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"THE IMAGE OF THE CITY IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH LITERATURE."

The city in the works of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan.

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"Prohlašuji, že jsem disertační práci vykonal samostatně s využitím uvedených pramenů a literatury".

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I. INTRODUCTION

The city and its milieu have always been a source of inspiration and motifs for artists and writers are no exception. The process of urbanization brought along rapid social, political, cultural and economic changes which evoked immediate responses of various kinds, from welcoming and celebrating ones to those of rejection and condemnation, from those who were traditionally the most sensitive about such phenomena – men of letters. As a result of this fact, the image of the city has been present in literature since the first urban societies appeared and to trace it back in detail would mean a different aim from that which this work is going to follow.

The main concern of my thesis is contemporary British literature and therefore I would like to focus on how the city is reflected in the works of British writers in the last two decades of the twentieth century. To provide certain general coherence, continuity and context of the theme, I will also put down a brief outline of how the image of the city has been developing and changing in English literature since the late Victorian period trying to show that the phenomenon is very deep-rooted in the tradition of the English imagination.

If we should mention the most notable contemporary British writers whose works are set in cities or in some other way depict the urban environment, these would undoubtedly include Martin Amis, Ian McEwan and Peter Ackroyd. It is obvious that Ackroyd differs from both Amis and McEwan at least as far as the subject matter of his novels is concerned, since the London of his fictional world is the historical London of Sir Christopher Wren, George Gissing or Karl Marx, though even as such it must be understood as a truly literary device of the postmodern poetics. Therefore, I decided to deal with the first two novelists and to reduce the image of the city to that which is either contemporary or both contemporary and allegorical. However, I have included a short chapter about Ackroyd's outstanding project of London's biography, a book that helped me greatly in understanding the city's literary character and served me as an irreplaceable source of inspiration for my own work.

Yet not only the postmodern fictional city with its atmosphere is central to this thesis, but also the people and characters that inhabit this space, since these characters, employed in various perspectives from mere functions in the narrative up to the complex narrative voices and authorities, also reflect the most characteristic qualities of the postmodern, or postindustrial, world – de-centrality, non-linearity, fragmentation and temporariness of human life and experience. The linear, predictable, invariable, socially and physically immobile and relatively unchanging (since unchangeable) existence in the modern industrial society controlled strictly by the state and its institutions was that of one life "Project", one aim for the whole life. Modern sociology traditionally uses the metaphor of *pilgrimage* (and a *pilgrim* for a modern person) to describe this idea. It is obvious that such a life is only possible in a neat and well-ordered world the structure of which is entirely independent on the individual.

However, the Western society and its way of life has changed dramatically especially since the Second World War and no longer bears the conditions necessary for a pilgrim to make his or her life journey. The linearity of life has been broken into a great variety of individual, often isolated and discontinuous experiences and episodes and thus the Project has been replaced by many smaller, personal projects. The state has lost its concern for permanent control over its citizens; instead of blind obedience, adaptability, mobility and responsibility are required of an individual. Such existence is varied, diversified and does not prefer values of permanent character. As a result, the postmodern person's identity is much more difficult to capture in one metaphor or one pattern of behaviour (some theories even claim that the true postmodern personality is marked by the absence of identity) which would describe it in its unstable heterogeneity.

Polish sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman[1] suggests that the personality of a postmodern person has dissolved into four identity patterns, the coexistence of which and permanent switching from one another, rather than their isolated occurrence, depict the fickle character of our postmodern existence. The first metaphor is that of *"the stroller"*, the most typical representative of the postmodern urban culture who, hidden in the safety and comfort of his or her anonymity in the crowd, carefully observes, or better said gapes, and in his or her imagination projects other people's lives, feeling like

1) Zygmunt Bauman, *Úvahy o postmoderní době*, transl. Miloslav Petrusek (Praha: Slon 1995), pp. 40-56

a powerful director of human fate. Ironically, the gaper is happily ignorant of the fact that he or she is a permanent target of other gapers, and not only theirs since the most 'natural' environment for a gaper is a shopping malls. Secondly, he describes *"the vagabond"*, one without any firm bond to a place or person (this metaphor is most suitable for a postmodern understanding of career and intimate relationships for which Anthony Giddens invented the term "confluent love"[2]), whose sense of life lies in the incessant quest for change, new challenges and temptations. *"The tourist"* is the seeker of ready-made exoticism, collector of prefabricated experiences mostly in the form of photographs and souvenirs (meaning the mass tourism that changes dramatically the local culture and people's lives by its monetary arrogance). Finally, *"the player"* indicates the accidental character of postmodern life that is more and more frequently taken as a slightly (yet not too) risky "game" in which things might but do not have to happen and which is all in fun unless we look for some unchangeable and enduring regularities.

These four metaphors depict the essential instability of one's identity and dissolution of the self characteristic of people in postmodern urban societies, and I will try to show how they have been mirrored in contemporary British writing. My thesis, thus, will concentrate on the depiction of the postmodern urban world with its characteristic and inseparable cultural milieu, atmosphere and inhabitants in selected works of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan since they both catch the theme very differently and enable certain comparison. Therefore, my primary aim is to illustrate how, through the image of the city, contemporary British literature reflects the social conditions which are traditionally (yet sometimes rather vaguely) termed as postmodern.

There is one final point I should mention – since any postmodern piece of writing cannot be discussed without regard to its style and peculiar narrative techniques, which themselves become one of the writer's main concerns, I feel obliged to include two chapters about the various postmodern perspectives and narrative devices Amis and McEwan have employed in their works.

2) See Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World* (London: Profile Books 1999)

II. THE CITY AS THE WRITER'S OBJECT OF INTEREST

"There has always been a close association between literature and cities. There are the essential literary institutions: publishers, patrons, libraries, museums, bookshops, theatres, magazines. There, too, are the intensities of cultural friction and influences, and the frontiers of experience: the pressures, the novelties, the debates, the leisure, the money, the rapid change of personnel, the influx of visitors, the noise of many languages, the vivid trade in ideas and styles, the chance to artistic specialization" says Malcolm Bradbury[1] and expresses thus the universal truth that since the appearance of modern writing big cities have always been literature's most natural and favourite milieu.

Writers and intellectuals have long abhorred the city fearing the immediacy of its vices, and the rapidity of its pace of life. Yet, simultaneously, the same writers and intellectuals have constantly gone there, subconsciously or consciously aware of all the opportunities the city offered them: conditions for their artistic quest and the fullest realization of their potential. Therefore, the city's specific environment and atmosphere have provided themes and attitudes that run deep in literature, where the city has both appeared as the actual setting as well as become a metaphor rather than a place.

Although the rapid development of the modern city influenced intellectuals and artists the most, the art of Modernism was not the first to touch on this theme. Such awareness can also be found in realism and naturalism; as Bradbury notes: "the occurrence of the modern city has much to do with the rise of that most realistic, loose and pragmatic of literary forms, the novel. Certainly many of its themes - from the realistic stress on the dominance of the new fact to the naturalistic stress on the power of the external environment, the movement of masses, the exposure to forces – are responsive to the idea of the great city of modern life. In for example, Stendhal, Balzac, Dickens, Zola and Dostoyevsky, we can see the novel-form expanding the urban metaphor or pursuing the urban experience, and taking up those postures of the

1) Malcolm Bradbury, James McFerlane, *Modernism*, chapter *The Cities of Modernism* (London: Penguin Books 1976), p.96

journalist, the social scientist, the visionary prophet, the underground man, which can best probe the contingency, diversity, and principles of conflict and growth in urban life".[2]

Big cities and everything connected with life in them have always fatally attracted and inspired scholars, men of letters, writers and other artists. For a long time cities in England meant just London which was understood as an independent territory, a state in a state, a minimized model of the whole England and its society. Therefore, everybody who wanted to mean something, hoped to become somebody, or at least felt the urge to be around when things were happening, moved, though with various feelings and consequences, to the capital.

2.1 ***LONDON'S BIOGRAPHY***

Many authors have already attempted, more or less successfully, to catch and depict the close yet highly tense relationship between the metropolis and art, especially writing. An undoubtedly extraordinary achievement among them is Peter Ackroyd's highly ambitious book, *London; The Biography* (2000) which traces and records London's spirit and literary reflections from the very first moments of the city's existence up to the present day. Although the city in British literature can, by no means, be reduced merely to London, for centuries it was the very metropolis that symbolized the development of the urbanized society and all the tendencies (positive or negative) and impacts that inevitably accompany such a process.

Ackroyd has been a genuine London writer for his whole literary career and the city, to various degrees, pervades all his works. It is far from being a mere background setting in most of his novels, such as *The Great Fire of London* (1982), *Hawksmoor* (1984), *English Music* (1992) or *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), where the city becomes one of the main motifs and themes. It also appears in Ackroyd's great biographies of writers who were simultaneously and not accidentally very significant

2) Ibid., p.99

London observers and chroniclers – *T.S. Eliot* (1984), *Dickens* (1990) and *Blake* (1995). Ackroyd was born and lives in London and the city is omnipresent in his writings. Therefore, London has become Ackroyd's Eternal City, the ever-fascinating object of interest, his life-long affection and artistic project.

Ackroyd's postmodern narrative permanently balances between imaginary stories and reality or, more precisely, between fiction and historically approved facts. His understanding of history is that of an immense intertextual web as history is exclusively to be traced and possibly "resored" through its miscellaneous written records. Therefore, his style skillfully mingles fictional narration with the elements of historical documentary, and in so doing, erases the differences between the two genres. As Bradbury puts it: "Ackroyd is a playful user of fiction, well aware of all the contemporary devices in the postmodern novelist's repertory: pastiche, parody, punning, intertextuality. He is also the writer as scholar-antiquarian, and a powerful writer of modern Gothic".[3] The result is striking – his novels always offer a fascinating story of imagination, in which real historical time and place become the stage and real historical characters, actors in a play masterly directed by Ackroyd himself.

In *London, The Biography* Ackroyd's narrative principle remains similar to that of his novels, only the imaginary, fictional elements have been replaced by a great number of various quotations from and references to authentic materials – chronicles, historical records and sources, descriptions of paintings, engravings or photographs, but also, and most interestingly, numerous quotations of and references to more or less famous writers or poets concerning what they said or wrote about the city. The author tries to combine his readable, light narrative style with a serious academic approach supported by vast scientific research and develops the history of London not strictly chronologically, but through detailed elaboration and analysis of various social, cultural, economic or political events and phenomena.

Such a technique inevitably has two seemingly contrasting effects: firstly, the reader may sometimes feel lost or confused, among the large amount of information and turnings; secondly, the chronological order of the book, despite everything, follows becomes less rigid and is reduced into an overall framework of which inner structure of

3) Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (London: Penguin Books 1994), p. 436

which gets loosen, breaks into individual themes and the reader soon realizes the order in which he or she chooses to read the chapters does not matter much after all. The themes are not perceived statically but in time, across different time layers which emphasizes the immense diversity and incomprehensibility of the real London. The story of the city thus remains of a fantastic colourful collage, an exciting jigsaw composed of an indefinite number of pieces which can never fully be put together.

In the introduction to *London. The Biography* Ackroyd introduces the most crucial and ancient metaphor of the city as a human body, which occurred to and was developed by writers such as Daniel Defoe. The author explains his stimulus for writing London's biography by reminding us that human qualities have always been attributed to the city and it has frequently been pictured as a living human-like being in various forms - as a mystical body the head of which was Jesus Christ and the rest constituted by the citizens, a swollen giant monster who killed and swallowed more than he could ever breed, or the image of London as a young man with his arms raised sideways in a gesture of liberation. For this reason, we should always take into consideration the city's inseparable human dimension with its own rules and laws of life.

Ackroyd also assumes Shakespeare's idea of the world as a theatre and attributes to the city its inimitable theatrical nature. Therefore, his London is vitalized in one great drama with its own specific rules and principles, the history of which can be understood as a series of lively dramatic scenes which, more than rigorous historical facts, express the city's dynamic character. And so Ackroyd invites the readers to join the Londoners shouting "Show! Show! Show!" whenever they anticipated a chance of seeing a performance of any kind in the streets, from an accidental fight to street artists or exhibited exotic animals. The author shows us round the most famous London theatres and cabarets, but also markets and fairgrounds with all their attractions, noises, voices, dialects, signs, colours, costumes and other effects. Life in the city thus becomes an eternal theatre performance in which the majority of its dwellers find themselves unable to resist the temptation to take an active part, intuitively feeling that, otherwise, they might be deprived of a big chance to enjoy their life to the fullest.

The author is literally fascinated by London and develops further metaphors and detailed analyses of the city's characteristic phenomena, using numerous writers',

artists' or men's of letters quotations, or at least references to their works from which I would like to mention just the most famous ones. When Ackroyd talks about the city's voice of money, he quotes Alexander Pope. To describe its noise he uses Tobias Smolett's *Humprey Clinker*, D. H. Lawrence's or Virginia Woolf's words, darkness and dirt in Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince*, Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* or Charles Dickens' *Sketches by Boz*, London's crimes, criminals and prisons are illustrated in brief extracts from Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, Arthur Morrison's *A Child of the Yago*, Oliver Goldsmith's *Caleb Williams*, Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, A. C. Doyle's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Thomas More's, Thomas de Quincey's, Henry Fielding's or W. M. Thackeray's words. In chapters devoted to food and eating we can find quotations from Joseph Addison's magazine *Spectator*, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* , Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The English Notebooks* (311), Dickens' *Great Expectations* (317), Thomas More's *Utopia* (321), Thomas de Quincey's essays or words by Harriet Beecher Stowe (303) and George Orwell (310). The theme of pubs and drinking quotes Ben Jonson's play *Every Man Out of his Humour* (331) or Charles Lamb's and Dickens' essays for *London Magazine*, those of gambling quote William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, quotations from Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* , Dickens' *Bleak House*, R. L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* or Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems help to evoke London weather, the chapter about the Thames contains quotations from Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, Iain Sinclair's *Downriver*, Stephen Graham's *London Nights* or William Blake's visions, while the phenomenon of poverty and the outcast is illustrated on Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, Jack London's *People of the Abyss*, Lamb's, Defoe's, Smollett's words or de Quincey's essay *Murder As a Fine Art* .[4]

However, this is only a very brief and incomplete outline of the literary materials that Ackroyd uses in his biography, for it does not mention all the historical sources, records and documents, the complete list of which we can find at the end of the book. *London. The Biography* is thus more than merely history and biography; it is also

4) Peter Ackroyd, *Londýn, biografie,* trans. Milena Nyklová-Veselá (Praha: BB art 2002), pp.71-621

Ackroyd's homage or paean to the city, a successful attempt at creating London's exhaustive yet ultimately fascinating literary image.

2.2 *THE IMAGE OF THE CITY IN MODERN BRITISH LITERATURE*

Postmodernism can by no means be reduced, on the one hand, merely to a phase which came after modernism, or, on the other hand, even to its entire negation. Linda Hutcheon notes that postmodernism "cannot totally reject modernism, especially its material and technological advances", and although it "challenges some aspects of modernist dogma; its view of the autonomy of art and its deliberate separation from life; its expression of individual subjectivity; its adversarial status *vis-á-vis* mass culture and bourgeois life", the postmodern also "clearly developed out of other modernist strategies: its self-reflexive experimentation, its ironic ambiguities, and its contestations of classic realist representation"[1]. Postmodern aesthetics should rather be understood as the unavoidable reaction to the modernist one, its imminent consequence. I am therefore convinced that the reasons and causes behind the city depicted in contemporary British literature may never be credibly discussed without tracing them back in the literary tradition up to at least before the rise of the modernist movement. And so, before I proceed to the actual core of my work, I consider it useful to recall briefly how the image of the city in British literature has been transforming since the late Victorian era.

Late Victorian Repudiation

Due to all the aspects of its historical development the city from its very rise became the object of immense interest and detailed scrutiny from the side of scholars as well as artists. The sudden and often chaotic concentration of a great number of people

1) Linda Hutcheon, *A poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1992), pp. 29, 43

from various social and geographic backgrounds in the relatively limited space led to a social phenomenon inevitably accompanied by social, economic, and cultural changes. However, not all of them were for good and doubt was cast upon the initial optimism concerning the development of cities and became gradually undermined by numerous problems and paradoxes, which became a target of social critique frequently reflected in works of art, literature in particular. On the one hand, the city represented the seat and bearer of culture and learning, yet on the other hand, the rapidly worsening socio-economic conditions of the lower classes as well as the increase of criminality made most learned people alert against any uncritical glorification of such a situation.

Before the nineteenth century ended, London had become the largest and the most populated city in the world with the population of six and half million inhabitants. The magnificent imperial metropolis and the capital of the world's trade dominated not only economy and finance but also politics, society, culture and art. Moreover, besides the rapidly growing suburban middle-class areas, the city still maintained its two contrasting faces – the luxurious West End showing the proud nation's wealth and the East End, the desperate and desolate jungle of poverty. Thanks to numerous immigrants, London was also highly cosmopolitan and multicultural. As Bradbury notices "there were more Irish people than in Dublin, more Scots than in Aberdeen, more Jews than in Palestine and more Catholics than in Rome".[2]

It is no wonder, then, that this cenre of fast technical progress and social changes, the world's focus of energy and power, attracted writers not only from England (like Thomas Hardy or Arnold Bennett), but also from Scotland (Robert Louis Stevenson), Ireland (W.B. Yeats, Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw), the United States (Henry James, Stephen Crane) and Poland (Joseph Conrad). All of the above mentioned artists tried to find new inspiration there, although urban setting was not typical of many of their writings. Literary depiction of the city's labyrinth became a big task or even challenge in English literature at the turn of the centuries. The vision of the city's greatness made Henry James put aside his international themes and write a purely London impressionist novel *The Princess Casamassima* (1886). In addition, it caused

2) Malcolm Bradbury, ed., *Atlas literatury*, trans. Vladimír Křivánek (Praha: Ottovo Nakladatelství 2003), p. 144, working translation

Oscar Wilde's prevailing concern in art and city in his plays and novel. From other writers who inserted London rather admiringly into their works we can mention Ford Madox Ford's *The Soul of London* (1905), Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) and H.G. Wells, who made his name predominantly by his futuristic fantasies, celebrated the city and stressed its inspirational power in his London novel *Tono-Bungay* (1909).

