Daniela Brockdorff – Taught M.A. Semester II

Advanced Literary Criticism II

Writing Death: Jim Crace's *Being Dead* and Graham Swift's *Last Orders*

'Thrasymachus: Tell me, briefly, what I shall be after death
Philathetes: All and nothing'

Arthur Schopenhauer, *A Dialogue on Immortality*[1]

'A death prompts the narration of a life. The particularities of that life become crucial in the face of the anonymity of death'

David Kennedy, *Elegy*[2]

'This is our only prayer: [...] Let thunder never find its voice'

Jim Crace, *Being Dead*[3]

In Graham Swift's *Last Orders* (1996), the dying Jack writes out a last order, to anyone who might be concerned, requesting 'his ashes to be chucked off the end of Margate pier'.[4] On their journey to Margate his old-time friends, Raysy, Lenny, and Vic, together with Jack's adopted son Vince, rather mediocrely speak about Jack's non-existent after-life. The quasi-ritualistic laying-to-rest journey they have to undertake appears to be futile having all attested to believing that Jack's presence is nowhere — except in their memories. Vic asks, 'Makes no difference, does it? Jack's none the wiser, is he? [...] If they scattered the ashes in the cemetery garden, he wouldn't know, would he?', and they all silently agree (*LO*, 30-1). Yet, they still set-off on a solemn journey that leads them to scatter the ashes, as requested, from Margate pier. Why?

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[1] Arthur Schopenhauer, 'A Dialogue on Immortality', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, I (1867), 61-2 (p. 61).
[2] David Kennedy, *Elegy*, *The New Critical Idiom* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), p. 20. To be henceforth cited within the main text as (*Elegy*, page number).
[3] Jim Crace, *Being Dead* (London, Basingstoke & Oxford: Picador, 2010), p.13. To be referenced as (*BD*, page number).
[4] Graham Swift, *Last Orders* (London, Basingstoke & Oxford: Picador, 1996), p. 13. Henceforth, further references will be given within the main text as (*LO*, page number).

Being Dead (1999), by Jim Crace, opens with an arresting tableau: Joseph and Celice, doctors of zoology, 'the oddest pair, these dead, spread-eagled lovers on the coast [...] without their underclothes, their heads caved in, unlikely victims of unlikely passions' (*Being Dead*, 1). What can follow after the ending that is death? With an author who is a professed atheist, an ensuing spiritual narrative — in all its diverse forms — is highly unlikely. Nonetheless, a narrative does follow. What physically stops with death seems not to stop in narrative as life is made to be reconstructed. In both novels, what ensues is more about life than about death because '[t]here's nothing after death for Joseph and Celice but "death and nothing after". Yet there can be a *quivering* of sorts' (*Being* Dead, 4)[5]. Why?

I shall not here attempt to arrive at any conclusions; the event of death is entirely about questions and not about answers. I have chosen to speak of Graham Swift's *Last Orders* and Jim Crace's *Being Dead* not because they are particularly representative of an age, or because they tower above other novels of the genre; but simply because of their provocatively poignant depictions of the interval between the instance of death and the laying to rest which seems to have preoccupied man from the beginning of time. Moreover, admittedly, the questions that rise to haunt from both these novels cannot be ignored.

In both novels, death's imperious abruptness seems to prompt the yearning for a reinforcement of the attachment to the solidities of time and space that life seemingly offers by those left behind. Immediately, one must here halt momentarily to ponder on the phrase 'those left behind'. Such a phrase seems to imply that the dead move on to a better — or worse — place still bound by space and also by time. The various spiritual fictions on the after-life created by

[5] 'Quivering' is a fictional term used by Crace in *Being Dead* to refer to a ritualistic memorialising of the dead in which their lives are recounted starting with the moment of death back to their birth.

and provided for our mortal selves all seem to endow rest in time and space beyond the death of our physical self. Yet, such spiritual fictions of the hereafter are rejected in the novels here being referred to. Swift's universe in *Last Orders* is a godless universe where the dead are taken care of by the living and where heaven and hell are hardly given any mention. In *Being Dead*, the austerely atheistic space created in *Quarantine* (1997) is extended from bygone historical ages to the present where what follows death is simply the relentlessly repulsive decomposition of the body:

> Should we expect their spirits to depart, some hellish cart and its pale horse to come and take their falling souls away to its hot mires, some godly, decorated messenger, too simple-minded for its golden wings, to fly them to repose, reunion, eternity? Might we demand some ghosts, at least? Or fanfares, gardens and high gates? Or some dramatic skyline, steep with clouds? The plain and unforgiving facts were these. Celice and Joseph were soft fruit. They lived in tender bodies. They were vulnerable. They did not have the power not to die. They were, we are, all flesh, and then we are all meat. (*BD*, 12)[6]

Thus, it is 'meat', the body, in all its nakedness, that obstinately remains after the instance of death. Upon Jack's death in *Last Orders*, Vince visits the 'Chapel of Rest' where his father's body is placed for final viewing:

> And I thought, I should see him naked. Because we all are, aren't we? [...] I should see his body. I should see his hands and his feet and his knees and his bleeding bollocks an' all. I should see Jack Dodd's body. Because this is Jack [...] Because naked we come and naked we...' (*LO*, 199)

What death reveals, therefore, is not the annihilation of the body but the overwhelming lingering of the body, the body being dead. In *Corpus*, Jean-Luc Nancy declares that 'To see bodies is not to unveil a mystery; it is seeing what is there to be seen, an image, the crowd of images that the

[6] In his novel, *Quarantine*, Crace relates the forty days that Jesus is said to have passed in the desert. However, in this narrative, Jesus too 'live[s] in [a] tender bod[y]. [He was] vulnerable. [He] did not have the power not to die. [He was], we are, all flesh, and then we are all meat'. Indeed, by refusing the body's necessities of food and drink, Jesus' death is witnessed before the end of the novel.

body is, *the naked image*, stripping areality bare.'[7] Swift and Crace's novels attest that death has nothing to divulge except its toll on the body. There is no mystery to be revealed but simply a stripping bare of a body of all the decorousness that life had attempted to bestow upon it. Indeed, elaborating on Blanchot's commentary on corpses, collected within *The Space of Literature*, Didier Maleuvre states that, '[t]o the wailing bereaved, the corpse may be the mere image of the body, the simulacrum of what was once living; to the dispassionate eye, however, [...] the body turns into the corpse which the body always was'. Indeed, one may say of the persistent presence of Jack's ashes in *Last Orders* that, not only are they 'the body [which] turns into the corpse which the body always was', but also, that they are the body which turns into a corpse which turns into the ashes it always was. It is the body stripped bare to its very last remains; the remains that truly remain and which are then scattered away. Maleuvre goes on to state that:

> we must define the corpse not by the absence it is supposed to embody but rather by the presence of a reality more enduring than reality. The corpse is by definition what will not go away even when life itself has departed. The corpse is that excess of reality which stubbornly lingers even after reality has passed away.[8]

Such an excess is best exemplified through a passage within Crace's text which must be quoted in full. It comes across as quite an unforgivingly unsympathetic stance towards the event of death, and yet, it is nothing more than the 'presence of a reality more enduring than reality, [...] what will not go away even when life itself has departed'. It is that which one chooses to forget when a loved one passes away:

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[7] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. By Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 47.
[8] Didier Maleuvre, 'A Natural Death: Zola and Literature', *French Forum*, 19 (1994), 309-328 (p. 320).

> The dead don't talk – but bodies belch for hours after death. A woman bends to kiss her husband for the final time. Despite the warnings of the morgue attendant — sweet-breathed or not — she puts a little weight upon his chest, and is rewarded with the stench of every meal she's cooked for him in forty years. The morgue could sound, at times, as if a ghoulish choir was warming up, backed by a wind ensemble of tubas and bassoons. It could smell as scalpy, scorched and pungent as a hairdressing salon. The breath of these cold choristers was far worse than the onion breath of clerks. But no one said that bodies weren't sincere. There's nothing more sincere than death. The dead mean what they say (*BD*, 135).

It is the bleak and undeniable candour of death; the reality of the dead body that causes much apprehension, and is thus most often best ignored. The lack that the loss of the living generates simply cannot be consoled by the excessive reality of the corpse; for those left behind, the presence and reality of the mourned had incorporated more than merely a body. Celice and Joseph's daughter, Syl, upon being shown the decaying bodies of her parents, disregards 'their eyeballs [which] were already liquefying' and the 'enlarged' faces. She ignores the 'bloated' innards, the 'methane and ethium', their 'ears and open wounds [which] had been made frothy by exuding gas'. She chooses 'not to remember all the wounds, the gull damage, the black dry blood'. Instead she chooses her own image of her parents, an image in which her father forever holds her mother's leg, in which her parents, had died in what seems for her to be a defiant moment of passion (*BD,* 166-8). The dead body is thus not recognized as that which truly resembles the deceased and an alternative is sought for; an alternative in narrative.

