

The Demise of Rural Life in Graham Swift's *Wish You Were Here*

Bożena Kucała

ABSTRACT

This article argues that Graham Swift's recent novel *Wish You Were Here*, which depicts the erosion of rural life in contemporary England, may be treated as a post-rural novel; it both overtly alludes to the tradition of rural fiction and the pastoral convention in literature as well as suggests that the lifestyle that sustained this type of literature is currently disintegrating. Although focused on the limited experience of a particular family, the novel forges connections between a series of recent personal disasters and national and international events whose impact may be felt even in rural Devon. The narrative is overshadowed by the protagonist's traumatic memories, and above all by his current mission to bury his brother, a soldier killed in Iraq. The burial that ends the story is a bitterly ironic return to the family farm, which, however, will never again serve the function for which it was once built.

KEYWORDS

Graham Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, rural fiction, pastoral tradition, retrospection

Swift's latest novel (published in 2011) has been compared to his Booker-winning *Last Orders* in that its action (and very slow action it is) is driven by a funereal journey which prompts the protagonist's retrospection. Jack Luxton, the sole remaining descendant of his family, has to bury his long-absent brother, a soldier who has been killed in Iraq. The narrative is pervaded by a sense of loss. Jack has much to mourn apart from the death of Tom; his whole life has been marked and determined by a series of deaths: his mother's death from cancer and his father's suicide, as well as, but of no less importance, the death of the family dog and the mass slaughter of cattle following the mad cow disease panic. Until he left his native village, Jack's life had been punctuated by annual Remembrance Day ceremonies, during which two of his ancestors, killed in WWI, were commemorated. The ritual, attended by many residents of the village, was a small-scale, communal event rather than part of the national mourning, and played a vital role in integrating the community. References to Remembrance Day and the memorial cross extend beyond the death of the Luxton brothers, stressing the crucial function of memory and habit in lending coherence to rural life. The silver medal, awarded posthumously to one of the soldiers, becomes more than a mark of individual valour – members of the family carry it with them at important moments in their lives, as a symbol of continuity and acknowledgement of the past. The Luxtons are "a tight-knit, inward-looking family, sustained by a proud heritage."¹ The last of the Luxtons, Jack, revives the ritual by taking the family heirloom to Tom's funeral. Accordingly, the act of throwing it into the sea must be interpreted as Jack's recognition of the irrevocable demise of his family. The pattern of life cultivated over several generations (the house in which Jack grew up was built by a Luxton in 1614) has been irrevocably disrupted. Jack wonders at the role in which he has unwittingly been cast (he has always let others decide for him): "And who would have thought [...] that he, Jack Luxton, would be the first of all the Luxtons (as he

1 Carol Birch, "Wish You Were Here by Graham Swift – Review," *The Guardian* 11 June 2011 (<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/jun/11/wish-you-were-swift-review>>), n.p.

was now the last) to cut that long, thick rope on which his own hands had been hardened and sell Jebb Farmhouse and all the land and become, with Ellie, the soft-living proprietor of a caravan site?"² Jack is surprised not only at his own responsibility and inadvertent contribution to the extinction of his family but also astonished at the speed at which it has happened.

It will be argued here that Swift's novel, despite adopting the self-limiting perspective of the protagonist, focuses on the contemporary process of the general, rapid decline of rural life. Although Swift's narrative offers few generalizations, instead giving a succession of interior monologues from characters who remain locked in their narrow world and are conspicuously inarticulate, the novel aims to portray "a rural England that is no longer merely under threat, but has been comprehensively vanquished."³

Glen Cavaliero identifies an emphasis on nature and the positive affirmation of man's vital struggle with his environment as central to rural fiction. Man is typically shown as part of a community, and the literary rural tradition tends to be optimistic about "the ability of men to live creatively together." Rural fiction acclaims the landscape and man's creative potential arising out of his involvement in his surroundings.⁴ Rural novels, although they may have their share of the pastoral tradition, are much more realistic in their representations of country life. Since the characters are typically working-class people for whom farming is the basic source of their livelihood, the countryside cannot be portrayed as an idyllic place of retreat and relaxation. On the contrary, the plots of rural novels are interwoven with or even driven by down-to-earth economic matters.⁵ The early twentieth-century saw a gradual problematisation of the rural novel, which supplanted naive representations of the pastoral with a modern social perspective. Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence played a major part in re-evaluating and complicating the tradition by making landscape "the arena of pressing historical change, rather than a scenic backdrop, or a poetic or contemplative retreat." The social transformations of post-war Britain, the displacement of a rural with a suburban lifestyle further challenged the relevance of pastoral fiction.⁶

