

A Romance with Words: Graham Swift's *Mothering Sunday* as a "Coming-of-Voice" Novel

Petr Chalupský

Charles University, Prague

Abstract

Although shorter than its predecessors, Mothering Sunday (2016), Graham Swift's latest novel to date, in a sense represents a noteworthy synthesis of its author's works of fiction. Using a close third-person narrative perspective, it confirms Swift's departure from first-person narrators which began in Wish You Were Here (2011). However, in terms of some of his idiosyncratic themes and narrative strategies, it more strongly follows his earlier novels, The Light of Day (2003) in particular. This article discusses Mothering Sunday's position within the body of Swift's novels and shows that by making the heroine a successful writer he more forcefully than ever before explores the theme of writing fiction. It also argues that the novel contains a significant degree of self-reflexivity, as Swift projects into the story of its central protagonist his crucial ideas and beliefs concerning creative writing and its ethics.

Keywords: Graham Swift, Mothering Sunday, language, voice, silence, storytelling, immediacy

Graham Swift's *Mothering Sunday* (2016), despite its rather moderate volume, is a remarkably complex and articulate text in that it synthesises the major concerns of the author's fiction as well as adding to them a degree of metafictional self-reflexivity by addressing the theme of writing. The protagonists of Swift's first nine novels tend to be preoccupied, if not obsessed, with their past, particularly some darker events of their familial history whose roots can be traced a long way into the past. The looming despair and hopelessness of their personal and/or professional situation provoke in them the need to discover and understand what shaped and affected their life prior to their crisis, which forces them to go

deeper into the past and gradually reveal long-forgotten and repressed memories and experiences. These are always frustrating, distressing or even traumatic, as they involve such occurrences as murder, suicide, abortion, insanity and fatal illness. However, the more the protagonists lay their past bare, the more confused and insecure they seem to be, as they feel that they are losing the very foundations on which they have built their identity and existence, including the mechanisms they have so far successfully employed to fend off their traumatising recollections.

As a result, they find themselves facing a dilemma of whether to follow the easier path and flee these memories, or whether to make them meaningful by verbalising them into a story, and, by doing so, attempt to make sense of their repercussions. As the first path proves to be a dead end, the protagonists, overwhelmed by the “insidious hold exerted over the present by a traumatic past” (Craps, *Trauma* 2), eventually tend to opt for the latter course. Through this they can come to terms with the past and thus hope for some form of redemption: “While denial is shown to have catastrophic consequences, Swift’s work also raises the possibility that the process of working through trauma might create the conditions for a viable alternative *modus vivendi* based on openness to and respect for otherness” (Craps, “Interview” 638). A crucial part of this process is the ability of the afflicted individual to transform the unspoken and cryptic past events into a coherent narrative. This is why these protagonists are mostly first-person narrators whose “dominant narrative mode” is that of “mourning and/or melancholia” (Bényei 40), yet whose memory proves these emotions to be pathological, as they originate in unresolved and suppressed issues.

Their narration is instigated by two contradictory motivations. On the one hand, they need to talk over the troublesome past, take it out of the unconscious domain and prevent its uncontrolled, obtrusive recurrence in nightmares or hallucinations. On the other hand, they also wish to justify and comfort themselves, to downplay or relativise their wrongdoing or failure, which can only be “achieved if the narrator is his or her own judge and confessor, hence the enterprise requires a degree of deception and self-deception” (Kučala 127). The process of disclosing their guilt is a lengthy one, as the protagonists are prone to evading the painful truth, and they repeatedly digress from it by telling a variety of other tales. Such narration has a disrupted chronology, as “[t]here is always a movement backward and forward between the narrator’s present and past events recounted” (Malcolm 16), and it is constructed “anachronically by means of numerous external subjective analepses” (Kempf 186). The effect is a “delayed confessional narrative” (Russell 116) that with greater frequency and intensity recurs to the crucial *moment* and makes it clearer. Thus, in the end, the protagonists recollect the missing bits of their story and, to their dismay and almost in spite of themselves, plead guilty by articulating it in its entirety.

