

‘Nothing will come of nothing’: Negotiating the postmodern in Martin Amis’ *Night Train*

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[Site manager’s note: When this essay was completed in 2003, Will Norman was finishing his M.Phil at Oxford University, where his research interests included contemporary British fiction. He was planning to commence his doctoral thesis on Nabokov and Time next year. This essay was initially published on the Amis Web in January 2004.]

Lear: Nothing will come of nothing, speak again (*King Lear* I.i.85)

These words, resounding ominously throughout the first scene of Shakespeare’s darkest tragedy, foreshadow a dilemma which has come to occupy the postmodern as well as the Early Modern. Cordelia’s ‘Nothing’, spoken in recognition of the inadequacies of language in its engagement with the real, precipitates the first of many instances of blind wisdom from Lear. For if our faith in meaning breaks down, then we lose the very foundation upon which we construct our existence. A fraction, however tiny, can be multiplied into something larger and firmer, but ‘nothing’, no matter what we do with it, will always remain ‘nothing’.

Postmodern theorisings, from philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard, tell us that there can be no more *métarécits* upon which to found a search for Truth, or absolute value¹. The value systems which man used to adhere to in order to give his life purpose can no longer bear the weight of certainty. Without such certainties our history collapses, retrospectively, into an incoherent tangle of events. This kind of historical anxiety has given impetus to a number of important British novels in the nineteen eighties and nineties. Graham Swift’s *Waterland* and Julian Barnes’ *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, for example, both represent attempts at confronting and articulating these problems. Martin Amis’ *Night Train* is troubled by the same loss of foundations, but, moving away from history, it sets itself in a country whose culture, arguably, does not share the UK’s affinity for it. In the self-consciously American world of this novel the problem which faces the characters is not how to face history in a postmodern world, but, more urgently, how to face the present. *Night Train*, though it engages with the challenges of postmodernity, is not reducible to ludic intellectual gratification, but explores and probes the human costs of that ‘nothing’ which threatens to nullify our efforts at finding purpose and logic in our existence. In response to Amis’ many detractors, who criticise his novels for their perversity and depthless sheen², this paper will show how *Night Train* intelligently interrogates and criticises the world it inhabits from a firmly moral perspective.

Mike Hoolihan, tough female cop and narrator of *Night Train*, tells her story using a slangy American idiolect far removed from Amis’ own impeccable public school English. Its use of culturally specific slang terms, often derived from popular media

¹ Jean-François Lyotard. *La Condition Postmoderne* (Paris, 1979).

² See, for example, John Updike, ‘It’s a Fair Cop’, *Sunday Times Books* (21 September 1997) Section 8 pp.1-2: ‘Amis, beneath his banter is a scowling, atrocity-minded author’.

or police jargon immediately jars with the reader. It is over-the-top, self-consciously positioning itself within the highly fictionalised world of hardboiled TV cop shows such as *LAPD Blue* and more intellectualised detective films such as *Chinatown* and *Seven*. Homicide, we are told, 'is the Show' (NT 3). Amis runs the risk of alienating both his British and American readership – through the apparently crude referencing of American TV culture, and more importantly for the latter, through ill-informed misrepresentation. If Amis' novels inhabit a clichéd world of seedy crime-ridden cities derived from fictionalised sources, how can they lay claim to seriousness or depth?

One of the answers lies in our ability to comprehend Hoolihan's idiolect. Her police jargon and street slang is immediately recognisable to the reader, American or British. When she says 'The city is the offense. We are the defense.' her referencing of American Football terms are comprehensible to us through a cultural knowledge of The United States made available mainly through television. Even if these terms are not part of our productive vocabulary, they are part of our passive vocabulary, current in a society which is far from immune to the infiltration of TV-reality. Hoolihan's slang vocabulary thus emerges as a strategy for both identification and alienation, which signals the fictionalised nature of *Night Train's* world as well as linking it implicitly to the reader's own. Hoolihan is fully aware of the gap between the fictional and her perception of the 'real' – 'TV has fucked up us police. No profession has been so massively fictionalised' (18). She even uses the phrase 'TV' or 'ketchup' (alluding to the fake blood used on old films and television programmes) to refer to the false – 'the homicide/suicide gray area is TV, is bullshit, is ketchup' (17). In a way not so different from our own however, the clichés and vocabulary of film and television have infiltrated her own lexical bank. For example, only a few lines earlier she describes murder as 'dumb, and then even dumber' inappropriately echoing Jim Carrey's slapstick comedy (17). In another instance, having stated that 'not even Italian police are sentimental about full moons' (8) she goes on to a sentimental, observation of a filmic image - Jennifer Rockwell's eyes 'still moist in the moonlight' (10).

