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Whither the Novel?

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The Information (1995), by British novelist and essayist Martin Amis, is a novel about writers and writing, about success and failure in contemporary literature. In the novel's world, successful writers are celebrities and difficult writers fail to be read and, therefore, published—it is a caricaturization of what occurs to writers in real life. By exaggerating possible situations, Martin Amis criticizes the contemporary literary world and illustrates what is actually happening: people do not read much, and the ones who read like easy and "trex" literature; good and complex literature is not read and is eventually in danger of not being published, because it is not a good product to be sold.

It is inevitable for Martin Amis, then, to include opinions and ideas about what literature is, where the novel is heading now, and what contemporary fiction should deal with. These ideas are illustrated in dialogues between characters (especially between Richard and Gwyn) and in the narration itself. Therefore, this paper intends to understand Martin Amis' literary theories about

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contemporary fiction from two sources: the style used in the novel itself, and the literary opinions present in it, whether they are given by its narrator or its characters.

The first metaliterary element is the structure of the novel, indirectly explained by the narrator. He states that the four seasons of the year correspond to the four literary genres: summer and romance, autumn and tragedy, winter and satire, spring and comedy (Amis 52-53). On the other hand, the novel itself is divided into four parts, and we know that Part One corresponds to summer—the author wants us to identify each part with its respective genre. However, there is a warning: all genres have bled into one another, and "decorum is no longer observed" (Amis 53); the reader is then expected to be constantly comparing each part of the novel to a particular genre, a task that might be unconsciously abandoned at any point in the novel. The narrator reminds the reader of this fact only a couple of times, to finally go back to this idea towards the end of the novel, in Part Four. It is spring, so this is supposed to be comedy. The narrator, though, admits to have had little luck with his season-genres system, by stating that there was satire in summer, comedy in autumn, and romance in winter; the only genre left is tragedy. Now he reassures us: "Never fear. You are in safe hands. Decorum will be strictly observed" (Amis 479).

This system does not intend to provide literature with a new way of organizing novels. It seems, rather, to illustrate something else: the author is no longer in control of the fictional situation—a narrator can make plans about a novel and tell the reader about them, and though he can still be omniscient, that does not mean he can manipulate characters and situations at his will. All this is aimed at reminding the reader that what he or she is contemplating is fiction, a work of art, an artifact—a novel. In his work *Understanding Martin Amis*, James Diedrick tells us that "(...) postmodern texts typically call attention to their status as fictions, as verbal constructs. The language of such texts calls attention to itself, and the author—or an author surrogate—is often present as a character in the narrative" (Diedrick 14).Thus, the author's intention no longer lies in distracting the reader with formal devices to make him believe that the story is real or to provide a sense of verisimilitude.

An example of this can be found in two passages in Part One, where the narrator assumes his first-person style (he becomes "Martin Amis" for a while) to make the reader believe that he has control over a particular situation: he will not let Steve Cousins enter Gwyn Barry's house yet: "This is the window to the master bedroom, where the master sleeps. I'm not going in there—not yet. So I

don't know what his bed smells of, and I don't know if he cries in the night" (Amis 38). By saying that *he*, not Scozzy, is not willing to go in, he emphasizes the fact that Scozzy is a creation of his own, and if any of his characters does or fails to do something, it is the narrator or the author who performs this action. The lack of control over this situation is unveiled in Part Two, where Scozzy manages to enter Gwyn's house at night:

> Steve Cousins strolled over to the refrigerator. (...) Maybe he fancied a grape? (...) And all this would have been fine if it had been his grape, his orange juice, his refrigerator—if it had been his kitchen. But it was Gwyn's kitchen. It was Demi's kitchen. He was in their house.
>
> I said I wasn't going in there, not yet. But here I am. I can't control him. People have been trying to control him, all his life. They couldn't control him. And I can't control him. (Amis 232)