It is the actual articulation of the protagonist’s story that lies at the centre of Swift’s attention. The beginning of his career in the early 1980s coincides with the narrative (re) turn following the crisis of storytelling after WWII. This entailed “the emergence of a sensibility characterized by a new kind of awareness of the ways in which human existence is saturated with cultural narratives, and by an acknowledgement of both the need for narratives and their ultimate lack of foundation” (Meretoja 2). One of the key themes of Swift’s novels is therefore the importance of storytelling, which for him represents a wonderful, democratic, humane communion whose magic is unsurpassable (Goring). Indeed, all his works show the need to express and share our experience, memories, and feelings

in the form of a narrative, which is one of the defining aspects of the human condition, thus presenting human beings as “the story-telling animal” (*Waterland* 62). This theme then inherently subsumes a number of related sub-themes which only add and attest to its complexity. Prominent among them is the significance of assuming one’s voice and finding a language which would feel natural for the teller and, at the same time, be rich and diverse enough to enable him/her to articulate what he/she wishes to communicate. Other aspects explored are the convoluted and changeable relationship between words and things, language and the world, and fiction and reality. Swift’s tenth novel, *Mothering Sunday*, offers his most thorough and elaborate exploration of the above themes, which is why it also moderates or even relinquishes some of the characteristic preoccupations of his previous works. This article shows that although *Mothering Sunday* bears similarities to some of Swift’s other novels, especially *Wish You Were Here* (2011) and *The Light of Day* (2003), its distinct thematic focus and stylistic rendering make it one of the most notable achievements of his career so far.

Silenced Voices and Voiced Silences

The quest for language inevitably takes place in relation to its absence, be it a temporal loss of voice, a long-term denial of the opportunity to express oneself, a reluctance or disinclination to speak out, or an inborn inability to give voice to one’s ideas, experience and feelings. Swift’s novels brim over with different forms of silence – wordlessness, reticence, verbal inadequacy – and the intricacy of their protagonists’ situations is shaped by their ambivalent desire to simultaneously break and preserve these silences which they find both stifling and reassuring. Another idiosyncratic feature of Swift’s stories is the particular combination of voices and silences. Typically, silence surrounds some unpleasant and painful past event in the life of a character and they are, at least unconsciously, aware that putting it back into words may prove disruptive to their current fragile state of mind. For a time, preserving the silence seems a more comfortable (and therefore better) option. Yet as the weight of the unuttered gradually grows and besets their day-to-day existence, the status quo becomes unsustainable, and they try “to wrest meaning from gaps and spaces where communication has broken down” and “force the silence to speak” (Winsworth 55), be it out of curiosity or despair.

Hovering between telling and remaining silent, the protagonists look for someone to share their stories with, which is why they come up with the notion of an implied audience, a kind of “a third party eavesdropping on private words, or acting from behind the scenes to elicit them, or to collect them”. This “idea of an audience [...] at the back of their minds” (Tatarian 53) then operates as a decisive driving force that prompts the protagonists to transform their memories and experiences into a narrative, an essential initial step in the process of bringing the truth to light. However, their attempts to get to the core of the event in question are rather tentative and lacking in confidence and determination, and touch on it at first only diffidently and fleetingly. Therefore, the silence that originally occupied a single space erodes, crumbles and “finds its way in the narrative in the gaps produced by the fragmentation and temporal dislocation of the story, as well as in the rhythm of a narration which makes us hear its breaks and pauses as much as the flow of its sentences” (Tollance 63). The narration is then repeatedly interrupted by silences and reticence that

in some way substitute for the yet unspoken parts of the revelation, as they help the reader deduce the truth from what the protagonists take pains to remain silent about.

These silences are scattered among the protagonists' strenuous wrestlings with words, and, perhaps paradoxically, they amplify rather than attenuate the effect of these words. They allow the words to stand out and resonate powerfully in the space enclosed by the silences, which are there "to bring out rather than to hush the disturbing power that each may possess – to unveil rather than to shield" (Tollance 64). And so, while outwardly silent, the protagonists are inwardly gaining in eloquence as their minds swarm with newly acquired words and phrases, at first topsy-turvily, on which they are striving to impose some order and thus endow with the potential to name what had hitherto been held back. Another function these silences perform is to enable the missing parts of conversations to be heard, particularly words that could or should have been said but were not, often with an inauspicious or even disastrous effect on the fates of the people involved. The silence and reticence intensify the echoes of both unanswered and unasked questions as well as the statements the protagonists choose to keep unuttered.

The echoes of the unspoken words thus resound in their mind, help them make sense of the past and, in consequence, constitute the crucial impetus to find their voice and take the initiative. Swift's silence is therefore less a display of postmodern playfulness or a retarding device that hinders the exposition of truth than "a dynamic and positive form of silence", that is "silence as a creative force that facilitates an imaginative and intuitive apprehension of the world" (Winsworth 61). The crucial issue here is that this understanding is often not a result of a rational cognitive process but is rather some kind of epiphany on the level of the sub/unconscious. Due to the distinctive choice of having an orphaned girl as its main protagonist, who manages to progress from being an ordinary maid and later a bookshop assistant to becoming a recognised writer, *Mothering Sunday* features diverse forms of silences – forced, necessary or voluntary, as will be shown later.