Therefore, the period which became first overtly hostile to modern civilization and, consequently, to big cities as its most prominent emblems, was the late Victorian Period. Although the critical voices had appeared much sooner, the optimistic spirit of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution managed to either silence them or at least sustain them in rather individualized opposition. Many Victorian scholars realized that the growth of the materialist-oriented middle class with its economic and political power represented an imminent threat that, along with religion, traditional culture could also fall into oblivion. Matthew Arnold, in his influential essay *Culture and Anarchy*, warned against people who thought that greatness and welfare were proved by their being very rich, who blindly worshipped various social or institutional machinery, and who thus believed that freedom was merely doing what one liked[3]. The change suggested was idealistically egalitarian, though Arnold himself realized its unfeasibility, claiming that the idea of culture "is not satisfied till we *all* come to a perfect man; it knows that the sweetness and light must be imperfect until the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light"[4]. Culture, thus, became a social idea since the cultural people who were represented, rather than by a monolithic social class, by exceptional individuals within each class considered to be "the true apostles of equality"[5]. Therefore, the ultimate chance for the city to regain its status as a cultural centre consisted in the culture lovers' attempt to cultivate all its inhabitants so as to promote the values of humanity over material profit or the prospect of power.

However, there were also writers who attempted to capture the dark sides of the metropolis, the dismal "urban *jungle*" lying beyond the boundaries of the "civilized" London of the East End and the City. Jack London described his feelings about these

3) Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Cambridge University Press 1971), pp. 43-97
4) Ibid., p. 69
5) Ibid., p.70

slums in *The People of the Abyss* (1903). The social critic, George Gissing, explored London's poverty, showing the most striking social problems and pointing to the need for reforms in his books like *Workers in the Dawn* (1880) and *Unclassed* (1884). Similar atmosphere also appears in V.S. Pritchett's *Tales of Mean Street* (1894), Arthur Morrison's *A Child of the Jago* (1896) and Israel Zangwill's naturalist novel about Jewish East End *Children of the Ghetto* (1892).

The turn-of-the-century London was characterized by its contrasts, especially those between the shiny, open and lit places of wealth and proud imperial beauty and the dark, dirty and narrow streets of the poor and desolate parts of the city, such as the East End or Soho. The polarity between these two faces of London could be understood as that between day and night, the first boasting its respectable and honourable social life with the latter embodying fear, violence and crime as it appears in R.L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). This London also gave birth to the most famous detective ever, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes pursuing a murderer who again and again disappears in the thick fogs of the abandoned back streets.

Although the voice of the literary social critics was still strong, the city as a source of literary inspiration or object of writers' admiration gradually prevailed against the city as a target of criticism or condemnation. Many works written at the beginning of the twentieth century envisioned the city as a natural environment of modern Western civilization and thus, foreshadowed thus the Modernist era with its welcoming attitude towards the urban milieu. In *Howards End* (1910), the synecdochic image of the pre-WWI Britain, E.M. Forster noticed this tendency in English literature no matter how illogical it might have seemed, due to all the city's negatives, as follows:

> To speak against London is no longer fashionable. The earth is an artistic cult has had its day, and the literature of the near future will probably ignore the country and seek inspiration from the town. [...] One visualizes it as a tract of quivering gray, intelligent without purpose, and excitable without love; as a spirit that has altered before it can be chronicled; as a heart that certainly beats, but with no pulsation of humanity. It lies beyond everything: Nature, with all her cruelty, comes nearer to us than do these crowds of men. A friend explains himself, the earth is explicable – from her we came, and we must return to her.

> But who can explain Westminster Bridge Road or Liverpool Street in the morning – the city inhaling – or the same thoroughfares in the evening – the city exhaling her exhausted air? We reach in desperation beyond the fog, beyond the very stars, the voids of the universe are ransacked to justify the monster, and stamped with a human face. London is religion" opportunity —not the decorous religion of theologians, but anthropomorphic, crude. Yes, the continuous flow would be tolerable if a man of our own sort – not anyone pompous or tearful – were caring for us up in the sky.[6]

E.M. Forster formulated a new artistic challenge – to make the city an aesthetic subject of art, especially modern writing, one which should have replaced the traditionally celebrated countryside's natural pastorality, a challenge to which the literature of British Modernism in particular, responded.

The Gloomy Modernist Legacy

Modernism not only maintained the Arnoldian highly critical, yet still not entirely hopeless view of the direction of the development of contemporary society, but, moreover, abandoned its democratic tendencies by making true culture an elitist matter. Cultural people were no longer "apostles of equality" aimed at the society as a whole, but a group of intellectuals who assumed the paramount right to refine culture and thus prevent it from being invaded by the vulgar and narrow-minded affairs of everydayness. As an emblem of the overall spiritual and cultural decay, the modernists turned to the city which they perceived, perhaps with the exceptions of several passages in Virginia Woolf's novels, as the ultimate manifestation of the impasse modern civilization found itself trapped in.

One of the most striking features of Modernism was its wide geographical spread and multiple nationality. Yet each of the contributing countries had its own cultural inheritance, its own political and social tensions, which imposed distinctively national

6) E.M. Forster, *Howards End* (London: Penguin Books 1985), p. 116

emphases upon Modernism and left any account which relied on a single national perspective misleadingly partial. As Bradbury states, one reason for this was that Modernism "found its natural habitat in cities – cities which themselves in turn became cosmopolitan centres".[7]

In his explanation of the nature of the relation between the Modernist movement and cities Bradbury goes on to say that "in many respects the literature of experimental Modernism which emerged in the last years of the nineteenth and developed into the twentieth century was an art of cities, especially of the polyglot cities, the cities which, for various historical reasons, had acquired high activity and great reputation as centres of intellectual and cultural exchange. In these culture-capitals, sometimes, but not always, the national political capitals, right across Europe, a fervent atmosphere of newthought and new art developed, drawing in not only young native writers and would-be writers, but artists and exiles from other countries as well. In these cities, with their cafés and cabarets, magazines, publishers and galleries, the new aesthetics were settled; generations argued and movements contested; the new causes and forms became matters of struggle and campaign. Of course, these cities were more than accidental meeting places and crossing points. They were generative environments of the new arts, focal points of intellectual community, places of intellectual conflict and tension. They were mostly cities with well-established humanistic role, traditional cultural and artistic cetres, places of art, learning and ideas. But they were also often novel environments, carrying within themselves the complexity and tension of modern metropolitan life, which so deeply underlines modern consciousness and modern writing".[8]

If Modernism represented a particularly urban art, that was partly because the modern artist, like his contemporaries, had been caught up in the spirit of the modern city, which itself bore the spirit of a modern developed society. The modern city had taken over most of the functions and experience of its newly forming commercial, technological, industrial, yet intellectual society. The inevitable result was that the city embodied culture and everything that accompanied the process of seeking the artistic

7) Malcolm Bradbury, James McFerlane, *Modernism*, chapter *The Cities of Modernism* (London: Penguin Books 1976), p.95
8) Ibid., p.96

identity. "It was becoming clear to many at the end of the nineteenth century that the city was part of a total process of dissolution of old feudal and class relationships and obligations. This process in turn affected the status and self-image of artists and encouraged them to seek aesthetic stimuli from the same context with which we associate the modern city".[9]

Modernist literature also changed the very nature of the city's literary imagery. Though the city's milieu was dominantly material, it managed to assume a certain artistic shape. The art of Modernism, however, seemed to substitute for the very real, material city the imaginative unreal urban space, in which the precise correspondence between fiction and reality had been replaced by presenting intense fragmentary and subjective experience. And so while "realism humanizes and naturalism scientizes, Modernism pluralizes and surrealizes".[10] Modernism thus became the environment of personal consciousness, and flickering impressions.

The theme of disconnection, loss of and consequent quest for the self, the most crucial plot of Modernist literature, restored art to the cities and the cities to art, as if such a quest could only be carried out in the glare of the existential exposure of the city. Thus "Modernism is a metropolitan art, which is to say it is a group art, a specialist art, an intellectual art, an art for one's aesthetic peers; it recalls, with whatever ironies and paradoxes, the imperium of civilization. Not simply metropolitan, but cosmopolitan; one city leads to another in the distinctive aesthetic voyage into the metamorphosis of form".[11] The writer might hold on to locality, as Joyce did with Dublin, but he or she perceived the subject matter from the distance of an expatriate perspective, especially under the influence of Eliot and Pound. The writer himself or herself became a member of a wandering, culturally and socially eradicated group in emigration or exile, an individual who could feel at home only in the international aesthetic modern country of arts in which the actual place of artistic creation could become an ideal distant city.

British Modernism, however, was especially associated with London, since only in the capital could such a group of young progressive intellectuals and artists with

9) Ibid., p.98
10) Ibid., p.99
11) Ibid., p.101

passion for beauty and truth, frank and independent thinking and sexuality, like the Bloomsbury Circle ever be formed. Therefore, it is not by accident that the two great modernist works which clearly marked both aesthetic and intellectual parting with the nineteenth century's tradition, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, are "pervaded with the vision of modern metropolis". However, unlike *Ulysses* the structure of which is designed by Homer's epic and thus has a firm plot, Eliot's *The Waste Land* is transformed into a "series of more or less isolated images and visions which acquire the aesthetic unity through the repetition of several leitmotifs"[12]. As a result, the poem does not proceed forward in a linear way but oscillates in circles, offering, thus, no conclusion or solution and making a parallel with the modern urban existence.

The real predecessor of the Modernist literary city was James Joyce's depiction of Dublin in his *Dubliners* (1914). However, although all the fifteen stories are set in Dublin, the city itself directly appears in only some of them. What they have in common is the motif of spiritual decay – each story is concerned with some failure or deception, which results in realization and disillusionment. This is because Joyce was convinced that the Dublin of the 1900s was a centre of spiritual paralysis and portrayed it as a place which inevitably contributed, in certain way, to the dehumanizing experience of modern life, an environment hostile to any spiritual or emotional values, inhabited prevailingly by people trapped by their hypocritical self-satisfaction and piety, and one which resembled a provincial town rather than a modern Western European capital.

Eliot's depiction of the urban milieu, determined, as Eagleton puts it, by the "spiritual emptiness and exhaustion of bourgeois ideology which springs from that crisis of imperialist capitalism known as the First World War"[13], and symptomatic of the whole modernist generation, represents a remarkable combination: on the one hand, there is the painful experience of the city as spiritual suffering which, by showing its doom, attempts to prove the higher essence of humanity, yet on the other hand, the poet consciously leans toward a myth which is to mediate for us the primary community,

12) Martin Hilský, *Básník a kritik T.S. Eliot*, in: T.S. Eliot, *O básnictví a básnících*, ed. Martin Hilský (Praha: Odeon 1991), pp. 331-32, working translation
13) Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge 2002), p. 13

divine order, and the loss of innocence, the initial cause of our today's roving and sorrow. As Roger Scruton notices, in each of Eliot's images of the modern London we can find two artistic expressions – the alienated observer, and his soul emptied due to the disappeared, or repudiated, religious culture in which the individual elements of human experience have reached their unity in the form of myth[14]. The Modernist city thus, above all, bursts with the lack or absence of any higher aim or purpose, since all the long preserved traditional values and principles have been dissolved in the dominant and corruptive materialism of capitalist society. Although the situation is not absolutely hopeless, such hope is hard to find, as well as the hopeful passages of the poem are often not easy to detect.

Urban Dystopias

The modernist legacy in English literature is followed by two outstanding urban writers whose crucial dystopist works were closely connected with the period of 1930s and 1940s and were relevant to the discussed subject matter (though we could also mention Christopher Isherwood' portray of the decay of the pre-war Berlin and its society in his *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939)). The first was George Orwell who, apart from his first neo-documentary novel *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) describing a period of economic deprivation in which he worked in Paris hotels and tried to survive in the London of the Depression, published his masterpiece in 1949, a dystopian political and satirical vision of totalitarian future, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The latter was Aldous Huxley with his most famous anti-utopian or dystopian satire of a future world where science and reason have triumphed over human nature, *Brave New World* (1932). Both of them can be understood as a study of the decline of Western civilization enclosed in big cities. It is not difficult to see that the two novels differ, as they rest on distinct premises, in the degree of their dismantlement of this civilization. *Brave New*

14) See Roger Scruton, *Průvodce inteligentního člověka po moderní kultuře* (Praha: Academia 2002), pp. 108-112

World, dealing with the theme of the death of culture at the hand of its commercial pseudo-variant and its consequent impacts on humankind as such, offers a warning against the contemporary social, economic, scientific and cultural tendencies, yet it does not lack sardonic and sarcastic observations full of ingenious wit. *Nineteen-Eighty Four*, on the contrary, is far from making the reader laugh – its rigorous literalness leaves minimum space for imagination and allows one, together with its unfortunate protagonist, only to wander round the mournful landscape of meaningless non-existence.

However, a very crucial element in both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World* is the fact that people are literally imprisoned in big cities and any journey into or contact with the natural countryside – which itself is understood as an anachronism – is considered undesirable if not illegal and requires special permission. The aim of this strategy is not only to put the people in one place so that they are more easily controlled and supervised, but also to deprive them even of the least possibility of gaining the essential experience with nature and its beauty so much important for developing the sense of humanity without which people can be reduced into thoughtless victims of manipulation. In these two novels, the city is given a warning as it is presented as a potential environment of highly destructive dehumanizing forces and mechanisms, either ideological or technical, which might prospectively become subject to a possible, extremely dangerous abuse.

The concentration of the whole population into big cities in *Brave New World* has an obvious purpose – to keep the wheels of the production-consumption process turning faster and faster. In a world where excessive consumerism is substituted for culture, mindless slogans for art, the pursuit of commodified self-satisfaction for human relationships, where idolatry is taken for belief, and where God has been thrown out and replaced by empty icons of the irresistible urge to have all one's needs gratified instantly, the city serves the compensatory function of a sanctuary in which people are perpetually gathered so as not to miss a single occasion to worship their idol. As a result, the urban environment has lost all its traditional attributes – not only we can hardly speak of it as a centre of culture and education, but it has also ceased to be a social space, there are no agoras since people are deliberately discouraged from

"wasting" their time doing things that do not allow them to consume things. The technocratic elite of *Brave New World* has abused the cities and altered them, as if in some perverted sociological experiment, into a modern version of "concentration camps" of happy ignorance in which the society is eventually driven to such an uncontrollable materialistic frenzy under which its system must inevitably collapse.

However, not all intellectuals of the pre-WWII decades shared such an intense discomfort with the direction modern civilization was taking as echoed in Huxley's dismal prophecy. Some of them even welcomed the invasion of popular culture's elements into high art. Walter Benjamin, for instance, made a straightforward parallel between the nature of modern art and modern urban life, since the latter "is characterized by the collision of fragmentary, discontinuous sensations. [...] Watching a film, moving in a city crowd, working at a machine are all 'shock' experiences which strip objects and experience of their 'aura'; and the artistic equivalent of this is the technique of 'montage'. Montage – the connecting of dissimilars to shock an audience into insight – becomes [...] a major principle of artistic production in a technological age"[15]. What Benjamin foresaw was in fact the postmodern egalitarian view of broadly pluralized culture.

The political development in Russia after Stalin had taken over the leadership and the experience of the Second World War led to an even more absurd and soulless vision of the future. The function of the city in *Nineteen-Eighty Four* is yet different, even darker than that in Huxley's fiction. The world of the novel represents a totalitarian system brought to the very extremes, based on the absolute transcendental negation, or rejection of the basic circumstances of human existence, deprived of whatever outer intentions, and thus freed from ideology of any kind. Power, which is the only remaining object to long for, becomes the society's ultimate device and goal. Power fosters greed for more power, it lays down the laws of truth, and reality is nothing but a construct of this power. Human existence has become a temporal dissolution in the continuous flow of meaninglessness, the artificially made up language has been turned against itself, denying all its traditional functions, and so any attempt at capturing the meaning or formulating a sensible utterance is condemned to failure from the start. The

15) Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge), p. 59

Newspeak deconstructs and distorts reality for it is a sole verbalization of power. Under such circumstances, O'Brian can afford to use rhetoric which undermines the system he serves by pointing to the senselessness of everything within the realm of this power. The cities of *Nineteen-Eighty Four* represent the only habitat of what has remained from civilization – wretched caricatures of human beings, the locus of the frame of mind which has been terrifying Western scholars and intellectuals since the Enlightenment and which Scruton calls the "religion of estrangement"[16]. To keep oneself entirely alienated means a greater chance of survival, certainly if that is what one longs for. The urban milieu as a spiritual and emotional wasteland of *Brave New World* is completed here with its social dimension.

Unlike in *Brave New World*, the people in Orwell's vision are not "liberated" from reality through various simulacra, but directly exposed to the horrors of human existence deprived of humanity. The city, thus, becomes a prison, or purgatory where its dwellers suffer for all the sins and preposterousness of humankind which can never be expiated. It is room 100, the entrance hall into the torture chamber which is the only way out of the humiliating non-existence. The city of sin has eventually changed into the city of damnation.

The Postwar Insecurity

After WWII, alongside the process of restoration and rebuilding of the damaged country, many successful attempts to restore the pre-war cultural spirit could be found in literary works of that time. The most crucial theme of many of them was, logically, war, the one people had just experienced or the potentially threatening nuclear disaster (which, for instance, appeared in William Golding's metaphorical parable *Lord of the Flies* (1954)). It is not surprising that these attempts were usually made in big cities, predominantly in London where the social and cultural atmosphere was strongly

16) Roger Scruton, *Průvodce inteligentního člověka po moderní kultuře* (Praha: Academia 2002), pp. 182-183, working translation

influenced by the Suez Crisis and the subsequent loss of the Empire as is depicted in the works of the so-called Angry Young Men. However, the London of the 1950s and early 1960s was not only a centre of street protests against the Suez War or campaigns for nuclear disarmament, but also a place where youth culture was developing in various new jazz clubs and espresso bars, in the London Teddy Boys' "street style", and the overall endeavour at the "New Look".

