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The Hero's Attempts to Understand His Existence in Graham Swift's *The Sweet-shop Owner*

Satoshi Masamune

Graham Swift (1949-)’s first novel, *The Sweet-shop Owner* (1980) depicts one day on which the protagonist Willie Chapman (Willy) commits suicide. Within this depiction, Swift intertwines Willy’s reflections on how he has spent his life. At the age of 24 (1937), he got married to Irene Harrison, and bought a sweet-shop in which he started to earn his living.

Then, after World War II, they had a daughter named Dorothy (Dorry), but as the relationship between Dorry and Irene soured, Willy, standing between them, suffered tremendously. Soon Irene died of asthma, and Willy, suffering from his own heart-disease, continued to worry about his daughter. The story ends with his not having been able to find a suitable way to relate to his daughter. She is the composite of all her parents’ problems.

Among the characters in this novel, Willy and his wife are both feeling some conflict in themselves. Two different kinds of attitudes towards life conflict against each other, and they can’t stick to either of them. In Irene’s case, the conflict is based on her indecision about whether she should follow her family’s way of living which gives priority to such things as “tradition” or “history,” in other words, ideas. This dilemma of hers remains unresolved.

On the other hand, Willy’s conflict, characterized by the way he interacts with the surrounding world and his place in it, brings him to

question his own existence. In this sense, his conflict assumes a more philosophical aspect. This paper analyzes through a philosophical perspective the hero's conflict which is part of his attempts to understand his existence.

I

Willy's conflicts are similar to his wife's in that they both originate from the questions relating to the value of "tradition" or "history" to any given individual. But in Willy's case, he takes another step towards philosophy. First, he doubts the way in which people emphasize ideational things because he thinks they are just arbitrary systems which men have created, and aren't necessary. Then, he goes on to expand his doubts to the existence of the objects we see. The first time he bears these questions are when he is in a history class in his grammar school days. Hearing the history teacher, he questions himself, while looking outside the window :

The history master was speaking as if his words were turning into print. Henry VIII and his wives were like characters in costume. They weren't real, but they didn't know it. History fitted them into patterns. He was looking out at the still rows of chestnuts, the asphalt, the footballers on their marked-out pitches. You touch nothing, nothing touches you. (44)⁽¹⁾

"Time and space" about which the history teacher talks is the "time and space" which has been systematized into "patterns," (like Kant's framework of recognition), and which is not "the raw time and space," (that is, the time and space which exists outside our framework of recognition). The reconstructed time and space has no existence, so

that men can neither touch it nor can they be touched by it. It's not only history. Neither can the landscape spreading outside the window be grasped as anything but a phenomenon, as long as he sits in the classroom. In order to touch reality, which is more than a phenomenon, he feels that he has to do something "positive and adventurous."⁽²⁾

It is one thing, however, to feel like this, but another to put it into practice. In his subsequent ordinary life, he plunges himself into a dull life, withdrawing from all the questions which bore him in his grammar school days. It is because the system of men's making—our ordinary rules as well as history—makes one feel comfortable as long as he is in it, and usually we don't doubt how arbitrary and contingent the system actually is. At the same time, we live our lives, believing in the existence of the exterior objects at least to a certain degree.

After graduating from his grammar school, Willy makes it his principle not to make plans for action by himself, but to wait for things to come. He is deeply steeped in the sense of security from the "pattern" which his workplace, the Ellis printing factory, gives him. His job is to arrange letters:

He had planned nothing. Not for himself. And yet he knew : plans emerged. You stepped into them.

That was why he liked it at Ellis's. The print-works. Setting up the type so that there was correctness of spacing, the letter size graded according to the importance of the word ; an overall effect of regularity and order. The content was unimportant. It was the layout that mattered. (24)

After marriage, when he buys his own shop, and starts selling newspapers, sweets, and tobaccos, he finds pleasure in the routine

which never changes from day to day, so his attitude toward life hasn't changed from the days when he was working at Ellis's. He talks about his new job: "To do what was fixed for you, that was easy." (42)

Only when something unfavorable happens, Willy resorts to a phenomenalist way of thinking that what he sees is just a phenomenon. For example, at his wedding, he gets shocked, overhearing Irene's mother speaking ill of her own daughter, or Irene's brothers criticizing the Chapman's family having no history. But to avoid the quarrel with them, he consoles himself by saying to himself thus:

No, he didn't mind. Landmarks were like that. They slipped by. They did not belong to you. And if you put out your hand to touch them, they parted and dissolved and grew flimsy like the world after champagne. And he didn't care. (24)

Using a metaphor of "landmarks," he is convinced that these mishaps are just passing by, without leaving any permanent trace upon him who is in the middle of the journey called life. Thus he never tries to step into that "positive adventurous action" whose possibility he dreamed about in school.

