

Language Matters: An Investigation into Cliché in *The Light of Day**

ANDREW JAMES

While Graham Swift's *The Light of Day* (2003) was not an overwhelming success with readers and reviewers, with Germaine Greer speculating that it had been rewritten too many times and labelling it "still-born" (Gove, Greer, and Lawson), it has come to be viewed as an intriguing attempt to create serious literature devoid of poetic language. The stripping away of poetic language and deliberate repetition of non-literary cliché phrases could be interpreted as measures in poetic economy. Swift does not dazzle with million dollar phrases but tries to squeeze poetry from well-worn colloquialisms. What is meant by poetry in this paper is really the accumulation of layers of meaning through language. This is an effect achieved by many writers through the use of advanced vocabulary and unusual collocations—language that is more literary than conversational, which sends the reader to the dictionary for demystification. In *The Light of Day* Swift attempts something quite different. He uses clichés that everyone understands but in such a way that they resonate, and we are made to reconsider their meaning. When the method works, Swift is able to create a literary effect through colloquial language which this paper argues is a form of poetic, or literary, economizing.

At a recent conference in Nice, France, Swift declared that "[w]riting is not about words," and that good literature expresses what is "beyond words": "the more ordinary they are, the more brilliant they could be" (Swift, Interview by Adam Begley). This is not a new position for Swift, who said in promoting *The Light of Day* seven years

*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debjames0222.htm>>.

earlier: "The real art is not to come up with extraordinary clever words but to make ordinary simple words do extraordinary things" (O'Mahony). In the novels which followed *Waterland* (1983), Swift's determination to move beyond words led him to simplify his prose and to use clichéd and hackneyed phrases shunned by novelists with more literary pretensions.

A possible justification for having *The Light of Day's* narrator George Webb think in clichés comes from his profession: he is a modestly educated private detective, not a student of literature, and commonplace language is all that he has at his disposal. In order to understand past mistakes and a present passion, George writes down his story, and in the process begins to pay attention to language. As he ponders the implications of being in the dark and seeing the light of day his perception of reality changes. The novel suggests that intellectual curiosity and love can help one see truth. The problem of seeing clearly in a murky world fogged with emotion and deceit is a recurring theme in Swift. This paper would like to add to the discussion on vision and language in Swift by looking more closely at the nature of clichés and how they work in the novel. It also traces the development of vision as an organizing principle back to an early, uncollected Swift short story which has yet to receive critical treatment. Finally, markings made to the manuscript draft contained in the British Library's Graham Swift Archive are cited to show the author's acute awareness of creating an effect by repeating clichés. It will be argued that, to an extent, the benefits accrued through verbal simplicity are mitigated by Swift's dependence upon the reader understanding the highly literary game he is playing and being willing to participate in that game.

Swift's interest in clichés is particularly apparent in a series of poems he composed shortly after the completion of *The Light of Day* and which were later published in his 2009 memoir *Making an Elephant*. Though Swift often reads poetry in between novels, this marked his first attempt at poetic composition. "One poem seemed to lead to another," he explained in the memoir, "so that I acquired, until it suddenly stopped, the cautiously darting momentum (quite unlike the momentum of writing a novel) with which you hop from stepping

stone to stepping stone" (227). The poems too are dominated by images of light and vision. In "We Both Know," memory and desire hover "around us when we meet / Like some trick of light" (*Making an Elephant* 2-3), while "Rush Hour" opens with "The fog of [commuters'] massed breath, / The still-sleepy glitter of their eyes" (1-2); most of the thirty-one poems feature impediments to vision and reminders that nothing is wholly as it seems. The cycle opens with "This Small Place," a study in clichéd expressions of quantity in measuring the smallness of human life against oblivion. The contrast is established in the first two lines: "The world is big enough, / Though getting smaller, they say" (1-2). We each inhabit our own "place of small talk and whispers and memories / And small mercies and small blessings, / And small comfort, true enough, sometimes" (5-7), and we know "where we'll be at the finish" (13), Swift muses: "Sure enough, true enough, big enough" (15). The style of "This Small Place" mirrors that of *The Light of Day*. In the poem the contrast between small and large things is made through clichéd expressions that contribute to a discussion of a philosophical question: the position of humanity within the world. The novel uses clichés based upon light and dark in asking us to consider questions surrounding the nature of love and limits of knowledge. For some reviewers of the novel, the method was more contrived than earthy, with Germaine Greer saying that it "smelled of the lamp" (Gove, Greer, and Lawson). James Wood, on the other hand, praised Swift's "commitment to ordinary speech," calling *The Light of Day* "as close to seeming spoken as any novel I have read. It dares the ordinariness of flat, repetitious, unliterate narration. Perhaps this doesn't sound daring; but it is certainly risky" (28). Robert Ross was also impressed and deemed it "a metaphysical riddle of loss and redemption" (230).