While the environment of Golding's novel is far remote and exotic, Kingsley Amis's revolting anti-hero in *Lucky Jim* (1954) gets stuck in a provincial town and longs simply to live in London. In John Osborne's play, *Look Back in Anger* (1956), the city appears only indirectly. However, there were other literary works which concerned the city to a much greater degree. Muriel Spark depicted post-war London from various retrospective views in her bitterly ironic novels *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960) and *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963). Among other writers interested in the urban environment we could mention the depiction of working-class Nottingham in Allan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), the African-American immigrants' community of London Notting Hill in Colin McInnes's *City of Spades* (1957) and *Absolute Beginners* (1959), and Anthony Burgess's, anti-Utopian darkly Orwell-like vision of Britain conquered and overwhelmed by destructive continental European influences, *The Clockwork Orange* (1962).

However, the novel in which the London of the post-war years plays the most significant role was Iris Murdoch's philosophical comedy, *Under the Net* (1954), which brilliantly and wittily catches the new age of existentialist anxiety and the typical London mood and atmosphere of the 1950s. At the beginning of the novel, Jake Donaghue, the main character in the story, divides the city into parts "which are necessary and the others which are contingent. Everywhere west of Earls Court is contingent, except for a few places along the river".[17] Jake hates "contingency" for he prefers things which "have a sufficient reason" and so he perpetually haunts the necessary parts like Soho, the City, or Hammersmith Mall, and his tour de force full of fantastic and hilarious adventures might also be understood as a celebration of London in all its times, forms and moods.

17) Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net* (London: Vintage Books 2003), p.26

Towards the end of the novel when, while sitting in a taxi, Jake is realizing his losses and is getting ready for the last act, he still expresses his undying affection for the city: "London sped past me, beloved city almost invisible in its familiarity. South Kensington, Knightsbridge, Hyde Park Corner. [...] London passed before me like the life of a drowning man which they say flashes upon him all at once in the final moment. Piccadilly, Shaftesbury Avenue, New Oxford Street, High Holborn".[18] Even when he is overwhelmed by his existentialist contemplation of the void of the urban civilization feeling "neither happy nor sad, only rather unreal, like a man shut in a glass", Jake manages to suppress such dark thoughts in favour of his creator's incorrigible zest for living, and as he looks down at the crowded Oxford Street, he expresses the feeling of enchantment mixed with the newly undergone experience, by no means largely urban, and determination: "Events stream past us like these crowds and the face of each is seen only for a minute. What is urgent is not urgent forever but only ephemerally. All work and all love, the search for wealth and fame, the search for truth, life itself, are made up of moments which pass and become nothing. Yet through this shaft of nothings we drive onward with that miraculous vitality that creates our precarious habitations in the past and the future".[19]

The city features in some other novels of the following two decades but its role is largely supportive, reduced to the background setting as it is in John Fowles's *The Collector* (1963). Images of Victorian London appear in his *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), and London is also celebrated in one of the best comical stories in the post-war British fiction, David Lodge's *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1964). The city can, for instance, be found in Angus Wilson's most famous novels, which try to mix elements of fiction with those of drama - *No Laughing Matter* (1967) and *Setting the World on Fire* (1980) - as well as in William Golding's evocation of evil, pervertedness and human suffering *Darkness Visible* (1979) which opens with an awesome scene suggestively describing burning streets full of desperate, helpless people during and after an air raid on London during WWII.

18) Ibid., p. 269
19) Ibid., p.275

Contemporary Urban Literary Images

The most recent literary works concerning the theme of a city, or London specifically, include those written by Angela Carter, Carol Birch, Martin Millar, Jim Crace, Margaret Drabble, Nigel Williams, Penelope Lively, Hanif Kureishi, Timothy Mo, Iain Sinclair, Michael Moorcock, Ian McEwan and Martin Amis.

Angela Carter's novel *Wise Children* (1991), a lively portrait of everyday life in Brixton, a part of the city south of the river rarely visited by tourists, is one of the most beautiful London novels in contemporary British literature. As Bradbury points out, the novel "begins by calling up London as a city split in two like Budapest, two different versions of life being led on the right and the wrong side of the river, the right and wrong side of the tracks"[20] and Carter's sympathy and liking lie unwaveringly on the side of the neglected, oppressed and outcast. Margaret Drabble's novels *The Radiant Way* (1987), *A Natural Curiosity* (1989) and *The Gates of Ivory* (1991) which also portray critically the gloomy, chaotic modern urban world in which "the public and private have split, contemporary cities grow even more apocalyptic, death, far-flung global crisis and a sense of impending catastrophe impinge even more on the decent, reforming middle-class lives which form the centre of her fiction, as they too begin to splinter in the social or moral confusion"[21], and Jim Crace's ironically titled poetic portrait of the universal modern city of darkness, *Arcadia* (1992), corresponds with the general attempt of the majority of writers of the age of Thatcherism and social discommunity to "look 'underground'"[22], a characteristic theme of the whole Eighties fiction.

A very specific, contemporary London writer is Peter Ackroyd. As a truly postmodern author, he likes using authentic historical materials and sources in his fiction in an attempt "to build a serious artistic bridge between the deconstructing present and the difficult past"[23] through a problematic recovery of certain historical subjects. His novel, *Hawksmoor* (1985), is a form of London Gothic with two parallelly-

20) Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (London: Penguin Books 1994), p. 401
21) Ibid., pp. 400-401
22) Ibid., p.400
23) Ibid., p.401

narrated stories developed into a counter-point. In the first, a real historical figure, Nicholas Hawksmoor, who appears under the name "Dyer" in the story, is a former clerk to Sir Christopher Wren, and an outstanding eighteenth century architect and secret Satanist who builds human sacrifices into his neoclassical churches. Dyer is confronted by Ackroyd's own Hawksmoor, a present-day detective investigating a series of twentieth century killings committed in and around "Dyer's" churches. *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994) is an adventurous legend combined with a dark comedy and inspired by the gothic novel set in the dubious and dangerous Limehouse and London docks of the late Victorian London of cabarets and music-halls with Dan Leno, the funniest man in the world. Around these colourful locales, a series of murders is attributed to the mysterious "Limehouse Golem", but Leno, too, seems to be involved. The late nineteenth century London is revived into a theatre performance in which fictional characters perform together with the real historical figures – Dan Leno, George Gissing and Karl Marx.

Another face of London can be found in the narratives of English language writers of bicultural ethnical origin, such as Hanif Kureishi or Timothy Mo. Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) which tells a comic and inventive tale of a Pakistani boy growing up in Bromley, an unpleasant suburban part of London, who dreams of becoming an actor and escaping from the edge of the city into the "real" charming London of intellectuals and artists. Similarly Mo's novel, *Sour Sweet* (1982), deals with another divided culture, that of London's Soho Chinatown, where the Chen family, in their endeavour to assimilate with the majority British society, "are subjected both to the ancient claims of the gangland triads and to the whims of the unpredictable English".[24] The novel's plot is enriched by a detailed description of the organization of a Chinese gang as well as an authentic artistic insight into a significant minority family's common everyday life.

Among other writers whose works are, to some degree, connected with London we can mention Nigel Williams's witty portrait of a London suburban community in *The Wimbledon Poisoner* (1990). The East End appears in Penelope Lively's most ambitious and comprehensive London novel, *City of the Mind* (1991), and Iain Sinclair's *White*

24) Ibid., p.361

Chapel, Scarlet Tracings (1987) and *Radon Daughters* (1994). Iain Sinclair also attempted to create a fragmentary surrealistically-episodic image of London as a place of "weird extremities and violent intersections"[25] built around the central motif, the river Thames. A similar narrative technique is used by Michael Moorcock in his *Mother London* (1988), a history of London from German air raids during WWII up to the present day, which "links the remnants of Dickens' city through the blitz to the eighties".[26] Both novels, through the means of audacious mingling of tragedy with farce, long to uncover the world of London's mysteries which lies beneath its surface.

Most contemporary British novelists writing on London perceive it as a great disorderly, chaotic city peopled by creatures confused and overwhelmed by their demanding life, desperately searching for the slightest sense of their dubious existence, and the spirit of urban apocalyptic resounds from their books. Ian McEwan and Martin Amis in particular, whose works are the subject of this thesis, are no exception to this tendency.

25) Ibid., p.423
26) Ibid., p.401

III. MARTIN AMIS – THE FEVER OFTHE POSTMODERN

Martin Amis is, undoubtedly, an urban writer - "one of the greatest urban portraitists in English prose" as James Diedrick suggests in his *Understanding Martin Amis*[1] - whose best novels are set in the modern city's milieu. Various aspects of the city's life have, therefore, become his favourite theme. I will try to follow the development of the urban image and imagery in Amis's narrative by focusing on the four novels in which their treatment is most apparent – *Other People: A Mystery Story*, *Money*, *London Fields* and *The Information*.

3.1 CITY, LANGUAGE AND OTHERNESS – *OTHER PEOPLE: A MYSTERY STORY*

The urban mystery

The title of the novel itself, *Other People: A Mystery Story* (1981), suggests a lot about its major theme, but not only about it. The longer we read the book, the more significant its subtitle, *A Mystery Story*, appears – the novel literally bursts with mysteries of various kinds and Martin Amis with his brilliant, quick and efficient style easily deploys the highly mysterious character of the story by mixing up the absurd, grotesque, violent but also humorous features and elements. In so doing Amis skillfully depicts the confusions, anxieties and nightmares typical of, and in many cases inseparable from, the modern urban human existence.

Despite its relatively short and simple plot, *Other People: A Mystery Story* offers various narrative levels and therefore also more perspectives for its interpretation. The most crucial questions, mysteries or themes of the novel appear to be, above all, the identity of the narrator and his power and control over the other characters, as well as

1) James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis* (University of South Carolina Press 2004), p.22

over the narration itself; the true relation between Mary and Amy, the modern city dweller's deal to participate in the perpetual process of encountering otherness in its various forms; and also the way the contemporary British social, economic and political situation is reflected in the lives and attitudes of the novel's characters. Although *Other People: A Mystery Story*, as a postmodern writing, seems to deal predominantly with the theme of its narrative structure, emphasizing a study of narrative closure and as such it foreshadows Amis's later novels, there are more points of view from within the text can be analyzed. One of them is the motif of a city, urban environment and modern city life.

The urban setting

The story of the novel is set entirely in London, yet the city itself does not stand at the centre of the book's attention. It probably cannot be classed as an urban novel, no matter how significant the role of the urban environment is for the development of its story. From this point of view the novel, like Amis's earlier work *Success* (1978), can be taken as a thematic foreshadowing of the author's later, and also more mature and appreciated, novels *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984) and *London Fields* (1989), which, together with *The Information* (1995), form a certain loose "London trilogy" in which the theme of modern urban existence in the Western late capitalist world dominates.

Although the city is not the central theme of the novel, it represents an inseparable part of it as the only environment in which such a story is possible to happen or, at least, to be imagined to happen. As a result of this fact, the city with its characteristic atmosphere appears in several roles throughout the novel and crucially influences the development of the plot and the individual characters' fates. From these roles we should mention the five most dominant ones – the city as a place of anonymity, unclear, distorted or hidden identities; the urban environment as a place where the encounter with "the other", be it other people or different forms of "otherness", is the most considerable and frequent; the city as a place of desperate loneliness and forced individualism; a place of great amount of various opportunities on the one hand, but, at the same time, a place of great many dangers on the other one; and there also appears

London as the Britain's capital city in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a place where the political, social and economic changes of that time were most marked.

Encountering Others

When at the beginning of the novel Mary gains consciousness in the hospital, she finds herself in a very peculiar state – she is physically more or less fit but she has lost her memory. She cannot even remember who she is or what has happened to her. Therefore, she is forced to rediscover her past life and mysterious identity from a position of entire innocence. Mary's amnesia allows Amis to bring to life the present, unencumbered by the preconceptions of the past and thus an unusual situation is depicted – the future is not important at all, it is the present that matters but only to the extent to which it helps to discover and understand the past. As the narrator says: "When the past is forgotten, the present is unforgettable".[2]

Such situation also enables Amis to play on the notion of the impossibility of knowing the past, the truth, as well as the textuality or narrativeness of the past's recollection. In concord with the postmodern teaching he suggests "not only that writing history is a fictional act, ranging events conceptually through language to form a world-model, but that history itself is invested like fiction" and therefore, having accepted the fact that the past did exist, fiction should attempt to "contest our ability to *know* the past by any other means than textualized, interpreted 'reports'"[3]. Therefore, the reader can follow Mary's struggle to regain her "true" self as a process of constituting the postmodern disintegrated subject through language, discourse, claiming (along with Foucault) that "the subject of discourse is always the dispersed, discontinuous network of distinct sites of action; it is never the controlling transcendental knower"[4].

Without past experience, suffering from an absolute lack of life experience, Mary's attempt to achieve and shape her new identity thus becomes dependent on

2) Martin Amis, *Other People: A Mystery Story* (London: Vintage Books 1999), p.53
3) Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1992), pp.128, 143
4) Ibid., p.84

those she meets on her way in the infernal London underground world: homeless tramps, human beings almost as unfortunate as she is. Thus, she seemingly becomes the most unfortunate city dweller since she disposes of absolutely no protective mechanisms against one of the most frequent, and often quite frustrating, urban experiences – encountering other people. Quite symptomatically, Mary obtains knowledge about society through those who occupy its very periphery. This fact corresponds with yet another postmodern perspective, as Hutcheon puts it: 'the "marginal" and what I will be calling the "ex-centric" (be it class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) take on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogenous monolith (that is middle-class, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed. The concept of alienated otherness (based on binary oppositions that conceal hierarchies) gives way [...] to that of differences, that is to the assertion, not of centralized sameness, but of decentralized community".[5] The whole process of Mary's re-socialization might be viewed as a reminder of the plurality and overall heterogeneous nature of the postmodern human existence, despite, and maybe even because of, all the globalizing tendencies of the late capitalist consumer society.

Mary's path to experience is also her journey upwards on the social scale. This process is marked by several characters whom she meets and stays with for some time. Although they represent various social classes and different life experience, there is one thing they have in common – the development of their mutual relationship with Mary. In the beginning they appear to play the role of her guides and protectors, those without whom she would be lost in their natural environment. Later on, as they help her understand and deal with reality, she gradually gets to know the true character of the world she finds herself in, and also slowly gains control, not only over her own situation, but also over her guides' lives. Finally she recognizes that these people have nothing more to offer her and leaves them, having ruined, consciously or unconsciously, their lives.

All these characters - Sharon, Alan, Russ and Jamie - eventually become victims of their own inability to see beyond their limited life experience, to step out of the shadow of their prejudices and their false interpretations of the everyday reality deceived

5) bid., p.12

by self-pity or self-centredness. Due to their inability to emphasize and their lack of proper life experience, they are not able or willing to see any possible differences in Mary's character and thus sooner or later end up "on the other side". As Sharon is leading Mary to her home, she observes that:

> ...without much warning the buildings dropped back to reveal a great breezy rift in the stacked and staggered city. Only a few arched, magical streets had been selected to ride this swathe of air. It made Mary's body hum; she would have turned and tried to run again but Sharon urged her on, unterrified.[6]

By urging her into the cold breeze of the "staggered city", Sharon definitively draws Mary into the low-class city's life, the dangers of which she symbolically represents. Sharon's main problem is self-deception about her true identity which, together with her limited intellect and experience, prevents her from explaining and understanding Mary's behaviour and attitudes through motives other than her own. Despite her amnesia, it soon becomes obvious that Mary is different from the outcasts she meets, since her natural intelligence or common sense gives her sufficient warning against the possible consequences of her future acts.

Through Sharon and her family - her brother Gavin and mother Mrs Botham - Mary also experiences her first direct encounters with the urban environment, in this case the dirty and demolished slums and poorest parts of London. During one of their walks, Mary describes the city:

> With Gavin, with Mrs Botham, and sometimes alone, Mary walked the streets of London, London South, as far as the River, as far as the Common, carving a track of familiarity from the grid of ramshackle streets, eviscerated building-sites, the caged sections with high-wire concrete. You needed to walk through somewhere seven times before it ceased to be frightening.[7]

For Mary, the city is a place where one must feel permanently frightened and endangered, a world full of depressed people suffering from various anxieties and worries in which the safest way to face the reality is to stay at home drinking.

As a result, Mary perceives the city as an archetypal wasteland peopled by wretched individuals who are desperately trying to avoid their inescapable destiny,

6) Martin Amis, *Other People: A Mystery Story* (London: Vintage Books 1999), p.31
7) Ibid., pp.56-57

fatally trapped by the environment they have spent their whole lives in and crippled by their narrow experience and education. Mary also comes to the conclusion that other people represent the most serious danger for the wasteland's inhabitants and recognizes how fragile the urban human existence in fact is.

With Alan and Russ Mary finds herself in a new world sets out to another part of London, as if the city itself represents and symbolizes all the possible kinds of life, identity and the opportunities to live them. Although the squat means an illegal and uncertain existence and is inhabited by poor, unhappy people, it is also a place where there are no alcoholics or criminals and which is free of the violence and gloom Mary experienced before. Despite all that, neither "idyll" does not last for long either because Mary soon starts to suffer both emotionally as well as intellectually in the two men's company. She soon recognizes that they both are victims of the city life, and that it is, in fact, Alan who needs to be looked after and protected, and Russ who deserves to be felt sorry for and consoled. As Mary becomes aware of the power she has gained over them, she suffers in their presence and knows that another stage of her life is over and she must go on by herself no matter how tragic the consequences such step will bring.

With Jamie she quickly learns that being penniless does not automatically have to be the norm of social status, as she has seen it in the places where she has lived up to that point, and that the life and behaviour of those she has met so far do not represent the only possible social standard. And so this time it is Mary who is going to be in control of the relationship right from the start. Jamie is likely to become just another victim, this time a planned and conscious one, on Mary's way back to her real self. Gradually, by forcing him to do what he does not feel like or even hates doing, encouraging him in excessive drinking and drug-taking, and various forms, sexual, verbal or non-verbal, of humiliation, she degrades and reduces Jamie into a powerless sexual slave without any trace of human dignity. Thus, she has managed to make the last step and become consciously whom she has always been – Amy, a predator in the city's jungle.

