

## Playing with the Ready-Made: Graham Swift's *The Light of Day* A Response to Andrew James\*

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Andrew James starts from the premise that *The Light of Day* (LOD) “has come to be viewed as an intriguing attempt to create serious literature devoid of poetic language” (214). The use of the anonymous passive voice allows him to imply that there is a critical consensus backing this opinion. James asserts in his introduction that in this novel Swift does use clichés “in such a way that they resonate, and we are made to reconsider their meaning,” and that “when the method works, Swift is able to create a literary effect through colloquial language” (214), yet his article shows that he remains inclined to agree more with the negative reviews of the novel, those that disapprove of Swift’s use of clichés and simple, colloquial language. His opinion rests on a restricted definition of “poetic.” The general definition of this word, according to the *OED*, is “[o]f, belonging to, or characteristics of poets or poetry,” but other definitions seem in agreement with Andrew James’s opinion when they equate “poetic language” with a language befitting “poetry, as in being elevated, sublime etc.”<sup>1</sup> In response, I will first argue with James about what he deems to be the protagonist’s “naivety” as regards clichés, and about the status of the narrative voice. Then I will focus on the fact that, in my opinion, his analysis of clichés has failed to take into account Swift’s playful humour, and the fact that unpretentious, colloquial language can be used to create a poetic, literary novel.<sup>2</sup>

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\*Reference: Andrew James, “Language Matters: An Investigation into Cliché in *The Light of Day*,” *Connotations* 22.2 (2012/13): 214-34.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debjames0222.htm>>.

James contends that, if the reader is forced to look at clichés differently, it is thanks to the author, not the character, because he describes George Webb as “[Swift’s] unintellectual narrator” (220), who “think[s] in clichés” (215). But he also presents him as an evolving character, who “writes down his story” in order to understand it better, and whose “perception of reality changes” gradually (215). This is doubly problematic, firstly, because the whole “action” of the novel takes place on one single day, so that any “evolution” of the character is already a thing of the past when the novel opens; and, secondly, because James seems to agree with Ruth Franklin, who equates the “homework” written for Sarah with the novel itself,<sup>3</sup> thus automatically regarding George as a “first-person narrator.”

However, when George alludes to the contents of his “homework” it is clear that what he writes for Sarah cannot be the text of the novel. He explicitly mentions, for instance, the fact that he has not “told Sarah everything,” that “there are things [he] can’t and won’t tell [her] yet” and perhaps “never will” (*LOD* 176). The dialogues with Sarah show how reticent George is with her, how reluctant to discuss his hopes and moods. When Sarah encourages him to write, it is not to read about his feelings; what she is hungry for is “every detail, every crumb” of “ordinary blessed life” (115). She wants to know “what it’s like out there” (188), “it” being the commonplace world of daily occurrences, city, streets, and weather; she wants him to “bring the world in here. Not like a police report” (188). George’s silent response is a deadpan joke on the cliché “to ask for the world”: “A tall order. Asking the world” (188). In a humorous conceit, the pages that he brings her become a way of smuggling the world *into* the prison: “The world brought in bit by bit, like prisoners—the other way round—chipping away stone by stone, at a wall” (188).

So we should consider the “homework” to be separate and different from the intimate thoughts and memories that the reader discovers in the words on the page. George’s sentences, addressed only to himself, are, as Adam Mars-Jones puts it, only a “mental revisiting.” Technically speaking, if we say that *LOD* has a “first-person narrator”

it is for want of a better word, because the word “monologist” seems to have been confiscated for novels deploying a stream-of-consciousness technique. As in *Last Orders*, *Tomorrow* or *Wish You Were Here*, the reading contract is that “the voices” we hear are “thinking,” not addressing a reader. However, those are only technical distinctions; the pages supposedly written by George as an offering to Sarah remain impalpable and invisible for the reader, and even if George is only addressing himself, his monologue *is* a form of narrative, a way of turning his own life and hopes into a narrativized, acceptable account. To all intents and purposes, George *functions* as the narrator in this novel.<sup>4</sup> If we adopt this reading of the novel, we can accept that, in David Malcolm’s words, George is indeed an “unreliable narrator,” but one who only deceives or deludes himself (as opposed to one who would deliberately attempt to deceive his potential readers).