There are a number of passages, particularly in Parts One and Two, where the narrator assumes a first-person style (as in the example above). We know that it is not Richard Tull, and he admittedly seems to be the omniscient narrator throughout the rest of the story. But when he assumes the "I" style—the first-person narrator—he does not seem to be a traditional narrator; he makes comments about astronomy and the decadence of the universe, he talks about people he sees in the street, and we soon realize he usually takes his children to the same park where Richard takes the twins, Dogshit Park. He belongs to the same world as his characters: he lives in London and knows everything about them, but his life is not mingled with their lives. There are two passages where we are given "clues" to come to think that this narrator is "Martin Amis" (not Martin Amis): in one of them, he mentions his height (he is five-feet-six-inches tall, just like the real Martin Amis); in the other passage, he is talking to a deaf-and-dumb boy, and he tells him his name: "And I made the signs—the M, the A—with my strange and twisted fingers, thinking: how can I ever play the omniscient, the all-knowing, when I don't know *anything*? When I can't read childish capitals in the apologetic fog" (Amis 63).

This inclusion of himself as a narrator or "character" inside a novel is not new in Martin Amis; he did it before in *Money* (where he is a secondary character), presumably in *London Fields* (where the reader is left with the doubt: Is Mark Asprey Martin Amis?), and in *Dead Babies* and *Other People*, where he "appears throughout the novel as an omniscient but personalized narrator, presiding

over what he calls an 'anti-comedy' of rancor and thwarted revenge" (Diedrick 143). This non-authority, this lack of mystery surrounding the author leads to the idea that narrators and authors are no longer gods ruling over their individual worlds: their novels. It is not clear if we are facing a different kind of author, or if there has been some kind of replacement. John A. Dern explains this process by showing the progression from modernist to postmodernist authors, saying that "while the modernist author existed as "author", the postmodernist author does not. He has resigned his command and ceded responsibility to the interaction of reader and text. The text itself is simply amorphous, proud of its own fictionality, intent on placing words on a plane outside of general human experience" (Dern 23).

On the other hand, in the case of Martin Amis we can see that the postmodernist author tries to deliver his worldview and different viewpoints in his fiction, not only through the characters, but also through the narrator himself: "Amis's novels are often 'double-voiced', a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin to describe the interrelationship between two sets of voices and attitudes: those of the characters, and those of the author" (Diedrick 24).

There is no way of leaving the reader out of this discussion; if the author or the narrator lose authority, something must happen to the reader: he will either diminish or gain importance. Both the way the novel is narrated and its author's recurrent intermissions turn the reader's task into a more active one—this is a game with new rules, and the reader will follow the rules if he wants to play. However, although the narrator in *The Information* is an omniscient one, we are not always provided with all the information we need; there are some obscure dialogues where we need to guess events or leave the information on hold, for the answer will probably come a hundred pages later. The task of the Martin Amis' reader is unclear, and so is his importance; for Dern, this ambiguity or lack of information is shared by the author:

> Amis makes authorial interjections a necessary part of his work in that they help to create and to sustain the partnership between author and reader: postmodernist literature depends more on the author/reader dichotomy than on the suspension of disbelief. Amis reveals both himself and his world view through these interjections, paralleling them in Richard. He is an "author" who does not possess answers: those must be provided by readers as they measure Richard's reaction to stimuli against their own and filter the result through the narrative "I". This technique forces the

> novel to be open-ended and to end (as it does) in the first person, allowing the "author" final contact with his "reader" (just as the "I" has initial contact) (Dern 138).

Regarding literary styles and movements, there is no clear agreement on Martin Amis' dwelling. John A. Dern, in the introduction to the novel, ends up stating that Amis' fiction can be classified as modernist, postmodernist *and* anti-modernist, but covertly suggesting that he actually belongs to none of these labels (Dern 37). Thus, we will leave taxonomies out and refer only to Amis' fiction as a particular literary phenomenon.