The Extraordinary Immediacy of the Ordinary

In order to approach Swift's exploration of the themes of language, voice and storytelling it is necessary to mention his views on writing, the genre of the novel and the relationship between fiction and reality. He claims that they stem from his creative principle of finding "the extraordinary in the ordinary", which is why his novels "start by being familiar, but they become less familiar" (Craps, "Interview" 652). Due to this primary focus on the mundane and habitual, in which Swift looks for the extraordinary and unfamiliar, he has been labelled "England's laureate of the everyday" (Keenan), and is renowned for his skill to reveal "the hidden poetry" in ordinary people's lives (Goring). Swift's novels are therefore a peculiar compound of diversity and range of characters, whether a university lecturer, news photographer, insurance clerk, private eye or farmer, and the mundanity of their daily life. He insists that "the fundamental task of literature is to enable us to enter, imaginatively, experiences other than our own" (Swift, "Throwing Off" 20), which can be found in the vast otherness of every individual, their unique experience and mental world.

As a writer Swift aims at portraying universal and timeless aspects of human existence, and he believes that this can be achieved through the prism of the everyday and the local. While the backdrop of his stories are great and life-changing upheavals, such as the

two World Wars, the war in former Yugoslavia, the BSE and foot-and-mouth epidemics, and the Iraq War, their forefront is reserved for ordinary people whose day-to-day life to some extent has been affected by these events but who have to go on living it nevertheless. "However 'global' we like to think", Swift notes, "we've become, it remains true that life is about our little corner, our little nook, our little niche, our little territory. It's a small world, but that small world opens up to the big world" (Craps, "Interview" 652).

Swift's point is that a novel cannot be strictly about the present or restricted to a single period of time but should present a whole life as there is no limit to the amount of history the genre can embrace (Keenan). For this it demands slowness and patience, "to take the long view, to show change and evolution, human behaviour worked on by time" (Swift on 'contemporary' novels). What the novel must have, rather than a "nowness", is an immediacy which bestows upon the narration a genuineness and credibility that grip readers and make the story seem very real to them, thus rendering its chronology and geography secondary, and which is "closely bound up with intimacy" (Swift, "As a novelist"). And it is this immediacy that allows him, and his readers in consequence, to get as close as possible to his characters and enter a moral dimension of fiction. This, he believes, "is governed by empathy, compassion, and a preparedness to suspend an easy judgement on anyone who features in the story", as well as "the ability not to be just a solipsistic unit but to imagine what it's like to be someone else" (Craps, "Interview" 649, 651). His novels offer an insight into what is happening inside his characters, especially into the thoughts and feelings they do not intend to show or say aloud, to examine the volatile and intangible relationship between the human psyche and the outside world, and thus to do what cannot be done in reality: freeze, immortalise a moment so it can be relived again, "grasp the fleeting, vanishing stuff of existence and make it always there" (Swift, "As a novelist") and explore the very transitoriness of life.

Language plays a fundamental role in this endeavour. While leading their ordinary, familiar lives, the protagonists do not perceive it as a problem – since they do things automatically, out of habit and hardly ever feel the need to talk about them excessively, and, even if they do, their verbal devices are sufficient for that. Yet, when a fatal moment turns their life upside down, making it unfamiliar and intangible, they suddenly find themselves nonplussed. They cannot grasp the new situation as they are unable to capture it in words, to name the cause of their unease, because their habitual vocabulary proves inadequate to the task. Out of perplexity and panic they at first resort to reticence, but as the unspoken experience buffets them strongly they cannot but embark on the difficult quest to find the words to voice it out of the unconscious. In some of his early novels there are protagonists who are educated people and skilled speakers, like Tom Crick in *Waterland* and Bill Unwin in *Ever After* (1992) but the accomplishment of Swift's later novels rests in giving emotional depth to characters who have great difficulties in finding this voice by themselves, like the group of friends in *Last Orders* (1996), George Webb in *The Light of Day* and Jack Luxton in *Wish You Were Here*. Their predicament makes the reader identify more easily with these characters, since, as Swift notes, "we are all, from time to time, inarticulate, at some level, about some things" (Keenan). This line of untutored protagonists in search of words is followed by Jane Fairchild in *Mothering Sunday*.