But, we should also be aware of the *writerly* quality of George’s “inner monologue” (a quality that I will attempt to illustrate further down): George is learning the art of writing, his mind has been opened to the subtleties of language, and in the novel his consciousness is actively *verbalizing*, seeking the exact words that might do justice to his visual impressions and perceptions. So if George functions as a writer in the novel, it is only because what is dramatized is the mental preparation before the act of writing (just as in *Tomorrow* Paula uses her long vigil to “rehearse” what she will tell her twins on the morrow, to choose her words as precisely as possible, so that her mental activity is highly verbalized).

Yet, Andrew James consistently presents the text of the novel as having been “written” by George, and, he implies, often *badly* written, as when he deplores the “awful” sentence “people don’t look how they look” (James 221, 230; quote taken from *LOD* 42). But the very fact that this sentence grates should alert us to its paradoxical power and philosophical depth. It is not simply a question of reality and appearance, depth and surface. The sentence therefore is much more striking than the trite “people don’t always look the same,” just as

Iago's "I am not what I am" (*Othello* 1.1.64) is deeply disturbing.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, George Webb implies that Kristina, to whom he applies the phrase, has no "essence" hidden beneath her looks, and that she is neither "trouble" nor a pathetic "lost soul" (*LOD* 43), or both at the same time.

Therefore, we should maintain a clear distance between George as a monologist and George as a would-be "writer," but reduce the distance that Andrew James posits between author and character when he asserts that, whereas Swift betrays, in his manuscript draft, an "acute awareness of creating an effect by repeating clichés," Webb is made to "*think* in clichés," uncritically (James 215, my emphasis). Indeed, one could argue that Swift encourages the reader to see George Webb as a man who consciously uses clichés and reflects upon them. Therefore, George does not think *in* clichés but *about* clichés. According to Andrew James, "George's attempt to understand the crime and his passion by writing it down enables Swift to conduct what James Wood terms his 'investigation of cliché'" (James 217). James has used Wood's phrase for the title of his article, but the point is that this "investigation" is "conducted" by Swift through the conscious awareness of his character, a private *investigator*. In fact, James Wood asserted that the novel "is explicitly an investigation into cliché, a skirmish not so much against as with cliché," but he did not equate the investigator with the author; on the contrary, he made it clear that "George himself likes to play with cliché," giving a number of precise examples (Wood 29).

George Webb does function as a self-reflexive figure of the writer, gifted from the start with the ability to *see* things (in spite of what his daughter says), and acquiring, under Sarah's guidance, the difficult art of choosing the right words and of stringing his sentences together. His sensitivity and "vision" were always there, as he protests in an imaginary dialogue with Helen about his first meeting with Rachel: "I remember everything—everything, Helen. [...] The shine of the wet road. The films of oil, like little coiling rainbows, in the gutter" (*LOD* 88-89). Yet, Andrew James obviously estimates that George writes

badly, and that the presence of imagery and other symptoms of literariness must be explained away by the fact that Swift cheats, and twists the arm of realism: "light and dark imagery betrays the presence of an artist hiding in the shadows behind George Webb" (James 220).

So why did Swift choose to make George use clichés? James contends that a "possible justification" for the presence of "commonplace phrases" in a "literary work" "is that in each usage the meaning alters" (219). Yet, surprisingly, when he looks at the repeated use of the phrase "to cross a line" he only mentions three instances of this "cliché," those marked in the manuscript, and concludes that those instances variously illustrate the same basic meaning: crossing a line, James explains, has negative implications, it refers to decisions that result "in an irrevocable change in status" or in "the breach of a contractual or ethical rule and a loss of innocence" (220).

