commitment involved, are called love (in Bauman’s view relying on Longstrup and Lévinas) (60). For all these reasons, being-for the other is a moral act.

In Bauman’s outlook, people are also moral when, having faced reality as it is, they act and make moral choices (1). Seeing reality in its gloomy appearance and expressing this

feeling are acts of courage, of refusing to lie to oneself, even if that brings more suffering. Characters like Will Chapman are numbed, incapable of acting per se in any grand way required of them by history. However, the mere expression of their opinions (as narrators), or their lack of reaction qualify as acting, because these attitudes change the others' perceptions of reality. Since these characters' thoughts and opinions create standpoints and modify reality, they are moral in the above-mentioned sense described by Bauman.

“Being-for the other”

Communion and being-for the other resemble “pure relationships” (Giddens 1991 88). According to Anthony Giddens, the main difference between a pure relationship and a traditional one is that the former “is not anchored in external conditions of social or economic life” (89). In it, “the connection with the other person is valued for its own sake” (90). It only exists as a result of internal motivation, and whether it lasts depends on the feeling of fulfillment experienced by the participants. This means that “anything that goes wrong between the partners intrinsically threatens the relationship itself”. Pure relationships are “reflexively organized” (91), i.e. self-reflexivity and self-examination are at work. Each of the participants constantly checks the level of self-fulfillment by asking oneself questions meant to establish who one is and where one stands. “Commitment” (92) motivates participants to try to preserve the relationship. The “committed person” is “someone who, recognizing the tensions intrinsic to a relationship [...] is nevertheless willing to take a chance on it”. Commitment must not be confused with either conviction or love; love is “a form” of it, but commitment remains “the wider category”. It is basically “what replaces the external anchors” of the traditional relationship, it is what helps “buy time” (93) when “perturbations” appear.

Pure relationships also have as necessary ingredients “intimacy” (94), (which should not be mistaken for “lack of privacy”), and “mutual trust” (96). Giddens explains that trust is not automatic. If the participant in such a relationship cannot trust other people due to previous traumatic experiences, the foundation of the pure relationship is jeopardized. Participants need to be “secure in their own self-identities” (95) and about their self-worth. Otherwise, relationships degenerate (95). “Co-dependency” (93) is a sort of addiction, as a partner is “psychologically unable to leave”, even if (s)he is unhappy and wants to. “Conflict-ridden relationships” (95) contrast with “de-energized” ones. In “convenience” relationships partners “settle” to stay in the relationship because it is more convenient than to leave. The reasons are potential exterior rewards, and/or avoiding difficulties or loneliness (95). Most of Swift's characters want to have pure relationships, but fail because they are traumatized. They lack self-assuredness, self-integrity, and the ability to trust.

Other recommendations to achieve a pure relationship are: to communicate, not to rehash old issues during fights, to engage together in recreations of all kinds, and “to express anger in a constructive way” (97). Giddens also informs us that marriage, friendship and sexual relationships fall under the category of pure relationships, but parental ones do not (98). The latter are dependent on external criteria, such as biological and power relations, and not upon the participants' choice (98).

According to Margareta Bertilsson, love transforms “both the subject (the lover) and the object of desire (the beloved one)” (Bertilsson 1995 307), who are “no longer identical

with themselves”. In other words, it changes identity. Niklas Luhmann sees love as “an important medium of symbolic exchange” (Luhmann qtd. in Bertilsson 1995 311), through which people get to know themselves better and enhance communication with the others. Thus, love is seen as the vehicle of the formation of both personal and social identities. Weber explains that when people consider God dead, the “eroticization of life occurs” (Weber qtd. in Bertilsson 1995 304). This could lead to violent relations between the sexes (to the detriment of women) (303). People would “become each other’s means” (304) of satisfaction or pleasure, in the absence of religious morality, spirituality, and superior guidance. This is precisely what happens, for instance, for quite a long period of time, in the characters’ lives in *Shuttlecock*. However, the individual’s personality weighs a lot in the constitution of her/his love interest and relationship. Simmel points out precisely that, when he says that the more evolved the individual “on the evolutionary scale”, the more “individuated” his/her love is (Simmel qtd. in Bertilsson 1995 305).

Although characters manifest distrust of love or of being able to hold on to it, they never see it as a petty interest. With very few exceptions, which may arise as momentary revolt that is soon corrected, love is never trivialized. In Swift, there is no room for Sartre’s view of love as “*une passion inutile*” (Sartre qtd. in Bertilsson 1995 321), or as unreal. In Sartre’s reflections, by being a desire for the other, once the other is possessed, love disappears, so it is an illusion.