The Light of Day would appear to be a slow-moving murder mystery told in reverse. The crime was committed and solved two years earlier, and events are retraced until the reader is brought back to the present. The binary opposition of clichés in "This Small Place" is replicated, with quantitative imagery giving way to images of light and dark. First-person narrator George Webb is a disgraced police-

man-turned-private detective hired by university lecturer and translator Sarah Nash to follow her husband in November 1995. Bob Nash, a gynaecologist, has been having an affair with Kristina Lazic, a Croatian refugee half his age. Sarah becomes suspicious and confronts her husband, who agrees to terminate the relationship when Kristina leaves London for her homeland. With the departure date looming, Sarah hires George to follow her husband to the airport, ensure that Kristina boards the plane alone, then report back by telephone. Everything goes according to plan, and Bob returns home, where Sarah has prepared an elaborate reconciliatory dinner. Before they eat, however, she stabs him to death with a kitchen knife. The novel begins and ends on the second anniversary of Bob's death, with George visiting his grave, then Sarah in prison. George has fallen in love with his former client who, after initially refusing to see him, now accepts his visits and tutors him in writing. George's attempt to understand the crime and his passion by writing it down enables Swift to conduct what James Wood termed his "investigation of cliché" (28).

While reviewers were divided on the novel's merits,¹ over the last decade Swift scholars have seen much to admire in the linguistic innovations of *The Light of Day*. The colloquialisms and clichés seem to work in two different ways: they simplify the narrative while creating deeper levels of meaning through heightened ambiguity. Both David Malcolm and Peter Widdowson thought that the use of cliché was a ploy on George Webb's part, labelling him an unreliable narrator who selects vague, often trite language for the purpose of deception. Malcolm argues persuasively that George frames both the narrative and his suspect by arranging truth to suit his needs. His obsession with Sarah is pathological, and he deceives the reader via imaginative but often inaccurate storytelling (205-06). Widdowson focuses on the repetition of the verbs "know" and "tell" in order to prove the unreliability of George, who reveals more than he intends to and offers a biased account due to his infatuation with Sarah (103). Widdowson sees the novel in terms of a critique of suburbia as an emblem of civilization, and the misguided substitute of fine cuisine for passion and real love (103-07). Daniel Lea, the writer of another Swift mono-

graph, does not use the term “unreliable narrator,” instead characterizing George as “delusional” (212) because he sees reality through a thick filter (209).

According to this interpretation, the use of limited and delimiting vocabulary is part of an authorial strategy to create a complex “edgy, uncontrolled voice” (203). Stef Craps, the writer of another Swift monograph, considers the effect of the clichés cumulative, as their repetition allows the acquisition of “ever more shades of meaning,” giving the novel the depth of poetry (176). The words may be the same, but they acquire greater depth through the changes in context. This is a recurring interpretative line among contemporary scholars: the use of simple language does indeed allow Swift access to a wider range of possible meanings, and it ought to be viewed as a positive achievement.² While these interpretations of *The Light of Day* are not necessarily flawed, they do not go far enough in considering the nature of clichés and colloquial language before evaluating Swift’s success in doing extraordinary things with ordinary words.

The overriding concern for language in *The Light of Day* gains further support from Swift’s own protestation that the novel should not be labelled detective fiction. “I never set out to write a detective story,” said Swift. “The character George was other things before he became a detective. The notion that he would be a detective came quite late, and it led to certain other possibilities, but I never had the original intention of writing a detective story.” He concluded: “I prefer to think of it as a novel that has a detective as its main character, not as a detective story. I can’t see myself writing another detective story. If I entered a genre, I did so inadvertently” (Interview by Fiona Tolan). In 2007 he made a similar disavowal, explaining that George Webb only became a detective because Swift “wanted a character who, for professional reasons, would be very close to what was going on in some household” (Interview by Francois Gallix). In truth, both textual and manuscript evidence shows that Swift is more concerned with language than murder. As detective fiction, it is tediously slow and unsatisfying because, as one reviewer said, the reader tires of watching the author do all the detecting (Quinn).³

Cliché expressions become the vehicle for exploring the following questions: can words ever express their intended meaning, and is it possible to understand the essence of what lies behind language? Swift's reliance upon clichés to make his points in a work that aspires to literature is a calculated risk; language purists and writers with literary aspirations shun them, and even dictionaries look upon them askance. One wonders, then, if clichés, as Swift uses them both in *The Light of Day* and his poetry, are up to the task of broaching linguistic and metaphysical problems while telling a story that is worthy of being called literature. *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* defines cliché as "[a] stereotyped expression, a commonplace phrase" (348), while *The American Heritage Dictionary* calls it "[a] trite or overused expression or idea" (356). Although little mystery surrounds the meaning of most overused pieces of language, there is no consensus on the question which words, expressions, or ideas deserve the label "cliché." One dictionary compiler explains the problem in the following terms: "They are impossible to pigeonhole. Classifying something as being overused and stale does not immediately call to mind a distinctive linguistic category" (Kirkpatrick vii). The above definitions raise a further problem in relation to cliché and *The Light of Day*: can something new be created from stale material?