The relationship with his wife, Irene, goes along the same way. Having asthma, and having gotten the label of "the odd one of the family" (28) from other Harrisons, Irene becomes a good counterpart to Willy who is not of a wealthy or traditional family.⁽³⁾ Their married life is not based on the affections, but it's rather a "bargain." The person who initiates a contract is Irene, so that Willy becomes a toy which totally obeys the master's instructions. According to the contract, she invests in the shop, and also gives their daughter, Dorry,

to Willy.⁽⁴⁾ Willy, far from complaining about this way of life, finds much satisfaction in it.

Therefore, there are no severe mental conflicts, between Willy and Irene. Even if Willy tries to get closer to Irene, passing the bounds of the contract, she keeps him away by saying that one step before the real contact is the ideal state, or a well-balanced state. He is just relaxing on her knees, and her feelings towards him are described in the following:

How peaceful this evening is. Your head in my lap. There, look up now : see what you'll always see if you never claim it. Only an image in a mirror, remember? What poise, what balance, Willy, this room, this moment. Nothing must be touched, nothing must be changed. (55)

Even when World War II comes, he, working as a stuff provider, doesn't directly face the war. World War II becomes one of those histories which he learned in school. Furthermore, his job of counting the helmets again happens to be a routine job. The war ends before he goes to the battlefield.

His life, thus lacking in "contact with reality" or "a positive and adventurous action," reaches a turning point after he returns from the war, when his wife and daughter start to fight with each other. He can't treat it just as a phenomenon, and he gets down to its solution. He, while paying attention to Irene, asks Dorry to forgive her mother, explaining in words how much her mother loves her. But the reconciliation was not as easy as to be made possible by his remarks. It is rather Dorry who makes a serious challenge. Dorry gets mad at her weak-kneed father, and bringing up as the topic of why her uncle, Paul

Harrison, went with somebody's wife, demands her father's answer. But Willy winces from her challenge, and regrets doing that in his reflections thus:

Why did I wince, Dorry, why did it shock me so, that evening after dinner? You didn't go straight to your room, and your little head was flushed with anticipation and daring. You made an enemy of Irene that evening. No, it wasn't what happened with Paul and the Hancocks. [Irene] even said of that, with a sort of strange approval: 'Well - there's justice there.' It was that note of adventure in your voice. (151-2)

Willy remembers that his daughter's voice was filled with a desire to get real contact with him. When another opportunity arises in which Willy might honestly speak to Dorry, Willy again assumes a weak position and barely confesses that their marriage was not based on love. He just asks her to forgive him.

Soon Dorry leaves her family both physically and mentally by meeting a man, and starting to live with him. Willy, hoping to recover the bond, sends her letters, and patiently waits. After Irene dies of asthma, he sends the inheritance as a final resort, hoping that this will have a huge impact on Dorry. Willy imagines Dorry's coming back to the same old place he is sitting now. Willy's passiveness is very apparent.

In the long run, Dorry does not go back to her father, and continues to live with her boyfriend, a young scholar, in Bristol. It's an irony, though, that the scholar is a historian. It would seem that Dorry has chosen "history" over the idea of "real time." She finally drops in at home to pick up her mother's jewels and a fur coat, showing her

mundane interests. She also sends her father a letter to break off with him. With her decisive action, he finally gives up on reconciling with her, and starts to assume a positive posture towards her:

.... And now you are living with a historian. What do you learn from history, Dorry? Was it history that made you come and plunder your father's house? Or the opposite? Did you want to escape history, to put it all behind you-me, her, those twenty-odd years in that house? To have your moment, your victory at last, with one wild gesture? But-don't you see?-it's the moment (framed in the doorway with your heavy box of loot) that captures you.

And have you escaped history, down there in Bristol? Found new life? Encumbered with all those things of [Irene's], encumbered with the money I sent you (that money, which was only converted history). Don't you see, you're no freer than before, no freer than I am? And the only thing that can dissolve history now is if, by a miracle, you come. (216-7)

Eventually, Willy shows his dignity as a father. And soon after this declaration, he makes a suicide attempt.