The first example quoted does turn "the injured party" into a spy, "entering a little web of deceit" (LOD 40), but the mention of the "little web" (by a character named Webb) encourages the reader to notice the constant crisscrossing of vertical and horizontal "lines," the intertwined motifs of "steps," "edges" (49, 55, 197), and "lifeline[s]" (214), like the "first brave step" against God taken by Rachel on a tight "high wire" (90). This enables Swift to *weave* a web-like pattern, balancing the a-chronological discontinuity of a narrative relying on memory with the continuity of patterns and variations. "Crossing a line" thus takes on a multiplicity of meanings, both literal and metaphorical, so that the etymological meaning of "transgression" (to take a step across to the other side) is foregrounded, mixing both negative and positive connotations. In fact, the phrase is already present in the third line of the novel, where it refers to a positive step into a whole new dimension, liberating "us" from the metaphorical prison of a humdrum, joyless life: "We cross a line, we *open a door* we never knew was there. It might never have happened, we might never have known. Most of life, maybe, is *only time served*" (LOD 3, my emphasis).

Trying to elucidate the reasons behind Webb's repetition of clichés, Andrew James sometimes falls back on doubt and unanswered interrogations (see for instance 224, 225), or accuses Swift of using "deliberate mystification" and intentionally obscuring his prose to "[keep] his readers in the dark" (226). James cites as an example George's silent comment to himself after a flippant exchange with Sarah about the Empress Eugénie: "Small talk, dodging the issue. Time's precious—but you just play cards" (*LOD* 182). James does see an authorial intention here but cannot define it: "Surely this is not a case in which the cliché is the obvious choice because four colloquial phrases feature in a very short span" (James 226). What he does not mention is the fact that the reader should link this particular sentence to what came just before (in the order of narrated events). Because of the fragmented, discontinuous nature of Swift's narratives, the two halves of the same episode are separated by chapter 48 and need to be pieced together: "Small talk, casual talk, skirting the subject. You sit by a hospital bed and talk about the weather" (*LOD* 174). In other words, the card game or the hospital visitors who avoid the mention of illness and death are both metaphors for the evasive, embarrassed exchange of George and Sarah who cannot bring themselves to address the issue of the terrible anniversary of murder that this day represents. If "the clichés pile up" (James 226) in George's account of a conversation, it is to emphasize and reflect the stilted, artificial nature of the language which the imprisoned woman and her visitor must resort to. Harmless and trite as it is, however, it nevertheless leaves the protagonists in no doubt that much has been left unsaid, and its commonplace nature even masks hidden double meanings, "as if there's a code, a second language under the one you speak" (*LOD* 175).

The "four colloquial phrases" incriminated by James could have another function: they enable Swift to minimize the exchange about the Empress in order to make it less obvious that she plays an important role in the economy of his novel. Indeed, the use of the present tense ("she's bought a yacht"; "she's over sixty" *LOD* 182) creates a

double temporality, uniting and blending the present of the translation and the vanished actuality of Eugénie's life. This in turn provides implicit metatextual comments, firstly, on the present tense used when George and Sarah both "relive" every second of what happened two years ago (as, for instance, in "It's nearly four. They're still in the Fulham flat" 173), and, secondly, on the complex temporality of a novel in which the narrative is constantly "to-and-froing" (the verb is George's coining; see 39) between two specific days in 1997 and 1995, and between this day in 1997 and the past. That past *is* dead and gone, whereas the present day unfolds as we read, hour by hour, with surprises in store ("she's never told me this before" 168). Yet George wishes he could undo the past,<sup>6</sup> hence for instance the pun on "holding her hand" (155), a phrase in which two meanings are deployed simultaneously: tonight, on the anniversary of the precise moment when the murder was committed, George will not be there to "hold her hand," i.e. to comfort her, nor will he be there to *stop* her hand, the knife-wielding hand, before it strikes again, as it will do, in Sarah's constant reenacting of the traumatic scene.

So the Empress is made to seem only anecdotal, but she's an important objective correlative, since Eugénie "had two lives really" (75), living "Nearly fifty years of afterwards" (237) after she became a widow. Metaphorically, working on the Empress has "kept [Sarah] afloat" like "a raft" (139); her translation is like "a lifeline" (214), preserving her life and her sanity. Exactly like Eugénie, Sarah is "a spring chicken in her forties" (214), and George can hope to see her live many years of "afterwards." Clichés in this novel cannot be isolated, studied separately from the larger context and from the patterns formed by repetition.