All the people Mary meets have just one thing in common – they represent the unknown, something mysterious, some kind of new experience. With other people there is always the promise that one could undergo discovering the mystery, the hidden

secrets or truths, they represent. However, this process of discovering and revealing does not always have to be exciting or pleasant. On the contrary, as Mary has already learnt, the only pleasant and safe encounter with other people in the city is the passive one, which means observing them in the streets and guessing what their real lives and secret dreams might look like. It is also the only occasion when other people's lives, or more accurately the observer's images of them, seem to be under the observer's control.

The City as a Language Structure

Simultaneously with the milieu of perpetual encountering otherness in its various forms, the city can be paralleled to the symbolic structure of language, as the novel can be read from the point of view of the Lacanian theory of the subject. It is not only otherness but also the linguistic experience that eventually enable the main protagonist to recover her self.

Not accidentally, both at the beginning as well as at the end of the heroine's quest for identity there is her look in the mirror. However, while the first look represents a mere experience of an alienated, empty image with which she "merges in a process of identification, creating an illusory experience of control of the self and the world"[8], the latter is a highly self-conscious recognition of her newly re-established self – the imaginary, childishly innocent and memory lacking Mary has gradually grown into the confident, being-in-the-world aware Amy.

In the meantime, Mary-Amy has to undergo a long and painful process of entering the symbolic order of language, as she discovers the "real" meanings of various words and realizes that the language enables her to differentiate from others, only through which she can acquire identity for the self. At the same time, however, she grows more and more aware of the necessity of the acceptance of the social roles and competences which have been prepared for her prior to her entry to such structure and therefore of the fact that she has been deprived of any possibility to interfere in it. Like

8) Philip Rice, Patricia Waugh, eds., *Modern Literary Theory* (London: Arnold 1996), p.124

the infant in Lacan's theory, she "experiences a loss or lack because it is subject to the positions that are predefined for [her] and beyond [her] control. The sense of a full and unified subject is contradicted by a sense of being defined by the law of human culture"[9].

The city in *Other People* can thus be attributed another role – that of the metaphor of the symbolic order of language with the various roles and positions it defines through its structuring of reality. The city/language allows Mary to become Amy, but only at the cost of her ultimate subordination to its order. Amy eventually understands that without language she is powerless; the otherness remains inaccessible and her despair and poverty undefeatable unless she is able to name them.

Down and Out in London

However, Mary has to undergo one more lesson of life's heterogeneity, a lesson about the city, its inhabitants and the enormous gaps that exist between various social classes. The mysterious John Prince at first takes her to an expensive restaurant so that on their way back he can organize for her a "tour de force of poverty and despair", showing her all possible forms of wrecked, unsuccessful and humiliating human existence – drunkards, prostitutes, beggars, and the insane. Mary herself describes it:

> Life nearly overloaded Mary that night. She had never guessed at the city's abysmal divides and atrocious energies, its furniture, hardware, power and glut.[10]

Mary also realizes what it means to be really down, at the bottom, what disgrace the extreme poverty represents and how it humiliates human dignity, people's attitudes to life and themselves – from initial despair and desire to get out to later resignation and final defeated indolence, like those rat-like dogs she spots behind dustbins.

Mary also discovers the close connection between urban life and money, the painful realization that the city will never give her anything for free until she makes her

9) Ibid., p.124
10) Ibid., p.112

offer first:

> Mary went on a journey, a journey that took several days. She rode the tubes, to and fro and round and round the city's fuming entrails. She rode the Circle Line until , on this new scale of time and distance, the Circle made her head reel. And it never got her anywhere. She walked the clotted concrete of Piccadilly and Leicester Square. She slept in a room full of other people and the gurgles and gases of bad food. She leaned against a wall where other girls were leaning. Two different men came up and asked her if she was free; she shook her head both times and they went away again. For a while, time turned into a series of boxes.[11]

She does not travel by the Circle Line accidentally – living homeless and without money in a big city inevitably means living in a destructive circle consisting of violence, filth, smell and pain, a circle from which there is no way out unless somebody else helps you. Without this help you always end up stuck in the same places, with the same people. However, this person can never be from the circle's environment, since the other people there are too preoccupied with their own selves and too despairing to care about someone else, the help must come from outside, like that of John Prince in Mary's case.

Together with the ability to manipulate and make use of people acquired through her recognition of the importance of mastering language, Mary has also picked up the ability to live inside the city which no loner represents a fatal threat for her. On the contrary, with Jamie she enjoys watching and being watched by other people, and walking along the crowded streets and shopping in shops full of people even becomes a part of her destructive tactics over him. Jamie, as a variant of a modern decadent aristocrat, wants to live his life as he likes it without encountering more other people than necessary. Therefore, he feels unhappy in the modern city environment predominated by the universal value – the hunt for money making and spending, a value he can never identify with. His life, thus, with all its absurd and upside down values and preferences, can be taken as a form of private revolt against the "madness" of modern Western society. However, such revolt cannot reach beyond his private life, his home and logically cannot influence other people. And so Jamie suffers with all its other

11) Ibid., p.157

inhabitants from living in the milieu where the basic values of commerce are pursued and worshipped most.

Political London

Other People can also be read as a socio-political novel since there are references to contemporary events and the generally poor state of the British economy during the second half of the 1970s, which were especially connected to the transition from a left-wing collectivist Labour government to a right-wing Conservative government, personified by a shift into Thatcherite individualism and deification of money. And so the novel's fictional process from innocent Mary to unscrupulous Amy may also be viewed as an allegory of this political transition.

The motif of money appears dominantly throughout the novel, however, Mary's and other people's attitudes towards it change and develop. At the beginning of the novel money is hated by all the, mainly working class, people Mary meets for it has done something bad recently:

> In shops everyone talked about money. Money had recently done something unforgivable: no one seemed able to forgive money for what it had done. Mary secretly forgave money, however. It appeared to be good stuff to her. She liked the way you could save money as you spent it... But Mrs Botham still couldn't find it in her heart to forgive money. She hated money; she really had it in for money. She would repetitively abuse money all day long.[12]

For innocent and inexperienced Mary this is an incomprehensible attitude which, in fact, had been caused by the Labour government's unsuccessful policies of spending cuts and wage restrains in an attempt to reduce inflation in the late 1970's which led to the 1978-79 'Winter of Discontent'. The working people cannot forgive money because it has become less valuable and they do not have enough of it. Later in the book there appears a parallel between the lack of money on one side and the abundance of bad weather on the other:

12) Ibid., p.57

> You could say one thing for rain: unlike so much else these days, it was clearly in endless supply. They were never going to run out of it. People shopped with wintry panic, buying anything they could get a hand to... Like the holds of ships in tempest, the shop floors swilled with the wellington-wet detritus of the streets, each chime of the door bringing deeper water, umbrellas working like pistons, squelching galoshes and sweating polythene, all under the gaze of the looted shelves. Things were running out, everything was running out, things to buy and money to buy them with. But the rain would not run out.[13]

The never ending rain not only can serve as a depressing contrast to the lack of money and goods, but, together with the shoppers' "wintry panic", it suggests that the scene takes place in winter which might be the one in 1978-79. This passage contains more than fiction - like a documentary, it draws attention to the real problems of contemporary Britain, in which the left-wing collectivist system was strongly opposed and criticized by the left-wing unions. This left-wing political crises contributed to the Labour government's failure and the Conservative victory in the 1979 general election, and the idea of collectivism was replaced by pure individualism accompanied with the limitation of most social benefits. The narrator identifies money with time because time is the only commodity an individual has to sell. Penniless Mary observes that "time was slow on the streets when you had no money", her salary is described as "the money she had earned from time sold".[14] The narrator thus expresses crucial maxims of the capitalist society: that money and time are inseparably linked in a cyclic process, in that the first is needed to make the latter bearable, but the latter is needed to be sold to earn the first, and therefore money represents the elementary requirement for life and the need for money is the primary motivation behind most activities. In short, time has been commodified and because all activities or actions can be seen as a time-selling process, money has become both the most crucial instrument and goal in the process, and the basic individual concern thus should be to accumulate at least enough to live on.

Amy soon recognizes the power and usefulness money can have as a tool of a happy life. While at the beginning of the novel the negative impact of capitalism predominates, in the ironic passage about the tramps, who ended up tramps because of

13) Ibid., p.178
14) Ibid., pp.68, 104

their lack of will to sell their time, and in which the increase of homelessness is justified by absurd "tramps like it [being a tramp], being a tramp is increasingly popular, statistics show"[15], towards its end, money is presented as a tool of independence and self-realization rather than repression. Consequently, Amy appears to have gained control over her life as she has become an individual. Therefore, the process of searching for identity can also be seen as the transition from the good-hearted, innocent and naive left-wing Mary to the rational, confident, independent but also merciless, unscrupulous and often dehumanized right-wing Amy. Therefore, I think that *Other People* can also be taken as a study of the development of modern Western capitalism in Britain in the late 1970s and early 80s and its impacts on the British society of that time. It is obvious that London, as the capital city, is the most suitable setting in which to locate such events.

The Urban Hostility

I have attempted to describe several roles the city assumes throughout the novel – from a place of anonymity, unclear and distorted identities, perpetually encountered otherness, loneliness and forced individualism, up to a place of numerous also tried to show that London appears in the story as a place of social and political change in the late 1970s and early 80s in Britain. Yet the predominant image of the city is that of a mysterious place full of unpredictable dangers, the environment and atmosphere of which make its inhabitants' lives move in cycles, repeating the same mistakes again and again, and in which exercising one's moral choice is very difficult for it seems to be the least comfortable of all the possible options. It is not accidental that only when Amy stays outside the city, living in the suburbs, she feels contented and balanced, and no matter how dehumanized the suburbs might seem to her – "the place was called a dormitory town… this was where the earners of London came back exhaustedly to sleep in lines" - she feels secure there and admits she still likes it there. When Prince is taking

15) Ibid., p.23

Amy back to London to murder her a second time, she verbalizes her feelings as:

> ... they drove up into black empty London. She felt like a child being taken on holiday or to hospital at an impossible hour, submitting to the grown-up machines. There was a mist lying low in the dark defiles, thin and salty in places, then as thick and fat as collapsed cloud.[16]

Her journey is described as entering the mysterious, unpredictable and unpleasant. The modern Western metropolis is thus depicted as an environment of emotional emptiness, lack of morality and collapsed values, in which humanity is as if imprisoned by all the technology and other material evidences of progress surrounding its inhabitants.

With respect to Bauman's terminology Mary is a perfect example of the metaphor of the tramp, an unwilling wanderer round the unknown and rough urban world of otherness who gradually manages to assume her identity through ruining those who are not able to cope with the complexities of their existence. As she gains her experience, and with the help of Prince, she also learns what it is like to watch from the outside and understand the rules of the "game of life". Therefore, the novel can also be taken as a study of the birth of a postmodern self.

3.2 THE CITY'S VOICE – *MONEY: A SUICIDE NOTE*

Money: A Suicide Note has a deceptively simple plot. Yet the novel has more levels and offers more perspectives than that of its actual story. Most of all, it can be read as a satirical novel, attacking the dehumanizing influence of capitalism and the specific form this has taken in the late twentieth century Western culture. It also represents the shocking experience from the modern urban life typifying the emergent pragmatic and economic values of Thatcher's England and Reagan's America, expressed by an artist who finds himself trapped living in the 1980s, a decade hostile

16) Ibid., p.203

and indifferent to most human and aesthetic values and principles.

However, the most crucial fact is that the materialist extremities of the late twentieth century are viewed through, and magnified by, the salacious leer of its narrator, John Self, who is trapped in his hectic, high-speed, high-rolling life living in and oscillating between the two cities, London and New York. He is not only, as he himself says, 'addicted to the twentieth century', but also to the city, urban life and all the phenomena that accompany such life. It is only in a big city where all his excesses and rather brutal and obscene joys can be realized. Thus, during his narrative the reader gradually experiences the damage these addictions inflict on Self's physical condition, as well as on the larger social space he also inhabits.

Therefore, Martin Amis offers the reader a savage, audacious, yet simultaneously highly comical artist's insight into the unstoppably booming commercial culture which is gradually gaining dominance in majority of the big city dwellers' lives. The shallowness of this kind of culture is hilariously parodied through the main character and narrator in one, John Self. In *Money* Amis employs, to much greater degree than in any of his previous works, irony, parody and double-voicing. These devices are used frequently in the postmodern poetics to bridge of "the gap between élite and popular art, a gap which mass culture has no doubt broadened' achieved 'through the ironizing of both"[1]. The result is an astonishing urban satire that both makes you laugh at its painful bonfires of embarrassment as well as shiver with disgust over the unscrupulousness of the newly arising social and cultural milieu.

The Commercial Self

Amis brilliantly pictures John Self as a warning example of a "man of his time" who has become famous as a maker of a series of controversial TV commercials advertising 'smoking, drinking, junk food and nude magazines' and whose whole life resembles an advertisement for smoking, drinking, junk food and nude magazines. He is

1) Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1992), pp. 20, 44

totally obsessed with money in all its forms. To Self, therefore, money is largely formative, especially of his language, which is very much like the language of TV commercials – he favours simple words (few of them having more than two syllables, many being of the four-letter variety), short and clear sentences and clipped syntax – minimal means from which he can achieve maximal effects, especially to draw the potential customers', in this case the readers', attention. And thus his language often employs allusions, sudden shifts of tone, and comic irony. Therefore, from the point of view of the narrator's voice *Money* can be taken as an overt demonstration of Roland Barthes's famous statement claiming that "'what takes place' in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally nothing; 'what happens' is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming"[2].

Self's language is exclusively the one of modern commercial urban discourse and there are other strategies he borrows from the world of advertising - addressing the readers, in more or less familiar way, various kinds of vocabulary, from rough and ready to emotional or even sentimental. As a result, his language is a brilliant mixture of working class Britishisms (brill, knackered), some popular Americanisms (deal, gimmick) and slang terms the meaning of which Self either expands or uses in an altered context (redo, rethink), and his voice thus becomes an alternation between the tough self-confident man and the oversensitive teenager.

Although the language Self uses is rather simple and the individual sentences make sense without any deeper examination, in context they create the opposite effect. The repetition, frequent shifts of mood and tone, flashbacks, omissions, his inability to keep to the topic and the omnipresent motif of money, which eventually interferes with anything Self's mind is hovering about, make the novel's narrative seem messy, sprawling and unfocused. The fact that he is also drunk a great deal of the time does not contribute to the narrative coherence and immediately poses the question of the narrator's credibility. As a result, it is not difficult to follow the basic story but to disclose the further levels of the narrative, the hidden meanings and clues leading to various dramatic revelations throughout the novel is a challenge.

Self's language reminds of the commercial, limited discourse of TV advertising

2) Ibid., p.144

and so does his thinking and understanding of the world. He is not able to understand anything which cannot be expressed in monetary terms, which cannot be bought or sold, and is completely lost in all situations in which money is not involved or does not help. The most obvious is the area of love and emotional relationships to women. Since love or emotions is not something one can easily make business with, he must reduce them into terms and fields he is familiar and capable of coping with – lust, obscenity and violence, which means sex for money, pornography and prostitutes, and beating women in the case that they object to any of his demands. Self's language reflects the postmodern world of late or postindustrial capitalism dominated by the materialistic, commercial and consumerist urban experience and values as well as the confusion and anxieties of a person who lacks the ability to protect himself against these influences.

It is not surprising that Self's life, on a practical level, lacks any deeper social contact or relationship. In all respects he represents a typical modern urban over-consumer "consciously" imprisoned in the isolation of the world of satisfied desires. Therefore, instead of social contacts, Self has developed various addictions, and the fact that most of these pleasures are solitary and hedonistic, masturbation, pornography, watching TV, drinking for drinking, topless bars and prostitutes, reinforces the sense that he is a slave of his own addictions. What the reader is introduced to is Self's own isolated world, the spectacle of his 'private culture', this appalling, hilarious, touching and contemptible one-man-show, featuring John Self and money. Self is very much aware of the fact that he is trapped in the pseudo-world of his addictions but at the same time he realizes his inability to escape from this world. On the one hand, he dislikes the emptiness of his existence but, on the other, he is not able to imagine himself leading a different way of life. And so he stays in, comically blaming it whenever he feels bad or whenever something goes wrong.

Although Self is, in fact, a violent, aggressive, disgusting and perverse weakling with artificially nourished self-confidence, there is still something in his voice that irresistibly attracts the reader's attention. Although his language is elemental and visceral, simultaneously, it is witty and full of common sense worldly wisdom, with strong sense for social detail. Because of the qualities of Amis's writing, all these features make Self's voice so unique that he never seems to be a mere mouthpiece for

his creator. It is the tone, which the literary critics once described as 'an urban-apocalyptic high fever'. Self's voice is ultimately that of commercial culture – one that is emptied yet not entirely deprived of meaning, one that, as an exemplary Barthesian myth-making process[3], does not try to conceal but perpetually deforms, one that is both repulsive and inviting in its simplicity.