II

At a glance it looks that Willy commits suicide because he has suffered a long battle with his daughter, finally getting a letter severing the relationship. But if so, his suicide comes on the surface rather suddenly. Thus it might be reasonable to think that along with the problems with his daughter, Willy has a problem of another sort, a quite philosophical sort. And this Cartesian problem eventually causes Willy

to commit suicide.

As mentioned earlier, Willy's project of taking a "positive and adventurous" action in order to dream the exterior existence has been difficult to realize because he has been feeling comfortable in confining himself in the phenomena or because his family has restricted his free actions. In the meantime, his self deep inside his mind never forgets that question of existence, and worries about it once in a while. It might be useful here for the analysis to set up two kinds of selves in his mind: the self inhabiting the surface and the self deep inside his mind. The issue is how this latter self has been struggling deep inside his mind.

One of the clichés which Willy uses is "The same and not the same." This might give us a clue to understanding his problem. During the war, he gets permission from his senior to return to his wife, and several times he travels by train from Hampshire to London where she is living. He thinks about the landscape outside the window of the train:

'41, '42, '43. How monotonously, how anonymously those years passed whose events would fill the chronicles. Like the lorries, passing in and out by the guard house, loaded with pale faces. Like the trains which bore [Willy] up to London to see [Irene] (how many times did he make that journey?), click-clacking over the points, slowly over the sections of bomb-damaged embankment, past the stations whose sign-boards had been removed to confuse a non-appearing enemy, so that you sometimes forgot where you were. And yet the places hadn't changed. Basingstoke, Farnborough, Woking. The same line had borne [Willy and Irene], in '37, to the white cliffs and the seagulls. And out there, beyond the window (if you could see for the bodies, kit bags and cases that crammed the corridor), the

same countryside, green, threaded with streams, peaceful under the evening sunshine. 'What war? What war?' said the steam chunting from the engine. Nothing was changed. (75)

Reflecting the days at camp which were monotonous, lacking in changes or distinct signs, he remembers he often got at a loss, not knowing where he was. It's the same as when he is riding a train now, looking at the disguised stations which confuse him. But the scenes from the window, if they are looked at closely, haven't changed essentially. This route is the one which Willy and Irene took on their honeymoon in 1937. Even after a long period of time, the very same landscape is spreading before his eyes. Therefore, he thinks that the elements which constitute the landscape - such as the fields, and the rivers - might have their own existence. To corroborate his view, his train runs whistling as if to mock the arbitrariness of the concept of history, and to claim to the existence of the objects.

On the contrary, Willy at the same time notices that something has changed:

Save that the drinkers, there outside the pub, were uniformed and were perhaps drowning the thought of comrades killed over Germany; and that gap in the hedge-row which might perhaps have been for a gate or a hayrick was where the Dornier had crashed and the children from the village had scrambled, before the wreckage was cleared, seeking trophies and the smell of an enemy's burnt flesh. So that it was not the same as it seemed, and he found himself as the train window eclipsed scene after scene, counting-counting, as he counted helmets and nameless stations-captured moments, pictures over which curtains had dropped,

shutters flicked, counting, where to, where to, till he slept, and someone said, awakening him (had nothing changed?), 'Waterloo,' and they slid into the grey platforms, under the iron girders named after a victory. (76)

The exterior world has changed all the same. The soldiers are chatting outside the pub, or the children are, in the midst of the odor, seeking parts of the aircraft which has crashed in the hedge which might have formerly been a gate. From these observations, he reverts to the position of phenomenalism and thinks that each constituent in his sight (field) doesn't possess its existence; rather, the whole field of his sight is just like a picture, and he convinces himself as he watches a series of pictures as time passes. Standing on this view, he recalls some of his important pictures in his life (he calls them "captured moments") and falls to sleep. Awoken up by somebody, he asks himself, "Has nothing changed?" It might show his desire to believe in the existence of the objects all the same. He repeats this question of a philosophical sort which does not require him to take any action. It is, however, difficult for him to dream existence only through this question, and he keeps wavering between "phenomenon" and "existence." Willy's frequent remark, "The same and not the same" clearly reflects that.

Thus, without fully dreaming the existence of the exterior objects, he turns to dream his own existence. Experiencing his parents' death, his wife's death, his neighbors' death, and his daughter's disjunction, he feels more isolated from reality. Now he has his existence as the sole material by which to dream existence. Conveniently enough, it's easy to perform a solitary experiment which involves no other people. Thus his suicide is nothing but a "positive and adventurous action"; there is nothing tragic with his putting an end to

his life.