The first page of the novel provides another example of a conversation which on the surface is commonplace, but which hides depths and unspoken intentions: George and Rita exchange their impressions of the weather ("'Cold,' she says" / "'But beautiful,' I say" *LOD* 3). But under the banal conversation and Rita's ritual offer of tea, George can sense her solitude, and he guesses that she will soon leave him (4).

The dialogue, with its feeble, threadbare adjectives (cold, beautiful) does little justice to the beauty of the day, but elsewhere, as we shall see, George's poetic thoughts amply compensate for this. Meanwhile he hides his real feelings behind these meaningless words, informing Rita repeatedly that it's "cold, but beautiful" (3, 6, 21). He hears embarrassed mourners in Putney Vale Cemetery cling to that same "inevitable comment," unable to find any adequate words for the subject of death (54), and he even imagines Bob sarcastically greeting him from his grave: "Nice flowers. Beautiful day" (84).

If the dialogues are deliberately banal, to fend off the embarrassment of "a bedside closeness, a hospital hush" (183), and keep the unsaid safely hidden, George's silent *thoughts* about the beauty of this day are undeniably expressed in poetic language, and this fact alone makes it impossible to agree with James's opinion that this novel is "devoid of poetic language" (214) and that Swift "is at pains to avoid" "richly associative poetic language" (226). Indeed Swift, through George's vision and sensitivity, deploys a strikingly rich, oxymoronic language combining many different pairs of opposites: an icy cold and a brilliant light, a fiery light and a cold metallic sheen, black and white, darkness and brightness, etc. "The sun picks out bursts of frozen fire" (LOD 21); "The sun flashes off the road where the frost has turned to a black dew" (26); Robert Nash may have seen "spiders' webs glinting" (39), and George sees the Common as "a sea of glittering yellow leaves" (36); the "hint of warmth" in the "crisp bright air" is "like warm water in a cold glass" (93). In the florist's shop there is "a cold sweat on the grey metal" of buckets that seem "packed tight" with freshly picked flowers, "as if there's a magic garden, just out the back, defying the November frost" (10).

This paradoxical language is introduced very early, when George notices "the low, blinding sun of a cold November morning" streaming through the "*frosted*" glass of his door (4, my emphasis), but it is only upon reading the novel for the second time that one can savour Swift's use of "frosted glass" in the light of later patterns of imagery. Gravestones become fiery under the "coppery light, the flecks in the



granite like sparks" (140), or coldly malevolent at night, "the smooth granite glinting like ice" (188). In a terse, paratactic paragraph George sees the "glitter in [Sarah's] eyes," and briefly comments: "Melting frost" (15).

Life and death merge and mingle; as George sits in the cemetery just after noon, on a bench donated in memory of a dead "John Winters." This name reminds him of the approach of night and winter, two forms of symbolical death: "The day's still brilliant, the sky an almost burning blue" but "it's waning already, it can't last" (127). After four, as he emerges from the prison, he sees: "A slice of moon. A vapour trail, thin and twinkly as a needle. Another bitter night coming, the air hard as glass" (188).<sup>7</sup> No wonder even Germaine Greer, in her scathing review of a novel that she dismissed as "still-born" (Gove, Greer, and Lawson) could not help admiring Swift's depiction of the November day: "What comes alive for me in this novel is the day, the frosty day, the light," she explained.