That Swift uses clichés, trite phrases, and commonplace expressions deliberately is evidenced by markings made to the manuscript, now held in the British Library's Graham Swift Archive. He drew rectangular boxes around dozens of phrases such as "To love—is to be ready to lose" ("Clear" 78), and "You never know what's in store" ("Clear" 38), then marked them with uppercase "R's," possibly signifying repetition, as almost all of these phrases appear again later in the text. When asked about this, Swift replied in a personal letter, "I do not instantly recall marking up the manuscript, but no doubt I would have done so at the time for a purpose" (Letter to the author). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the repetition of these commonplace phrases—and a possible justification for their presence in a literary work—is that in each usage the meaning alters. "To cross a line" is one of the author's favourite clichés, and in the manuscript

Swift enclosed the three passages connected to this cliché with boxes: “They cross a line” (“Clear” 40); “As if there’s a line for them too. All the lines” (“Clear” 179); and “You cross a line” (“Clear” 187). The first sentence refers to the line crossed by Sarah Nash and other women who spy on their adulterous partners, the implication being that their status is complicated through the investigation because they are no longer passive victims. The second, altered in the published novel to “You take a step, you cross a line,” reminds the reader that Bob Nash could very easily have joined Kristina and thrown away his marriage and life in London. After all, “people do weirder things” (199). The third reference was ultimately excised, though others, unmarked in the manuscript, survive. One such example follows the narration of the murder, with its victim described as “a gynaecologist who’d crossed a line—and taken advantage (if it was that way round) of a poor helpless refugee girl” (224).⁴ In all of the above instances, the reader is made aware that some decisions result in an irrevocable change in status. By having her husband followed, Sarah in some way ceases to be a victim; if Bob runs away with Kristina, he will forfeit his job and family in London; and once Bob has slept with Kristina, he is no longer the good Samaritan offering shelter to the needy. Cumulatively, then, crossing a line implies the breach of a contractual or ethical rule and a loss of innocence. The repetition of two other cliché phrases—to be in the dark and to see the light of day—works in a similarly economical way. The same words are used in different contexts to invoke different meanings, showing a progression from ignorance to knowledge.

There are at least two problems with Swift’s experimental use of clichés in *The Light of Day* that make it uneconomical in a literary sense. Although he would have us believe that he is trying to make his novel closer to reality by replicating the speech and thought patterns of his unintellectual narrator, the deliberate repetition of light and dark imagery betrays the presence of an artist hiding in the shadows behind George Webb. The readers most likely to appreciate the game the author is playing are those aware of literary traditions, who understand the intended effect. Swift’s ideal reader is not the man or

woman on the street but the student of literature. Further, appreciation is contingent upon knowledge of the taboo against cliché in literary novels. Most writers avoid clichés, except in dialogue, because it suggests a lack of verbal ingenuity. The best stories, and the ones that win literary prizes, are told in voices that seem original. As Frank Kermode has argued, the originality of a book cannot be measured without knowledge of the genre and conventions within which the author is operating. In a discussion of Robbe-Grillet's experimental novels, Kermode admitted to being sceptical about "how far these books could make their effect if we were genuinely, as Robbe-Grillet thinks we should be, indifferent to all conventional expectations. In some sense they must be there to be defeated" (20). Thus, if the author of *The Light of Day* (and winner of the Man-Booker Prize) employs a first-person narrator to tell the story through clichés he must be doing so for a reason, and not just to reproduce the mind and milieu of his central character.

The textual justification for the repetition of clichés is that George has begun looking at the familiar with a fresh eye. "Before Sarah became my teacher," he says, "I never used to think much about words—hold them up to the light" (177). This is precisely what Swift was doing when he drew boxes in the manuscript draft: holding commonplace expressions up to the light, altering angles and circumstances in order to consider as many interpretations as possible. In the novel people too look differently as the light changes. George remembers that Sarah "had eyes that seemed to shift—under a slight frost—from black to brown, to ripple. Tortoise shell. The hair was the same. Black, you'd say, but when the sunlight from the window caught it you saw it was deep brown" (17). Appearances can be deceiving, as George clumsily reports while examining identification photographs of Bob and Kristina: "people don't always look like they look" (57). The message is that one must go beneath the surface in order to truly understand, and *The Light of Day* traces George's search for the meaning beyond words to illuminate and elucidate memory.

There is a sharp divide separating writers and linguistic commentators on the utility and propriety of clichés. Eric Partridge, the author

of *A Dictionary of Clichés*, which first appeared in 1940, advances the negative view. The 1978 edition's dedication is to one A. W. Stewart, a "lover of good English," who assisted Partridge "in that excellent blood sport: cliché-hunting." The preface contains an attack on linguistic lassitude: "Only those of us who are concerned to keep the language fresh and vigorous regard, with dismay, the persistence of these well-worn substitutes for thinking and the mindless adoption of new ones." He is critical of "well-known writers of every sort" who "bore us by employing a cliché when they could so easily have delighted us with something vivid or, at the least, precise" (Partridge ix). Martin Amis would agree with Partridge, for he even called a collection of literary and cultural essays *The War Against Cliché*. At the end of the foreword, Amis announces that "all writing is a campaign against cliché. Not just clichés of the pen but clichés of the mind and clichés of the heart. When I dispraise, I am usually quoting clichés. When I praise, I am usually quoting the opposed qualities of freshness, energy, and reverberation of voice" (Amis xv).