In the afternoon of the day he kills himself, he walks to his other store at Pond Street to pay his employees. On his way, he confirms various places which still hover strongly in his memory: “Grey spire of St. Stephen’s. Dome of the Town Hall. Everything is in its place.” (186) The fact that even after the passing of time, those places remain as they were before gives him coordinates of recognition, and his consciousness feels more or less sure about the existence of the exterior objects. But at the same time, he brings up again that remark, “The same and not the same.”:

Perhaps I knew him then, perhaps I was already his memory, this old, breathless figure, the same and not the same as me, with a briefcase, walking now down Russell Street. Perhaps I knew Mr Vincent’s shop would become Mr Chapman’s; perhaps I knew when I walked home over the common that I was crossing the path I would one day take home to my wife. Life was set out like a map. Like the waxy, pastel-coloured maps that hung, that afternoon, in the History Room. (189)

Here Willy, referring to his present self by a third-person pronoun, as “this old breathless figure” and mentioning his past self by a first person pronoun, makes the present self lose its priority in terms of time. Selves at various points of time are grasped equally as phenomena in time. So that, the life of Willy Chapman’s as a whole can be looked at from a transcendental perspective, which is shown by the sentence: “Life was set out like a map.” The thing is, thus, whether there is something which unites this bundle of phenomena. If he could find it, he might be able to dream his own existence.⁽⁵⁾

While walking to Pond Street, many pictures of his former selves (he calls them “mental photographs”(175)) come up to his mind. The first days when he went on a date with Irene in the park, or the evening he drank with Irene at a pub. But he notices that in those pictures he tried to act just as he had intended to do in order that the picture could be seen as perfect later. In other words, he was just acting:

I told [Irene] to meet me after work and to wear the blue and white dress she wore on our honeymoon, because I wanted just one perfect evening. She came. She wore the dress. She looked like someone acting under instructions. She sipped the Pimms I bought her ; she smiled across the table, and even laughed at my joke, because she knew this was expected of her and it wouldn't happen again and I must have one perfect picture ... (175)

He can't confirm his existence in these “pictures.” Willy starts to fall into the idea that he himself might be another “phenomenon.”

When he passes his old school, however, he remembers the day of an athletic meet which was held there at the age of 16, and returns to the date.⁽⁶⁾ David Leon Higden says that the key to understand the present in the novels of Graham Swift lies in momentous moments in the past, and it is certain that his recollection of this day induces his suicide.⁽⁷⁾ Though he was bad at studying, he was proficient in running a long distance, and on this day, he was fully expected by all his classmates to win the race. Once the race began, he made a slow start, positioning himself at the rear of the whole group, and remained there until near the final stage of the race when he popped up to the front. In the meantime, to his consciousness come two images: the far

distant future image of his classmate, Thompson, then fully grown up, cheering-up his son, and the image of himself just about to win this race:

(1) Thompson grinned. Thompson was captain of his house, a senior prefect and one of the honoured of the school. He would stand by the track one day, vigorously shouting-on his own son.

(191)

(2) The crowd is screaming. There will be the victory ceremony, the trophies, proud smiles, grandiloquent words on the loud-speaker. *Virtus et Fortitudo*. After the excitement, the crowd will go away, light cigarettes, buy evening papers. (197)

Willy sees these pictures as if he were a prophet. But this is not pleasing to him by any means. Everything is previously arranged so stringently that there is no room for his free action. In order to get out of this state, seeking a self in the blank future by which he can dream his existence, he yields the championship to another runner at the last moment of the race, spoiling all the expectations of the spectators. At that crucial moment, he says, "All right. Now." (198) Nothing which happened after this is written. Literally it is a blank future, which might mean that even at his old age, what happened just at the ending of the race can't be grasped as a mere picture, nor any words can describe it.

Incidentally, reading the last stage of the race, it seems that his face is filled with ecstasy. It might be because at this moment he is feeling ecstasy in the act of dreaming his own existence. It might not be wrong to reason that Willy, in order to reexperience this ecstasy, attempts to kill himself. His final letter to his daughter looks more like a declaration of his own exulted feelings confronting his death than

a declaration of war with her. In this exultant state, he finally takes a look at the things in Dorry's room. Thinking over how he will be after death, he dreams about another form of existence which is floating over the border between "phenomenon" and "existence."