Thus, a comforting narrative needs be found to accompany a corpse to its final resting place; a narrative that follows the narrative of life that has come to an end and which draws attention from the instinctual rejection of the dead body. However, what narrative of comfort can one adopt in the godless universe of Crace's and Swift's novels? Being an atheist herself, Syl:

> [t]ried to let the hymning voices pick up the bodies from the dunes and take them to the kingdom of their verses, amongst the heavens and eternities, into the everlasting peace. But it was obvious that these were voices and these were verses that had not got the muscle to displace a single leaf, let alone pass sinners into paradise. Her father's songs, for all their mawkish sentiment, were far more powerful. Love songs transcend, transport, because there's such a thing as love. But hymns and prayers have feeble tunes because there are no gods [...] The world's small, breathing denizens, its quaking congregations and its stargazers, were fools to sacrifice the flaring briefness of their lives in hopes of paradise or fears of hell. No one transcends. (*BD,* 170).

In front of the rotting bodies of Celice and Joseph in the dunes — a home for beetles, flies, crabs and gulls alike; in front of Jack's robustness reduced to a few ashes within a plain brown cardboard box, the gaping space between life and death is revealed and instantly filled with a narrative of life. As Paul Ricoeur declares, the trauma of death shatters the lucidity of the life narrative. Trauma can thus be overcome through the rewriting of the plot, recollecting the 'bits and pieces' left by death into a narrative which is slightly 'more intelligible and more bearable'.[9]

Catherine Bernard, upon interviewing Swift, comments that:

> [f]or Swift, man is "the story-making animal" [...] which for all its capacity for survival in a hostile reality yearns to return to its natural element: myth, fiction. Stories are more than placating stratagems to face reality; they inform it, are given a hermeneutic function. Hence in his novels, the constant confrontation of our fabulating capacities with the harshest of realities: death, loss, madness, suffering, oblivion. Hence also the jubilation that lies for all the narrators in endlessly retrieving the past by rewriting it, by telling it anew. Hence finally the proliferating logic of the narrative texture.[10]

Such is the novel that Swift writes. Through a coming-together of voices, the tales of Jack, Raysy, Lenny, Vic, Vince and Amy weave themselves into a narrative spanning more than half a decade; a narrative which consoles upon the occurrence of meaningless death. As the narrative evolves, it soon transpires that it is not only Jack who is being mourned; each voice mourns his

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[9] Paul Ricoeur, 'Life in quest of narrative', in *On Paul Ricoeur*: *Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. by D. Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 30.
[10] Catherine Bernard, 'An Interview with Graham Swift', *Contemporary Literature*, 38 (1997), 217-231 (p. 218).

or her life as they themselves sense the looming presence of the plotlessness of death; feeling—using Thom Gunn's words — entirely 'Unready, disappointed, unachieved'.[11] Thus, the chapters alternate between name and place, between the unfolding of the present through place and the delving into the past through time. Facing the timelessness and spacelessness that is death, a narrative affirming time and space is constructed.

A sense of rest and stability, therefore, is shown to be very much yearned for by the living. The narrative that unfolds in *Last Orders* is more about the living dead — trying to 'turn it into living again' — than about Jack (*LO,* 128). In a further interview, Swift declares that his novel is 'in certain obvious ways about death, but it's about death in order to be about life. It's often – literally and comically – about life getting in the way of death. That, I think, is only how it should be'.[12] Jack's last orders set Raysy, Vic, Lenny and Vince off on a journey which unravels a polyphony of voices from the past attempting to impose order on the mess of the present. And indeed, it is comic. The first inkling of tears for Jack's passing occurs during a leak at the Gents. 'But it's not just to take a leak. I find the Gents and I unzip, then I feel my eyes go hot and gluey, so I'm leaking at both ends', says Raysy (*LO,* 111). Soon, such an overwhelming moment of grief is made to be forgotten with Raysy's crude commentary on the 'two condom machines' and his musings on 'porcelain, stainless steel, [and] tarred-over cement' pissers. 'Crying's like pissing', he maintains '[y]ou don't want to get caught short, specially on a car journey' (*LO,* 111-2). The solemn car journey they undertake turns into a unflinchingly prosaic re-collection of the bits and pieces of memory that are their lives; as the reader gets to know about June, Raysy and Amy's affair, times of war, the troubled relationship between Jack and

[11] Thom Gunn, 'The J Car', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993).
[12] Lidia Vianu, 'Interview with Graham Swift', *Desperado Essay-Interviews*, (2006), <http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/graham_swift.htm> [accessed 4 July 2012]

Vince, and also gains insight into all their mundane thoughts and actions. Indeed, it is a remarkable representation of man's 'constant confrontation of [his] fabulating capacities with the harshest of realities: death, loss, madness, suffering, oblivion'.