The Urban Self

John Self is not only a typical product of late twentieth century capitalism but also of a megalopolis, since megalopolis has become its emblem ("my head is a city, and various pains have now taken up residence in various parts of my face"[4]. His mentality has been shaped by various aspects of the city life. A big city, with its commerce, fast-food restaurants, variety of shops and shopping malls, video centres, bars, nightclubs and anonymity, is the only place where he can realize himself and pursue his addictions. He is an urban person and the city is the environment he knows he belongs to, and where he feels relaxed and self-confident. Therefore, it is especially in his descriptions of London and New York streets and their city life where he retains the uniqueness of his language showing thus a great capacity to render every single detail and to express his never ending excitement with and understanding of the city and its specific atmosphere. And so when he describes one of his first impressions of New York he suddenly employs this language of a patient observer, full of detail and admiration, quite different from his ordinary language of alcohol and pornography:

> So I walked south down bending Broadway. ... I strode through meat-eating genies of subway breath. I heard the ragged hood of sirens, the whistles of two-wheelers and skateboarders, pogoists, gocarters, windsurfers. I saw the barreling cars and cabs, shoved on by the power of their horns. I felt all the contention, the democracy, all the italics, in the air. These are people determined to be themselves, whatever, little shame attaching.[5]

3) See Roland Barthes, *Mytologie* (Praha: Dokořán 2004)
4) Martin Amis, *Money* (London: Penguin Books 1995), p.26
5) Ibid., p.6

As a professional city-dweller, Self is well aware of the fact that people in the crowd, who know they are constantly being watched by hundreds of pairs of unknown eyes, have and usually take advantage of the possibility to present themselves in the way they choose and hide their real self behind the mask anonymity and reserved indifference. Like in a theatre play, rather than a real life character, in the city street one can become, at the same time, an actor performing his or her part, a director who, using his or her imagination, can secretly invent and predict the other people's fates, and a spectator deliberately standing apart, watching the urban performance which is the position Self loves adopting the most. He also knows that the real basis of the permanent feeling of insecurity and unknown danger of the urban existence must be sought right in those hidden identities of the city inhabitants living in their private safe shell inside the crowd ("Actors are paid to pretend that they are unaware of being watched [...] There are unpaid actors too (I thought); it's them you really have to watch"[6]).

Another perspective Self's New York city documentary offers us is the social one, focusing on the wide social and economic gap between the rich and people living on the periphery of the society, in the inhuman conditions of ghettos and slums. When he and Fielding go for a walk into a slum, as soon as they enter it, Self feels the sudden change of the atmosphere, as if the slums were not a part of the city:

> But here I saw the way the streets were going, how they darkened despite the sun, the juicy air, the innocence of the covering blue. ... Now the lanes were careless, lawless. We skirted the spreading sponge of split mattresses and jaw-busted suitcases facedown in the gutter, saw the dark excluded profiles behind windows and chicken wire - this was no-money country, coldwater, walkup. And so sudden, the breakdown, the feelable absence of all agreement, of all consensus – except for the money-hate or anger you get when cities wedge their rich and poor as close as two faces of a knife...[7]

Self understands that, from material point of view, these people have nothing to lose and that the thing they are really afraid of being deprived of is their dignity. For them the only way how to keep this dignity is to clearly mark and protect their territory against

6) Ibid., p.132
7) Ibid., pp.113-114

those who have rejected them and made them outcasts. As a result the slums have their own rules, laws and social hierarchy by which their inhabitants claim their right to be ignored by those who have rejected to make them a part of their social milieu. And so two white businessmen walking carelessly in their territory, as if along a boulevard, embody an offensive mockery and humiliation of the remaining bits of their human dignity.

Since John Self's identity and career has been formed and influenced especially by the two big cities his life oscillates between, London and New York, it is quite interesting to observe the way he describes and compares them. And because he is half American and half British and has spent half of his life in the States and half in Britain, the result of his observations is a wonderful comparison of the two places and the ways of life they allow. Self offers commentaries on the two cities from several points of view, however, the most crucial one for him is obviously money. Although he has become successful and famous in London, he is not satisfied there because it is not what he really wants. For Self, New York represents a hope in future, the American Dream, a promise of great wealth and subsequent change of his social and economic status.

This fact causes Self to depict London as a far more unpleasant and less advantageous place than New York in many aspects other than money, for instance the space. The States, including its big cities, is a vast country full of great spaces which can represent freedom of whatever kind, since physical space is one of the most important conditions for a modern person to feel comfortable and free. Self finds no such space in London. He expresses this feeling in his observation of the situation when he cannot find a parking place in front of his small and expensive London flat :

> ... You *can* doublepark on people: people can doublepark on you. Cars are doubling while houses are halving. Houses divide into, into two, into four, into sixteen. If a landlord or developer comes across a decent-seized room he turns it into a labyrinth, a Chinese puzzle. ... Rooms divide, rooms multiply. Houses split – houses are tripleparked. People are doubling also, dividing, splitting. In double trouble we split our losses. No wonder we're bouncing off the walls.[8]

What he lacks in London is enough space and freedom for the otherness and diversities

8) Ibid., p.66

he meets on each step in New York. Thus, compared to the exciting "Manhattan miracle of heat and cold" London seems to him rather "watery and sparse". And so, on the on hand, he realizes that New York is a dangerous place to live, calling it a jungle full of "crocodiles, dragons, noise machines, witchdoctors, headhunters and voodoo-men" where the streets are "sprung with pits and nets and traps" where the human existence becomes uncertain and risky in the dog-eat-dog conditions in which success and happiness are expressed exclusively in terms of trade and profit, yet on the other one he considers the promise of wealth and all the possibilities and opportunities of the American Dream more exciting, tempting and worth risking than the rather more secure and comfortable life in London. In the jungle of New York he has seemingly nothing to lose if he "takes it seriously and hires a guide"[9]. Self's fatal mistake is that his guide, Fielding Goodney, is one of those headhunters hiding in the jungle waiting for a victim to catch and kill.

However, since Self uncritically or even naively trusts his guide, he soon forgets about the dangers of the world of rough business and lets himself get blinded and seduced by the vision of money lying or rolling on the streets waiting for someone to pick it. And so the following description of New York is fully dominated by the glittering voice of money:

> Yesterday I was walking up golden Fifth Avenue towards the tawny gulf of the Park. The powerful stores were in full exchange, drawing people in, easing people out, superintended by the lean Manhattan totems, these idols of rock-statues that stare straight ahead in grim but careless approval of the transactions compounded in the street beneath. It was pouring money. On the pavement the monkeynut operatives and three-card trick artists, the thimble-riggers, hot-handbag dealers, contraband bandits – they all plied their small concerns.[10]

Again, when describing the city he loves, Self's language gains a new dimension – it is full of imagery, the words and sentences grow longer, there is no repetition – it becomes a language of admiration and fascination.

One of Self's most favourite means of expressing his likes or dislikes about a particular place is evaluating its weather. For him, weather is largely symbolic. It stands

9) Ibid., all p.193
10) Ibid., p.218

for the whole set of conditions for living in the sense he understands it – conditions suitable for successful individualistic assertiveness. It is not surprising then, that New York weather easily overcomes that of London. When he speaks about London weather, he describes it as "fag murdering weather". According to him, London is an unlovely place, an "old man with bad breath"[11]. On the contrary, the description of the sky above Manhattan is far brighter and more optimistic, with the "pinks and blues, an avocado tinge of beautifying city sickness"[12]. And therefore, the only aspect the two cities have in common is violence. Violence is omnipresent and the same in both the cities, simply because the majority of it is committed just from the pleasure of the act. It is not important whether it is London or New York, violence is there in all its various forms simply because it belongs to each city's life.

John Self has grown up in a city and the city environment is the only possible one in which he can exist. He has also become a person whose needs no European city can satisfy any longer. Although he much welcomes the change the American megapolis offers him, he is not able to see it realistically. He overestimates his powers and abilities and succumbs to the naive illusion that getting rich in New York is an instant and easy process. And so he gets trapped in the net of the money conspiracy in the city which has proved to be more powerful than he thought it would be and where the "locks and light switches all go the wrong way, and where the sirens say 'you' and whoop! and *ow, ow, ow.*"[13]

The 'Roaring Eighties'

The world of the 1980s is a strong formative power in Self's life. It is a world dominated and controlled by the economic criteria and rules of the liberal economy and so-called free market, a world whose material side far overcomes and suppresses the

11) Ibid., pp.231, 85
12) Ibid., p.117
13) Ibid., p.26

spiritual one. On the one hand, there is the optimistic vision of economic growth, prosperity and wealth, yet on the other, there are demonstrations, social riots, protests, high unemployment in industrial cities, urban violence, crime, and communist terror in Eastern Europe.

Self is, all in one, a maker, admirer and desperate victim of the commodity mass-culture which has become the dominating phenomenon of the socio-cultural discourse of the late twentieth century. As such, he represents the "perfect misproduct" of the system – he has become addicted to its devices which he knows to impair his life and perception of reality, and has gradually assumed the attitude of comfortable weakness, the consequent excuse of succumbing to something that is simply stronger than himself. In the case of culture he himself can serve as a living example of its paradox. Although he likes the popular culture of advertising, commercial television, fast-food restaurants and pornography, which seems to suit him, he, at the same time, feels that there is something wrong with this kind of culture. When he, for example, is watching a commercial TV in his hotel room, he clearly expresses his awareness of the possible negative influence it can have on a person:

> ... Television is cretinizing me – I can feel it. Soon I'll be like the TV artists. ... Or the cretinized, those who talk on buses and streets as if TV were real, who call up networks with strange questions, stranger demands... If you lose your rug, you can get a false one. If you lose your laugh, you can get a false one. If you lose your mind, you can get a false one.[14]

He seems unable to exist beyond this environment but still he realizes that such life is infantile and that he should quickly grow up. He even expresses the wish to find what is missing in his life. For a short time, he wants to escape from the world of money into the world of "thought and fascination" but at the same time he confesses that he can never make it by himself since he doesn't know the way. He resembles Aldous Huxley's machine-like people - "adults intellectually and during working hours, infants where feeling and desire are concerned"[15], only his predestination has been less scientific and more based on the natural human tendency to choose the easiest and most comfortable way to achieve things.

14) Ibid., p. 27
15) Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Flamingo 1994), p. 84

In many ways Self resembles Martina's dog Shadow. On the one hand, he appreciates the comfort and human touch she offers him, but on the other, he cannot resist the 'call of the wild' - the temptation of the natural environment he belongs to. Like Shadow he rather escapes into the dirty city streets where he feels his place is, he escapes to be in the "high-risk zone, an inner city" again, back into the rough material city life where he can set himself free of any impacts of culture or education, the environment to which he is, despite all its negatives, too much addicted to be able to abandon it completely:

> The streets sing. Yes they do. Can you hear them? The streets scream. You're told about street culture. There isn't any. That's the point. This is as far as it goes. Where does the song end, the scream start? And in the monologue malls and choric alleys of London West the screamers sing and the singers scream... The song the screamers sing is a song to what they cannot bear, defining and miming the meaning of the word *unbearable*.[16]

Now, John Self can become one of those screamers again, singing a song about the unbearableness of the way of life he will never be able or willing to give up. As such, he is not only a product of its time but also a sinisterly gloomy prophecy about the "ordinary" person yet to come.

Postmodern Dystopia

Money: A Suicide Note was published in 1984 and this date is significant in the context of the story since Orwell's dystopia *1984* is a recurrent motif in Amis's novel. In *1984*, Winston Smith, the doomed hero, is led to "Room101" where he is tortured and loses the lasts bits of his freedom and dignity. It is no accident that Self's expensive New York hotel room has the same number. This room soon becomes a place where he is tortured by his addictions and subsequent anxieties and insecurities which also deprive him of his freedom. Moreover, like Winston Smith, Self spends most of his narrative discovering that he is trapped, out of control of his own life, not by a

16) Martin Amis, *Money* (London: Penguin Books 1985), p.26 or 360

totalitarian regime but by his own debased private culture and modern high-speed urban life. He feels that he is "controlled by someone [...] not from out there but from in here"[17]. Like Smith, Self is also permanently watched, not by screens but by Fielding as Frank the Phone, as if, symbolically, he is watched and controlled by his personification of money. And so he is imprisoned in the hectic urban life of false visions and predictions, and in the hedonistic limited world based on satisfying basic physical needs:

> At sickening speed I have roared and clattered, I have rocketed through my time, breaking all the limits, time limits, speed limits, city limits, jumping lights and cutting corners, guzzling gas and burning rubber, staring through the foul screen with my fist on the horn. I am that fleeting train that goes screaming past you in the night. Through travelling nowhere I have hurtled with blind purpose to the very end of time. I have lived headlong at a desperate rhythm.[18]

Unlike Winston Smith, John Self lives in a 'free' society, but like Winston's life, Self's has been conditioned, not by a state apparatus, but by the powerful economic system that replaces traditional human values by monetary ones, forms individual subjectivity, fetishizes material objects and commodifies relationships. And so *Money* can be understood as an analogy of Orwell's analysis of totalitarian ideology in conditions of post-industrial capitalist democracies.

Also, like the people in *1984*, Self is trapped and imprisoned in the city, the milieu which allows the highest social control and therefore enables him to abolish and impose just those feelings required by the establishment. And so we can see that the commercial world assumes the principles which remind us of those of the totalitarian regime, only the face of Big Brother and the omnipresent Thoughtpolice spies have been replaced by more peaceful and seemingly much less harmful devices – billboards, advertisements and the never-satisfied consumers' needs and desires which keep driving their unfortunate bearers to seek further, more elaborate and ingenious forms of pleasure.

Money can therefore be read as an anti-utopia or dystopia depicting all the extremities and possible consequences of the postmodern consumer Western society (in this respect, the sub-title is more than adequate) and, as such, it foreshadows Amis's

17) Ibid., p.330
18) Ibid., pp.311-312

most ambitious novel concerning this theme – *London Fields*. John Self is more than an exemplary stroller, the permanently unsatisfied consumer of visual images, the seeker of form where there is no content, the life observer, and unsuccessful gambler, drawing his dubious confidence from the self-deceiving and ignorant persuasion that it is him who is in control of his and other people's fates.

3.3 THE CITY'S LINES OF FORCE – *LONDON FIELDS*

Written and published in 1989, *London Fields* immediately proved to be the best, most complex, affecting, powerful and ambitious of all Martin Amis's novels he had written up to that time. It far surpasses all its predecessors in terms of complexity of textual structure, number of complications and problems designed for the reader to solve or puzzle out, the use of verbal and situational humour and, of course, questioning the narrative authority in the novel. Moreover, the story is set in the near future at the very end of the millennium in the maddening apocalyptic nuclear-haunted world which seems to be approaching one of its final stages before reaching that of an ultimate collapse.

Amis himself considers *London Fields*, despite its futuristic setting, a book about the present. It is a state-of-England as well as state-of-the-world and also state-of-the-writer novel. In this respect, the novel can be taken as a kind of sequel to *Money* which attempted to do something similar in the mid-1980s. *London Fields* develops several key motives which already appeared in *Money*, especially those which accompany our postmodern contemporary life, such as the mass or pop culture dominated by tabloid pseudo-culture and other mass media influences. However, while *Money* creates a satirical picture of the distorted values of the materialist culture in the modern capitalist society; *London Fields* focuses rather on the more wholesome, generally unbearable state of the modern civilization imprisoned in vast megalopolises, leading to its inevitable downfall.

Are There any Fields in London?

Although all Amis's works are set in big cities, *London Fields* is his only novel where the city appears even in its title. In the Note, the implied author under the initials M.A. presents the reader with a list of his options for the title. This author himself assures the reader that the title does not decide 'on a name for something that is already there', on the contrary, that 'it lives and breathes, or it tries on every page'. The title has been chosen deliberately and suggests that it is not only a state-of-England but also state-of-the-modern-city novel. The extract from Peter Kemp's *Sunday Times* review on the novel's cover calls the title of the book 'savagely inappropriate to its inner-city setting' since the pastoral, mysterious and timeless motif of *London Fields* does not correspond with the novel's sinister plot and setting, which are totally different from the expectations the title might bring out, for it suggests some rural idyll rather than the urban inferno of hysteria and disintegration Amis wittily creates in his novel.

Even the combination of the two words in the title itself is contrasting, if not illogical, for it is not possible to find any fields in the traditional sense of the word in the city environment, only physical and metaphorical ones from which those of various negative energies prevail. As Sam observes:

> ... this is London; and there are no fields. Only fields of operation and observation, only fields of electromagnetic attraction and repulsion, only fields of hatred and coercion. Only force fields. [1]

There are more such fields in the novel, in fact each of its characters can be taken as one, but even among them there is one exceptionally strong force field – Nicola Six. She personifies herself with a black hole, the destructive magnetic field made up of negative energy that threatens to swallow up our solar system in the same way as Nicola's negative energy swallows up her men's positive feelings and emotions, dries them up and alters them into some form of deprivation or despair.

If there are some fields in the novel, then they exist only in Sam's mind, in his sentimental memories of the idyllic past. For him, London fields represent the image of his lost innocent childhood ("Bury my bones in London Fields. Where I was raised."[2])

1) Martin Amis, *London Fields* (London: Penguin Books 1990), p.134
2) Ibid., p.120

as well as the immediate impulse that makes him help the unfortunate and helpless child of Keith and Kath. Yet the reader soon learns that Sam's childhood was quite far from any rural idyll since his father worked in the nuclear industry, being thus one of those responsible for the contemporary Crisis, which might have been the cause of his son's incurable disease and consequently his unhappy fate. While, in the course of the narration, Samson permanently feels the urge to go to London Fields, expressing thus his wish to return to his innocent carefree childhood, "before it's too late"[3], towards the end of the novel he admits it is just a naive illusion of bringing back to life something that is gone and unavoidably belongs to the past. And so when he is getting ready for his final homicidal act, he realizes the impossibility of finding or reaching what he has been longing for. In one of his last diary entries he eventually surrenders:

> I must go back to London Fields – but of course I'll never do it now. So far away. The time, the time, it never *was* the time. It is a far, far... If I shut my eyes I can see the innocuous sky, afloat above the park of milky green. The traintrack, the slope, the trees, the stream: I played there with my brother as a child. So long ago.[4]

He has also been taught by experience that what he has been looking for can never be found in the place where he finds himself – in the city. It is most of all the urban environment which disturbs his illusion and makes his dreams impossible to come true and Samson shows his awareness of this fact:

> The people in here, they're like London, they're like the streets of London, a long way from any shape I've tried to equip them with, strictly non-symmetrical, exactly lopsided – far from many things, and far from art.
> There is this terrible suspicion. It isn't worth saving anyway. Things just won't work out.[5]

Instead of pleasant fields Sam permanently encounters various forms of dead-end-streets, especially that in which the enigmatic Nicola Six lives. Those are places where there is no way through but also from which there is no escape. As a result,

3) Ibid., p.323
4) Ibid., p.463
5) Ibid., p.463

paradoxically, Sam is trapped exactly where he hoped to find his lost age of innocence – in London Fields. It appears that, with his disease, Sam is paying the price for his father's sins through the painful recognition of the true nature of his idealized careless childhood. His illusions and dreams were false as there are no fields in London either. London Fields are dead-end-streets. Once again it is the city and its inseparable atmosphere that, to a great extent, contribute to the development of the story, but also supports its credibility and attraction. The city represents, rather than some stable, predictable areas, a vibrant, unstable web of various fields of force, be it language, other people, commercial culture, or one's own insecurities and anxieties. And thus, on the stage of London, Amis creates and performs his dark and absurd comedy of modern civilization.