There are, however, some potential advantages in using clichés that one ought to consider. Although they might not always be fresh or vibrant, they sometimes succinctly capture an idea or sentiment. While James Rogers, the compiler of another dictionary of clichés, admits that their bad reputation is generally upheld, he maintains that "[a]mong people who do pay attention to their phrasing [...] clichés can serve as the lubricant of language: summing up a point or a situation, easing a transition in thought, adding a seasoning of humor to a discourse" (Rogers vii). Language guide author H. W. Fowler, too, thought it unfair to view all clichés negatively for this "obscures the truth that words and phrases falling within the definition are not all of a kind." While he has no use for "those threadbare and facetious ways of saying simple things and those far-fetched and pointless literary echoes which convict their users either of not thinking what they are saying or of having a debased taste in ornament" (90-91), he argues for the necessity of phrases like "foregone conclusion" and "white elephant," whose implementation in conversation is "the obvious choice." Such clichés are "readily recognizable, and present them-

selves without disguise for deliberate adoption or deliberate rejection” (91).

Graham Swift clearly sides with Fowler for he, too, believes that just because clichés are the obvious choice, writers need not always reject them in favour of the flowery or esoteric:

I do not automatically regard clichés in the pejorative way that some people do. On the contrary, I think they can often be an effective, consensus way of communicating certain things. In any case they are language “such as men do use” and novelists should reflect this, particularly if, as I do, they wish to get intimately close to their characters and so register their (non-literary, non-original) use of words. (Letter to the author)

Swift goes on to say that he tries “to give new life, new relevance and depth to well-worn, common or proverbial phrases, be they clichés or not (for example the phrase ‘to be in the dark’ in *The Light of Day*).” He describes George Webb as Sarah’s student, “with language as one of his subjects. Never having been a wordy man, he now dwells on words quite often, they are among many things he sees in a new light.” He concludes by making a familiar appeal: “More and more I believe that the real art of writing lies in giving new power and meaning to ordinary, even simple language, not in finding extraordinary, ‘impressive’ language for its own sake” (Letter to the author).

When one considers poetic economy, Swift’s use of clichés makes sense. The goal of directly communicating with the reader in the plainest terms leaves little room for misunderstanding. And yet the negative reviews of *The Light of Day* find it problematic that he deliberately mystifies the narrative by withholding information and repeating the same vague clichés while leaving so much unsaid. Is this, one wonders, really language such as men do use? The author appears less like “a man speaking to men,” to borrow Wordsworth’s definition of the poet, than a tease imparting just enough information to keep the story going and readers in the dark, and this did not escape the attention of reviewers. Mark Lawson speculated that “there are two kinds of novelists, the ones who put stuff in and the ones who take stuff out,” and that Swift “has taken a lot out,” citing “huge gaps” in the

romantic relationships; he even went so far as to say that “something has gone wrong” with the author (Gove, Greer, and Lawson). Michiko Kakutani praised Swift for his skill in “slowly revealing the hidden patterns and impulses that connect the lives of George and Sarah and Bob,” but disliked the “labored and ceremonious gravity with which it was done.” However, there is a logical contradiction inherent in a novelist employing colloquial, non-literary language to argue for the power of words, and this requires further analysis.

David Lodge has pointed to the difference between conversational and textual communication in cautioning against “the naive confusion of life with literature” (184). When one engages in conversation, it is always theoretically possible to interrupt and demand clarification or restatement. But reading a text is a different matter: “the fact that the author is absent when his message is received, unavailable for interrogation, lays the message, or text, open to multiple, indeed infinite interpretations. And this in turn undermines the concept of literary texts as communications” (192). *The Light of Day* paradoxically imitates conversation without narrowing the range of potential interpretations. As we have seen, the meaning of “to cross a line” is on one level obvious, but excessive and indiscriminate use has turned the phrase into an imprecise cliché, the meaning of which is wholly dependent upon context. If it is made to stand alone, the potential interpretations are endless, though generally negative. If you really want to know what someone means by the phrase, you will have to ask for an explanation. This is not possible with a novel, as Lodge says. There are numerous examples in the novel of situations in which a cliché is not the natural choice, and its deployment is puzzling. In one such scene, George says the cut flowers to be placed on Bob Nash’s grave “are almost superfluous. It’s the thought that counts” (22). Perhaps Pascale Tollance is right in saying that George strives “to bring out the excess that the simplest words contain, to allow words to mean always more than they seem to mean” (69), but the reader also has a simple desire to know what is being conveyed. It is unclear in this scene whether George is making a black joke or giving a positive appraisal of the dutiful, albeit murderous, wife’s celebration of the anniversary. Some-

times clichés do function as puns, though the reader cannot always discern whether George is indulging in wordplay for its own sake or in order to arrive at a deeper meaning. When George recalls his wife leaving him because of his “taint,” he says, “I didn’t have a case, a leg to stand on. She might have made *me* do the walking, with no leg to stand on” (96). The potential meanings of “to have a case,” and “no leg to stand on” are undercut by George receiving his walking papers, and one wonders if it is worth the effort of disentangling the mess of clichés to figure out what, or how deeply, the narrator means.

Swift has received numerous letters from readers asking what his novels mean and, while he sometimes agrees with suggested analyses, he refuses to enlighten the confused,⁵ citing the reader’s prerogative to make meaning as he or she wishes. His mantra is as follows: “I believe in mystery and, more and more, in writing by instinct and intuition. I want to write the kind of novels which get more mysterious as they progress and reach their end, not less. Which is also like life.” He concludes: “I don’t want to write novels that solve things. More mystery by the end, not less!” (Interview by Paula Varsavsky).

