Lessons in humiliation in three mystery novels: Martin Amis' *Money*, *The Information* and *Night Train*

Elsa Simões Lucas Freitas
Universidade Fernando Pessoa

ABSTRACT
This article aims to analyse the processes of humiliation undergone by John Self, the protagonist of *Money* (1984), by Richard Tull, the main character of *The Information* (1995), and by Mike Hoolihan, the woman detective in *Night Train* (1997). The humiliations suffered by these characters present an evolution in complexity that echoes the author's own evolving concerns as a writer: Self's debasement is primarily a personal one (even though it undoubtedly has a larger resonance), featuring a hilarious physical degradation that culminates in his total demoralisation as a human being. Richard Tull's degradation originates in the professional jealousy he feels as a conscientious and 'serious' writer towards a successful and market-driven one. The spiral of disgrace that finally engulfs him is the direct result of his incapacity of controlling events – a predicament of contemporary human life that is extensive to a macrocosmic level. This conclusion is finally confirmed in Amis' last but one novel, *Night Train*, where the detective's professional success in deciphering a mysterious death case is revealed as the tragic conviction that there is no motivation to explain the 'crimes' of daily life, and that our high expectations always fail to match reality.

A large part of Martin Amis's writing consists in an analysis of the process of writing – his own and other people's, as well as the readings his writings might implicate. This is true when it comes to the considerable body of literary criticism, collections of journalism and non-fiction Amis has published so far, but also true when we consider his ten novels, two short story collections, a screenplay, an autobiography and a historical memoir. Amis's reputation as a word virtuoso and major postmodern experimentalist has been definitely established after the publication of his first three 'apprentice' novels (Diedrick 1995: 20). By that time, the writer's satirical vein aimed against some of the scaliest social realities in contemporary urban life had already guaranteed him exalted reactions that range from enthusiastic acclaim to vehement condemnation in the literary circles.

The three novels under analysis here – *Money*, published in 1984, *The Information*, published in 1995, and *Night Train*, published in 1997 can all be described as mystery novels – with a twist. As we will see, they subvert the genre of the classical detective novel: on a surface level, *Money* could be seen as an ironical variation of one of Agatha Christie's most famous works, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, where the first-person intradiegetic narrator is finally revealed as the murderer. The narrators in *The Information* and in *Night Train* are remarkably similar to the dark, cynical and disenchanted voices of detectives created by Chandler and Hemmet.

These three novels present a number of recurrent issues under slightly different shapes that allow us to establish continuity and progression as to the type of concerns that are increasingly more present in the writer's mind. One of them, perhaps the most relevant for the topic under discussion, is the repetition of a pattern of intersection of fact and fiction. We are in presence of a constant double perspective where the writer, in a very explicit manner, is also the reader of the story being told (Reynolds; Noakes 2003: 6) and where characters, situations, cars and even physical space seem to multiply and divide at a frightening pace:

> The car and I crawled cursing up the street to my flat. You just cannot park round here any more. ...You *can* doublepark on people: people can doublepark on you. Cars are doubling while houses are halving. Houses divide, into two, into four, into sixteen. ... Rooms divide, rooms multiply. Houses split – houses are tripleparked. People are doubling, also, dividing, splitting. In double trouble we split out losses. No wonder we're bouncing off the walls. (Amis [1984] 1985: 63)

This extreme consciousness of doubling and repetition often translates as the high degree of authorial intrusion displayed in Amis's novels. This voice allows us to effectively gauge the decline and downfall of the protagonists of these three works, since all of them – for various reasons – are blinded to the true extent of what lies in store for them. The protagonist's delusions are all the more apparent when they are confronted with the superior knowledge displayed by the author. Because of the repeated use of authorial presence, the 'real' permeates fiction in an obvious manner – thus, the source of the humiliation all the protagonists experience is located in the narrative threads, but is also originated and related to extradiegetic situations.

The comparison between the amount of information the protagonist and the intrusive author possess is relatively straightforward in *Money*, since John Self, the protagonist, and a fictional 'Martin Amis' share some of the scenes that take place in London – in a way that establishes a fusion of diegesis and extradiegesis (Musarra 1987: 218). Their dialogues are extremely enlightening for the reader, in that they provide important clues as to the author's designs and as to the ludicrous ignorance Self reveals about literature, about literary genres, and about the plot that is being weaved around him (Amis [1984] 1985: 246-248). The fact that this fictional 'Martin Amis' is very similar to the real Amis in physical appearance, life habits and manner of speech makes this

intertwining of fiction and non-fiction even more complex and intricate. It is almost impossible not to identify the fictional Amis with the non-fictional one, since the author's public voice is well known from his other novels and essays (Todd 1978: 135). Even more revealingly, in some of the John Self/'Martin Amis' dialogues, the theoretical reflections of the later about the distance between author and narrator are an almost exact word-by-word match of excerpts from Amis's interviews (Haffenden 1985). This author confesses to the protagonist of the book he is writing that he – in his role of author - has sadistic impulses and enjoys punishing his characters. This is even more likely to happen when the narrator is 'wicked, deluded, pitiful or ridiculous' (Amis [1984] 1985: 246). The protagonist of *Money* is, in fact, an expert in misinterpretation. He is constantly deceived by others much more skilled than him on the exercise of reading. John Self is deliberately fed the wrong type of information, and he passively thrives on it. In fact, it is something he has been trained to do, by watching too much television and reading nothing but tabloids, which have created in him a chronic moral and temperamental laziness. He lives his own life by always choosing the easiest path – and that is the type of service he provides for others, since, as he describes himself, he is a professional of the industries of non-effort.

