Amis and postmodernism

(excerpt from *Understanding Martin Amis*, by James Diedrick, pp. 10-14)

The first of many orphans to wander through 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 had brought so much despondence to the commune in the summer of 1972, when Andy was just a boy." Amis is doing more here than merely commemorating the death of a great thinker. *Dead Babies* is about the violence and brutality that is unleashed, even partly produced, by an age of ostensible social liberation. In this sense, it is a fictional counterpart to Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer's great work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) whose first two sentences could serve as an epigraph for much of Amis's fiction: "in the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant."²

Adorno is central to any discussion of postmodernity, because he has had a formative influence on the philosophical assumptions of postmodern thought. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* argues that the "reason" enshrined during the Enlightenment as a force of liberation from superstition, as an agent of human mastery over the world of contingency, is a reductive form of reason, a discourse that is itself enslaving. Since Enlightenment "reason" takes a specific, Eurocentric incarnation of consciousness, of thinking, as the norm, it is also racist and imperialist, seeking to impose its standards and practices onto all regions of the world. Well before Michel Foucault, Adorno and Horkheimer insisted that "power and knowledge are synonymous." Their subsequent claim that "Enlightenment is totalitarian" is the seed from which much postmodern theory grew, informed as it is by a rejection of totalizing claims and a suspicion of the uses to which they are put.³ Martin Amis's discussion of the Nazi's "Final Solution" in his "Afterword" to *Time's Arrow* reflects this thinking: "The offense 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.""⁴ Rather than an antithesis of Enlightenment ideas, the Holocaust represents one of its faces. Calling Amis's fiction "postmodern," then, involves far more than stylistic analysis, since his style is inseparable from, and embodies, his larger social outlook.

It is important to remember that aesthetic postmodernism can never be separated from, is always already implicated in, 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. Indeed some theorists of postmodernity define the term this way exclusively. For Sven Birkerts, three historical conditions have been definitive: 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 World War II; the cumulative effects of the Western world's shift from "industrial mechanization to information processing"; and the saturation of Western societies by electronic media, "particularly television." 

All three of these developments have dealt blows to the Enlightenment-inspired fiction of individual autonomy, stability and agency, 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 unswervable and adamantine. My father has this quality. I don't. None of us do. There are too many forces at work on us." The increasingly fluid, unstable nature of selfhood is one of Amis's central subjects. He attributes this change primarily to the ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation, but he also points to the relentless mediation of experience by popular culture. "Modern life," he has argued, "is so mediated that authentic experience is much harder to find. Authentic everything is much harder to find. . . . We've all got this idea of what [life] should be like--from movies, from pornography." 

This observation helps explain Amis's much-quoted assertion that "motivation," an essential element in the traditional novel, is "a shagged-out force in modern life. . . . A.C. Bradley and that whole school of humanistic criticism tell us that people behave for reasons, whereas--if you read The Sun every day, and keep your wits about you in the street--you see that motivation has actually been exaggerated in, and by, the novel: you have something much woollier than motivation." It isn't so much that motivation doesn't exist; rather, traditional humanist conceptions of conscious motivation have been questioned by much postmodern thought, replaced in part by psychoanalytic notions of unconscious drives and structuralist theories of the socially constructed nature and shape of subjectivity itself. It is no accident that Amis's novels consistently emphasize the socio-economic forces that shape his characters. By doing so they implicitly question the bourgeois myth of individual autonomy.

Amis's increasingly complex manipulations of narrative temporality also reflect his awareness of the postmodern condition. Haunted by the potential for planetary destruction, placed in an eternal present by the
non-linear representations of reality by video, experiencing a diminishing sense of agency, "we start to surrender our sense of narrative connection," Birkerts argues, "and any feeling about our own historical place in the world."9 This has profound consequences for the novelist, whose narratives are traditionally founded on causality, continuity, and linear progression. In this connection it is not surprising that Amis consistently disrupts, subverts, and in one case (*Time's Arrow*) inverts chronological order, so that time itself becomes a subject of his fiction.

Postmodern discourses, as Linda Hutcheon has noted, "manage to point to conventions as conventions and thus to de-naturalize the things we take as natural or given."10 "What you're always looking for," Amis has said of his novelistic quest, "is a way to see the world differently."11 If *life* has changed profoundly in the late twentieth century, it follows that the *forms* that represent life must change as well. Amis is a self-consciously postmodern writer, and every novel he has written is at one level a critique and modification of the sub-genre(s) it participates in. Of his first novel, Amis has said that "the only twist I was conscious of giving to the adolescent novel--the genre to which *The Rachel Papers* belongs--is that Charles Highway is a budding literary critic, whereas the narrators of such novels are usually budding writers."12 Actually, this "twist" serves to embody the novel's central concern with self-consciousness, mediation, and inauthenticity. His second novel, *Dead Babies*, is a grotesque variation on the country house novel, set, like most of Jane Austen's novels, on a country estate, and concerned with the (ill) manners of a group of the young and the privileged. The head of this estate is a man who seems to represent the quintessence of Enlightenment notions of reason, culture, and civility, but who is revealed as a moral monster by the end of the narrative. And in the more recent *Time's Arrow*, technically his most audacious novel, Amis reverses chronological time entirely, in part to evoke the progress-denying catastrophe that was the Nazi Holocaust.

"Among the many mysterious processes under way in this century is a breakdown of genre," Amis has said, "so that comic novels can take on quite rugged stuff. . . . comedy is a much looser form than it once was."13 Indeed, Amis's novels have engaged such subjects as incest, murder, Nazi death camps, and nuclear warfare. His treatment of these subjects calls forth the outrageous, the uncanny, and the grotesque as often as it employs more traditional comic tropes. None of this is surprising considering the pitch-black humor of the American writers who have influenced him, like William S. Burroughs, Joseph Heller, and Thomas Pynchon. It does mean that while Amis's much-praised comic gifts are often a source of complex delight, they are also a method of confronting often-repressed truths, of using humor to gain a critical leverage on them.
NOTES


3. Adorno and Horkheimer 4, 6.