Swift is also a tireless tinkerer, who enhances mystery by cutting back the prose in each successive draft. Early novel drafts often contain insightful explanations and descriptions that are later cut. When Picador reissued *Waterland* in 1992, Swift was asked to check the proofs and took the opportunity to “clarify the prose where sometimes it seemed to get a bit clotted, and to lighten some of the heavier emphases or repetitions,” as he explained in a letter (23 July 1994) to a bewildered American who was teaching the novel in a university class. In answer to the question of which edition he considered definitive, Swift wrote: “As a matter of principle, the more recent, revised text should take precedence over the earlier one, but I’d urge your students to get on with responding to the book (as I hope they can) and not to be side-tracked by the business of comparing variations.” He then expressed surprise that his revisions would catch the eye of anyone except “a certain kind of scholar (aaagh!)” and instructs his correspondent to tell his students: “if I had to sit an exam on *Waterland*, I wouldn’t do any better than any of them” (The Letters). In an

earlier letter of 15 January 1993 to an American student reader, Swift admitted to having made minor changes but insisted that none of them were significant enough to attract the average reader's attention.⁶ "I hope you're enjoying studying WATERLAND in your course (though I should say I write simply to be read not to be studied)" (The Letters).

Swift himself did not seem to recognize the inconsistency in making voluntary changes to a novel published ten years previously, then dismissing them as irrelevant. But when this editorial episode is viewed alongside the deliberate use of clichés in *The Light of Day* a pattern emerges. Simply stated, Swift prefers half-meanings to full ones, is unbothered by misinterpretations of his work and feels no need to supply sufficient details to help readers draw satisfying conclusions. When other novelists rely on plot twists and poetic description to heighten mystery, Swift opts for chronological contortions and, in the case of *The Light of Day*, vague language. In his later novels one even has the impression that Swift writes with the intention of keeping his readers in the dark. This deliberate mystification makes his style of fiction particularly difficult to classify, for one of the most obvious differences between literary discourse and ordinary language lies in the evocation of secondary meaning. Stein Haugom Olsen explains that "[a]mbiguities and paradoxes both of single terms and of whole phrases are used in literature to give language what has been called 'semantic density'" (90). While *The Light of Day* is full of ambiguity and paradox, its tone is more conversational than literary. At times the clichés pile up, one on top of another, giving the sense that one is moving further away from, rather than towards clarity. During his visit to the prison, George asks about Sarah's translation of a biography of the Empress Eugenie, and calls the exchange: "Small talk, dodging the issue. Time's precious—but you just play the cards" (244). Surely this is not a case in which the cliché is the obvious choice because four colloquial phrases feature in a very short span.

In *The Light of Day* Swift is at pains to avoid the richly associative poetic language favoured by English writers such as Martin Amis and Will Self, and to suggest shades of meaning through the repetition of

clichés and trite phrases. When Swift limits himself to examining single cliché phrases, the method is more effective than instances such as the prison exchange cited above, when the accumulation of clichés seems contrived and the power of the overall meaning is diminished. In an interview, Swift said that the novel's title refers both to the "brilliant clear weather" and "the light of someone's new vision of the world" ("The Challenge of Becoming Another Person" 142). It is the type of "phrase that you might have heard or used over and over again in a mundane context [that] will suddenly pop up [...] in a way that takes on a different level of deliberation" (Tonkin). The definitions offered for "light of day" by cliché dictionaries vary somewhat and emphasize different points. Kirkpatrick lists it under "to see the light of day" as "to be born, be first invented, have its first performance, be first in evidence" (63). Rogers, meanwhile, introduces "first saw the light of day" as "a biographer's clichéd way of recording the birth of a subject. The phrase 'light o dai' was in print by 1300" (106). In Swift's novel it is the rebirth of George Webb which is most strongly evoked by the phrase. He has started to see things in a new light and his vision of the world is changing.

Vision was the central theme in "Myopia," *The Light of Day's* understudy,⁷ a little-known, uncollected short story first published in *Punch* in 1979. It begins with forty-three year old Mr Sharpe deciding to have his eyesight checked because he suspects his wife of carrying on an affair with her fitness instructor. "I ought to open my eyes in other ways too," he thinks. "To act on what I saw" ("Myopia" 1). After confessing to his optician, "I thought what I saw—the fuzzy faces, the illegible lettering on signs, the general impression of cloudy, impenetrable distance, was normal," he is assured that this is "[a] common experience," for "[h]ow are we to know we are not seeing all we could?" (1). The word choice is significant. Swift would have us believe that the commonplace in life and language is not always properly understood and is worthy of investigation. When he learns that myopia begins in one's teenaged years, Sharpe makes a horrifying realization: "So I've always been like it, always not seen the world for what it is" (3).