In instances such as these Amis uses Mike Hoolihan's slang and jargon as a means of demonstrating how language can take us further from reality rather than nearer to it. The brutalities of her job are sanitised and robbed of their horror by euphemisms and jokes. Hoolihan has 'seen them all: Jumpers, stumpers, dumpers, dunkers, bleeders, floaters, poppers, bursters' (4). Her darkly comic list of corpses nervously laughs off the unthinkable and clearly illustrates the misunderstanding of those reviewers who saw in *Night Train* an attempt to 'celebrate the demotic'³. Rather, Amis' parody of the discourse of fictionalised cop-land reveals this kind of language as a sham, 'warding off the experience it describes'⁴. Trader Faulker, the partner of Jennifer Rockwell, emerges as the only character to really see through it. In the interrogation room Hoolihan tries, as she does with other suspects, to manipulate him by her use of clichéd jargon, and fails:

Trader, you're going before a grand jury. Know what that is? Yes, I'm going to *grand-jury* you, Trader. Yes I am...

³ Anita Brookner, 'Farewell, My Lovely', *Spectator* 279:8826 (27 September 1997), pp.36-37.

⁴ Adam Philips, 'Cloud Cover', *London Review of Books*, 19:20 (16 October 1997), pp.3, 6-7.

As it happens, Detective Hoolihan, I do know what a grand jury is. It's a hearing to establish if a case is strong enough to go to trial. That's all. You probably think I think it's the Supreme Court. Same as all the other befuddled bastards that come through here. This is so ... pathetic. Oh Mike, you poor bitch. Listen to you. But it's not Mike Hoolihan talking. (NT 56-57)

Hoolihan ends the encounter in tears, shocked by the recognition of the dehumanising effects her interrogations methods have caused. Her use of jargon is only one element in a strategy founded in manipulation – a large part of which involves the assertion of clichéd patterns of motivation and false identification:

I know. It's like I was there. You and her have the final argument. The final fight. It's over. But you wanted to make love to her that one last time didn't you Trader. (NT 52)

This conjecture is about as believable as the false suicide note left by a murderer as if written by his victim, pinned up on the notice board of the police station – 'Good by Crule Whirl'd' (NT 17). This episode is characteristic of the way Amis produces pathos in *Night Train*, by creating a character in Mike Hoolihan who, despite her awareness of the inadequate clichés of fictional language and patterns of behavior, finds herself resorting to them again and again in order to shield herself from the reality that few in the novel are able to face – the possibility of a suicide without cause and a character without motivation.

This is the possibility which haunts the novel and which is responsible for its irreverent subversion of genre. For all its early promise as a mystery detective thriller, *Night Train* emerges as its very antithesis. If *Waterland* can be described as an inverted detective novel, in which the mystery deepens as the plot evolves, rather than revealing its solution, then *Night Train* is the detective novel rendered void – a novel in which the mystery is dissolved into the banalities of the explicable quotidian, unsolvable due to its absence. Hoolihan employs the Holmesian method of eliminating the impossible, so as to isolate one factor, which, however improbable, is the solution. After making a list of possible causes of suicide, she crosses them off, one, by one, until 'Now there is nothing' (NT 132). 'Nothing' then, is the cause, the motivation behind Jennifer Rockwell's suicide. And neither can it be dismissed as a momentary lapse of reason in an otherwise reasonable world. Jennifer plans her suicide and accomplishes it emphatically with three shots through her head.

The idea of reality which *Night Train* proclaims is similar to that suggested by *Waterland* – 'Reality is uneventfulness, vacancy, flatness. Reality is that nothing happens' (WL 40). It shares the notion of a 'nothing' which mocks the very possibility of human purpose and endeavour. *Night Train*, however, goes even further than *Waterland* and strikes directly at that territory which Tom Crick, Swift's narrator, valued as almost sacred – the concept of inquiry and causality. If, in *Waterland*, civilisation can be maintained so long as the act of inquiry into causes is continued, *Night Train* envisages the end of that civilisation – a moment at which all avenues of investigation are exhausted. To use semiotic terminology, this is a situation in which signs are not simply problematised in their relationship to the signifier, as in classic poststructuralist discourse, but totally isolated, and the signifier dissolved. Actions are just actions, and nothing more. For Crick, the question 'why'

is what makes us human. For a police, however, ‘ours is not to reason why ... fuck the why’ (NT 31).