Self's undoing is subtly engineered by creative artists, with high expertise in intertextual games – whereas Self is always incapable of relating things with each other in a meaningful way; nor, until the bitter end, is he able to gather lessons from past experience that will help him shape and order his present. His final humiliation is intellectual and professional, since he painfully finds out that he is not, after all, a clever and promising media mogul, on the fast track to success in the film industry. Rather, he is a poor wreck, who makes it a point of not reading anything serious and, because of that, is never able to recognise that plots as old as the world are being planned against him. Even when he, in a very painstaking manner, does read literature, he is only capable of extremely basic, shallow and cynical interpretation. The other layers of meaning are lost on him, and ironic remarks and allegories are read at facial value and, therefore, misunderstood.

It is interesting to note that this intellectual shortcoming is, in John Self's mind, closely connected to physical problems: he prefers not to read because it hurts his eyes and, given the choice between pain and not reading, he prefers the later. The intellectual humiliation John Self suffers is accompanied by an array of symptoms of physical

decadence. At some points, Self's body becomes a metaphor for the urban realities he is living in: he indulges in gigantic excesses, and his many addictions are symbols of urban crimes and misdemeanours in the twentieth-century (Simões 1997: 116). This larger-than-life dimension of the protagonist expands the sense of decadence into a macroscopic level: while the author constantly humiliates Self, he also satirizes the social system and the consumerism of the Western society that made Self what he is (Diedrick 1995: 74). On a microscopic level, the portrait of Self's decadence and debasement is achieved by the description of his physical ailments and the use of animal imagery. Self's teeth are decaying and his gums are traumatised; his hair is thinning and receding; he is fat and heavy; he hears strange sounds all the time; he has bouts of amnesia (at the most inconvenient times). Just like the urban spaces he inhabits, he feels that, to solve these physical problems, he needs a major overhaul – or a 'body rethink' – performed by a state-of-the art plastic surgeon somewhere in America. The animal images associated with Self accentuate his humiliation. When he is threatened, Self's face is like the face of a fat snake (Amis [1984] 1985: 9). When he wakes up he sometimes feels like a cat runover (Amis [1984] 1985: 11). When he has a hangover, he walks out of the bathroom on all fours as if he were 'a pale and very penitent crocodile (Amis [1984] 1985: 11). When reading *Animal Farm*, he identifies with the dog, and Fielding Goodney, in their final confrontation, shouts at him (quoting from *Othello*) 'Oh inhuman dog'. When he is found by Martina Twain (his American lover) in bed with Selina Street (his English lover) he looks like a bug with his arms and legs in the air. Still climbing down the stairs of decadence, in the last scenes of this novel, Self is mistaken for a beggar and given a ten-penny coin by a compassionate passer-by. After all he had been through within the narrative bounds of the novel, Self is finally capable of reading irony – and, by extension, his own ironical predicament. He laughs at himself and he invites the readers to join in.

In *Money*, we are in presence of a complex pattern of 'rise' and 'fall'. Self's ascension in the world of money and fame is apparently meteoric. However, for someone in full possession of the facts- i.e. the author and the readers, all his steps take him down and down until he reaches final disgrace. Someone with such a flimsy grasp of reality lacks the underlying mental structure that is necessary for relating with others on a human basis. As we have seen, his relation with other people's 'living texts' is, at its best, cursory and

shallow – and, most of all, mediated by money. That implies a literal and metaphorical 'suicide of the Self/self'. Money represents, as the subtitle of the novel tells us, a 'suicide note', especially for people who can read nothing else.