The Illiterate, the Ignorant and the Knowing

Generally speaking, Martin Amis's characters in *London Fields* have been created to demonstrate the dark, bleak and absurd sides of our contemporary life and they can be understood as the reader's guides through certain dystopian inferno of postmodern Western civilization. At the same time, these characters are often quite comical, Amis treats them with irony and black humour which contributes to the absurdity of their behaviour, and thus they gradually become victims of the author's creation, unfortunate objects of his mockery. To evoke such effect Amis employs doubling, double-voicing, a favourite postmodern device that prevents the readers "from confirming [their] own subjectivity as coherent, non-contradictory spoken subjects"[6]. Like in *Money* (Self – Fielding, Selina – Martina), all the comical characters of *London Fields* have their alter-egos that set off their ridiculousness and absurdity: Sam – Mark Asprey, Keith – Guy, Marmaduke –Kim. As a result, pity, sorrow or sympathy are rather unlikely to be invoked in the course of the story. The more probable reactions are those of astonishment, disbelief and, probably most frequently, a typically postmodern

6) Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1992), p.176

reaction – "helpless laughter"[7]. Amis's characters most of all make the reader think, wonder what the motives of their acting are like and therefore our responses to them as well as the novel's appeal are intellectual rather than emotional since laughter is an expression of a state of the mind rather than the emotions.

The three main protagonists in the novel should undoubtedly be taken as functions in the narrative rather than characters in the traditional understanding of the notion. "[The novel] maximizes Amis's preference for caricatures over characters, extremes over complexities. Nicola is the ultimate male fantasy, Guy is the ultimate dupe, Keith is the lowest lowlife, Marmaduke the most destructive of babies, Kim the most innocent of victims, and so on"[8]. The more Guy and Keith are drawn into the complicated plot, the less credible they grow as characters and consequently the attempts of their psychological analysis becomes less and less possible and preferable. More than characters, they are 'stereotypes' or 'cliches' who act in accordance with the function they have in the overall plan of the novel. By denying his characters the capacity for change, Amis deprives them of the possibility of evoking the reader's identification or sympathy.

Amis's lack of interest in character development comes from the postmodern belief that it is no longer possible to clearly detect the motives behind people's behaviour, which is reflected in literature by the absence of the omnipotent and omniscient narrator disposing of any total knowledge of the characters' psyche. Such narrative device also corresponds with Vladimir Nabokov, whose influence on his work Amis frankly admits, and his belief that rather than with the characters the reader should identify with the writer. In other words, the readers' primal concern is not the characters' motives for acting but the writer's motive for making his characters act the way they do. The novel can thus also be read as a sociological study of certain character stereotypes in the postmodern urban society.

The substitution of caricatures for protagonists gets more complex in the case of Nicola Six. Of all the possible interpretations of her character, the most significant seems her personification of the postmodern civilization. In concordance with the

7) Martin Procházka, ed., *Lectures on American Literature* (Praha: Karolinum 2002), p.295
8) James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis* (University of South Carolina Press 2004), p.131

condition of postmodern life, her identity is a mixture of roles demanded by the entertainment industry and mass culture on one side, and the wide public on the other. What distinguishes her from Keith and Guy is her high self-consciousness, her awareness that those roles do not express her true identity. By saying about her life that "it's always felt like a story"[9] she acknowledges not only that her identity is something artificially created for certain purposes, but also shows her ability, in contrast with Guy and Keith, to detect the fictitious nature of her very existence.

Nicola Six thus, above all, represents the innermost essence of the collision between high and popular culture – the distinction between image and imagination. As Roger Scruton claims in his overt critique of postmodern culture, while through the mediation of imagination embodied in a true artistic work we encounter a world of real, living people, the one that our imagination enables us to enter as well, images provide us only with compensatory gratification of lower or forbidden desires. The ideal image, Scruton suggests, is that which is perfectly realized or materialized, yet simultaneously perfectly unreal, an unreal object that leaves no space for imagination.[10] For both the male victims, Keith and Guy, Nicola manages to mould herself into such image – alluringly close, seemingly inexpensive, seductively sentimental – an object deceptively real yet perpetually out of reach, a simulacrum representing "the final destruction of meaning"[11].

Through the various roles Nicola plays she has, similar to but more than other characters in the novel, a fragmented personality. She plays roles and assumes various identities to fit other people's fantasies. To both Keith and Guy, she is the personification of their wildest dreams, the ultimate "male fantasy figure"[12] – a darts-loving whore for Keith and an immaculate Madonna for Guy. She plays roles required by the situation and the reader never finds out what her true identity is, if there is any at all, because there is no real Nicola Six. Instead, she is the embodiment of the ridiculousness of the patriarchal, and often sexist, projection of male images and,

9) Martin Amis, *London Fields* (London: Penguin Books 1990), p.118
10) See Roger Scruton, *Průvodce inteligentního člověka po moderní kultuře* (Praha: Academia 2002), p.79
11) Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1992), p.223
12) Martin Amis, *London Fields* (London: Penguin Books 1990), p.260

simultaneously, fear of women as either witches and dangerous seducers or immaculate virgins.[13]

In the character of Nicola Six many aspects and paradoxes of the postmodern urban condition are reflected: the fragmentation of life experience causing the unavoidable de-centering of the self; the less independent, if not sometimes fictitious, character of one's existence as it is more and more shaped by the supply-and-demand strategies of the vicious circle of the consumer society; the widening gap between the traditional, modernist concept of culture and its commercial pseudo-variant, a gap which can only be bridged by ironizing them both; and last but not least, the perpetually growing feeling of insecurity and the consequent desperate need of a stable, predictable, no matter how illusory or deceitful, "always-here" instance of certainty. Nicola stands for this ultimate "certainty" of postmodern city dwellers, one with extremely dangerous, though rather latent so far, destructive and self-destructive tendencies.

By understanding her role, Nicola rises above other characters in and this fact gives her other meanings in the novel especially those related to the narrative authority and authorial control. What distinguishes Nicola is her ability to grasp language as well as to recognize the power hidden behind its possible uses. Through capturing the various discourses, she consciously exercises power over her victims and demonstrates an important paradox of postmodernism: that "discourse is both an instrument and an effect of power" a language is shown to be an ultimate "social practice, an instrument a much for manipulation and control as for humanist self-expression"[14]. If postmodernism pluralizes, then Nicola is the voice of this plurality.

The Apocalyptic Urban Frenzy

Due to the great number of various symbols, metaphors and therefore also points of view for understanding the novel, the role of the city in the book is rather complex. The fact that London appears even in its title makes the significance of the role

13) See Pam Morris, *Literatura a feminismus* (Brno: Host 2000), pp.29-48
14) Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1992), pp. 185, 186

apparent. No matter how illogical or oxymoronic the combination of the two words London and fields is, we soon realize that it is most of all London and it force fields that dominate the overall atmosphere of the novel. Diedrick calls the novel a "mixture of millennial murder mystery, urban satire, apocalyptic jeremiad and domestic farce"[15] and in all these genres contained in *London Fields* the city plays a very significant if not crucial role.

In the apocalyptic view of the planet at the end of the millennium, with the destroyed environment and unpredictable climatic changes caused by nuclear weapons together with the permanent threat of a war conflict (referred to as the Crisis), the inner city setting represents the human inferno, the world in which traditional moral and ethical values are precious and no longer appreciated, the world in which humanity has nearly become extinct, the world inhabited by selfish individualists whose capacity for feeling any emotions has dried up having been replaced by anxiety, fear and the feeling of the senselessness of human existence. The story is set into the atmosphere of the serious crises of modern civilization and its imminent collapse, which coincides with the day for which Nicola plans her death and symbolically with the Eclipse, the phenomenon which was believed in the past to signify the end of world. London, as the only setting of the novel, thus inevitably helps develop this atmosphere.

From the very beginning of the novel the inner city is presented as a place full of violence and poverty with people fighting and stealing for a living – drunkards, criminals, prostitutes and other unfortunates – people with eyes full of "urban severity", a filthy place where "the attempt at greenery would itself appear to attract the trash"[16]. The book is literary stuffed with the images of desperate poverty which correspond neither with the names of the places nor with its dwellers' perception of them.

Yet when the story takes us, for an instant, to the world of money and affluence represented by Guy and his family, we receive an image of emptiness, purposelessness and sterility of life. Guy's loveless but luxurious household leaves him with the feeling of life wasted in nothingness and idleness. Since he has never had to work to earn his living, he is suffering from boredom and looking for the meaning of his life, be it

15) James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis* (University of South Carolina Press 2004), p.147
16) Martin Amis, *London Fields* (London: Penguin Books 1990), pp.9, 25

anything compatible with his puritan morality. However, the only place he can go to in his search of real life is the world out there, in the city streets with their sinister atmosphere of hatred and despair. Innocent and also naively ignorant, Guy decides to find the life's excitement in the inner city and so, ironically, we get the description of the wrecked place through the eyes of an aristocratic dreamer:

> And God – look out! – the Portobello Road, the whole trench scuffed and frayed, falling apart, and full of rats. Guy could feel the street frisking him – to see what he might give up. A queue of tramps had formed at the gates of the Salvation Army Hostel, waiting for soup or whatever was offered, the troops of the poor, conscripts, pressed men, hard pressed. Tall, and with clean hair, cleaned teeth Guy moved past them painfully, the tramps and their tickling eyes. All he saw was a montage of preposterous footwear, open at the toes like the mouth of horses, showing horse's teeth... [17]

Walking down the streets and observing 'real' life, Guy realizes that the city environment is far from his image of a relatively safe source of excitement and new experiences. He also immediately sees that the dangers and fear no longer inhabit the dark abandoned back streets, yards, slums and den-like pubs, but that they have moved into the light, they are not hiding but can be found right in the streets. As Guy notices when he is entering the Black Cross:

> Once upon a time, the entrance to the Black Cross was the entrance to a world of fear. Nowadays things have changed places, and fear was behind him, at his back, and the black door was more like an exit.[18]

It is the urban environment as such that creates in itself the haunted atmosphere so unbearable that it presses people to keep searching for various forms of pseudo-realities, the simulacra that would make their life if not easier, then at least more comprehensible and less complicated. It is predominantly through the character of Keith where Amis makes his commentary on the phenomenon of postmodern simulacra. For Keith, reality has been neutralized by mass media, dissolved into a set of deceivingly soothing, since seemingly intelligible, images he has consciously and unconsciously projected upon the outer world in order to grasp it. However, such state is by no means presented by the

17) Ibid., p.149
18) Ibid., p.149

novel as one that attempts to mask the ultimate absence of reality - the simulacra's potential to undermine one's perception of reality does not inevitably deny its existence, it only problematizes our chance of knowing it objectively. "It is not that truth and reference have ceased to exist [...]; it is that they have ceased to be unproblematic issues. We are not witnessing a degeneration into the hyperreal without origin or reality, but a questioning of what 'real' can mean and how we can know it."[19] The ridiculousness of the characters like Keith of Guy, therefore, suggest that the essential question to be posed is not whether reality or truth do exist, but how we can ever (get to) know them.

Each of the three main characters has his or her special relationship or attitude to the city. Keith seems to be bored most of his time, as he is walking the streets aimlessly just to avoid being at home, the foolproof evidence of his wretchedness, because "in a modern city, if you have nothing to do (and if you're not broke, and on the street), it's tough to find people to do nothing with"[20]. However, it is only in a big city where a person like Keith could exist. What suits him most is the anonymity of the place, the basic condition which enables him to create and take on any identity he wishes or dreams to have without any imminent danger of being revealed. Moreover, the city offers him enough space and opportunities to satisfy his needs and desires as well as provides him with sufficient anonymity of the streets which, combined with the otherpeople's listlessness or even apathy, encourages him to project his own made-up identity behind which he can hide his true confused self. Keith, therefore, is a modern city stroller, a typical member of the crowd. Samson realizes that he has long been wrong about Keith:

> The moment I set eyes on him I thought Keith Talent was an anachronistic kind of character. I thought that time and inflation and the new demographics would have mopped him up by now or sent him somewhere else: to the North, or at least to the suburbs. Not so. The streets are full of jokers, dodgers, lack-the-lads and willie-the-dips – whole crews of Keiths...[21]

Keith has been brought up by the city and thus has got used to it as his natural

19) Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1992), p. 223
20) Martin Amis, *London Fields* (London: Penguin Books 1990), p. 41
21) Ibid., p.134

environment, but also as the only environment he is able to survive in. He did not choose it but has learnt how to cope with it.

Guy, on the contrary, has almost no direct experience with a modern city of this kind. His desire to get to the environment is based on his delusions and false expectations deriving from his naive and illusionary ideas of the world. His whole encounter with the miserable reality is a continuous process of disillusionment, what he feels for the people is "shame and pity. But not fear"[22]. The scene when he is first about to enter the inner city zone foreshadows his later fate:

> Guy came to a halt on the street and blinked twice with his whole forehead. He raised a hand. With two soft pops he freed his lower eyelids, and waited for the sluicing tears. He had begun to enter the world of duplicity. He was passing through the doors of deception, with their chains of lies. And all London swam.[23]

Through the doors of deception, Guy enters an unscrupulous modern world of illusions and distorted moral values, the duplicity of which lies in the fact that the unstable and fragmented self, the artificially created identities, are the curse and simultaneously one of the basic conditions of postmodern life. Guy's qualities such as kindness, generosity and justice are rather burdens in the world where the people's basic goal is satisfaction of their desires regardless of what harm it could do to the others. The environment Guy hopes to find the meaning of life in will inevitably use him up, and what awaits him most of all is hostility toward anything moral or traditional which must result either in his retreat or unavoidable destruction.

Nicola is the character who is most comfortable with the setting of the story. Guy is ridiculously lost in the city, Keith survives there because it can satisfy his primitive desires, but Nicola not only understands the true nature of the environment, she is also able to make use of it for her own benefit. Due to her knowledge, experience and the essential capacity of self-reflection, she copes with the complexity of the modern urban life and uses these skills to manipulate and eventually destroy the weaker ones. While Guy is walking the streets in vain to find something that is no longer there to be found,

22) Ibid., p.153
23) Ibid., pp.86-7

and Keith is desperately and usually unsuccessfully trying to cheat some other people to have money for his countless drinks and cigarettes, Nicola feels independent, elated as she walks down the streets "stretching her arms as if they were wings for flight"[24].

Even for Sam, the city is something more than he can fully cope with. As he gradually realizes that he is losing his control over the story and thus admits his inability to pick up the postmodern spirit of literature, he also admits his inability to understand the city streets:

> There was a time when I thought I could read the streets of London. I thought I could peer into the ramps and passages, into the smoky dispositions, and make some sense of things. But now I don't think I can. Either I'm losing it, or the streets are getting harder to read. Or both. I can't read books, which are meant to be easy, easy to read. No wonder, then, that I can't read streets, which we all know to be hard ...[25]

Therefore, one of the functions of the city in the novel might be the comparison between the complexity of the modern city and its culture to that of postmodern literature. Like the playful contemporary writings, the modern city life requires close and analytical "reading" as well as some additional knowledge and experience to preserve one's own identity from being entirely dissolved in the unstable or "liquid" (as Zygmunt Bauman calls it[26]) modernity, as well as to detect the various meanings and interpretations of the city's various, often mythical, discourses.

However, the main and most significant role of the city in *London Fields* is to represent the state of modern civilization in the process of its moral and ethical decay. London is depicted as a place with the "sense of approaching catastrophe" in which the winds "tear through the city", the omnipresent rains "try to wash something unclean in unclean water", where the streets remind one of "dark chambers of the elaborately suffering city" with all the people already dead. In its overall atmosphere of unavoidable collapse people appear "helpless against these [negative] forces. You can't stop them – the century says you can't stop them"[27], and as they find themselves more and more

24) Ibid., p.125
25) Ibid., p.367
26) See Zygmunt Bauman, *The Liquid Modernity* (London: Polity Press 2000)
27) Martin Amis, *London Fields* (London: Penguin Books 1990), pp.329, 43, 205, 391, 412

helpless and desperate against the circumstances and pressures of the modern civilization, they grow indifferent and childishly dependent on the superficial simulacra through which they are trying to live in order to get rid of the "unbearable lightness of being". It is Sam's act of saving the innocent child, the demonstration of love and moral strength, that finally averts the disaster, at least temporarily, suggesting thus that only precious human feelings together with responsible moral choice can save our postmodern dehumanized civilization from its doom.

3.4 THE CITY AS (UN)LITERARY BATTLEFIELD – *THE INFORMATION*

Yet Another Hero

The Information (1995), together with *Money* and *London Fields*, completes Martin Amis's loose modern urban, or London, trilogy. In part, along with their immediate predecessor, *Other People; A Mystery Story*, the three novels attempt to catch and depict the atmosphere - pleasures, worries, anxieties, struggles and other particularities characteristic of city life in the postmodern era which shows more and more dehumanizing tendencies.

What the three novels undoubtedly have in common is the urban setting of either London or some American metropolis. However, it would be a great mistake to say the same about their main heroes, or, better said, anti-heroes. Amis managed to populate the relatively similar urban environments by seemingly almost related, yet in fact quite different characters whose behaviour, no matter how similar it might appear, is driven by very distinctive motivating forces. It would be rather misleading, superficial or even ludicrous to claim that there is some explicitly direct and profound link between the three men. Like Talent and Self, Richard Tull finds himself suffering from a frustrating state of mind, that the world around him offers success, fame and money but he seems either unable or unwilling to take the right steps. What distinguishes them, however, are

the means they employ to reach their achievement and also the environment in which they move. The way Tull acts may well be understood as a protective mechanism against the emptiness and superficiality of the commercial culture in which he, as an artist, must inevitably suffer.