Similarly, in an interview, Jim Crace reveals that not only does such narrativisation occur within the novel but also at the level of the author himself:

> In 1979, I had buried my own father, who was also an atheist, a really good old fashioned political atheist, and he had asked for an appropriate funeral for him, which was no funeral at all. No guests. No announcement. No flowers. No eulogy. No hymns, God's sake, no hymns. And no collecting of the ashes. We carried out his wishes, and it was a huge mistake. The memory of how we failed to bury my father properly and pay attention to his unique life was with me as I wrote this novel.[13]

Therefore, the haunting failure to provide Charley Crace's corpse with a proper final resting place has left the memory of him in a perpetual space of liminality. The commonplace acts of burial and cremation typically serve as a ritualistic seal on the meaningless gulf that death exposes. As Stephen Palmer maintains in '"Dead but not departed yet': the exploration of liminal space in Jim Crace's *Being Dead*', Jim Crace felt that his father 'needed to be imaginatively recovered' from the limbo he was roaming in. By penning his own 'false narrative of comfort', 'aware of its own essential narrativity', Crace manages to overcome the restless liminality of the memory of his father's death through the narrative of Joseph and Celice.[14] This fiction-making impulse thus seems to ensure a continuity beyond death that seeks to affirm its presence alongside the persistent reality of the corpse. The incomprehensible, timeless, spaceless liminality opened up by the event of death, together with the refusal to accept a corpse as that

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[13] Ron Hogan, 'Jim Crace', The Beatrice Interview, (2000) <http://www.beatrice.com/interviews/crace/> [accessed 28 June 2012].

[14] Stephen Palmer, 'Dead but not departed yet': the exploration of liminal space in Jim Crace's *Being Dead* (1999)', *Mortalilty: Promoting the interdisciplinary study of death and dying*, 17:1 (2012), 51-63 (p.57). To be henceforth cited as (Dead but not departed, page number).

which truly remains out of what once was a living person, thus leads to a construction of a narrative; a quivering of sorts in which order presides.

Hence, death, liminality and narrative transpire to be intricately bound. *Being Dead* is not a novel that merely overcomes the liminal space exposed through death; it is a novel that within its frames plays with a narrative of liminality alongside a narrative of the re-collection of memory which seeks to reaffirm time and space. The author may thus be said to have projected himself onto the figure of the narrator who encounters and has to narrate away the liminality of Joseph and Celice, rather than directly narrating that of Charley Crace. Yet, this liminality within both novels cannot be so cursorily addressed. Indeed, might I venture to claim that this is a liminality that endows *Being Dead,* most particularly, with a potential for the sublime? The scope of this work precludes a detailed exploration of the sublime in these novels. However, excluding it entirely does the literature little justice.

Liminality in Crace's novel is symbolised through nature in its timelessness, spacelessness and plotlessness. It is a landscape that knows no time and yet is still in time; a landscape that cannot be spatially defined due to its continual change and ever-moving sand and hues; a place that cannot be haunted because it has no memory, no plot to follow; a place defined by death and yet a place that holds no notion of death (*BD,* 152-3). Being dead on the dunes renders Joseph and Celice without an identity, and what remains is nothing but two bodies 'posed as lifeless waxworks of themselves [...] No one could tell what kind of man he was, what type of woman she had been. Their characters had bled out on the grass. The universe could not care less' (*Being Dead,* 11). Their bodies at once become part of natural landscape which is somewhat liminal, with its ever shifting dunes and its seeming proximity to death as well as life. They become 'insensible as stones', 'stiff as wood' and Celice's upper thighs become 'black as

grapes' (*BD*, 68). Celice and Joseph become everything and nothing, they are everywhere and nowhere much like the landscape they inhabit; at one with a nature that is both constant and eternal: 'change is the only constant; nothing in the universe is stable or inert; decay and growth are synonyms; a grain of sand is stronger and more durable than rock' yet 'the landscape could be flattened and reshaped in just one night, by just one storm' (*BD*, 87). Such descriptions of Joseph's and Celice's bludgeoned rotting bodies, almost serenely nestled in an insensate and listlessly comforting landscape, at times instil a sense of 'astonishment', that state 'in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror'; a sense that, if one accepts Burke's definition, 'arises the great power of the sublime'.[15]