In Search of Words and Voice

Apart from the third-person narration of limited omniscience and the theme of finding one's language, *Mothering Sunday* shares with *Wish You Were Here* the protagonist's background as an ordinary person with little formal education and the triggering moment being the death of a close person. However, the stories differ in almost all other respects.¹ Jane Fairchild, the protagonist of *Mothering Sunday*, is a well-voiced woman, which marks a change from Swift's series of silent and silenced women characters "in the sense that they remain undeveloped as autonomous individuals, being mediated to us through the male narrative discourse" (Widdowson 112). She is optimistic, vigorous, open, observant and even outspoken within the limits of her job as a maid in a rich family's household, with a thirst for life and little regret for the past. Her fate as a motherless foundling raised in an orphanage has taught her to take things as they come and appreciate their brighter side. Moreover, the news of the death of Paul Sheringham, an upper-class man from Berkshire with whom she had a clandestine sexual affair for almost seven years, no matter how shocking it was in its unexpectedness, can hardly be considered a truly traumatising event in the long run. She has no share of guilt at his death to trouble her conscience, and although she had some feelings for Paul and in her dreams even cherished the vain hope of living by his side, she is well aware that for him the relationship was mainly physical and that it was coming to its end as he was soon to enter a pragmatic marriage with a rich young lady and move to London. By the time the news of his death reached her, she had already come to terms with and accepted the fact that she was going to lose him as a lover and friend.

In Jane's need to find her language, and her curiosity about how language works and what it means, she is close to George Webb from *The Light of Day*, another Swift novel that centres on an initially inarticulate person's quest for language. In fact, in spite of the differences in setting, the time in which the story is set and the protagonist's gender, age and background, the two novels have more in common than may initially appear to be the case. The crucial moment in George's life, when his client unexpectedly kills her unfaithful husband, is not for him a traumatising one, but although he is involved in the matter rather indirectly it does turn his life upside down as he decides to wait for his beloved for years, visiting her in prison twice a month. The incident changes his life in one more significant way – it turns him into a writer of a kind, when Sarah asks him to produce for her "reports from the world" (*The Light of Day* 185). Writing down what is happening around him, not to mention his emotions, is a new and demanding task for George, as he has not been used to putting things into words; in his job, his role is to listen, watch and keep secrets.

However, George is willing to learn because of Sarah, and the first step is to start thinking about words. Having done his homework for almost two years he finds his way to language, taking words seriously, no longer considering them "just bits of air" (*The Light of Day* 133), an immaterial, enigmatic substance, but "as real as rocks" (*The Light of Day* 227), powerful tools that can not only describe reality but also enliven it or even affect it. He has learnt that words and phrases can manifest themselves by evoking feelings, stimulating the imagination and thus instigating thoughts and ideas; that words and phrases, even very common ones like "wrong", "a winter dusk" or "vacant possession", have their "shape, trace, scent" (*The Light of Day* 252). Although he knows that "words aren't things,

things aren't words" (*The Light of Day* 300–301), he realises that some of them can materialise for him, for instance, "corrupt" feels like a "strangely physical word. A black taste welling in your throat, a thickness on your tongue, as if you have a disease" (*The Light of Day* 179), while "a cold trail" is visualised as a "long empty path, stony and bare" (*The Light of Day* 308). And so he translates things into words, weaving them together into stories, but also coming to understand that certain things, especially those concerning the inside of the human mind, might never be known and will forever remain a "spring coiled inside us waiting for release" (*The Light of Day* 322).

The reversal in the course of Jane Fairchild's life also starts inadvertently, with her crossing a professional line – falling for the wrong person, in her case not a client but a member of the upper class. And, like George as a private eye, Jane as a maid is required to turn "a blind eye and a deaf ear and, above all, ke[ep] a closed mouth" (*Mothering Sunday*² 32), expected to respond to the world around only when asked and in a set of strictly prescribed phrases, which leaves her with very limited linguistic resources. Yet her inquisitiveness and eagerness to learn lead her to start thinking critically about words and the ways in which they can have meaning. Unlike George, the crucial stimulus for her to start her quest for a voice long precedes the life-changing moment – it comes when she is allowed by Mr Niven to read books from his library. This gradually helps her to develop her sense of language, and she becomes increasingly aware of the simultaneous beauty and intricacy of transforming lived experience into words, and the peculiar two-way interference between words and things. This experience with the language of fiction not only extends her vocabulary, but also makes her wonder about some newly acquired words and their rich connotations and metaphoricity. Having gathered up these words and phrases "like one of those nest-building birds outside" (*MS* 35), she cannot help toying with them in her mind and in the narration. And so, in typically Swiftian style, the ones she finds most noteworthy, such as "seed" or "yarn", recur in different situations and contexts, each time somehow modifying its previously contemplated meaning and emotional colour, thus adding new tiles to the mosaic of her language.

