MARTIN AMIS AND POSTMODERNISM

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Abstract

Directly contradicting Kinsley Amis's more traditional beliefs and realistic presentations, Martin Amis evinced respect for the stylistic innovations usually attributed to modernism and postmodernism, returning glory to those writers his father excoriated. No other father-son tandem has produced a corpus as sizable and significant as that of Kingsley Amis and his son, Martin Amis. They have maintained not only a quality of writing but also a duration of productivity that other literary families simply have not matched.

Keywords: Literary paternity, autobiography, aesthetic side, fiction, realism.

"For the rest of us, the surprise comes from the recognition that one's father death is a beginning as much as a conclusion. We rebel against our fathers, we argue with them, we deliberately misunderstand them; we proceed from the firm assumption that their opinions must be wrong and their advice bad; we do everything in our power to assert our generational difference and our personal distinctness. Then, when our fathers die, we begin to see not only how alike we were but how well we understood each other all along. For a writer, this realization will sooner or later form itself into what Wordsworth called 'a timely utterance.'"[2]

The first of many orphans from Amis's fiction appears in his second novel, *Dead Babies* (1975). His first name is Andy, and he gives himself his last name Adorno, "after the German Marxist philosopher whose death brought so much despondence to the commune in the summer of 1972, when Andy was a boy. "[3] Amis is doing more here than only commemorating the death of a thinker. *Dead Babies* is about the violence and brutality that is unleashed produced by an age of social liberation. It is a functional counterpart to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's great work Dialectic of Enlightenment (1947), the first two sentences of which could serve as an epigraph for Amis's fiction: "in the most general sense of progressive thought, the Establishment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant."[4]

Adorno is central to any of postmodenity, because he had an influence on the philosophical assumptions of postmodern thought. Well before Michel Foucault, Adorno and Horkheimer insisted that "power and knowledge are synonymous." Their claim is that "Enlightenment is totalitarian" is the seed from which postmodern theory grew, informed as it is by a rejection of totalizing claims and a suspicion of the uses to which they are put.[5] Martin Amis's discussion of the Nazi's "Final Solution" in his after word to

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[2] Powell, Neil. *Amis ans Son Two Literary Generations*, Macmillan, 2008, p358
[3] Amis, Martin. *Dead Babies*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1975, p 179
[4] Diedrick, James. Understanding Martin Amis, 1995, p 17
[5] Ibid.

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Time's Arrow reflects this thinking: "The offence was unique, not in its cruelty, nor in its cowardice, but in its style-in its combination of the atavistic and the modern. It was, at once, reptilian and 'logistical'" [6] rather than antithesis of Enlightenment ideas, the Holocaust represents one of its faces. Amis's fiction is called "postmodern" then, involves far more than stylistic analysis, and embodies his larger social outlook.

The aesthetic postmodernism can never be separated from political postmodernity. While the roots of the postmodern may be found in Enlightenment thinking, recent historical developments have definitively shaped the postmodern concerns of writers like Amis. Some theorists of postmodenity define the term this was exclusively. For Sven Birkerts, three historical conditions have been define: the existence of the "actual and psychological" fact of the nuclear age and the possibility of human annihilation that has dominated power relations and political agendas since the Second World War; the cumulative effects of the Western world's shift from "industrial mechanization to informing processing"; and the saturation of western societies by electronic media, "particularly television".[7]

All these developments have dealt blows to the Enlightenment –inspired fiction of individual autonomy and this is another aspect of the postmodern condition. Writing about Philip Larkin's reputation, Amis notes that "Larkin the man is separated from us, historically, by changes in the self. For his generation, you were what you were, and that was that. It made you answerable and adamantine. My father has this quality. I don't any of us do. There are too many forces at work on us. "[8]

Brian McHale has argued that the historical shift from modernism to postmodernism can be theorized as an alteration in moral imperatives. In his formulation, borrowing terminology from Roman Jakobson, the "dominant" imperatives of modernism are existential, concerned with individual behaviour in the face. By contrast,"dominant" imperatives of postmodernism are ontological with being and identity and with lesser regard for nature of the universe. Modernist writing, foregrounds such questions as "How am I to understand my world in opposition, postmodernist works engage such questions as "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it? What is a world?"[9]

Applying McHale's framework, Kingsley's chief concerns are existential, concerned with social and moral implications of his character's behaviour. Kingsley is not an existentialist or a modernist writer. His characters never complete their trials as exiles from the word of commonsense, wit and reason. Even his problematic creations, such as Jake Richardson and Stanley Duke, discover a community of sympathy or the sympathies of the reader.