Potentially sublime moments are rare, if at all present, in Swift's *Last Orders.* Nonetheless, through the liminal, might one say that the author achieves to portray at least fleeting moments of epiphany, particularly at the end? Despite the quasi-stifling humdrum narratives in *Last Orders*, the liminal still succeeds in asserting its absent-presence. Jack Dodd's presence seems to be restlessly everywhere and yet nowhere. In spite of the somewhat oppressive presence of the ashes in the cardboard box, the sign, which is the ash-reduced Jack, does not seem to entirely match the signifier which is Jack. Upon death, Jack becomes a liminal presence much like the dead immortalised on the Chatham naval memorial '*...who have no other grave than the sea*' (*LO*, 134), and whose presence upon death becomes likewise liminal; without a solid grave, without the ritualistic seal of burial, the dead eternally and restlessly roam in a space which is indefinable, an everywhere and a nowhere, an everything and a nothing. The very last words of the novel must here be quoted:

[15] Edmund Burke, 'The Sublime', in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. by Isaac Kramnick (London: Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 329-3 (p.329).

> Then I throw the last handful and the seagulls come back on a second chance and I hold up the jar, shaking it, like I should chuck it out to sea too, a message in a bottle, Jack Arthur Dodds, save our souls, and the ash that I carried in my hands, which was the Jack who once walked around, is carried away by the wind, is whirled away by the wind till the ash becomes wind and the wind becomes Jack what we're made of (*LO,* 294-5).

If not sublime, after the relentlessly prosaic journey in *Last Orders*, such closing words seem to hint at the possibility of an epiphany — though hardly spiritual —amongst the ordinariness that is life and death. In Joyce's Stephen Hero's words, an insight into the *whatness* of being is given — albeit liminal and ungraspable — which is somehow radiant.

Indeed, the ending quoted does not seem to suggest the rest for the dead that the living yearn for. It emerges that the narratives of comfort resorted to are endlessly juxtaposed with a liminality that persists; and one is led to question whether the dead do, after all, need the rest that the living long to give them — naturally, the dead need nothing at all. In *Being Dead*, the narrator mournfully states that '[i]t is, of course, a pity that the police dogs ever caught the scent of human carrion and led their poking masters to the dunes to clear away the corpses for "proper burial",' because, he declares, 'the earth is practiced in the craft of burial. It gathers round. It embraces and adopts the dead. Joseph and Celice would have turned to landscape, given time. Their bodies would have been just something extra in a landscape already sculpted out of death' (*BD,* 207). Perhaps, therefore, one might say that the dead find rest in such restlessness; Celice and Joseph's 'bodies were unstiffened and fell into the hollows of the grass, like sleepers fall into the cushions of a bed, relaxed and rounded, fitting in' (*Being Dead,* 167). Alas, for the living, according to Victor W. Turner, liminality is part of tripartite process which involves separation, margin and aggregation.[16] The separation that comes with death thrusts the dead into a marginal

[16] Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process*: *Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1997), p.94-5.

non-time and a non-place described by Crace as the moment between 'the lightning and the thunderclap' (*BD*, 12); a moment which causes much unease amongst those left behind as they quickly seek to combine, in a moment of aggregation, most often through burial, that which death had brought asunder: the intolerably inert and excessive reality of the corpse with the restless absent-presence of that which is not corporeal. After all, as Hamish Henderson declares in his final elegy of the *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* sequence, 'their sleep's our unrest'.[17]

Nevertheless, in both novels, the scattering of the ashes, and even the ritualistic act of burial, prove to be insufficient in giving the aggregation and comforting closure desired. Hence, once more, I must here return to the concept of the turn to narrative; a turn that produces literature which is more about the living, seeking aggregation, than the dead; and which thus gives the lightning its ensuing thunderclap. And is this turn a contemporary turn, one might ask, heralded by the individual talent of Swift and Crace? Perhaps not. And thus, a necessary connection must here be made to trace what has been discussed back to the age-old literary tradition of the elegiac mode.