Long before the word "prison" is first introduced, the crucial and conflicting motifs of light, imprisonment, lines, and "stepping across" are playfully and poetically intertwined.<sup>8</sup> When Rita first enters George's sunlit office, "she steps through bars of bright light" (4). This clever, poetic tetrameter, constructed with very simple monosyllables enhanced by alliteration (*b*) and by assonance (the diphthong [ai]), is echoed by the flower girl stepping "through the light" as if "through some screen" (10-11), and by the description of George's first meeting with Sarah, in his office, on a sunny October day two years before: "Cold outside, warm slabs of sun indoors. [The sun] fell like a partition across the desk between us" (8). The choice of unusual collocations ("bars" and "slabs" of sun) is coherent in this poetic foreshadowing of future constrained meetings under the inquisitive glare of the "screwesses" (139). The very first, "free" meeting of George and Sarah is told in the language of the separation to come, and the descriptive details take on a deeply symbolical meaning, evoking an obstacle first, in the sentence "[s]unlight streamed between us" (20), but also a kind of prophetic summary of George's

future role as a steadfast, devoted “knight to the rescue”<sup>9</sup> (91) who will help Sarah to live again: “I held out my hand, through the shaft of sunshine. She managed to stand” (21).

Andrew James quotes Swift when he evokes his attempts to give new power and meaning to ordinary, even simple language (see James 223) but he does not give any concrete examples of this. He could have quoted the ship imagery deployed in the text, or the dynamic tetrameter (with its alliteration in *b* and *br*) that George uses to conjure up the love-making of Kristina and Bob: “An English wood. Bracken and brambles and silver birch” (60). Poetry for descriptions of nature is to be expected, but more originally Swift is able to sum up George’s disgrace as a policeman in a spare, powerful tetrameter containing only colloquial language: “I got the axe while Dyson walked” (134): a regular iambic tetrameter with an alliteration in *w* and an assonance in [ai]. Elsewhere, the depiction of a busy supermarket car-park becomes a striking little prose poem with rhymes in “-ing”: “The car park was heaving. Trolleys careering, boots yawning, a scene of plunder” (31). “Poetic” language (compact, witty, imaginative, musical) also characterises George’s recurrent memory of Rita’s fluffy bathrobe, “loosely tied, tits nuzzling inside” (4), “a pale-pink fluffy dressing-gown, inside which her tits huddled and snuggled up to each other” (192).

Although Andrew James concludes that *LOD* “is in many ways a brilliant work,” he does not disclose any of those “ways” and limits the “poetry” to “poetic awareness of secondary meaning” (230). He never gives examples of “brilliance,” preferring to tut disapprovingly at the use of clichés that do not “merit serious reconsideration” and prescribing a more “discretionary use” of cliché (230). James is particularly puzzled by the use of “the greeting card phrase ‘it’s the thought that counts’” (230), and wonders whether it is “a black joke” or “a positive appraisal” of Sarah’s “dutiful” observance (224). To this question one is tempted to answer that the “thought” is indeed both the result of Sarah’s remorse and the expression of George’s jealousy, hence the sardonic irony within an oxymoronic opposition: “The sun

is shining down on me and I'm black with hate" (LOD 55). George fantasises that the dead Bob can read the hostile "thought" of this "phoney friend," this "fake well-wisher" (85).

In her review, Hermione Lee wrote that "casual phrases gather weight, and every word tells," because "no cliché is innocent here," so that George produces "some nice grim comedy." This is a refreshing change from the readings of critics like Daniel Lea and Michiko Kakutani, who seem impervious to Swift's tongue-in-cheek humour. They do not appear to notice that George often plays with the *literal* meaning of set phrases, making dead metaphors spring to life again, or take on a different, twisted meaning. When it suddenly occurs to him that Bob might be committing suicide, he runs to try and interfere: "I ran, for dear life" (LOD 185). The use of the comma artfully changes a phrase which is normally synonymous with "running away from danger." Bob's murder in the kitchen gives birth to puns that are explicitly underlined: "She was dressed—don't say it—to kill" (161); "The Nash Case. It had all the ingredients [...]. If 'ingredients' isn't an unfortunate word" (161). The meaning of words and phrases is constantly interrogated and sometimes literalized.