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[6] Amis, Martin. *Time's Arrow, or The Nature of The Offense*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1991, p 168
[7]Sven, Birkets. "Postmodernism: Bumper-Sticker Culture", in *American Energies*, New York: William Morrow, 1992, p 21-23 qtd. in Diedrick James
[8]Amis, Martin. "Don Juan in Hull ", *New Yorker*, 12 July 1993,p
[9] McHale, Brian. *Postmodernism Fiction*, New York: Methuen, 1987, p 10, qtd. in Keulks Gavin

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Martin explores existentialist question equally as frequently as Kingsley, but his works more directly engage ontological issues of being and identity rather than morality or social behaviour. That is one key to his postmodernist tendencies and a helpful maker within McHale's polarities. Martin's characters seem trapped in repetitive or fixed time. They are unable to effect meaningful change, and they often discover that identity and reality are illusory constructs, manipulated by authorial guile. Times moves circularly in work such as *Other People: A Mystery Story* (1981), whereas it makes backward in *Time's Arrow* or *The Nature of the Offence* (1991) (one of Kingsley's letter to Philip Larkin[10]makes reference to the same phenomenon. Certainly, the Amises discussed the thematic and stylistic ramification of such a structural device.) In *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984) the character John Self discovers the artifice that thwarts his attempts at self-realization or free will, and triumphantly he throws a punch at Martin, liberating himself from his creator's fictive prison. Martin is more interested in examining the disconnected modern world; Kingsley concentrates more upon the function of individual identity and relationships within the world.[11]

These elements of characterization and theme also illuminate some of the formal evolutions of the novel since 1950. Just as Kingsley reacted against his modernist forebears rejecting their syntax and structure, so did Martin renounce the dominant literary models of his father's generation. "In their separate declarations of literary sentiments, the Amises prefigured the transnationalist, historiographic, and autobiographic nature of literature that has come to distinguish, the British novel at the end of the century."[12]

When considering the future of Martin's fiction, or British fiction in general, three particular examples seem significant for their predicative potential. Two are conferences and one is a review essay. The earliest occurred in the summer of 1978, when the English journal New Review convened a symposium to evaluate the state of contemporary fiction. Its purpose was to ask the authors to appreciate the changes that fuelled the transformation from realism to postmodernism. Martin Amis was one of the respondents and he took as his subject the Eliot impact of historical tradition upon his work. Although his words are over twenty years old, they still provide one of the best interpretations of his literary goals and of the general evolution of the novel since 1950.

> A new tradition can only evolve out of an old one", he proclaimed; "it cannot be induced. If I try very hard, I can imagine a novel that is as tricksy, as alienated and as writerly as those of, say, Robbe-Grllet, while also providing the staid satisfaction of pace, plot and humour with which we associate, say, Jane Austen. In away, I imagine that this is what I myself am trying to do.[13]

[10] Leader, Zachary. *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, HarperCollins Publisher, 2000, p 874
[11] Gavin Keulks. *Father and Son. Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis and the British Novelsince 1950*, p 234
[12] Ibid.
[13] The Dictionary of Literary Biography (Gale Research Company, 1987) vol. 14

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Twenty-two years later Martin attended another important conference, "The Novel in Britain, 1950-2000", held at Huntington Library. Appearing with writers ranging from Ian McEwan to Salman Rushdie and reviewers such as Lindsay Duiga and James Wood, Martin spoke about "Amerianization" of British fiction. In 1991, Martin published an important review celebrated American novelist DeLillo. His novel Mao II in which he questioned the future of postmodernism, elaborating his conviction that the next phase of literature must assimilate classically realistic protocols, not oppose them. Barrowing terminology from Roland Barthes, Martin praised DeLillo's ability to create works that were simultaneously "readerly" and "writerly"combining the old methods of realism with the stylistic and structural achievements of postmodernism. Martin was not the first person to wonder whether postmodernism's technical experiments had started to appropriate upon depletion. This exhaustation derived from the fact that postmodern writers were the inheritors of an external world where moral codes of conduct no longer applied, where nuclear weapons invalidated all forms of transcendence, and where the very natures of history, reality were unstable. "Whereas his contemporaries have been drawn to the initial, the ludic, and the enclosed, DeLillo goes at things the other way. He writes about the new reality-realistically."[14]