At first glance, the novels of Swift and Crace seem quite uncomparable to the elegy, primarily because of the basic constituents of form and content. However, it is pertinent to note that what is conventionally regarded as elegy has its origins in verse which was entirely non-funereal; the subject matter covered ranged from war and love to philosophical advice, and can thus be said to have been more about life than about death.[18] Such Greek verses soon evolved into a well-defined poetic form written upon death and articulating mourning through set

[16] Hamish Henderson, *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990).
[18] *Elegy,*11. David Kennedy goes on to explain that, eventually, '[t]hese poems came to be known as elegies because they were written in elegiac couplets which alternate dactylic hexameters and pentameters'.

conventions amongst which are the invocation of the muses, the pastoral context, the procession of mourners and the movement from grief to consolation.[19] One might here mention Theocitus' 'First Idyll', Spenser's 'November' eclogue, Milton's 'Lycidas' and even Shelley's 'Adonais' as elegies which are generally accepted as "conventional". However, closer reading soon unveils the Bloomean complex of ephebe versus master in each and every poem; as the elegiac form becomes an ever-changing one, establishing conventions only to soon after question them to give rise to what Dennis Kay terms: 'form without frontiers'.[20]

May one thus attempt to incorporate *Being Dead* and *Last Orders* within the frontierless form that is elegy? Cannot one speak of the recurrent turn to narrative, a resort to literature as potential consolation, as the one constant within the continuous flux that is elegy? And if so, cannot one thus include Swift's and Crace's novels within this much-contested tradition? David Kennedy suggests that John Ash's 'Elegy, Replica, Echo: in memoriam John Griggs 1941-91', speaks of 'the way modern funeral elegies are fainter and fainter copies of an unobtainable origin'.[21] Yet, why speak of what seems to be a movement from centre to periphery; why not speak of the centreless play, under the rubric of elegy, that death gives rise to? Consequently, as John Hollander attests, elegy predominantly becomes a mood rather than a well-defined form, in which —Kennedy maintains — the lament for the dead is combined with meditative and

[19]For a detailed discussion of both primary and secondary conventions refer to Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy*: *Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1985).
[20] Dennis Kay, *Melodious Tears: The English Funeral Elegy from Spenser to Milton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 7. For a detailed discussion of the matter, see *Elegy,* pp.1-10.
[21] John Ash, *Two Books: The Antalikon and to the City* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2002), p. 24.

reflective tendencies (*Elegy*, 15).[22] Thus, why cannot the two novels being addressed be considered as a contemporary play on elegy?

This inevitably leads to the question of whether prose can ever be considered elegiac. If it can, for some this would mean that — using Celeste M. Schenck's descriptions — the elegy is becoming increasingly 'generically mutant', une 'elégie manquée'.[23] But as early as 1768, William Shenstone writes that the style of elegy should be 'simple and diffuse, and flowing as a mourner's veil. A versification, therefore, is desirable which, by indulging a free and unconstrained expression, may admit of that simplicity which Elegy requires'.[24] A leaning towards prose as a medium most apt for mournful expression can thus be discerned. It would seem, therefore, that the 'simplicity which Elegy requires' cannot be better expressed than through prose. This in no way means that poetic elements are entirely eliminated. Indeed, one may speak of *Being Dead* as being written in iambic utterances very close to verse; the rhythm is poetic and the effect is strangely that of poetry.[25]

Adopting Heaney's turn of phrase, many might say that in Swift's and Crace's hands, the elegy is made to 'eat stuff it has never eaten before'.[26] True, but not entirely. Referring back to the conventions of elegy, of particular interest is the primary convention of the procession of mourners. In the novels, these are hardly Milton's 'Pilot of the *Galilean* lake' (l.109)[27] or

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[22] John Hollander, *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New York: Oxford University press, 1975), p. 200.
[23] Celeste M. Scheck, 'Feminism and Deconstruction: Re-Constructing the Elegy', *Classical and Modern Literature*, (1986), pp. 97-108 (p. 108).
[24] William Shenstone, 'A Prefatory Essay on Elegy', in *Poems* (London: J.Dodsley, 1768).
[25] Both Carey Harrison from *The San Francisco Chronicle* and Justin Cartwright from *The Literary Review* attest to the fact. In '*Being Dead:* A Novel', Macmillan, <http://us.macmillan.com/beingdead/JimCrace> [accessed 28 June 2012].
[26] Seamus Heaney as quoted in Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 95
[27] John Milton, *Selected Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press/Oxford Authors, 1990).