The china shepherd and shepherdess on the dressing table still anticipated their embrace. He wasn't aware how many times he slipped from one room to another, inspecting their silent contents. Was it to make sure all was complete, secure? To summon life from those unmoving objects? To laugh at their fraudulence? Perhaps he was already sitting, motionless himself, in the armchair where he'd decided he would sit, and it was only some shadow of himself, touching but not touching these frozen items of stock, who drifted now—out of his daughter's room—onto the landing at the top of the stairs. (219-20)

His feelings, so far wavering between "phenomenon" and "existence," now arrives at the third, ambivalent state on the border between them.⁽⁸⁾ He feels more happy than pained. And his very last remark in the book, "The garden framed in the window was like a photograph. 'All right - now.'" (222) tells us clearly that in this ecstatic state, he is ready to jump to a "positive and adventurous action."

Conclusion

It is pointed out that *The Sweet-shop Owner*, if it is compared to other works by Swift, is loose in its constitution.⁽⁹⁾ It is not clear exactly how it is so, but it would not be wrong if the reader had an impression that the plot is abrupt in its treatment of the hero going to his suicide.

The reader might think that more descriptions are necessary for the rationale for his suicide.

Apart from this structural defect, it is noteworthy that Swift is presenting a philosophical problem through his novel, though he may not be particularly conscious of it. Furthermore, Swift is depicting a quite ordinary man so that we might consult him when we want to seek our own ways of living. As a result, he shows that we can count on philosophy to solve our problems of a similar sort. Finally, it is worth pointing out that Swift's description of the hero's ecstasy at the final stage is unique and artistically marvelous.

Unfortunately enough, it seems that few philosophical approaches to his novels have been made yet. However, Swift himself offers his philosophical interest in his interview with Marc Porée.⁽¹⁰⁾

In fact, the idea that the world is just a scene where representatives play their roles attracts me very much, and I see in this idea something profoundly liberating for the novelist. To think that we all dwell in a theatre of shadows, far from being in bondage, constitutes for me, on the contrary, a breakthrough. I see the major philosophical problems touching the status of the uncertain reality.

From this quotation, it can be said that Swift believes in the dualism of "phenomenon" and "reality," placing more emphasis on the former. In addition, as he seems to think of the relationship between them as the one between freedom and bondage, his phenomenistic interests are based more on the practical or ethical demands than on the metaphysical or epistemological ones. According to *The Columbia History of the British Novel*, Graham Swift is listed under the headline

of “The End of History” with other writers like Julian Barnes and Kazuo Ishiguro.⁽¹¹⁾ However, more light should be shed on Swift’s philosophical interests for understanding his works.

NOTES

- (1) In this paper, all quotations are from *The Sweet-shop Owner* (1980 ; New York : Vintage, 1993).
- (2) It reminds us of Jean Paul Sartre’s novel, *La Nausée* (1938) in which the protagonist, feeling the need for a “positive and adventurous action,” ends up suiciding himself. It might be more than a coincidence that Swift’s novel and *La Nausée* both end with a sentences like, “Tomorrow rain would fall on it.”
- (3) David Leon Higden makes a psychological analysis about the reason Irene got married to Willy. “Irene has married out of a complex need to distance herself from her family, to insulate herself from sexuality, and to punish herself for the unidentifiable wrong she has committed.” David Leon Higden, *The British and Irish Novel since 1960* (New York : St. Martin’s, 1991), p. 182.
- (4) Del Ivan Janik mentions that the reason Irene gives Dorry to Willy is to compensate for her affection which she can’t give to her husband. Janik, ‘History and the “Here and Now”: The Novels of Graham Swift’ (*Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 35. no. 1, Spring 1989), p. 75.
- (5) This might have much connection with David Hume’s idea of “self”: “...I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that [selves?] are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.” Hume : *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part IV, Section VI.
- (6) It is of significance that the day this athletic meet is held is the day after the history class which gave Willy an incentive to all his subsequent questions.
- (7) “[T]he key to understanding the present resides in a crucial moment in the past, a moment crucially defining the protagonist’s life and a moment rendered numinously symbolic by the connections established over the span of years.” Higden, ‘Double closures in

postmodern British fiction : the example of Graham Swift' (*Critical Survey*, vol. 3. no. 1, 1991), p. 95.

- (8) One of the themes in Swift's *Last Orders* (1996) is the blurring of a border of any kind.
- (9) Higden, p. 93.
- (10) Marc Porée, 'Entretien avec Graham Swift' (*La Quinzaine Littéraire*, vol. 621, 1993), pp. 10-11.
- (11) *The Columbia History of British Novel* (New York : Columbia Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 972-77.