Richard Tull is by no means the third brother of the Talent-Self family. Despite some similar vices and habits shared with Self, he could not be further socially, culturally and morally removed from Talent. Additionally, no tertiary institution for a spell could turn those two into the intellectual, erudite and excessively thoughtful, though unsuccessful London writer. Yet Amis does not miss the chance of a bitter and poignant commentary that in his fictional world such differences are more and more difficult to distinguish and detect:

> ... the truism is true, and the criminal *is* like an artist (though not for reasons usually given, which merely depend on immaturity and the condition of self-employment): the criminal resembles the artist in his pretension, his incompetence, and his self-pity.[1]

The Information can, above all, be read, using Richard's meditative thoughts, as a contemplation of the very nature of fiction writing, the modern writer's deal, for it is predominantly a novel about literary competition and those phenomena which inevitably accompany it – envy and malice. Yet the novel's thematic structure is far more complex than those of its predecessors since it involves such varied subject matters as numerous autobiographical reflections of Amis's own literary career, rendering of the peculiarities of publishing, book market, and the deliberate tastes of the reading public, post-structuralist treatment of the de-centered self, references to Greek mythology, general astronomy, other literary works, as well as to the contemporary nation-wide debate about childhood and children's safety (caused by two recent brutal child murders[2]).

1) Martin Amis, *The Information* (New York: Vintage Books 1995), p. 76
2) See James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis* (University of South Carolina Press 2004), p.156

The Postmodern Modernist

To understand the role of the urban milieu of the novel, it is necessary to briefly outline Richard Tull's approach to literature as such. As he bitterly points out: "Literature wasn't about living. It was about not dying. Suddenly he knew that writing was about denial. Suddenly he knew that denial was great. Denial was so great. Denial was the best thing. Denial was even better than *smoking*"[3]. However, Richard finds himself incapable of such denial at least in one respect – in taming his fury and jealousies toward another writer, regardless of how good he is or how successful he deserves to be.

Richard's writing block is caused by the fact that he has got stuck between two different literary movements, postmodernism and modernism, out of which he struggles to fulfill the standards of the latter while, simultaneously, finding himself unable to abandon the maxims of the first. And thus, his novels deliberately bear elements of modernist prose to reach the quality that, in Richard's opinion, good literature should inevitably have – to be difficult to read. At the same time, he is aware that purely modernist books would be considered an anachronism on the contemporary literary scene and therefore he decides to employ truly postmodern devices, especially his sixteen unreliable narrators and complicated time schemes, and insert them into the modernist atmosphere of his books, believing that by so doing he might reach another stage of the novel's progress, the one which should follow after postmodernism gets exhausted. Yet, he has not avoided making a crucial mistake for he has assumed the position of an uninvolved outsider critic who laments over the culture's devaluation without perceiving himself a part of the cultural milieu and discourse. He thus has violateed one of the maxims of postmodernism (which he strives to become a spokesman of) that "you cannot step outside that which you contest, that you are always implicated in the value you choose to challenge".[4]

However, although Richard seems to be lost in a dead-end-street as far as appreciated literature is concerned, there is one aspect of the modern prose he is firmly convinced of:

3) Martin Amis, *The Information* (New York: Vintage Books 1995), p.337
4) Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1992), p. 223

> Essentially Richard was a marooned modernist. [...] Modernism was a brief divagation into difficulty; but Richard was still out there, in difficulty. He didn't want to please the readers. He wanted to stretch them until they twanged. ..] *Untitled*, with its octuple time scheme and its rotating screw of sixteen unreliable narrators, sounded like a departure, but it wasn't. As before, all you had was a voice. This was the basket that contained all the eggs. And the voice was urban, erotic and erudite...[5]

No matter how desperate and fumbling he appears in his attempts to assume the role of an unrecognized modern literary genius, one thing Richard knows for sure: if literature does not want to give up its commitment to the contemporary social, cultural and political situation, it should by all means represent the urban voice with whatever consequences it brings along, to demonstrate that modern literary discourse is that of a city and its environment. Richard fails in transforming this urban voice into his novels and is put to shame by a second-rate author of a best-selling pastoral bland. However, the urban voice is not silenced by that fact, since it becomes well heard in Amis's interpretation of Richard's story. There it gets loud, provocative, comic and thus becomes a brilliantly disturbing force the reader feels on almost each page of the novel.

The City of Conscience

Underneath the main story of Richard Tull, an unsuccessful and unrecognized writer who is planning to mess up his incredibly and unjustly celebrated friend's life, the vast untidiness of male middle age: indecision, competitiveness, impotence, petty jealousies, vanities and greed, we can find an equally exciting and significant story of Richard Tull, a modern city dweller at the end of the millennium, a story that not only coincides with but also crucially influences the overall plot of the novel.

What Richard experiences seems to him like a bad dream, a nightmare from which he finds himself unable to wake. The atmosphere of Amis's city corresponds with and contributes to that feeling from the very first lines of the book: "Cities at night, I

5) Martin Amis, *The Information* (New York: Vintage Books 1995), p. 125

feel, contain men who cry in their sleep and then say Nothing. It's nothing. Just sad dreams. Or something like that..."[6] Like these men, in his male vanity, Richard is too proud to admit that he has been crying in his sleep. The city of *The Information* might thus be taken as a parallel to his desperate and confused state of mind, a map of its main protagonist's anxious soul. And so we learn that "in the dawn, through the window and through the rain, the streets of London looked like the insides of an old plug" or that "from outside through the shivery window came the sound of fiercely propelled metal as it ground against stone, shearing into the sore calcified struts and buttresses with sadistic persistence: the house, the street, the whole city, taking it deep in the root canal"[7]. The city is permanently perceived as something mysterious which the reader is allowed to peep into, like he or she is given the privilege to take a glance into the character's mind and thoughts.

There are several aspects characteristic of the way London is depicted and described in the novel – the first is that the city is humanized, described in terms of human qualities and vices that, as a result, reminds the reader of its inhabitants' states of mind or feelings rather than the mere setting of the action. Another aspect is that it is viewed with a certain distance, as if from the outside, through a window, or from a car, which creates the effect of the city as an individual, isolated organism living its life only seemingly separately and independently from those of its observers. And so when Richard is going in a cab round the city, what he sees is not the actual physical environment, but an image of a human soul, more precisely that of his own:

> Here perhaps was the only way to see London truly, winging low over it, in a cab, in darkness-at-noon July. London traffic lights are the brightest in the world, beneath their meshed glass: the anger of their red, the jaundice of their amber, the jealousy of their green.[8]

The city is endowed with the capacity to mirror accurately its citizens' confusions, frustrations and anxieties, to display and make them as transparent as possible for their owners, so that they can become even more aware of them. From this point of view the

6) Ibid., p.3
7) Ibid., pp.4, 47
8) Ibid., p.23

city, as it is presented by Amis, might embody the conscience of not only its inhabitants but also of the whole modern civilization – the emblem of the civilization expresses the its ultimate state of mind. And since this state of mind is, for various reasons, loaded with guilty, burdened, it is more desirable to keep away from it, to suppress it somewhere back in one's unconsciousness. When Richard is to get off the cab, he observes:

> Jesus, the light through the open door looked like the end of London, the end of everything; its guttering glow was livid now, and something you wouldn't want to touch, like the human-hued legs of pigeons beneath their dirty overcoats.[9]

It is as if getting off the car was like leaving the safe but fragile shell of one's self-deception, of getting ready for the painful confrontation with reality and thus, unavoidably, with the conscience.

The urban voice can thus be understood as the voice and persistent reminder of human conscience, a disturbing and warning reflection of people's behaviour in the modern or postmodern Western capitalist civilization. It assumes the role of an uncompromising mirror of the contemporary crisis of humanity in a society too frequently neglecting or even ignoring moral values that seem still more and more incompatible with the generally accepted and followed principles, and harder to exercise in an atmosphere dominated by individualistic, and often egotistic, impetuses based on immediate gratification of needs and desires.

The Languages London Speaks

However, the city in the novel does not only function on the symbolic level since Amis makes it physical through frequent vivid description of its, predominantly, but not only, poorer parts. The individual descriptions are neither very long nor connected with one another so they form a sort of series of scenes from urban life. In these scenes, London, with its "fagsmoke summer air", "stinky night streets" and an "endless supply

9) Ibid., p.24

of cars"[10], is presented as a rather unpleasant, sinister, generally unhealthy place inhabited by crowds of lonely and hostile people.

There are even parts of London so desolate that they have lost the character of a city and have become the anti-city, or underworld. From the description of Landbroke Grove we learn that it is:

> ...that patch of London owned by bums and drunks, exemplary in its way – the model anti-city; here the pavement, even the road, wore a coat of damp beer (in various manifestations) which sucked on your shoes as you hastened past. Crouching men with upturned fucked-up faces... It made Richard think of Pandaemonium and the convocation of rebel angels – hurled like lightning headlong over the crystal battlements of heaven, falling and falling into penal fire and the deep world of darkness.[11]

The devastated parts of the city full of poverty, filth and stinking pubs are depicted in terms close to those of the Apocalypse, places of entire darkness with their desperate inhabitants, lost like the fallen angels, wandering aimlessly and listlessly around with complete absence of faith or hope.

The modern urban existence is shown not only as one in which poverty and affluence coexist without interfering much with each other, but also as that in which social class and race awareness still plays a very significant role:

> ... in the street outside, the old divisions of class and then race were giving way to the new divisions: good shoes versus bad shoes, good eyes as opposed to bad eyes [...], different preparedness for the forms that urban life was currently taking, here and now.[12]

The big city is an environment in which, due to the coexistence a great number of people in one limited space, the encounter of members of different social classes as well as various races becomes inevitably very frequent, and though these encounters have been going on for ages, they are still characterized by their protagonists' incapacity to find a common language, a mutually understandable and acceptable means of leading a sensible and functioning conversation. When Richard is to deal with the young shop assistant, he

10) Ibid., pp.49, 170, 83
11) Ibid., pp.42-3
12) Ibid., p.33

realizes that:

> The young man looked at Richard with pain and pre-weakened hostility. [...] What divided the two of them, in the shop, was words – which were the universal (at least on this planet); the young man could look at Richard and be pretty sure there were more where *they* come from. [...] Beyond, in the back, in a valved heap like the wet city, lay all the stuff that wasn't working, and would never work again: the unrecompleted, the undescribed.[13]

The Keith-Guy or Scozzy-Richard cases are just extreme demonstrations of a more general phenomenon – the inability of modern people living in the modern, global, world with a very various and diversified cultural discourse, to find a global language which would obliterate the differences and consequent complications resulting from different social, cultural and racial background of the individual members of the society. The postmodern city thus reminds us of the legendary city of Babylon, with the difference being that its inhabitants speak the same language but find themselves rather difficult to understand because of the isolation into which they have been voluntarily imprisoned by their social class or race awareness and pride.

The modern civilization comprises a great variety of partial social-cultural discourses and the cosmopolitan and commercial nature the of urban environment suggests that big cities are places where the encounters of these discourses become the most perceptible and contrasting since the individual discourses have assumed distinct forms of the given "official" language – from academic terms, via mass media misuse or even abuse of the language, to various dialects, sub-dialects and slangs derived from the social stratification and divisions of the society. While the first are variants of the language created to follow certain goals, the aim of which is not to become incomprehensible, the aim of slang is to separate the users by making them incomprehensible. When the criminals Scozzy and Steve Cousins disclose some of their Cockney rhyming slang terms, he considers it innocuous. Richard is not aware of the counter-productive or even dangerous effects such language separation can bring along: "Richard, whose internal alarm was not what it ought to be, felt quite at home"[14]. In this respect, Richard represents a typical modern city dweller who, instead of being alarmed

13) Ibid., pp.33-4
14) Ibid., p.140

by finding himself in an environment he is absolutely unfamiliar with, feels comfortable when he learns a minute part of its language. He does not realize that the whole process is not that of making friends but that of warning, or even threatening demonstration of the gap between Richard's and the two men's social and cultural milieu.

The Urban Pastoral

As in *London Fields*, where one part of the novel's disturbing effect is created by the striking contrast between the inappropriate and almost pastoral title, though the title itself is paradoxical, and the description of the brutally violent, aggressive, dirty environment of London's underworld it should denote, in *The Information*, Amis further develops this ironic contrast by creating the notion "the urban pastoral". It is especially used in situations when Richard walks across one of the London parks with his little son, Marco. At first it is presented as a possible place of calmness, relaxation, and a break from the persistent and permanent pressure and hostility of surrounding concrete and the impersonal metropolis:

> Hand in hand they did their tour of the urban pastoral, the sward beneath the heavenly luminary, its human figures brightly half-clad at rest and play. [...] Walking here, he felt the pluralism and the petty promiscuity and, for now, the freedom from group hostilities. If they were here, these hostilities, then Richard didn't smell their hormones; he was white and middle-class and Labour and he was growing old. [...] It sometimes seemed that he had spent his whole life avoiding getting beaten up (teds, mods, rockers, skinheads, punks, blacks) but his land was gangland no longer: violence would come, if it came, from the individual, from left field, denuded of motive. The urban pastoral was all left field. There was no right field. And violence wouldn't come for Richard. It would come for Marco.[15]

Unlike with the rest of the city, Richard's perception of the park seems to be that of a peaceful place, a precious oasis in the urban desert of hostility. However, what we get,

15) Ibid., p.99

in fact, is a self-deceptive image of a man who, paradoxically enough, appears to feel secure in his calm, relatively established, routine and dull middle-class middle-age life he normally considers so annoying. On the one hand, Richard foolishly believes that in the park, the only piece of nature the city can offer, he, because of his social level and age, can find himself safe from and without the reach of the city's omnipresent violence and hostility. He also expresses an opinion that, because of their tendencies to form various groups and gangs, the universal violence is attributed to the young and children and, therefore, they are most likely to become subject to it. On the other hand, he admits that there still remains the danger of violence from an individual, violence without a motive.

By this contradictory statement Richard demonstrates his lack of understanding of not only the essence of violence but the whole phenomenon as such. The division into group, or organized, violence with some motive and motiveless brutality of individuals is a dangerous simplification of this pathological tendency in human behaviour. The result is, thus, rather confusing – the urban pastoral is a place where those who have reached a certain age can feel secure from the somehow motivated group violence but where, at the same time, no one can avoid the individual, senseless violence. Moreover, as Richard himself admits, the grown-ups are permanently threatened by the danger of violence that might always be committed against their children. Therefore, as the novel proceeds, the park, symptomatically called "Dogshit Park", soon loses all the pastoral attributes so that only the urban ones remain – what the reader is left with is a disturbing description of a closed crime scene:

> Perhaps the urban pastoral was all left field. There was no right field. And now came a moment when London seemed to configure itself for the observing eye, and grossly, like a demonstration.[...] Richard moved through the loose talk of the loose clump of mums and heard their choric song: a little girl this time; in the summer it had been a little boy, and the crime-scene tape had played on the other path.[16]

The "urban pastoral" is a rather ironic term since nothing pastoral, in the full meaning of the word, can be found in the modern city. Even the seemingly natural urban places –

16) Ibid., p.138

parks – are an inseparable part of the city's organism, metaphorically observed and controlled by the city's eye, hiding thus in themselves similar dangers as the rest of the city environment.

The Urban American

Some less favourable reviews of the novel state that once the setting shifts to America, *The Information* gets weaker or even collapses. On the one hand, it is true that the novel shifts into a new milieu which does not have some of the qualities characteristic of the London setting, especially the close, persistent and sinister breath of the city the reader feels from the depiction of the London scenes. However, no matter how much the atmosphere of the novel changes, one aspect remains – it is still urban since the London environment is replaced by those of New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. On the other hand, it is important to say that the American section is necessary to elaborate the fact that when Richard acts on his envy of Gwyn, he paradoxically brings about the very thing that tortures him: Gwyn receives even more literary fame and recognition, and so the whole section is essential to the escalation of Gwyn's success and Richard's misery.

To highlight the resonant comic effect of his writing, Amis switches the familiar West End London setting of his previous works to a quick succession of seven American cities, and the result is, apart from other things, a "memorable series of urban portraits"[17]. Despite having been living in London for decades, in America Richard gains a new experience with cities, especially when he is confronted with their vastness and giganticness. He sees that compared to a megalopolis like New York, London reminds him of a provincial town, but it is in America that Richard realizes how violent and disturbing the interference of such a megalopolis is for the natural landscape. He also notices the unhealthy effect such great city has not only on its inhabitants but also on people who are, for various reasons, forced to spend some time there: "The big city

17) James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis* (University of South Carolina Press 2004), p.149

turns up their volume dial; it floods faces with heat; it makes them young and bad and lewd [...] The megapolis makes them overdrink, of course; the Smoke makes them smoke, too, some of them: they light up with a flourish and tell everyone how long ago they quit..."[18] It is here where he comes to understand how unnatural and artificial the modern overtechnologized urban civilization is, imprisoned in overcrowded streets so long and wide and under buildings so high that the inhabitants, have long lost the slightest chance of getting in touch with nature and therefore of the comprehension of the very essence of human existence, as well as of the awareness of the true, sadly alienated, and rather alarmingly self-destructive, state of the planet's ecology at the end of the millennium.