The use of cliché assumes a specific role in this process. Swift had also explored this theme in his previous novels, namely in *The Light of Day* and *Wish You Were Here*. As George's job consists mostly of dealing with a single, stereotypical situation – a husband's infidelity – his active vocabulary has been restricted to a few jargon phrases. Jack Luxton in *Wish You Were Here* is also a very inept language user. In fact, whenever he tries to express something he always finds himself short of words and ends up using clichéd phrases, such as the eponymous one on the holiday postcards to his girlfriend, which is why he has come to the conclusion that the best option for him in such cases is "to shut up or say very little" (*Wish You Were Here* 155). He considers these phrases artificial, but unlike George, he makes no effort to find better, more natural-sounding ones and instead resorts to taciturnity. However, neither of these novels is uncompromisingly dismissive of cliché. On the contrary, they work as a "skirmish not so much against as with cliché" (Wood). Some people in difficult life situations may find conventional expressions help them to cope, such as when withdrawn people like Jack or George express their feelings, or when the Nivens in *Mothering Sunday* obliquely refer to the loss of their two sons in the war. And cliché as such may not be harmful for storytelling either, as long as one knows how to handle it.

In *Mothering Sunday*, Swift presents this argument in its entirety: it is absolutely acceptable to use clichés when one is trying to create one’s language almost from scratch, because they can serve as stepping stones for the user to seek other, more original expressions. Jane comes to understand that frequent use may not deprive clichés of their meaning, that although clichés may sound strange they are still “sometimes actually true of what happened to people” (*MS* 11), and that provisionally helping herself with some of them may enable her to express what up to that point she has lacked words for: “Her heart had soared. Feast your eyes. A story was beginning” (*MS* 12). Jane’s professional trajectory, like George’s clumsy writing attempts but more explicitly so, can be taken as Swift’s “reminder of how important cliché is to living literature” (Wood). It literally endows her with a voice, and without acquiring this voice to start telling her story she would never have become a writer well-known for her ability “to deal intricately with words” (*MS* 96). Even clichés have a place in a writer’s vocabulary, though their role inevitably changes with time – while they can help a beginner lay the foundations of his/her narrative style, a skilled author may use them moderately to spice the narration with linguistic and stylistic curiosity, as a creative use of even a banal sentence in an unfamiliar context can make it sound powerful (Roblin 80). *Mothering Sunday* proves this, and indeed its thoughtful and multi-layered story begins with a conventional “Once upon a time” opening.

In her peculiar position, Jane has to speak more than just one kind of language. As a servant in an affluent household she is familiar with the maids’ slang and jargon and is able to use a simple register to talk to her less linguistically equipped colleagues. At the same time, she needs to have a command of various humble and polite formal expressions for communication with her employers. Moreover, as the mistress of a gentleman, she has used a hybrid of her colloquial language and an upper-class variant, which is not at odds with the intimacy of their relationship and also maintains some semblance of social hierarchy, supplemented with a few phrases from “her private unconfessable code-language, standing for so much that was beyond telling” (*MS* 33), devised to keep their affair secret from the outside world. However, while this heteroglossic capacity proves sufficient for the practical purposes of daily communication, she finds out that it does not do so when she has to accurately render what has happened and how she has felt about it. She discovers such material in books and immediately starts to absorb its vocabulary, yet in order to develop her own, distinctive writer’s language she first needs to find her voice. And this voice, as is usual in Swift’s novels, emerges from various forms of silence.

First of all there are the silences between Jane and Paul Sheringham, which spring from the mismatched character of their affair. There are things she does not dare tell him, such as that their relationship may have an emotional level enabling it to be called serious (*MS* 5), and there are things he does not want to reveal to her, above all his true feelings. Although sometimes it can be comforting for her, for example when he does not speak about his fiancée, in most cases it leaves her with even more silences in the form of unasked and unanswered questions, primarily those concerning the future of their liaison. Their intimate, post-coital moments abound in silence as he does not say what she hopes he could say, and, afraid of his possibly irritated reaction, she does not want to speak up so as not to spoil the precious moments, “to falsify – or nullify – anything by the folly of putting it into words” (*MS* 56) and disturb the illusion of their permanence. Then there is the reticence she resorts to when he eventually says he has to go, “as if enough silence after his remark,

for all its apparent call for punctuality, might cancel everything" (MS 38). Instead, she keeps lying on the bed watching him getting dressed slowly and unconcernedly, thinking about all the things she is not going to tell him, before blurring out a banal compliment to which he does not even bother to respond. And later, on top of all this, she has to keep silent when she hears the news of Paul's death so as not to give herself away, stifling her tears and her urge to scream in despair. All these silences only amplify the unsaid words as they recur in Jane's mind, resonate loudly, and call for a release which is granted when she projects them into her narratives.