Wish You Were Here should more properly be designated as a *post-pastoral* and a *post-rural* novel in that in portraying life at Jebb Farmhouse it foregrounds the recent process of its quick degeneration and eventual change of status from a genuine farmer's homestead to a city dweller's refurbished, quasi-pastoral country cottage. Critics detect echoes of Thomas Hardy in Swift's book,⁷ not only because the setting is in Devon (part of Hardy's Wessex), and because Swift's characters, like Hardy's, journey across the region. More importantly, both writers capture the quality of the area at a time of change, when the cyclical patterns are being subsumed under linear time, with the old routines disappearing. K.D.M. Snell notes that in the history of English literature regional novel-writing "emerged most strongly during periods when older interior ways of life were being threatened economically, and when changes in familiar and psychological 'landscapes' affected even those who were economically secure, who comprised the majority

2 Graham Swift, *Wish You Were Here* (Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 2011), 29.

3 Clare Morgan, "Graham Swift's Piece of England," *Times Literary Supplement* 17 June 2011, 19.

4 Glen Cavaliero, *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel 1900–1939* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978), 204–5.

5 Cavaliero, *Rural Tradition*, 206.

6 Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 189.

7 Morgan, "Graham Swift's Piece of England," 19.

readership."⁸ Swift's novel leaves the reader in no doubt that things are changing for the worse in rural Devon. "[Hardy's] epic fatalism will sometimes come to mind," comments Boyd Tonkin in his review of *Wish You Were Here*.⁹ The protagonist, as a representative of the generation who witnessed the erosion of country ways and manners, thinks nostalgically of his early childhood. He does not need to idealise that time; for all its harshness and lack of sophistication, the Devon farm was and still remains his natural element, and his identity depends on his emotional connection with the microcosm of his native village. There are echoes of the pastoral (or bucolic, since the Luxtons are cattle-breeders) in Jack's nostalgia for a past which was markedly better than the present. Jack's attitude exemplifies Peter V. Marinelli's assessment of the conditions that facilitate the emergence of pastoral literature: "it is written when an ideal or at least more innocent world is felt to be lost, but not so wholly as to destroy the memory of it or to make some imaginative intercourse between present reality and past perfection impossible." Marinelli cites Frank Kermode, who noted that pastoral literature cannot be written in a generation whose children have never seen a cow.¹⁰ In a strangely apt illustration of Kermode's comment, Jack's memory is haunted by images of burning cow carcasses.

The epigraph to the novel is taken from "A Little Boy Lost," from Blake's *Songs of Experience*: "Are these things done on Albion's shore?"¹¹ The poem portrays a little boy, innocently proclaiming self-love, for which he is harshly punished by being burnt, as others were before him. The concluding line – quoted by Swift – expresses disbelief at the wanton cruelty and damage, which are strongly contrasted with the poetic images of England conjured up by the term "Albion." In Swift's novel, the incidents that disrupt the family's life can be traced to past national or even international events and processes, even though the characters themselves may be unable to understand it. Images of fire recur at crucial moments in the story, signifying mindless destruction. In the last decade of the twentieth-century, a nation-wide blow to rural life was the mass slaughter of cows, following cases of BSE. Despite the promised compensation, the killing undercut the rural economy, destroying not only the farmers' livestock but also their lifestyle. What made the death of the animals disturbingly different from previous agricultural disasters was the unnatural and very dubious reasons for the slaughter. Swift limits the narrative to the perspective of the Devon villagers, who view the developments with horror and incomprehension and yet are powerless to avert them. The comment on overwhelming madness, which opens the narrative, refers to the popular name of the disease but is simultaneously an assessment of the irrational decision to slaughter thousands of animals, including the sixty-five head of cattle owned by the Luxtons, on very feeble grounds:

Healthy cattle. Sound of limb and udder and hoof- and mind. "Not one of them mad as far as I ever saw," Dad had said, as if it was the start of one of his rare jokes and his face would crack into a smile to prove it. But his face had looked like simply cracking anyway and staying cracked...¹²

-
- 8 K.D.M. Snell, "Regional Novel: Themes for Interdisciplinary Research," *Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland, 1800–1990*, ed. K.D.M. Snell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 27–8.
- 9 Boyd Tonkin, "Wish You Were Here, by Graham Swift," *The Independent* 17 June 2011 (<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/wish-you-were-here-by-graham-swift-2298489.html>), n.p.
- 10 Peter V. Marinelli, *Pastoral* (London: Methuen, 1971), 9.
- 11 Swift's citation differs slightly from the version in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman: "Are such things done on Albion's shore." (William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly rev. ed., ed. David V. Erdman [New York: Doubleday, 1988], 29.)
- 12 Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, 1.

The BSE panic was followed by the foot-and-mouth epidemic a few years later, causing another wave of animal slaughter. This time, Jack, having renounced his farm, watches TV images closely resembling what he once witnessed in person. On both occasions the decisions, taken by enigmatic experts and enforced by far-off authorities, are only very vaguely and unconvincingly justified, but their effects materialise in very concrete apocalyptic scenes: "Thousands of stacked-up cattle, thousands more lying rotting in fields. The thing was burning day and night."¹³ Scenes observed in his youth remain emblazoned on Jack's memory and return to haunt him, even on occasions when people, and not animals, are the victims. In retrospect, the unnatural, perverted violence in the countryside marked the onset of madness and violence world-wide. In Jack's mind, there is an oblique link between the large scale animal carnage and the 9/11 attacks:

BSE, then foot-and-mouth. What would have been the odds? Those TV pictures had looked like scenes from hell. Flames leaping up into the night. Even so, cattle aren't people. Just a few months later Jack had turned on the telly once again and called to Ellie to come and look, as people must have been calling out, all over the world, to whoever was in the next room, "Drop what you're doing and come and look at this."¹⁴

Although away from his ancestral farm at the time of the subsequent disasters, Tom Luxton comes to the same conclusion as his brother: "The cow disease, when it came, was like some not quite final warning."¹⁵ While serving in Iraq – the war itself is of course one of the consequences of the 9/11 attacks – Tom continually associates images of burning cattle with the current scenes of violence all around him. The images are, in his opinion, "a good guide and reference point to have."¹⁶ Tom's choice of a military career was on the one hand a practical way of making a living after abandoning his father's home, but on the other hand it melded with his grim recognition that the world was violent, mad and cruel, a recognition that made death, whether of cattle, other people or oneself, an acceptable prospect. Tom dies in an explosion, but before dying has time to recall his father's farm in Devon and to realise that he, too, is going to be burnt to death.

In Book Eighth of *The Prelude* ("Retrospect, Love of Nature leading to Love of Man") Wordsworth argued that his appreciation of nature taught him to extend his affection to mankind. The ancient mariner in Coleridge's poem receives a harsh lesson in the consequences of failing to observe the obligation to love all living beings. The moral of the story he is compelled to tell is "He prayeth well, who loveth well / Both man and bird and beast." The reasons why both Luxton brothers ultimately abandon the ancestral farm and renounce the inheritance of generations are never clearly articulated, but it is obvious that the violent death of the animals was a major contributing factor. It is their generation in which the bond between man and nature has been broken. The culling of all the perfectly healthy cows perceptibly diminishes life on the farm, making Michael Luxton unable to show his love to his sons, and causing "silence and emptiness" among the three bereaved men, a mood comparable to that which prevailed at Jebb Farmhouse when Mrs Luxton died several years earlier. Recollections of milking cows, a task that he used to perform on the farm, sustain Tom Luxton on the frontline, replacing the reality of violence and terror with a sensation of idyllic warmth, comfort and a sense of belonging to the nourishing, self-regenerative world of nature:

13 Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, 3.