People as social beings

In support of identity construction in connection with space and positions in society, and as a reason why we need Bourdieu and Goffman’s theories, we have Charles Taylor’s perspective. We “don’t, individually, determine the options among which we choose” as far as who we are in society (Taylor qtd. in Appiah 2005 107). To forget that is to neglect Taylor’s “webs of interlocution” and to commit “monological fallacy”. People choose positions from a pre-existing set, or “web”, and they are not monads, they need interaction with others to reach these positions. People “make up selves from a tool kit of options made available by our culture”. These options are considered in our paper the “spaces” or “positions” in relation to which characters construct their identity.

Richard Jenkins also makes the point that identity is social, constructed through interaction, in context (Jenkins 2005 4). Stuart Hall contends that identities are constructed within discourse “in specific historical and institutional sites” (Hall 2000 17). They “emerge within the play of specific modalities of power”, and “are constructed through, not outside, difference”, “only through the relation to the Other”. To Hall, identity is always contextual. Here, Hall meets Althusser’s interpellation theory: subjects are created by being summoned into positions by ideology.

Bourdieu tried to give a more thorough picture of social interaction in his equation: “[*habitus*] (capital)] + field = practice” (Bourdieu qtd. in Crossley 96). Besides the tangible, economic capital, there is also “cultural capital”, as well as “symbolic capital” (97). Symbolic capital refers to status, recognition, and generally “the manner in which an individual is perceived” by the others. Forms of social stigmatization, such as racism or sexism, are translated as “capital deficit”. Different “levels of capital”, of either form, create class differences that make up a hierarchy on a vertical axis (99). The “horizontal

axis” maps understanding according to social spaces or “fields”, which often overlap. The likening of fields to “markets” (100) or “games” points to their common elements of strategy and negotiation. Capital and *habitus* are two parameters that shape the agent’s courses of action, i.e. establish affordability within the fields (101). Of course, in its turn, the field shapes the *habitus*; the social environment actions and perceptions ultimately (re)create the field (101). Bourdieu’s fields may be likened to Taylor’s “webs” or Hall’s “sites”.

The game is therefore a set of positions, a situation, context, or even a role. The characters sometimes break conventions. They not only bring new content to a role, but also show that the respective position might be an illusion. For instance, they regard the concept of war hero as oxymoronic, denying its validity. Some characters do not believe in the positive archetypal connotations of the concept of home (Vince Dodds in *Last Orders*). They implicitly deny *ethos*, and put forth the conviction that a “home” gives the individual an accidental identity. A third example is the claim that an individual can truly love and be moral and a murderer concurrently (Sarah, in *The Light of Day*). At times, it is precisely the extra-ordinary nature of a situation that brings meaning.

Swift’s characters are not playing the insensitive game of the cynical, typical, late modern character, described by Bauman (Bauman 1998 99). In Bauman’s games, players are aware that what they do is “just a game”, with no emotional involvement. There is “no room for pity, commiseration, compassion or co-operation”. Yet Swift’s characters are torn by existential issues, bound by duty, and in search of being-for the other.

Bourdieu calls “social libido” the “impulse” that connects the players to a certain field (Bourdieu qtd. in Crossley 2001 102). Crossley disagrees that this force is merely a biological drive, and claims that it has a more specific nature, being a “desire for recognition” (Crossley 2001 102). It is a “desire of the other” if this other can act as a mirror. This is a Lacanian mirror situation combined with interpellation. Desire for recognition gives people the incentive needed to compete for status, thus lying at the foundation of social dynamics. With Swift’s characters, this desire does not come out of egotism or vanity, but out of a need for meaning. It is a moral drive, rather than one for self-affirmation or empowerment for the sake of power.

Goffman’s performance theory

According to Goffman, people act whenever they are in somebody else’s presence. He defines “interaction” (Goffman 1969 26) or “encounter” as “any one occasion when a given set of individuals are in one another’s continuous presence”. To him, any effort to render an impression is an act. A “performance” is “the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants”. He makes a distinction between “‘part’ or ‘routine’” (27), the “pre-established pattern of action”, and “social role” – “the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status”. A social role may involve more parts (27). The former two concepts refer to representation as actual behavior, whereas the latter shows who one is.

The existence of a moral dimension in Erving Goffman’s theory corresponds to this particular drive in Swift’s characters. It is visible in “idealization” (44) – the tendency to present to the others a better self than the actual one. Idealization is not viewed as an

inclination to lie, but as one towards self-improvement (44). It also aims at smooth social interaction and cooperation for harmonious co-existence (45). This is what most characters ultimately seek to do, as much as possible, in their micro, duty-bound contexts: to act out (adapted) roles that fulfill them morally. Another reason why we resort to this theory is the similarity between – this time – the negativism accumulated by characters with respect to the unnaturalness of certain roles, and the artificiality involved in performances.