Shelley's 'Pilgrim of Eternity' and his self-reflection in 'came one frail Form' (l.264, 271).[28] However, there is a procession of sorts, one might say. In *Last Orders*, the prime mourners are rather obviously Vic, Vince, Lenny, Raysy and Amy as they make their way across the pages to pay their final respects to Jack; and *Being Dead* presents the narrator as being the leading mourner, followed by Syl and even — one might say — the various insects of the landscape. Indeed, in light of what has been argued, one can say that Swift's contemporary elegy is as equally about the mourners as the mourned; and still, even such a stance cannot be considered as entirely new.

In 'A Refusal to Mourn: Stevens and the Self-Centered Elegy', John Dolan speaks of Stevens' elegiac poems in relation to what he terms the 'sub-genre' of the elegy. Even though Dolan's critique of Stevens' elegiac poetry is rather intriguing, it is far from the purpose of this essay. However, certain points raised by Dolan are of pertinence. Dolan maintains that such a 'sub-genre' harbours within it the 'self-centered elegy'; an elegy through which writers 'try to enrich themselves by gathering to themselves the souls of the peasants unknown to them', with focus on 'persons (or, in some cases, animals) too low, too vulgar, or too obscure to be celebrated by the more traditional elegy'.[29] Admittedly, this is the precise scenario of *Being Dead* and *Last Orders*. Yet, the elegy is certainly not eating stuff that it has never eaten before. Dolan identifies this tradition as having originated within the work of Gray, eventually leading up to Wordsworth. Following Dolan's argument, should Gray and Wordsworth thus be excluded from the genre that is elegy and ordained to Dolan's sub-genre? And if one disagrees by maintaining that Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' and Wordsworth's 'Lucy

[28] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Poetical Works*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).
[29] John Dolan, 'A Refusal to Mourn: Stevens and the Self-Centered Elegy', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 21(1997-8), 209-22 (p.209).

Poems' and 'The Brothers' are indeed elegies, cannot *Being Dead* and *Last Orders* be likewise considered as elegies? Therefore, much as Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' is still considered by many to be an eligible elegy despite the bestowing of the right for poetic elegiac treatment on unknown and obscure figures, Swift's *Last Orders* and Crace's *Being Dead* must equally be considered as eligible elegies despite the poetic elegiac treatment of figures who not only are unknown and obscure but also entirely fictional.

Moreover, not only do Swift and Crace adopt the elegiac feature that Gray developed, but they also give back to the elegy that which Gray removed through his Romantic elegy: 'the change of focus from the body of the deceased to the events occurring in the mind'. Of course, 'the events occurring in the mind' are very much present; however, the focus on the body is, as has been shown, as equally present. Indeed, the forceful presence of the dead body is made to revisit the tradition of the elegy with a deep-felt intensity in the twenty-first century. One may mention Owen's somewhat eroticized images of young lads and the equally sexual undertones in Heaney's 'bog poems'. Through her Visible Human Project, Catherine Waldby brings into focus the necessity of the dead body for an elegy to be written, 'an anatomical body from which the complications and open-endedness of subjectivity and vitality have been subtracted' and are thus then added again through elegy.[30] This is because it might appear that the body 'can no longer give birth to any new meanings of itself. Any new meanings that are produced are the work of the elegist responding to the way death limits the body's spatiality and temporality' (*Elegy,* 123). As argued, it is a turn to narration that is sought to console the meaninglessness that is death; the

[30] Catherine Waldby, *The Visible Human Project: Informatic Bodies and Posthuman Medicine* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.23. As explained in *Elegy*, 105, the VHP study, 'although not concerned directly with elegy and mourning, shows how virtual technologies, such as digital imaging of the human interior, highlight the complex currents of cultural meaning that flow between living and dead bodies'. For a detailed explanation of the project, see *Elegy*, 105-9.

meaninglessness that is insistently present in the image of the corpse. Yet, despite the characters' turning away from the corpse, Crace and Swift write a narrative that does not allow its readers to withdraw from the corpse but rather to embrace it for what can be called the aesthetic of ugliness. In the twenty-first century, therefore, the elegy does not seek to "beautifulise"; death is captured in all its ugliness, which at times is potentially sublime.