14 Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, 3.

15 Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, 199.

16 Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, 197.

He could still remember that daily treadmill of extracting milk from cows, and the thought that would sometimes come to him while doing it, that it was only the same essential process [...] by which human babies were nursed and eased into the world, by which he himself had once been nursed and eased ...¹⁷

In his dying vision Tom returns to the farm, which becomes a kind of farmer's paradise, and the last sound his dying senses conjure up is the sound of cows steadily eating grass, "the most soothing sound in the world."¹⁸ Or perhaps, since this is a return, it would be more appropriate to say that Tom conjures up the golden age of his early childhood, before his world began to go wrong.

In reality, the ancestral farm, even when he still lived there, had become a rural waste land where life had suddenly become paralysed and the residents were incapable of sustaining or generating life. In hindsight, Mrs Luxton's premature death heralded the erosion of the natural cycle. After two difficult births, she died of ovarian cancer. Her husband failed to find a new wife, and neither of his two sons has children. The reason why Jack did not escape like his brother was his passivity rather than his commitment to the land, but after his father's death Jack's wife Ellie easily persuaded him to sell the farm and move away. However, his instinctive reaction to the series of disasters haunting his family, and possibly an expression of his sense of guilt over his part in its disintegration, is his refusal to have children: "He simply hadn't wanted any more of himself, of his own uprooted stock, after Tom had left and then he and Ellie had left too. And Dad had gone anyway. He hadn't wanted any passing on."¹⁹ Jack's deliberate childlessness is then in a sense a parallel to his father's and brother's self-destructive tendencies.

Both brothers, despite being uprooted, mentally remain Devon farmers; this is also a major reason why they cannot settle anywhere else. Living on the Isle of Wight, Jack retains his Devon accent and his farmer's schedule of daily activities. Being a man of the land, he cannot fit into the life that Ellie has enforced on him. They run a holiday caravan site, yet in the winter they themselves fly on holiday to the Caribbean. He is forever a creature of the earth; up in the air in the airplane or by the water's edge Jack is clearly out of his element. And Tom, too, is out of place in the army: his voice keeps its "buttery burr," and, despite his intentions, sounds soothing; it is the voice of a cowman rather than the voice of a corporal.²⁰

The correlations between the human and natural cycles of life, traditionally assumed to be a staple of rural existence, are emphasised in Swift's book, but they are shown to degenerate into a correlation with decline and collapse. Jack looks "bovine"²¹ and feels strongly for the plight of the cows. The family dog falls ill, almost as if in response to the disease of the cows ("you might have said that Luke, though he'd taken his time, had only come up with his own disease in sympathy"²²), in turn triggering Tom's alienation from his family and his decision to leave home. The sick dog would have died anyway, but Michael's act of shooting him, far from being just mercy-killing, appears gratuitously cruel, as if the farmer, unable to stop the general decline all around him, decided to go along with it. His striking wish expressed after the killing of the dog, that someone would one day have the decency to do the same for him, defines the

17 Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, 204.

18 Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, 209.

19 Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, 105.

20 Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, 207.

21 Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, 98.

22 Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, 138.

shooting as a prefigurement of Michael's suicide. Jack speculates that it is only natural that his father should have killed himself in the cold, dark hours of a November night – with the farm in ruins and all organic life numbed, he felt no motivation to go on living.²³ It is also understandable that before dying in a manner similar to the dog, Michael had taken to sleeping under the dog's blanket.

The oak tree, traditionally a symbol of continuity and endurance, whose origins go back to the foundation of the Luxton family, will from now on bear the mark of Michael's suicidal shot. Immediately after the tragic incident, Ellie, Jack's future wife, treats Michael's suicide and her own father's almost simultaneous death as a chance to break her bonds with the place of her birth. To enable Jack to do the same, she irreverently puts her fingers into the hole in the tree, which Jack interprets as both a liberating and a sacrilegious act. The disgrace continues as the new owners, kept in ignorance of the story of the oak, use the place of Michael's death for picnics and invent stories to account for the origin of the strange hole in the tree.