In this sense, Amis violates the traditions of realist fiction on its own territory, for *Night Train* is a realist novel which refuses both the autonomy of the individual and the effects of tragic or historical forces. This is the point around which this novel’s most well known detractor, John Updike, bases his critique:

The trouble ... my trouble, the reviewer’s trouble – with [Night Train] isn’t the faux-demotic mannerisms, or the heavy debt that Amis’ Oz of an America owes to frequently cited cop shows on the telly but the unmentionable way the plot proceeds. My problem is with the solution of the mystery and the point of the book.⁵

Updike’s issue with *Night Train* suggests how the crisis of motivation articulated by Amis not only applies to the postmodern world of the novel but to the status of the novel as a literary form within that world. Just as *Waterland* and *A History of the World* struggle to give story telling a meaningful position in an increasingly meaningless world, *Night Train* grapples with the same problem but from an even more extreme perspective. Key to the way this situation is brought about is the concept of suicide, for *Night Train* not only uses suicide for its subject matter, but also *enacts* it on the level of form. The novel can be read as a self-destructive mechanism, dismantling the very components which give it meaning. Amis asks the question of how can one have a novel in which the plot leads nowhere (or, more correctly, to nothing) and one of the most important characters has no motivation. Looking at it from this perspective, however, the artefact of the novel itself stands in defiance of the threat to its own form. The answer is given simultaneously to the asking of the question, and the realist novel is not yet dead.

‘Suicide’ wrote Adam Philips in his review of *Night Train*, ‘violates our sense of ending’⁶. The novel shares with *Waterland* its fascination with closure. While the latter refuses to entertain it, with a cyclical view of history built into its very structure, *Night Train* is more ambiguous in its stance. On one hand, the act of suicide is the ultimate act of closure – an emphatic full stop which marks an act of self-definition and the imposing of the individual’s will on the world. By committing suicide one creates an ending for oneself, and therefore a story – a *petit récit* with which to replace the *métarécits* which are no longer adequate to give structure to our existence. This *petit récit*, however, stands as an admission of failure and isolation – a last resort. Even murder requires interaction, some kind of engagement between the individual and the society he or she resides in. Suicide is absolute solitariness and therefore incompleteness – at best a gesture at completion which betrays its absence – in the words of Mike Hoolihan, ‘some kind of half-assed attempt to ‘put things in order’’ (NT 79).

To approach *Night Train* from this angle of isolation is to begin to understand the novel as a deeply human and moral work concerned with the future of the individual’s relationship with society in a postmodern world. Jennifer Rockwell’s professional interest in the future of the universe – whether it will continue to expand or contract –

⁵ John Updike, ‘It’s a fair cop’, p.2.

⁶ Philips, ‘Cloud Cover’ p..5.

converges on a key question which also applies microcosmically to society. This is whether the forces that bind bodies together are stronger than those which pull them apart. This metaphor of gravity may account for the size of Mike Hoolihan ('I'm five-ten and I go 180' (NT 3), who, despite the bleak world in which she lives, feels strong bonds with the people she encounters, manifested in the physical as well as the emotional – 'of all the bodies I have ever seen, none have stayed with me, in the gut, like the body of Jennifer Rockwell' (NT 4). Hoolihan remains preoccupied with the physical size of the other characters in the novel. Her partner, Tobe, is 'enormous' and silent, as if the power of this invisible force were the only thing holding them together, while Colonel Tom, ravaged by grief and retreating gradually from the world is observed to become physically smaller – 'he is shrinking' (NT 40) and later, at the funeral, 'obviously reduced, scaled down' (NT 62). Hoolihan's universe, despite her efforts, continues to expand, the constellations unfixed. The reader must share in her horror as she views the receding bodies and reflects mutually on their unknowability and her own isolation.