George Webb is a year younger than Sharpe, and his dismissal from the police force for framing a suspect forces him to admit that he might not be as clear-sighted as he thought. His daughter Helen, however, has been issuing warnings like the following for years: "You're a detective, Dad. But you don't see things. You don't notice things" (63). The names of both characters alert us to their failings. Just as Mr Sharpe's vision sharpens with his new eyeglasses, enabling him to understand at a glance his wife's reason for enrolling in fitness classes, George Webb escapes from the web of past mistakes by following Sarah Nash's orders to the letter and resisting the desire to form convenient conclusions. Mrs Sharpe dreams not of a new love but of regaining lost youth, and her husband is comforted by this fact. He may be unable to fulfil her needs, but no one else can either. When the daughter asks where the mother goes each Tuesday and Thursday, Mr Sharpe mentions the keep-fit classes as "something you think about when you're getting old." "Daddy, why do we grow old?" she asks and, in the story's final sentence, Mr Sharpe privately admits, with a certain equanimity: "I can't answer her question" (7).

Regarding metaphysical matters, Mr Sharpe remains in the dark, a phrase that experts agree qualifies as a cliché and means to have "no or little knowledge about something; [to be] ignorant of something" (Kirkpatrick 94). This is a state that the typical Swiftian protagonist inhabits for most of his life; he thinks he understands, only to learn later that he was mistaken all along. Throughout his fictional oeuvre, Swift has proved to be primarily interested in analysing those moments when the veil is lifted and darkness turns to light. Knowledge can both empower and destroy, and this dangerous duality is embodied in the idea of crossing a line.

An episode that occurs one afternoon in George's childhood, while caddying for his father, teaches him that ignorance is not always a bad thing. At the golf course he accidentally overhears talk of his father's affair, and at this moment George knew he had "crossed a line" (133). He embarks on his first detective assignment, following the alleged mistress and peeping into his father's appointment book. It was "as if I was on guard" (137), George says, remembering how he followed

Mrs Freeman to her rendezvous with his father. He explains his reasons for conducting the investigation thus: "If you knew something then you had to *know* what you knew, you had to have proof. Otherwise you might be tempted to think it was all a mistake, everything was like it had always been" (134). The scenario is doubtless one that intrigues Swift. In a previous novel, *Shuttlecock* (1981), he explored the implications of the son investigating the father in an even more complex manner. While Prentiss attempts to discover the truth about his war hero father's behaviour as a prisoner-of-war, Prentiss's own son spies on him, following him in the street when he goes to work. The young George Webb, following Prentiss's example, meticulously gathers proof, then does nothing with it, overcome by the "mysterious urge to protect" (137). This is another of the novel's recurring phrases, marked twice by rectangular boxes and uppercase R's in the manuscript.

As a young policeman, George first meets his future wife Rachel when they are both off-duty: he has stopped in a coffee shop where she worked as a waitress until moments before his arrival, when she was fired for refusing the manager's advances. Unlike Mr Sharpe, who has never seen things as they are, George is a keen observer at this point in his life. He will tell Rachel later on the same day: "Only women smoke like that—blowing the smoke straight up—women who are angry. Like a kettle on the boil." Impressed, she says: "You notice things" (118). As a married man and crooked policeman, George stops noticing things, his vision narrowing as marital relations become strained. Finally, he is discharged from the police for concocting a story to fit a crime. He wants the thug Dyson to be guilty of an attack on an Indian shopkeeper, and out of desperation implores Dyson's associate Kenny to choose the most plausible version of events and testify against him: "Okay. You weren't there, you weren't with him. Here's another story—tell me if it's any better" (152). Though George claims that ninety-five per cent of the statement about the attack is true (159), his lack of concern for the truth precipitates his descent into darkness. He is rescued by love and rehabilitated by his dedication to recording incidents and emotions as they occur. Late in

the novel's single November day, George reflects on the connections between language, light, and darkness: "Dusk. Twilight. She taught me to look at words. The way I think she once taught Kristina. Strange English words. Their shape, their trace, their scent. Dusk. Why is it so strangely thrilling—winter dusk? A curtain falling, a divide. As if we should be home now, safe behind doors. But we're not, it's not yet half-past four and everything becomes a mystery, an adventure. Now everything we do will be in the dark" (252). This passage reminds us of the implications of George's emergence from darkness into light. And though his growing familiarity with words and their meanings leads towards self-knowledge, he is still capable of writing awful sentences like "people don't always look like they look" (57).

In a sense, *The Light of Day* is problematic because Swift resembles the crooked policeman who frames his story too well. This point has been made in a more limited way through David Malcolm's discussion of George's unreliability (206). But Swift too seems afraid that the reader will not understand the lesson of moving beyond words to oft-overlooked truths if the story is told with too much eloquence. And so we receive a mixed message: it is not about those (poetic) words, he says, while instructing us to look more closely at these (commonplace) words. The novel is not stillborn, but short on vitality because of the dependence on delimiting clichés. It is worth remembering that Swift's favoured pieces of language inherited their bad name from the "past participle of *clicher* stereotype, said to be imit[ative] of the sound produced by dropping the matrix on the molten metal." Stereotype blocks made from metal were used in the late nineteenth century for printing (*SOED* 348). In the end, some clichés merit serious reconsideration but others do not, and discretionary use becomes important. While the commonplace phrases connected with light and dark that feature in Swift's novel are of interest, the greeting card phrase "it's the thought that counts," for instance, is not. As *The Light of Day* progresses, it becomes apparent that complex ideas lie behind the plethora of clichés. It is in many ways a brilliant work, written with a poetic awareness of secondary meaning. The fact that the novel has been better understood by Swift scholars than by reviewers suggests that

one needs to study by the lamp in order to appreciate it, which in turn tells us that it is not written in the language that men do use, for very few men or women deliberately use clichés to plumb emotional or psychological depths.