The play on literal meanings makes Swift's gallows-humour very enjoyable: the Robinson family, who bought the Nash house, were perhaps influenced by its luxurious kitchen, "a kitchen to die for," and "they might even have sold on, for a small killing" (26). In the cemetery, George notices "[t]he crematorium doing a roaring trade" (54), and the comic quality of this fusing of two similar set phrases, "roaring fire" and "roaring trade," is characterized by discretion this time, since the pun is not underlined. In a quiet corner of the cemetery George seems "to be the only soul around," but this is immediately qualified: "Living soul" (54). George creates a funnily irreverent iambic tetrameter—"The gravestones twinkle in the sun" (135)—that sounds like a verse out of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" poem, and uses a cliché which in the context is both comically incongruous and literally appropriate: "this place, when you think about it, must be *riddled with corruption*" (135, my italics). This usage mixes literal and

metaphorical meanings, putrefaction and lack of integrity, and lightens the bitter mood induced in George by his musings on the word “corrupt,” a word that tastes like the black, oozing humours of decay, the “foul stuff inside” corpses (134).

Andrew James’s article has the merit of originality, since he studied the manuscript and analysed the links with an uncollected short story written by Swift, but perhaps James spent more time on his attempts to find answers in interviews, letters and other secondary material than on the actual analysis of the novel. His questions elicited from Graham Swift himself no other response than an admirably polite and non-committal statement about his own marking of the manuscript (James 219). In my opinion, however, the use of “million dollar phrases” and “advanced vocabulary” (214), combined with the scrupulous shunning of clichés, do not constitute an indispensable condition for the creation of a poetic, literary text. Swift’s witty, moving, and poetic mastery of language is perfect as it is, because he is not a novelist with “literary pretensions” (215) but, to the delight of his readers, a gifted, greatly talented novelist.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See the second entry for “poetic” in the *Collins English Dictionary*.

<sup>2</sup>In his review of the novel, Adam Mars-Jones was of the opinion that “the overall effect is of a poem, a superbly prosaic poem.”

<sup>3</sup>See Franklin: “But George’s inadequacy as an investigator of his own affairs is more troubling for the fact that the book itself is presented as his written record to Sarah, his ‘twice-monthly reports from the world,’ which he delivers to her on each visit.” Franklin does not clarify what she has in mind behind the passive verb “is presented as”; she gives no justification for her equation.

<sup>4</sup>As David Malcolm perceptively noticed, sometimes George even behaves like “a kind of novelist too,” enjoining an unspecified “you” to “put yourself in the scene” (Malcolm 213, quoting *LOD* 87).

<sup>5</sup>The sentence gives Iago a diabolical stance, and may also have inspired Bill Unwin's statement in Swift's *Ever After*: "I am not me. Therefore was I ever me?" (4). The sentence certainly struck Stephen Greenblatt: "We expect Iago to say 'I am not what I seem,' asserting at least a hidden identity, but his actual words imply a sinister and terrifying emptiness, an absence of being that is outside the pale of human logic and experience" (47).

<sup>6</sup>George's many uneasy references to ghosts in *LOD* show that he is not really convinced that the past is totally dead and gone, but not until *Wish You Were Here* did Swift allow such ghosts to materialise in his plots.

<sup>7</sup>David Malcolm is also very sensitive to the poetic density of many sentences; analysing the opening paragraph of the novel, he writes: "One is tempted to set these lines out as verse, and even to attempt a scansion of the first paragraph" (212).

<sup>8</sup>David Malcolm also noticed the fact that "these motifs of light overlap with those of imprisonment and line crossing" (210).

<sup>9</sup>"I was Saint bloody George riding to the rescue" (*LOD* 86): here the chivalrous imagery is used in a self-derisive manner to define his relationship with Rachel, when he was still a would-be supercop in "invisible armour" (86), projecting an image of Saint George similar to Joe's perception of St George as "chain-mailed thug" in *Out of This World* (156). But with Sarah the reference is pared down to a subdued phrase, "Saint George" (*LOD* 156) reactivating the gentle image of courtly love present when Swift's sweet shop owner surrenders to Irene, "like a knight laying down arms." (*The Sweet Shop Owner* 26). George himself is loath to use the word "love" for his feelings for Sarah, yet what James calls his "infatuation" (*LOD* 207) could just as well be read as selfless (and perforce sexless) love.

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