The identity-forming silence continues after Paul departs. Jane, in the magic egalitarian spirit of "the perfect politics of nakedness" (MS 35), walks around the house in silence, through room after room, becoming conscious of herself as a unique human being with all her future possibilities ahead of her – "her own true, naked self, without the social definitions that imprison her" (Liu). This recognition, which is "almost a kind of rebirth" (Frostrup), reaches its peak in the "muted, suspended, immured" (MS 81) seclusion of the library whose knowing quietness makes her inner voice even stronger and more confident, and where she feels "like some welcome, innocent thief" (MS 76) of words, phrases, ideas and beliefs. Yet there is one more "silence" in Jane's life, a secret she has always held back from everybody. Although as a writer she has produced countless stories, many of which contain motifs and characters based on her own life, there is one story she will never tell: the one about how on a sunny Mothering Sunday in March 1924, a young maid in unbelievable circumstances – walking naked in a rich family's house where she is even not employed – realises what she wants from life through an epiphanic series of (self-)recognitions and embarks on the long struggle against being silenced by social conventions and prejudices in order to find her voice and assert herself as a writer. It is this silence that Swift's novel fills.

A determining aspect of depicting the quest for language is the form of the narration, especially its composition and perspective. The first refers especially to the way in which the narration works towards the disclosure of the story's crux. The actual action of Swift's preceding novels takes place in the present, but the sought-for truth lies in the past. The narrative then works through reminiscences and flashbacks as the protagonists strive to recollect and discover what really happened and how. This process is demanding for them, and so they tend to elude it by digressing to other topics and tales. The main plotline becomes fragmented, but after each interruption the narrators return to where they abandoned it. This narrative therefore advances in narrowing concentric circles, and each of these "returns" reveals a new detail which helps the protagonists to compose a more complete image of their centre, until the truth is fully known. *Mothering Sunday* in fact has the opposite composition: its main action takes place in the past, specifically on 30 March 1924, when the young Jane experiences the loss of her lover. The storyline is interrupted by flash-forwards to various periods of her later life, both personal and professional, covering the span of almost the whole rest of the century. The narration thus progresses in widening circles, where the unknown is not the centre but what it triggered and how her life developed subsequently. The fact that the narration does not head towards the revelation of a momentous secret or fact, but instead shows how one incident can fundamentally alter the course of life, changes its dynamics and mood, providing the author with more space to

explore themes which would otherwise be subordinate to that of the quest for truth, namely finding one's language and voice.

As for voice, Swift's first eight novels are told in the first person, which offers a very intense and intimate account that draws the reader deep inside the narrator's experience and emotion. This singularity of viewpoint can be undermined and partially dialogised by the employment of other speakers, like the alternating dual narrators in *Out of this World* (1988) or the multiple narrators in *Last Orders*, yet the inescapable subjectivity and bias of their versions cannot compensate for a reliable, detached perspective from outside. The story of *Wish You Were Here* is narrated in a close third person which adheres to the main protagonist's point of view, yet which is not his point of view *per se*. This kind of narration gives the story's psychological intensity a new twist as it grants readers access to Jack's mind but also confronts it with other characters' perspectives and authorial speech, making the discrepancy between how he sees himself and how others see him even more palpable. This difference in the form of narration has a crucial impact on the treatment of the theme of finding one's voice. While in the first person readers are invited to experience the narrators' toiling over the puzzling substance of language, the third person adds a level of reflection through the authorial "metalinguistic" commentary. This is the case in *Mothering Sunday*, all the more so because its main protagonist, though of low-class origin and poor education, eventually becomes a successful writer.

This authorial metacommentary gives the treatment of the theme of finding one's language a depth and complexity that is impossible to achieve through first person narration only. As it is told indirectly from the perspective of an adult person in various phases of her life and career, the narration makes use of the hindsight of a skilled writer and mature personality which allows it to keep a distance from what is actually happening and point out how it is later reflected in terms of her coming of age as well as her "coming of voice". Readers are given access not only to what Jane says and thinks, but also, and often equally importantly, to what she does not say and why, and what she would have said had she been equipped with the proper words and phrases. Readers not only learn how she contends with words and the pitfalls of their use, but also how they resonate and echo variously in her later life. By this Swift "achieves a delicate harmony between the cool detachment of the narrative voice and the intensity of emotion conveyed on every page" (Allfrey). And so, for instance, when Jane mentions the phrase "I'm mugging up", which Paul uses as a pretext to his parents and fiancée so he can spend the fateful day with her, we are informed that she "would never be able to hear the phrase lightly, even in Oxford, where a great deal of mugging up went on" (*MS* 33); when she retells, word for word, Paul's surprisingly aloof, matter-of-fact farewell speech, she adds that she has recalled it so often over the decades that it has turned into a sort of fiction as she "would brood over it like some passage that perhaps needed redrafting, that might not yet have arrived at its proper meaning" (*MS* 60); or when in retrospect she accentuates the milestone moments and events that marked her path to becoming a real writer.