Meiji University
Tokyo

NOTES

¹For a summary of the negative opinions voiced by reviewers of *The Light of Day* and Swift's reaction to them see the interview/review by Dan Cryer. When Cryer asks Swift about Anthony Quinn's negative remarks he replies, "I would say that he's not read the same book," and, on criticism from a female reviewer, Sylvia Brownrigg, in *Newsday*, he adds: "I write what I write. If people don't get it, then that's their prerogative. I've written enough books and had enough reviews to not be particularly affected by the slings and arrows of outrageous criticism" (Cryer).

²Beatrice Berna sees "infinite resonance" in the novel's clichés, creating "unlimited freedom to explore possible answers in the silence that follows the questions." She connects them with Swift's paranomasia, a further reminder of the multiplicity of meaning (75). Catherine Pessa-Miquel has seen the use of "terse, clipped nominal sentences" as a way of avoiding bathos and echoing cliché "the better to dismantle it, paring it down to its bare bones" (93). In two essays Laurence Tatarian considers the purpose of verbal repetition and silence in existential terms ("Reprising or the Subject in the Making," and "Vocal Silences"), while Pascale Tollance interprets the employment of cliché "as an attempt to put language at the service of the story, of what needs to be told, rather than allow words to take over and show off" (63).

³Both David Malcolm and Daniel Lea concur that it would be wrong to view *The Light of Day* as detective fiction. Malcolm points out that the novel lacks suspense since the reader is able to guess the fact that Sarah has murdered her husband long before it is actually revealed (191), while Lea calls it "insufficiently mysterious" (192). Pascale Tollance makes the interesting argument that the novel's lack of suspense is a product of the textual focus on details in order to increase the accuracy with which events are related (68). This view is not consistent with the argument that George Webb is an unreliable narrator, thus reminding us of the potential for myriad interpretations in a linguistically vague literary work.

⁴Daniel Lea also discusses the crossing of lines in *The Light of Day*. He claims that Swift uses this clichéd metaphor to remind us of "the dissonance between the subjective and objective realms," which is always important in Swift (106).

⁵A letter to Nicole Clements on 10 September 1986 is representative of Swift's evasiveness regarding content questions: "I can't tell you, any *more* than my novel can, whether Willy is a hero or if Irene finds peace, or if the flowerlady represents anything. But even if I could, it would be wrong of me to do so, since I believe that a novel is different for every one of its readers, and your interpretation is free. It follows that you should not take as gospel what your 'English Handbook' says!" (The Letters).

⁶The type of changes Swift made to *Waterland* ten years after its first appearance were primarily lexical and orthographic, thus, in a sense, he is right to say that they do not affect the average reader's experience with the novel. But one wonders why he would tinker if he really thought it unimportant. When *The Light of Day* reached the proofs stage, he made dozens of corrections, none of which are errors in spelling, typing or punctuation. (The manuscript seemed not to have any errors of this sort at all). He had simply changed his mind about which word to use. Here is a representative sampling of the corrections, all of which are found in the British Library's "Page Proofs" manuscript for *The Light of Day*: "Clever, and comfy: the coat" becomes "Clever, and comfortably-off, the coat" (14); the description of the contents of George's sandwich is altered from "lollo rosso" to "a few leaves" (23); "pretty strange" becomes "pretty odd" (61); "even as I sat there, still" changes to "even as I kept on sitting there" (72); "But maybe" to "Though maybe" (81); George sees his father "hurry to where it seemed he didn't have to wait to be let in" becomes "hurry to the same house. He didn't [...]" (102).

⁷The roots of many Swift novels are found in his early short stories. Another source for *The Light of Day* is the story of a Hungarian foster-child, "Gabor." The titular character suspects that his father's war exploits were lies, which becomes the focus in the novel *Shuttlecock*. Another point of comparison with *The Light of Day* lies in Gabor's comment at the end of the story: "I like London. Iss full history. Iss full history" (*Learning to Swim* 53). Sarah Nash is translating a biography of the Empress Eugenie into English, and this allows Swift to examine her role in the history of London.

WORKS CITED

- The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992.
- Amis, Martin. *The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews 1971-2000*. New York: Vintage, 2002.
- Berna, Beatrice. "Graham Swift's *Last Orders* and *The Light of Day*: Investigating Human Experience." *Etudes britanniques contemporaines* 41 (Dec. 2011): 73-84.
- Craps, Stef. *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift: No Short-Cuts to Salvation*. Brighton: Sussex Academic P, 2005.
- Cryer, Dan. "The Stealth Writer." *Newsday* (12 Jun 2003): 6.
- Fowler, H. W. *Fowler's Modern Usage*. 1965. 2nd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1983.