Nevertheless, beauty is not altogether absent in the elegies that are *Being Dead* and *Last Orders*; it is a beauty through nature, the touch of nature that harks back to the tradition of the pastoral within elegy. Both novels establish the seascape as the main landscape or as the landscape to be journeyed towards; a convention that can be traced back to Milton's 'Lycidas'. Thus, both novels re-reveal the quasi-archetypal affinity between death and sea; the life-death liminality of the sea that takes narrative back to Greek mythology and that can then be seen evolving in literature such as Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* —to name but a few. And thus, the sea in all its beauty comes to suggest — as in Ariel's song from *The Tempest* — the prospect of a 'sea change'; leading perhaps to the figuration of an apotheosis, a transcendence, much like that in Milton's 'Lycidas' where Lycidas is apotheosised into a 'Genius of the shore' and thus the Shepherds 'weep no more' (l.182). The element of the pastoral, therefore, refined by Milton into a seascape seems to ensure the progress from grief to consolation and ultimately detachment; a progress that has traditionally been seen as the main "purpose" of elegy.

Hence, consolation and detachment in elegies imply closure; the successful attainment of the Freudian work of mourning. As Kennedy maintains, 'the ultimate end of the genre' is none other than the 'detachment from the dead' (*Being Dead*, 74). However, Jahan Ramazani speaks of the twenty-first century's supposed 'antipathy towards the genre's consolatory turn' and

Kennnedy provides his readers with ample illustrations of the fact; namely, Hardy's 'A Singer Asleep' (*Elegy*, 73). There seems to be, therefore, an unwillingness on the part of modern and contemporary elegists to let go of the dead, Ramazani insists.[31] Indeed, '[t]his is our only prayer:' the narrator in *Being Dead* tells us, '[l]et thunder never find its voice' (*Being Dead*, 13). Therefore, is there, despite the turn to narrative for consolation, despite the quivering, the ineffable attachment to that which is a liminal play with the dead, that which leads to the frontierless and ever-changing form of elegy?

It has been shown that both novels juxtapose the order inherent in a construction of narrative with the space of liminality that is opened up with death. It has also been shown that it is liminality which seemingly presides over the ending of both novels. Is there, therefore, an subconscious refusal of detachment, a refusal of a second burial, a literary burial through elegy? Is there a hidden rejection of transcendence — spiritual or aesthetic — in favour of a celebration of "deadness" in all its corporeality and in all its liminality? Jack Dodds' remains are scattered off Margate pier, along sea and wind, forever liminal. Moreover, even though Crace seeks a proper burial for the liminal presence of his father, the novel he writes is one which thrives on liminality and closes with words that are not in any way those of closure. 'These are the everending days of being dead', Crace writes. Once more, the lexical choice of 'everending' instead of 'never ending' further reinforces this liminality and captures the essence of the entire novel through a few words: a closure through burial that is ever promised but never attained; a closure that is not desired.

[31] Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.4.

And thus, one might ask, does a conventional elegy with a movement from mourning to consolation to detachment — a process akin to Turner's separation, margin and aggregation through burial — represent an urge to silence the dead? Indeed, in 'The Absent Dead: Wordsworth, Byron, and the Epitaph', Paul H. Fry declares that '[t]he urge to express burial, however diverse its manifestation may be, is at bottom always the urge to bury expression, to subsume the priority of the sublime [...] The epitaph is the gravesite of the sublime'.[32] What does this tell us of the sublime? Can it only be achieved through the play with conventions? Can it not be achieved though a well-defined elegy? Is literature inherently sublime or is it a medium that through order and conventions tries to trick its readers out of capturing the sublime? Moreover, can the sublime only be achieved through a play with the dead?

I shall not here attempt to arrive at any conclusions; the event of death is entirely about questions and not about answers. Admittedly, however, the questions that rise to haunt from Crace's *Being Dead* and Swift's *Last Orders* could not have been ignored. One might here question indefinitely. Can narrative ever bestow consolation on those who turn to it for consolation? Is literature inherently a medium of utter unrest, or is it its potential for liminal unrest that draws writers and readers forever in its snare? And ultimately, does literature dwell with the living, for the living? Or does it dwell with the dead? And if so, despite man's seemingly innate rejection of death and that which is dead, why do we turn to elegy, the death-imbued novels that are *Being Dead* and *Last Orders*?

[32] Paul H. Fry, 'The Absent Dead: Wordsworth, Byron, and the Epitaph', *Studies in Romanticism,* 17(1978), 413-33 (p. 414; 33).

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