The Robinsons' motives in buying Jebb Farmhouse show the insubstantiality of the myth of the pastoral England they believe in. They are presented stereotypically, as city-dwellers caught up in "the madding crowd's ignoble strife," dreaming of a retreat to the peace and quiet of an English village. The idea of Jebb Farmhouse as an "away-from-it-all place" is flawed from the start, as Jack's decision to sell it is a sign of the utter collapse of true rural life. Equally flawed and naive is Clare Robinson's conviction that the farm is a place of refuge from the horrors of national and international disasters:

When those planes hit the towers that September, everyone said that the world had changed, it would never be the same again. But she'd felt it less distressingly, if she were honest, than the foot-and-mouth and those previous clouds of TV smoke. Since now they had this retreat, this place of green safety.²⁴

The reader is aware of the irony that she was able to buy the farm precisely because it had been affected by both events.

The Robinsons use the farm only for recreation, and never assimilate with their environment in the way the villagers used to. They start with a complete renovation of the original building and keep to themselves, avoiding any contact with the native inhabitants. Ellie quite rightly senses their proprietary attitude: "Throw in Barton Field, [...] throw in that oak, and they'll think it's their own little bit of England."²⁵ But, although in the course of the narrative the Robinsons never find out the true history of the place, they realise, on a personal level, that their image of the place as an embodiment of security and a pastoral idyll is a false construct – Toby Robinson bought the place partly to compensate his wife for his continuing extramarital affair; besides, a country cottage serves as a status symbol. Although Clare Robinson inadvertently learns of Tom Luxton's death in Iraq and has a vague intuition of something sinister connected with the oak, she painstakingly suppresses all that threatens to destroy her pastoral delusion.

The central event of the narrative, i.e. Tom's funeral, completes the novel's demonstration of the demise of rural life. The process of decline is absolute – it has ended in exile and death. In the army's terminology, the return of a dead soldier's body is called "repatriation," but to Tom's brother "patria" has a local meaning. Although the brothers did not keep in touch, Jack's instinct is correct: Tom did not die for his country,

²³ Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, 234.

²⁴ Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, 319.

²⁵ Swift, *Wish You Were Here*, 285.

he actually did not care what war he was fighting – while abroad, he still mentally relived his youthful joys and traumas on the family farm. Therefore, Jack insists that Tom should be buried in their native village. By asking the army officers to remove the Union Jack from Tom's coffin during the official ceremony and by burying his brother in a plain oak coffin, Jack instinctively restores to his brother his regional identity and rebuilds his connection with the land. The burial is, however, both an intuitive confirmation of Tom's lasting commitment to Jebb Farmhouse and a reversal of the significance of a country funeral – this death is just as unnatural and meaningless as the death of the cattle, and leaves no hope of regeneration.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Birch, Carol. "Wish You Were Here by Graham Swift – Review," *The Guardian* 11 June 2011. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/jun/11/wish-you-were-swift-review>>.
- Blake, William. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Newly rev. ed. Ed. David V. Erdman. New York: Doubleday, 1988.
- Cavaliero, Glen. *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel 1900–1939*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978.
- Head, Dominic. *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950–2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Marinelli, Peter V. *Pastoral*. London: Methuen, 1971.
- Morgan, Clare. "Graham Swift's Piece of England," *Times Literary Supplement* 17 June 2011: 19.
- Snell, K.D.M. "Regional Novel: Themes for Interdisciplinary Research," *Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland, 1800–1990*. Ed. K.D.M Snell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998: 1–53.
- Swift, Graham. *Wish You Were Here*. Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 2011.
- Tonkin, Boyd. "Wish You Were Here, by Graham Swift," *The Independent* 17 June 2011. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/wish-you-were-here-by-graham-swift-2298489.html>>.

Bożena Kucala teaches nineteenth-century and contemporary English literature at the Institute of English Studies of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Her academic interests include nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction, especially history and the novel, intertextuality, neo-Victorian fiction. Publications: *Intertextual Dialogue with the Victorian Past in the Contemporary Novel* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), numerous articles on contemporary fiction (Graham Swift, A.S. Byatt, Peter Ackroyd, J. M. Coetzee, etc.), and, as co-editor (with Katarzyna Bazarnik), *James Joyce and After: Writer and Time* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010).