- Gove, Michael, Germaine Greer, and Mark Lawson. Rev. of *The Light of Day*, by Graham Swift. *BBC News*. 27 Feb. 2003. Web. 19 Aug. 2010. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/review/2806197.stm>>
- Kakutani, Michiko. "A Lovesick Gumshoe Who Is Willing to Wait." Rev. of *The Light of Day*, by Graham Swift. *The New York Times Book Review*. 2 May 2003. Web. 17 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/02/books/books-of-the-times-a-lovesick-gumshoe-who-is-willing-to-wait.html>>
- Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue*. 1967. New York: OUP, 2000. Kindle file.
- Kirkpatrick, Betty. *Clichés: Over 1500 Phrases Explored and Explained*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996.
- Lea, Daniel. *Graham Swift*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005.
- Lee, Hermione. Rev. of *The Light of Day*, by Graham Swift. *The Guardian*. 8 Mar. 2003. Web. 19 Aug. 2010. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/mar/08/bookerprize2003.fiction>>.
- Lodge, David. "The Novel as Communication." *The Practice of Writing*. New York: Penguin, 1996. 180-97.
- Malcolm, David. *Understanding Graham Swift*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2003.
- O'Mahony, John. "Triumph of the Common Man." *The Guardian*. 1 Mar. 2003. Web. 19 Aug. 2010. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/mar/01/fiction.grahamswift>>.
- Olsen, Stein Halgom. *The End of Literary Theory*. 1987. Cambridge: CUP, 2008.
- Partridge, Eric. *A Dictionary of Clichés*. 5th ed. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979.
- Pesso-Miquel, Catherine. "No 'screaming and shrieking in the wind': The Playfulness of Reticence in Graham Swift's *Last Orders*, *The Light of Day*, and *Tomorrow*." *Etudes britanniques contemporaines* 41 (Dec. 2011): 85-104.
- Quinn, Anthony. Rev. of *The Light of Day*, by Graham Swift. *The New York Times*. 4 May 2003. Web. 19 Aug 2010. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/04/books/review/04QUINNT.html>>.
- Rogers, James. *The Dictionary of Cliches*. 1985. New York: Ballantine, 1991.
- Ross, Robert. 2003. "Searching for the Light: A Detective Sets out to Solve the Mystery of Life." Rev. of *The Light of Day*, by Graham Swift. *World and I* 18.12 (Dec. 2003): 230.
- The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (SOED)*. Ed. C. T. Onions. 3rd ed. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1975.
- Swift, Graham. "Clear Light of Day." Undated earliest working ms. of *The Light of Day*. Graham Swift Archive. British Library, London.
- . "Myopia." Undated ms. Graham Swift Archive. British Library, London.
- . *Shuttlecock*. New York: Vintage, 1981.
- . *Learning to Swim*. 1982. New York: Vintage, 1992.

- . *The Letters of Graham Swift: 1985-2007*. Graham Swift Archive. British Library, London.
- . Interview by Adam Begley. 1992. Web. 20 Aug. 2010. <<http://www.bookpage.com/BPinterviews/swift492.html>>.
- . Interview by Catherine Bernard. Ts. Graham Swift Archive. British Library, London. Nov. 1995.
- . *The Light of Day*. 2003. New York: Vintage.
- . "The Challenge of Becoming Another Person." Interview by Heike Hartung. 2005. *Anglistik* 16.1: 139-46.
- . Interview by Fiona Tolan in London. Ms. Graham Swift Archive. British Library, London. 9 Aug. 2006.
- . Interview by Francois Gallix, Vanessa Guignery, et al. Conference of London and Contemporary British Fiction. The Sorbonne, France. Ts. Graham Swift Archive. British Library, 17 Mar. 2007.
- . Interview by Paula Varsavsky, conducted by facsimile, for *La Gaceta*, Buenos Aires, Argentina. (June 25). Ts. Graham Swift Archive, British Library, London. 25 Jun. 2008.
- . *Making an Elephant*. New York: Knopf, 2009.
- . Discussion with Graham Swift. SEAC conference. Nice, France. 5 Nov. 2010.
- . Letter to the author. 5 June 2011.
- Tatarian, Laurence. "Reprising or the Subject in the Making." *Rewriting/Reprising in Literature: The Paradoxes of Intertextuality*. Ed. Claude Maisonnnet, Josiane Paccoud-Huguet, and Annie Ramel. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009. 77-90.
- . "Vocal Silences." *Voices and Silence in the Contemporary Novel in English*. Ed. Vanessa Guignery. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009. 38-54.
- Tollance, Pascale. "'You Cross a Line': Reticence and Excess in Graham Swift's *The Light of Day*." *Voices and Silence in the Contemporary Novel in English*. Ed. Vanessa Guignery. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009. 63-73.
- Tonkin, Boyd. "Graham Swift: Distant Voices, Still Lives." 3 Mar. 2003. *The Independent*. Web. 15 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/graham-swift-distant-voices-still-lives-745932.html>>.
- Widdowson, Peter. *Graham Swift*. Tavistock: Northcote House, 2006.
- Wood, James. "How's the Empress?" Rev. of *The Light of Day*, by Graham Swift. *London Review of Books* 25.8 (17 Apr. 2003): 28-29.