Writing realistically about the new reality has come to resemble what Martin calls 'higher autobiography". *In The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America* (1986) and *Experience*, a mode that has much in common with Linda Hutcheon's notion of *historigraphicmetafiction.* For Martin, especially in such works as *Einstein's Monsters* and *London Fields*, this type of writing which incorporate history, can be viewed as a by-product of the nuclear age, in which weapons transform history into apocalyptic threat, destabilizing reality. Omnipresence of fear produces harmful upon subjectivity and upon transcendent emotions such as love, family, and hope. The"end of history" that Jean Baudrillard uses to define the post-modern world, however, many of the best novels of the 1980s and 1990s incorporate history in ways that signal an evolution beyond the nature of technique. A tendency arose in many works from this period to assimilate elements from both postmodernism and classical realism. Positioning history as a by-product of subjectivity and textuality determined Martin to explain that: "I think the novel is moving more and more closely to what life is like-[which is] not the same thing as realism - and that is why it's so autobiographical at the moment."[15]

At one polarity of the imaginary spectrum between mimesis and postmodernism (or Kingsley and Martin) can stand such writers as Salman Rushdie, Graham Swift, Julian Barnes, Ian McEwan, and Martin Amis, proponents of a type of experimental realism that intentionally blurs the boundaries of narrative and reality. Rushdie's masterpiece, *Midnight's Children* (1980), is a novel seemingly at war with itself novel's interpolation of Indian politics since 1947 summon Marxist and historicist dialects into the text,

[14] "Thoroughly Post-modern Millennium", Review of Mao II, by Don DeLillo, Independent, 8 September, 1991, p 29 qtd.. in Keulks Gavin

[15] "Martin Amis" interview by John Haffenden in John Haffenden, *Novelists inInterview,* London: Methuen 1985, qtd. in Keulk Gavin

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demanding fixed material realities that avoid postmodern experiment and derive from postcolonialism. Saleem Sinai, the narrator, confronts these same internal oppositions: throughout the book, he disintegrates, culminating in total fragmentation and discontinuity at the novel's end.

Similarly, Graham Swift's masterpiece, *Waterland* (1983) traces the expansive genealogies of two families, the Cricks and the Atkinsons. The historical reimagining, is prompted by the narrator Tom Crick's attempt to re-establish order and control. In the process of trying to deduce logical reasons for his wife's abduction of a baby, Tom is forced to confront the separation of history and fairy tale. He turns the classroom history lessons into personal recollection, abandoning his subject, the French Revolution for other revolutions, more individual.

At the opposite polarity of this spectrum between realism and postmodernism, are situated writers as David Lodge, Malcom Bradbury, and Kingsley Amis, practitioners of a more traditional form of realism whose characters, themes, and structural grammar remain for the most part, moral and humanistic. Just as many postmodernist writers internalize realist norms, these writer imaginatively engage postmodernist experimentation. The majority of this writer's work declares their allegiances to more classic forms of realism, especially as regards morality, the individual, and society. "Morality meaningful behaviour", Kingsley said in the mid-1980s, "depends on there being some sort of structure. No system or belief exists by which society can judge somebody by which can judge himself. When your only interest is in surviving, life becomes meaningless and not worth living." David Lodge comment upon the combination of subjectivity and history in many post-modern novels: "History may be, in a philosophical sense, a fiction, but it does not feel like that when we miss a train or somebody starts a war."[16]

The key difference between these two groups of novelists represents the literary opposition that existed between Kingsley and Martin. Far more significant then a quarrel between father and son or a provincial English conflict between realism and experimentation, the Amises literary debates did not illuminate the transformation from mimesis to postmodernism aesthetics. The rise of such writers as Rushdie, Swift, and Martin Amis attests not only to the influence of "higher autobiography" and "historiography metafiction" in contemporary literature but also the decline of more traditional forms of mimesis. In the last years of the twentieth century after Kingsley's death, over two-thirds of his novels would be put out of print in England: in America, only three of his twenty-four novels would remain available. With Kingsley's departure, it remains to be seen whether Martin's best work is yet to come or is already behind.

[16] "Kingsley Amis" interview by Salwak Dale. In interview with *Britain's Angry youngMen,* edited by Dale Salwak, San Bernadino, Calif: Borgo, 1984, p 13-40

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