However, in Goffman's theory the world is seen as rule-governed, orderly, and even helpful and didactic. The world provides a kind of symbolic manual to help one exist in it. The theory relies upon conventions whose validity it presupposes. Thus, it seems too much anchored in ready-made recipes for living. Also, even if (s)he acknowledges the existence of order, (s)he does not display a positive attitude to it, but discards it as faulty and hypocritical. Nevertheless, some of Goffman's concepts serve as clarifications for the characters' behavior in some contexts.

Stuart Hall wonders about the mechanisms that determine how and the extent to which individuals identify with the positions that summon them (Hall 2000 27). He wants to know how they “fashion, stylize, produce and ‘perform’ these positions”, and why there is a “constant, agonistic process of struggling with, resisting, negotiating and accommodating the normative or regulative rules”. The (ab)use of space(s) performed by Swift's characters for reasons that we have mentioned may constitute a partial answer to this question. The relation of the individual to “discursive formations”, the way (s)he tries to adapt her/his behavior to these by “chaining” (19) or “suturing” oneself to them is defined as “articulation”. Articulations show relations of “no necessary correspondence” (27) between the desires of the subject and what they can actually have.

From within a role, characters turn their attention to the law and to themselves (Butler 1997 108). There are two important aspects within Butler's trope of turn. One entails looking at oneself from within the position held, which is the equivalent of a transgression of the limits imposed by that status. It is also a schizoid examination. The other aspect is an active contemplation of the laws involved by that position, in a desire to reassess a given. The result is that the person becomes a subject in a three-fold sense. Firstly, one is subjected to a set of rules imposed by that position. Secondly, one is the subject of analysis. Thirdly, one gets to act via discourse, becoming an agent who will (in)validate the givens, adjusting them to one's own view. It is only through acceptance of being a subject (i.e. subordinate, obedient) that one gains the momentum to perform as an agent. Trespassing helps identity construction. It also shows the individual to be ambivalent, both inside and outside the role.

With these characters, the resulting multifaceted and ambivalent identities are never as clear as to be determined via “role location” (Sarbin and Alleen qtd. in Baugnet 1998 56). According to Sarbin and Alleen's model, identity is definable by means of three categories: “status” (57) (designated by a noun), “value” (described with an adjective, such as good, bad etc.), and “implication”, i.e. salience in society. Thus, identity could theoretically be pinpointed by answering simple questions, such as “who”, “what” or “how” (56). However, clear answers are not available for Swift's protagonists, due to their ambivalent roles.

Status or role?

One last clarification that needs to be made at this point bears on the concepts of status and role. These necessarily appear in an analysis of social interaction. According to Jenkins, the main difference lies in the polarity prescriptive-performative, whose terms are associated with status and, respectively, role. Jenkins pinpoints it by assigning to these concepts synonyms that he deems more illustrative of this contrast, namely “nominal” for status, and “virtual” for role: “The nominal in this case is the ideal typification of the institutionalized identity – its name or title, the notional rights and duties which attach to it, etc. – while the virtual is how the identification is worked out” (Jenkins 2005 142). The virtual allows for “variation” for the individual and local. T. H. Marshall connects his explanation of the distinction between status and role to space. Status is the person’s “place in the relationship system considered as a structure” (Marshall 2000 304). It is a naming or identification of the respective position. A role refers to the person’s conduct, the “items which make up the behavior that is expected” (306). Marshall also distinguishes between status with no hierarchical implications, and social status, which has come to denote a “position in the hierarchy of social prestige” (308).

In my approach, status is not considered as significantly different from role. There are two arguments to support this suspension of distinction. Firstly, late modernity is a world in which social class becomes elusive, and hierarchies clash. Thus, the distinction between role and status in its second sense mentioned by Marshall disappears.

A second argument that supports giving up the opposition is how the characters perceive a role. Theoretically, a status is more rigid or fixed than a role, which is dynamic. In agreement with Marshall and Jenkins, a role would be what one does in association with a status, in the sense of what one is supposed to do. Thus, characters see the role, despite the dynamics that it involves, as yet another fixity, because the variations it allows are within certain boundaries and conventions, which they still dismiss as rigid. What counts is their attitude, and the effects that it engenders when they approach roles. To them, the meaning of the “role” they play is in complementary distribution with that of “status”, “position”, “space”, or “context” which they accept and at the same time reject, deconstructing the traditional perceptions on these.

Conclusions

This paper has been an interpretation of the attitudes of Graham Swift’s characters in tandem with the social background and mentalities at work in their time. This approach is motivated by the firm belief of many critics (and the author’s) that identity is created in correlation with and under the influence of the social environment. In other words, identity and the environment are mutually reflexive. That is why, the characters’ despondency and distrust, concomitant with a still hopeful search for meaning are dispositions that coexist in them, and go hand in hand with their – on the one hand, artificiality in roles, and, on the other, lyricism.

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