The direction of contemporary fiction, for the characters of novel, is quite unclear. Richard Tull, in a conversation with Gwyn Barry, presents it in this way: "When we started out I think we both hoped to take the novel somewhere new. I thought the way forward was with style. And complexity. But you saw that it was all to do with subject" (Amis 113). This is one of the few passages where Richard is honest to Gwyn and is not joking or being hostile to him. But, is he really being honest? If we compare this opinion to the actual novels written by Martin Amis, we can see that his innovations have more to do with style than with subject; in fact, style is clearly given more importance than subject. However, this is probably the only passage where Richard does not agree with Amis—or rather, where Amis does not want Richard to agree with him. Because Richard Tull writes "fanatically difficult modern prose" (Amis 121); he thinks that life and literature are not the same (136); and he does not want "to please the readers", but to "stretch them until they twang" (170). These and other descriptions are suitable both for Richard Tull and for Martin Amis.

In *The Information*, Amis is depicted in more than one character. Richard seems to represent that part of Amis: the difficult-to-read novelist, the intellectual junk-literature-despiser, the admirer of great techniques used before, striving to find a voice of his own. According to Dern,

> "Amis uses only inflections of free indirect style and limited examples of interior monologue. He admires these techniques, especially when employed with genius, as with Joyce, but he also recognises that if he over employs stream of consciousness, his writing becomes more modernist than postmodernist, more fixed than mutable. He would acquire an authority over his prose, an authority he currently disdains so as to maintain a 'living' style. To move forward, he must redefine fiction with each new attempt, and therefore no one technique can be preeminent" (Dern 21).

Unlike Richard, he *has* been successful, and here lies Gwyn Barry's importance : he represents that other part related to fame and the contemporary commercialization of literature, something that—inferring from the opinions about trex literature given by Richard Tull in *The Information*—Amis does not like much; but it is in general a situation where authors can also gain a communion that was not available for older writers. In *Experience: A Memoir*, Martin Amis tells us that:

> You arrive in each city and present yourself to its media; after that, in the evening, a mediated individual, you appear at the bookshop and perform. And now something salutary happens, as you are confronted by your most priceless asset: your readers. How badly you need them—because they know who you really are; they are the confidants of your unconscious mind. It does the author good to Meet the Reader. Sometimes, in the signing queue, I see a pair of eyes quietly telling me that communion has occurred, and I feel a proportional transfusion (Amis 275).

It is possible to state that there are some slight differences between Tull's and Amis' view of what literature is today. Clearly, Tull's view is far more pessimistic. He believes that literature has evolved and improved over the times—presenting a queer analogy with the history of crime—but now it has neither reached a high point, nor returned to the beginning: literature has become *paperwork*, it has become *Amelior*, Gwyn's happy utopia (Amis 191). Of course there are other types of literature, but *paperwork* is the kind that is being read—and most important of all: bought—by the people. However, this pessimistic view is entirely related to the moment that is narrated in the novel, that of Gwyn's success opposed to Richard's failure. Because there is another definition, given by Richard when the two friends were younger, when Gwyn was not successful yet—when no bitterness could blur Richard's vision:

> Literature (...), Richard said, describes a descent. First, gods. Then demigods. Then epic became tragedy: failed kings, failed heroes. Then the gentry. Then the middle class and its mercantile dreams. Then it was about *you*—Gina, Gilda: social realism. Then it was about *them*: lowlife. Villains. The ironic age. (...) now what? Literature, for a while, can be about *us* (...): about writers. But that won't last long. How do we burst clear of all this? And he asked them: whither the novel? (Amis 435-436)

We could go on comparing Richard Tull's views with Martin Amis' prose and coming up with more definitions of literature and its fate—if literature can be said to have a fate. But this is what appears on the surface when looking at *The Information*'s metaliterature: contemporary fiction already possesses its own tasks—for readers and authors—its own stylistic propositions, its own difficulties. To classify contemporary fiction, and particularly Martin Amis' fiction, with labels such as "postmodernist", is to narrow the way—not only Amis' way, but also other writers', who might be hurriedly and unnecessarily labelled before they have said everything they wanted to say. It is abrupt and unwise to label the present, since we do not yet have the necessary objectiveness to recognize something that we are still immersed in.

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