The metafictional aspect of the novel rests in depicting what made Jane a writer and, along with this, what generally makes a writer. The first step is to "cross an impossible barrier" (*MS* 146), to find the strength and courage to overcome some seemingly insurmountable obstacle – and there may be several such barriers. In Jane's case these barriers relate to social background and gender, and her achievement is all the more admirable as all her

“unsilenced” female writing predecessors and contemporaries were not only not servants but indeed had servants or some other form of household help (Olsen 16). And there may be other less noticeable challenges, such as abandoning the secure real world of one’s experience in favour of letting one’s imagination take over and roam freely. The second, and most crucial, step is “finding *the* language” (*MS* 146, emphasis original) which would feel natural, efficient and apt to write in. Using Jane’s example, Swift shows that being a writer means an incessant, life-long commitment to language. Interestingly, Jane’s reflections on the nature of words and their relationship with reality strikingly resemble George Webb’s lay observation: “you have to understand that words are only words, just bits of air” (*MS* 109). However, as a writer, she goes further than George in his realisation that words can materialise for him and help him, at least for some time, to capture, pin down and make sense of a reality that is frequently elusive. Although she admits that a word is not a thing and a thing is not a word, she points out that in the realm of the imagination, words exercise a powerful spell over things:

But somehow the two – things – became inseparable. Was everything a great fabrication? Words were like an invisible skin, enwrapping the world and giving it reality. Yet you could not say the world would not be there, would not be real if you took away the words. At best it seemed that things might bless the words that distinguish them, and that words might bless everything. (*MS* 108)

If a writer finds a language that enwraps the world and gives it reality, and whose words bless the things they refer to by bringing them to life, then his/her fiction can achieve the immediacy Swift calls for and thus fulfil the primary goal of writing – “to embrace the stuff of life” (*MS* 111), to make it more tangible and graspable in defiance of its intrinsic inaccessibility.

The intertextual dimension of *Mothering Sunday* is also significant. Some critics and reviewers have noticed allusions to the historical television drama series *Downton Abbey* (2010) and the mystery film *Gosford Park* (2001) (cf. Gee, Kakutani), and some passages also seem to pay tribute to modernist writers, namely to Virginia Woolf’s lyricism and D.H. Lawrence’s earthiness. However, the novel’s most explicit invocation is that of Joseph Conrad. A legitimate, if not unavoidable, step in the process of finding one’s literary language is seeking inspiration in established writers, as long as inspiration does not turn into plagiarism. Jane finds such inspiration in Conrad’s novels. On the one hand, she finds his fictional worlds fascinating, his vocabulary and turn of phrase distinctive and captivating, in which specific expressions like “yarn” and “youth” seem to stand for an idea rather than just a word (*MS* 141), yet, on the other hand, any time she reads him she has “that feeling of entering unknown and possibly dangerous territory which, if she’d had the word, she might have called ‘Conradian’” (*MS* 145). This can refer to the novels’ plots and locales, but it can equally refer to her awareness that Conrad’s forceful style might easily overpower her own still developing language. She also finds his writing stimulating because of certain similarities between his and her lives: he too was orphaned, had a made-up name, received no training in writing and had to learn how to write in a whole new language. Conrad’s example is important for Jane not only in terms of language and

style, but also for her finding of her own voice – it bolsters her confidence and helps her find the strength to build up her professional identity, literally from nothing.

Of Fiction and Truth – Conclusion

The story of an aspiring writer finding her language and becoming successful allows Swift to shape the novel's ending into a commentary on storytelling and writing fiction in general, a self-conscious and “glistening study of the writers’ craft” (Hawkins). As Jane’s is an ultimately storytelling mind, *Mothering Sunday* demonstrates the centrality of stories in our lives – that they shape our beliefs, behaviours and ethics, nourish our imagination, and create meaningful patterns where we cannot find them by imposing narrative structure on chaos and illogicality. Therefore, we automatically extract stories from the information we receive and happily invent the missing bits or even a whole new story where there is none (or only an unsatisfactory one), which is why we tell some of the best stories to ourselves (Gottschall). When Jane lacks some pieces of information, including unpleasant ones, she immediately makes them up, for instance, the scenes and dialogues between Paul and his fiancée. She knows it to be mere fabrication, though it is loosely based on a few known facts: “To imagine them was only to imagine the possible, even to predict the actual. But it was also to conjure the non-existent” (*MS* 63), yet it represented good practice in empathy and imagination, so essential for a future writer. When she sees Conrad’s photograph she imagines an intimate scene with him in bed, both physical and mental, “just to lie beside him, not speaking, a naked, ageing Conrad, both of them looking up and watching the smoke of their cigarettes rising, mingling under the ceiling, as if the smoke held some truth greater than either of them could find words for” (*MS* 147). Imagining for her thus becomes the most exciting of adventures, a very emotional thing full of great sweetness, as Swift puts it (Marriott), though one which involves a degree of “constant mental hazarding” (*MS* 89) – hazarding with her name, with her readers’ tastes and expectations, and, last but not least, with truth.