Unlike John Self in *Money*, the protagonist of *The Information*, Richard Tull, suffers from an excess of familiarity with literature and literary devices (Mars-Jones [1995] 2000: 156). He has too much information about how to write well, and about what it takes to make a novel a success, but he is utterly incapable of writing a successful work himself. He is a specialised reader or critic of other people's writings, never an accomplished writer, in a novel about literary rivalry. Richard's downfall is caused by his need to take revenge on the success his friend Gwyn Barry has achieved with *Amelior*, a blandly optimistic and unchallenging novel. In Richard's mind, the consensual acclaim enjoyed by his friend is a glorification of mediocrity – and a condemnation of his own literary ideals. He fails because Gwyn Barry has succeeded; the corollary being that, if he is ever to enjoy success, Barry has to be publicly humiliated. If balance is to be achieved, humiliation of the other is necessary for the other part to come up in the world. The narrator (an extradiegetic omniscient one, identifiable with the author's voice) tells us about this feeling, and how it applies to literature but also to higher and deeper levels in the life of humanity:

> Supposing...that the progress of literature (downwards) was forced in that direction by the progress of cosmology (upwards – up, up). For human beings, the history of cosmology is the history of increasing humiliation. Always hysterically but less and less fiercely resisted, as one illusion after another fell away. You can say this for increasing humiliation: at least it was *gradual*. (Amis 1995: 436)

This gradualness of the process of humiliation is certainly true in the case of Richard Tull, unlike what happens with John Self in *Money*. For Richard, things are not well at first, but every step he takes to make them better only seems to make them worse. The action that precipitates this inexorable chain of events is Richard's devious plan to write an 'original' version of his rival's best-seller novel, so that Gwyn Barry would be accused of having plagiarised some other writer's work. This is the kind of strategy that could be expected from a failed and embittered professional critic in a novel about books, intertextuality, types of writing and forms of reading.

In *The Information*, we can witness a new stage in the writing of Martin Amis, where it is no longer so important to make an explicit display of postmodernist strategies.

In this novel, which presents a much more sombre tone than *Money*, the hand that controls the characters has a looser grasp and reveals less firmness than the one we saw in previous novels. At a certain point during an interview, Amis himself explains this change:

> People talk about postmodernism as they do... all evolutionary developments, in a novel, as if they were fashions or bandwagons. But when a lot of writers start doing the same thing, it isn't fashion, it is the novel making another lurch forward in its evolutionary path. ... In the novel *Money* I have a character called 'Martin Amis' who has long discussions with his protagonist, John Self, and gives him great hints...But of course my main character is never listening. He's always worrying about his car, or his girlfriend. And I thought *there* was a vein of comedy that was characteristically, essentially postmodern. But I don't feel I'm in that stream anymore. I think we are all moving on from that kind of playful, tricksy work. It's like the architecture that has all its innards on the outside – you show the reader what you are doing. (Reynolds; Noakes 2003: 16)

If we analyse the three novels under discussion here under this perspective, we can say that *Money* focuses on the ludicrous aspects of humiliation: the God-like intrusive author, the knowledgeable characters and the readers both enjoy and deplore John Self's path to ruin. It is clearly a case of 'the higher the climb, the harder the fall'. In *The Information* the path towards final humiliation is steadfast – and there is nothing openly funny about it. The narrator/authorial voice places himself at the same level as his protagonist. He makes no pretence of knowing everything and being in control all the time. At the end, it is not the author who ruins Richard Tull. Rather, it is the Universe which is finally through with him (Amis 1995: 455).

This apocalyptic view is further reinforced in *Night Train*, a sombre Chandleresque anti-detective novel, where the authorial instance is only discernible through the narrator's voice. As Amis's new novels are published, the intrusive author progressively effaces itself, until, in *Night Train*, it becomes recognisable from vague echoes of the real author's public voice. The creative power that determines the storyline is shared between Mike Hoolihan, the tough and masculine woman detective, and Jennifer Rockwell, a beautiful and intelligent young scientist who, inexplicably, commits suicide. This woman detective is a specialist in the reading and interpretation of crime scenes. Her working methods are similar to those of a writer at work on a novel (Phillips [1997] 2000: 179). Investigating the death of Jennifer Rockwell will prove to be the hardest case in her very long, busy and successful career in the Murder Department. This happens because of Hoolihan's closeness

to Jennifer and her family, but mostly because she finds herself constantly following deceptive leads. Finally, Jennifer's role as creative artist when staging her own death is finally evident: the decoys have all been planted by her. Hoolihan knows Jennifer trusted her to find the solution. However, she painstakingly realises that the solution to its case is that it can never be closed. Jennifer committed suicide because she was disappointed beyond any hope: 'Sir, your daughter didn't have motives. She just had standards. High ones. Which we didn't meet.' (Amis 1997: 147) In *Night Train*, it is Jennifer, the creative artist, who finally gives up and ends her life. Paradoxically, when she decides to do it, she is, in fact, affirming a desperate sense of agency the world has denied it. Her humiliation becomes her victory.

The outcome of a classical detective/mystery novel would be the glorification of the detective, with the presentation of conclusions about identity, motivation and modus operandi of the culprit. In the universe of Christie, Chandler and Hemmet, the sense of completion and closure –which is something yearned for, even by the protagonists of Amis's novels – is achieved. However, in Amis's novels, one never gets closure. Their ending is their beginning and vice-versa. Humiliation suffered at the hands of the world – which is senseless, inartistic and utterly lacking in logical and conscious motivation - results in literal and metaphorical suicide for these characters. Reading and re-reading: in Amis's world, this is as close to closure as it gets.

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