It comes as no surprise, then, that most of the characters in *Night Train* are sketches, their outlines hazily delineated. Updike asserts that they, and the novel, 'become pure diagram, on a blackboard as flat as it is black'⁷. The logic which suggests that, if many of the characters are depthless, then so is the novel, is flawed. Updike's diagnosis of *Night Train* owes something to the Baudrillardian 'hyperreal' condition⁸, in which the world is experienced as pure surface, made up of simulacra which have replaced their originals and now form a new 'real'. Thus the characters in *Night Train*, just like Hoolihan's narrative voice, are derived from other 'versions' rather than real people and real ways of speaking, and are consequently lacking in depth. The novel's achievement, however, is to present simulacra *as themselves*, their inadequacies and deceptive nature exposed. Catherine Bernard, in writing on *London Fields*, perceives this operation from another angle:

if hackneyed mimetic stratagems prove unable to account for an insane world, the same stratagems, carried to their limits, may recover a contradictory relevance to their referent . . . [Amis' novels] are absent structures built around the tragic hollowness of meaning which always betrays the strategies evolved to grasp it.⁹

For these betrayed strategies to be deceptive or inadequate there must be something more firmly rooted against which to judge them. In disclosing the *virtuality* of representation, Amis implicitly posits the existence of genuine experience, located outside the textual limits of the novel but informing it nonetheless. A sensitive reading of Mike Hoolihan's narrative voice yields the possibility of depth, for, as Adam Philips observes, 'What she . . . writes – the way she represents herself – doesn't tally with what she is'¹⁰. Despite presenting herself in clichéd terms as the unshockable hardened cop, Hoolihan constantly surprises herself and the reader with the flaws in her own self-image, as when she is reduced to tears in the interrogation room by Trader's ability to see through her. Through the cracks in the hard surface of Hoolihan's tough-cop voice lurks the potential for genuine character in the kind of

⁷ Updike, 'It's a fair cop', p.2.

⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulations* (Paris, 1985).

⁹ Catherine Bernard, 'Dismembering/Remembering Mimesis: Martin Amis, Graham Swift', *Postmodern British Fiction* ed. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam, 1993) p.123.

¹⁰ Philips, 'Cloud Cover', p.6.

three-dimensional sense Updike would approve of. Furthermore, even if Jennifer Rockwell's suicide remains an action without motivation, a sign without a signifier, Hoolihan's final intentions, signalled in the final paragraph as being to drink herself to death, are clearly motivated by a very human anguish and despair.

It would be easy to find, in those devastating last words, which make of *Night Train* another suicide note to add to those of *Money* and *London Fields*, a fulfilment of Lear's prophecy – 'Nothing will come of nothing'. On close examination the rhetoric contains an ambiguity which permits the reader some degree of optimism:

There-finished. All gone. Now me I'm heading off to Battery and its long string of dives. I want to call Trader Faulkner and say goodbye but the phone's ringing and the night train's coming and I can hear that dickless sack of shit bending the stairs out of joint and let him see what happens if he tries to stand in my way or opens his mouth and say so much as *one single word*.
(NT 149)

Upon that 'one single word', either rhetorical hyperbole, or *love*, hinges the reader's perception of the novel, as either a despairing admission of the failure of the realistic novel or a plea for its continued relevance. Tobe, thus far, has not spoken to Hoolihan, and neither has she to him. The natural force which has bound them together has become insufficient. Something more, something spoken, is needed. Hoolihan does not fulfil Lear's prophecy, she repeats it, as warning – 'Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.'

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Night Train. Martin Amis. Detective Mike Hoolihan has seen it all. In his uproarious first novel Martin Amis, author of the bestselling London Fields, gave us one of the most noxiously believable -- and curiously touching -- adolescents ever to sniffle and lust his way through the pages of contemporary fiction. On the brink of twenty, Charles High-way preps desultorily for Oxford, cheerfully loathes his father, and meticulously plots the seduction of a girl named Rachel -- a girl who sorely tests the mettle of his cynicism when he finds himself falling in love with her. He states that, "nothing will come of nothing, speak again." Well if you say nothing, you get nothing. She is disowned. Read the rest of the play to discover some of the most amazing English language, insights into what it is to be human and a great story. Lear's fatal flaw is he trusts people's words when the true test of character is deeds, not words. Shakespeare's nearest source is most probably Persius Flaccus, who declared that "out of nothing can come, and nothing can become nothing." In the context of Shakespeare's play, the entire scene becomes a meditation on the de Vere family heraldic motto, *vero nihil verius*, nothing truer than the truth. Sponsored by Gundry MD. How to entirely empty your bowels every morning (revealed). R.C. Sproul reminds us that if there was ever a time when there was nothing, there would be nothing now. Transcript: <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/out-nothing-nothing-comes/>