“A storyteller by trade” (*MS* 99), Jane is well aware that in fiction the notion of truth should be perceived differently than in real life. What she has now, at the end of her life and career, are all the scenes, real and fictitious, and if she wishes to recount her life truthfully she has to carefully distinguish between them. However, in creative writing the correspondence between words and reality is of negligible consequence, as in its essence it needs to fabricate, and thus in a way “trad[e] in lies” (*MS* 140). Yet, at the same time, she knows that good fiction also contains truth in that it is authentic to the fabric of human life and human character. This truthfulness can only be achieved through immediacy, that is in getting as close as possible to the heart of what is being rendered, trying to capture “the very feel of being alive” (*MS* 147), which is also how fiction fulfils its ethical dimension. A significant part of this, however, is the ability to admit and accept that certain aspects will always remain unspoken, “that many things in life – oh so many more than we think – can never be explained at all” (*MS* 149). The fact that Swift identifies with Jane’s views can be seen, besides what he says in interviews and articles, also in the narrative itself; for instance, we can share the weight and intensity of Jane’s joy in life and eagerness for what the future has in store for her when she is cycling away from the Sheringhams’ house, although it is just a fleeting moment:

Peddalling hard at first, then freewheeling and gathering speed, she heard the whirr of the wheels, felt the air fill her hair, her clothes and almost, it seemed, the veins inside her. Her veins sang, and she herself might have sung, if the rushing air had not stopped her mouth. She would never be able to explain the sheer liberty, the racing sense of possibility she felt. (*MS* 92)

Leaving one phase of her life behind, Jane exemplifies that at times a loss turns out to be a gift in that it brings a new course in one's life. This passage, whose poetic wording Swift sportively rounds off with an earthy anti-climax, "The air was up her skirt and a Dutch cap up her fanny" (*MS* 93), convincingly captures the immediacy of her mood and feelings and the transience of the experience, while the true cause of her sudden excitement and delight defies rational explanation and thus remains beyond telling. Indeed, many other important things in her life and career are omitted, such as how she came to marry her husband, an Oxford graduate and philosopher, while, with a sense of detail, the narration focuses on the individual little "seeds of her vocation" (Kakutani).

Mothering Sunday is the shortest of Swift's novels, so elliptical that it borders on being a novella, yet generically it is difficult to categorise as it "builds in complexity with its layering of revelations and memories over time" (McAlpin). With its "Once upon a time" opening and "You shall go to the ball" *Cinderella* epigraph it has the loose fairy-tale framework of an unprivileged maidservant turning into a literary queen, yet the novel has many more layers of meaning than are found in a stereotypical narrative for the young. Another clue Swift offers is the subtitle "A Romance", but even this is partly a false lead; although the story opens with a romance, or more precisely with the end of a romance, what follows by far exceeds the limits of this genre. It is easier to find parallels with the genre's original form as a heroic tale in which protagonists undergo exhausting adventures on their quest and are rewarded not only with what they sought, but also with "an improved character – tested, rebuked, and strengthened" (Keen 11), yet still this covers only a part of the plot. What starts as a love story gradually evolves into an insightful and intimate contemplation on writing and literature, "an elegant reflection on the impulse to tell stories" (Charles), and, in a broader sense, on the sometimes wonderful intricacies of life. In fact, it can be taken as a romance in the modern sense, but a romance with words, with language, which grows into a life-long engagement. It is the coming-of-age as well as "coming-of-voice" story of a writer whose imagination can work wonders, yet who is forever fated to be "constantly beset by the inconstancy of words" (*MS* 108). By bringing the narrative method of verbal brevity, silences and reticence to perfection, Swift achieves a remarkable eloquence and clarity when it comes to the message it aims to convey. And so, in spite of the background of terrible losses, *Mothering Sunday* is his most cheerful and optimistic, though also his most self-reflexive novel to date.

Notes

¹ One of the key differences is the focus on trauma and guilt. For a detailed analysis of these themes in *Wish You Were Here* see the article “The Specters of the Unspoken Past – Trauma in Graham Swift’s *Wish You Were Here*”.

² In subsequent references abbreviated as *MS*.

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Address:

Department of English Language and Literature

Faculty of Education, Charles University

Magdalény Rettigové 4,

116 39 Prague 1

Czech Republic

petr.chalupsky@pef.cuni.cz