In Chicago, Richard finds himself in an even more desperate and frustrating state of mind from the very first moments he appears there. Trapped in a huge traffic jam all the way from the airport, in depressing misty and rainy weather, he observes how enslaved by and dependent on the modern technologies people have become. When he finally arrives in Chicago, the first views of the city are rather dark and pessimistic:

> And then at last they were in the city or under the city, with its halls and chutes and stanchions of steel, and you were a lab-rat in the rat-trap of steel Chicago. Richard suddenly felt that American cities were the half-mouths of lower jawbones and held a monstrous acreage of wedged dentition; with those bigteeth they have, no wonder their gums whine with permanent maintenance and repair, all the deep scaling and root-canal work, the cappings, bridgings, excruciating extractions.[19]

While London, is depicted as an environment predominated by other people's hostility and violence of various kinds that one must unceasingly attempt to avoid or ignore, where you should be very attentive not to get into a trouble but, simultaneously, where there is at least a slight chance that you may manage to escape the city's long fingers, there seems to be no such chance in Chicago. The city reminds him of a pair of great steel jaws permanently threatening to damp their teeth together in which Richard feels desperately trapped and in which one is sentenced to await passively what is going to be done to him or her.

18) Martin Amis, *The Information* (New York: Vintage Books 1995), p.249
19) Ibid., pp.247-8

The next stop on their American tour is Los Angeles, but this change does not bring any good to Richard's state of mind either. Once again, his never-ending misery is compared to the vastness of the city. However, unlike the other American cities, Los Angeles is presented not in depressingly dehumanized terms, but in terms of culture, although in those of its mass, commercial variant:

> And Richard's body knew that whatever it was Richard stood for – the not-so-worldly, the contorted, the difficult – had failed. Los Angeles sought transcendence everywhere you looked, through astrology or crystal or body-worship or templegoing, but these were stabs at worldly divination, tips and forecasts about how to do better in the here and now.[20]

Los Angeles, with all the imaginable forms and variants of popular culture and the consequences their uncritical and excessive consumption brings along, represents the centre and living symbol of the real art's devaluation which thus becomes the reminder of Richard's failure in his attempt to contribute to the complicated struggle against this process as well as his misery resulting from the conflict between literature and popular trash in which victory and fortune seem to incline to the latter side. By comparing his book to the city: "As Gwyn had truckingly told his audience, during the warm-up at the reading, Los Angeles was Amelior... With differences"[21] Gwyn admits that this hippie-utopia is just another product of popular culture and thus bears all the main features of such a prototype – it is not derived from the author's urge to create or say something new, or original, but from the contemporary demands of the masses and with the intention to please them. Richard's problem lies in the fact that he is not willing to wait, he is too impatient to let the time carry *Amelior* as well as its author's fame away. On the one hand, he wishes to write a timeless, immortal literary masterpiece, an artistic message for the future generations, but on the other hand, his ego is not able to stay above its vanity and grows too preoccupied with the "here and now".

If the whole American tour is used to intensify and escalate Richard's desperate state of mind, the individual cities contribute, to a great degree, to this resulting effect since they not only welcome his literary and life nemesis but also, in their vastness and giganticness, more than anything else he has experienced in his life, evoke in him the

20) Ibid., p.272
21) Ibid., p.272

idea of the end of civilization, the final stage of humankind. The result is quite surprising for Richard since he misses not only his home and family but also "the shape and color of London skies"[22]. In comparison with the American megalopolises, London appears to be a rather minor and harmless realization of a town-planning project.

A City to Be Feared?

The city's world, or better said underworld, also becomes vivid in the perception of the characters of London criminals. Their world and its distorted values are examined with irony through their slang, a contorted version of working-class English, as well as their understanding of reality. For example one of them, Steve, meditates over the difference between the city and the country as far as the safety is concerned during which he comes to an interesting conclusion: "It all proved that the town was safer than the country. The trees were more dangerous than the streets. The city was like world opinion – it held you back. The fields held no one back. [...] Given the leisure (the privacy, the seclusion), you don't stop. It's the ... reverse righteousness. [...] What held him back wasn't his strict instructions – but the city"[23]. Steve appreciates the city environment for its high social control which prevents him from committing a crime with every step he takes, which he thinks would inevitably happen if he lived in the country where he supposes he would have more opportunities to avoid such control. Ironically, and in opposition with how it is perceived by ordinary people who are afraid of the anonymity the urban environment provides the criminals with, Steve shows that, in fact, he has no idea why he prefers being in the city since he naively believes that the city discourages the criminals from causing more evil than is necessary.

The everyday struggles of the modern urban life are not contrasted only with the criminal underworld, but also with the innocent and peaceful pastoral world of childhood, the traces of which Richard keeps fruitlessly trying to discover in various places in London. As he is leaving London for Lady Demeter's mansion, the road

22) Ibid., p.277
23) Ibid., pp.162-3

leading into the countryside makes him recall the image of an unspoiled, idyllic childhood:

> its green world, unfallen, where the lion lay down with the lamb and the rose grew without thorn. In the city you looked for this world, in Dogshit Park, in the Warlock Astro Turf, in the ravings of the wild boy, in the leaden pages of *Amelior*. The green world symbolized the triumph of summer over winter; symbolizing that triumph, though, was all the green world could do, because here was winter and the cold he feared.[24]

Richard realizes that the idealized world of childhood is nothing more than a symbolic remembrance of what the world might have been once, but which can never be brought back to life, especially in the conditions of the cold, emotionless city.

Towards the end of the novel it is not only Richard who suffers from being a city dweller. As we gradually discover his true character, Gwyn begins to feel rather uneasy in the city streets. The more his real self is disclosed, the more hostile way the city seems to behave towards him: "The universe, the world, the hemisphere liked him. But the street didn't like him, and the city didn't like him. [...] Before, the city had never paid him any mind [...] ... But now the city behaved as if it wanted to break his face". Gwyn notices that although the masses praise and welcome his literary works, there is something in his life the city does not appreciate at all: "Whereas applause and praise were gathering, circumambiently, in response to the new thing he had brought into the world, his novel, his gift, the world itself – the streets, which stretched away, in folds and folds - and begun to hate his being"[25]. He realizes that such an attitude, unlike Richard's, has nothing to do with his writing, success or fame. Once again, the function of the city could be understood as that of the human conscience that keeps punishing its bearers for their sins and vices – in Gwyn's case for his hypocrisy, conceit, vanity or cynical conjugal infidelity.

24) Ibid., pp.193-4
25) Ibid., p.301

The Postmodern Alter-egos

The majority of the negative reviews of the novel claim that there is a great deal of Richard Tull in Martin Amis, an accusation based on Amis's real-life melodrama, and that the book was written to manifest Amis's guilty conscience for "having gone greedy and American". I personally consider such an opinion a misunderstanding of the writer's intention, if not of the whole novel as such. The book might seem a bit long and some passages incomprehensible or confusing for a reader who is not accustomed to Amis's style, but its author is too clever, talented and capable of irony and self-irony so that the book is by no means a result of his apologetic humility on one hand or revengeful bitterness on the other.

The Information is not only a story about a mid-life crisis and all the vices connected with this state of mind, but also, above all, an absorbing meditation upon the nature and role of fiction in the postmodern era and beyond, written in provoking language with Amis's typical verbal felicity and coinage. Amis brilliantly depicts this struggle of literature in the modern urban environment dominated by commercial mass culture, its values and demands which art can and should neither compete with nor conform to. By letting Richard say to Gwyn that "whatever happens, we balance each other out. We're like Henchard and Farfrae. You're part of me and I'm part of you"[26], Amis shows that the two writers are more than mere envious enemies. Since neither of them is credible enough for the reader to identify with, rather than rivals, they represent the alter-ego to each other, the two sides of the postmodern writer's inner struggle between the high-principled voice of the artist's consciousness and the comfortable temptations of popular culture.

The satirical design of the novel also, a well as all Amis's fictions, occupies with the post-structuralist disbelief in the idea of a solid centre of self as well as the illusion of stable, transcendental meaning. The very title of the novel is a part of this design since it keeps making the reader expect some revealing, clarifying information which, however, is being repeatedly "deferred" throughout the book. Therefore, instead of the liberating "truth", the reader is left with a chain of misinterpretations which mars any

26) Ibid., p.358

hopes for decoding the text by showing them hopelessly illusionary. Diedrick claims that "*The Information* is Amis's most deconstructive novel; Richard's failed plotting, and his failures of interpretation, point toward an unsettling indeterminacy. So the novel's dark ending, an emotionally charged 'pregnant arrest' that abandons the generic stability of satire and leaves the reader stranded in the realm of nightnmare."[27]

Like in *Money* or *London Fields*, Martin Amis's bitter, violently hostile and loveless world of *The Information* is entirely a modern urban one, set especially in London of the end of the millennium. *The Information* also further deploys the urban character of Amis's novels, as the city is becoming a more generalized milieu the meaning and role of which has been widened from a mere background setting into the universal symbol of the postmodern civilization. As Amis himself puts it, while *Money* is "about a city" and tries to "compare one city to another", in *London Fields* he is "writing about the planet", and "by the time you get to *The Information* then it's the universe"[28].

3.5 MARTIN AMIS'S NARRATIVE

Martin Amis is an extraordinary and unique writer in the context of contemporary British literature, and therefore it would be misleading and incomplete to analyze or discuss his novels without mentioning the specific attributes of his narrative which make his fiction what it is: a hilariously comical and simultaneously sarcastically sinister reading in which highly enjoyable passages alternate with complicated or even enigmatic ones. Martin Amis is undoubtedly a postmodern writer, and therefore reading his books requires much more than a mere following of the story; it takes aesthetic as well as cultural and political insight. Moreover, most of his narrative techniques are

27) James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis* (University of South Carolina Press 2004), pp. 147-148
28) M. Reynolds, J. Noakes, *Martin Amis, The Essential Guide* (London: Vintage Books 2003), p.13

closely related to the urban character of his novels.

However, calling Amis's fiction postmodern involves far more than stylistic analysis, and his style is inseparable from his larger general outlook since recent - and frequently not only recent - historical, political, social and cultural developments have definitely shaped the postmodern concerns of contemporary artists. James Diedrick in his *Understanding Martin Amis* quotes Sven Birkerts, a theorist of postmodernity, who considers three historical conditions as definite and exclusively influential in the process of dealing blows to the Enlightenment-inspired fiction of individual autonomy, stability and perpetual progress: 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"[1].

The world of Amis's fiction, with its central motif of the increasingly unstable, vague and fragile nature of selfhood, precisely corresponds to this definition. It is an alineated and fragile nature of selfhood, precisely corresponds to this definition. It is an alienated milieu of desperate individuals who restlessly try to find or at least artificially make up their identity in the atmosphere of the ever-present threat of nuclear catastrophe, struggling for an authentic experience in culture relentlessly mediated by commercial demands and virtual simulacra of reality which persistently keep persuading them what "real" life should be like. It is not surprising, then, that logical or at least understandable motivation which is to lay behind the traditional acts of the novel's characters seems to be exhausted, used up, or is no longer available. "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."[2]. It is no accident that Amis's novels consistently emphasize the socioeconomic forces that shape his characters. By doing so, they implicitly question the bourgeois myth of individual autonomy.

1) James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis* (University of South Carolina Press 2004), p.18
2) Ibid., p.19

Another logical and very significant consequence of the postmodern situation in the narrative is the destruction of the narrative connection traditionally based on causality, continuity, and linear progression. The combination of persistent threat of the potential planetary destruction and the permanent and intrusive influx of non-linear representations of reality by various electronic media reduces the sense of time to an eternal and self-obsessed present. The unavoidable result is that the fiction also shows its awareness of this condition and reflects it by an increasingly complex manipulation of narrative temporality. As we can see in his novels, Amis consistently interrupts, disrupts, subverts (and in *Time's Arrow* even inverts) chronological order, so that time itself becomes a subject of his fiction. The logical consequence of employing these postmodern devices is a different, more demanding reading that sometimes might border with the readers' paranoid feelings about what kind of game the writer is playing with them. This fact is wittily parodied in *The Information* in which the main character, Richard Tull, writes novels of such complexity that readers get literally sick from attempting to read them.

Therefore, if life has changed dramatically in the last decades of the twentieth century, the novelists' quest should correspond to this fact. It follows that not only the subject matter but also its treatment must change as well since the traditional narrative forms lack the potential of doing so. It is thanks to his techniques, which are mostly a profound method of confronting the often-repressed truths and taboos, that Amis manages to deal with subjects such as nuclear warfare, incest, murder, Nazi death camps or perverted sexuality so skillfully that he reaches an outrageous, uncanny and grotesque comical effect. Amis is a self-consciously postmodern writer, and every novel he has written reflects, at some level, a modification of this socio-cultural condition. In my thesis I would like to demonstrate Amis's postmodern narratives predominantly on the novels *Money* and *London Fields*.

Money – The Narrative Voice and the Author as a Character

The very first and most obvious postmodern feature in *Money* is the main hero, or better said anti-hero, and simultaneously the narrator himself. John Self brilliantly personifies the dominant, popular commercial cultural environment in which he, but also the author and the readers, though with various consequences, finds himself "comfortably trapped". He is an advertisement for the world he has been trapped in, a perfect product of this culture – glittering, tempting, sometimes even funny, yet shallow, simple and temporary – one to be consumed, used up and thrown away. The result, thus, is a ridiculous creature who is both awfully despicable as well as comically pitiable. Amis ironically gives his hero the name Self so that he could show, through the various narrative voices, that he has no coherent self that has been dissolved in the shallow vagueness of his existence since he is aware that "postmodernism establishes, differentiates, and then disperses stable narrative voices (and bodies)" by doing which it "both installs and then subverts the traditional concept of subjectivity"[3]. The narrator as well as his self is thus dissolved to correspond with the plurality of identities and discourses characteristic of the contemporary urban life.

As I already pointed out in Chapter 3.2, Self's language is a hilarious mixture of slang and vulgar words mixed with vocabulary used in his favourite media, television and pornography, and therefore reminds the reader of that of commercials – short and clear sentences with frequent repetitions of words or whole phrases. Yet because of this fact rather than in spite of it, Amis grants Self a first-person narrative voice. This has a disturbing effect on the readers: letting Self speak for himself sets loose an ironic playfulness that both deepens as well as disarms his horrors. Self's accurate and cheerful recognition of the harm his vices do to himself and others, though he is mostly interested in the harm he does to himself, makes it very difficult for the readers to judge him. The eloquence of his language does not lie in its content but in its form; he never allows the reader to become comfortable which he accomplishes by rapid andunexpected shifts in style. As Diedrick puts it: "Amis's language becomes a kind of character here (and in his other novels) – self-conscious, virtuosic, vying for attention

3) Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1992), p.118

with the plot and the other characters"[4]. Through this voice, the city ceases to be a mere setting but alters into a formative force of the narrative.

Yet the most distinctive postmodern device Amis employs in *Money* is the persona named Martin Amis that appears in the story and that is more significant in the overall context of the novel than it might seem. Throughout the whole book there are clues, which Self turns out to be unable to follow, that suggest some larger artistic structure. Self permanently feels that he is being controlled by someone, he even has the real insight that his life is taking on an artistic aspect. At the beginning of the novel he even admits that: "Things still happen here and something is waiting to happen to me. I can tell. Recently my life feels like a bloodcurdling joke. Recently my life has taken on a *form*"[5].

Amis's appearance inevitably gives the novel a metafictional character. When the Amis character agrees to become Self's script counselor, he comes across the troubles that mirror the critical controversies in postmodern narratives. When Self complains that: "We have a hero problem. We have a motivation problem. We have a fight problem. We have a realism problem"[6], he in fact spells out the concerns of Amis's fictional world – the protagonists are freaky anti-heroes with their motivation rarely fully comprehensible, often involved in grotesque violence – an environment which, rather than conventionally realistic, obeys only a certain fictional logic. The whole scene gets very ironic since Self wants to depict his own life, which bears all the elements mentioned above, but demands a life hero with a clear-cut motivation in a realistic story.

It is necessary to say that the Amis character is treated with the same comic irony as Self. Despite having the author's name, the character of Martin Amis is by no means allowed any absolute detachment from the story as he is just another, though far more self-conscious, unfortunate city dweller. On the one hand, Self claims that "[his] respect for Martin Amis knew no bounds"[7], yet on the other one, he pays attention to him only when he speaks in terms or about subjects close to him. When Amis is trying to explain

4) James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis* (University of South Carolina Press 2004), p.15
5) Martin Amis, *Money* (London: Penguin Books 1985), p.3
6) Ibid., p.237
7) Ibid. ,p.296

to him why heroes are scarce in modern fiction and the distance between the author and narrator, Self responds to him with just an occasional "Uh?" and the final complaint that he "had just stabbed a pretzel into [his] dodgy upper tooth"[8]. In some respect, Self refuses to be a mere authorial joke and asserts certain autonomy.

Amis is very reluctant to reveal his real role and identity in the novel and the readers are given clues that point to Fielding Goodney. Self also feels at first that Goodney is responsible for the joke his life has become. From this point of view the final scene in which the Amis character and Self are playing chess, after Self's financial dissolution and immediately before his suicide attempt, represents the crucial act of revelation since it is here that the Amis character assumes his true identity. At first he maliciously describes the details of Goodney's plot, revealing thus the clues he has left himself and enjoys the moment when Self does not recognize that he, in fact, no longer talks about Goodney but himself. Then suddenly Self begins to understand the larger structure he has been involved in and realizes Amis's role as the author. When he says *'I'm the joke. I'm it! It was you. It was you.'* he has also realized his status as a character. This realization is approved by his subsequent act when he unsuccessfully takes a swing at Amis and the description of the act is opened by a wonderful announcement by Self: "I didn't see my first swing coming – but he did"[9].

However, no matter how much a victim of his author's postmodern assumptions about fiction Self might be, he never loses his fundamental autonomy within the novel since he maintains his ignorance of his role in a fictional character, of the reasons why things are happening to him in a particular way. Self's relative autonomy from the Amis character is also reinforced by the ironic fact that they both must make their way in the cultural marketplace where Self's TV advertisements are far more commercially successful than Amis's postmodern narratives. Thus, through the Amis character the novel deals with the dilemma of a serious writer in a commodity culture indifferent to traditional artistic values.

Yet Amis goes even further in his game with readers; at the novel's opening he says that: '*This is a suicide note. By the time you lay it aside (and you should always*

8) Ibid., p.246
9) Ibid., p.379

read these things slowly, on the lookout for clues or giveaways), John Self will no longer exist'. However, Self survives his suicide attempt and even narrates the last section of the novel as if from a position outside the book as a piece of art in which the Amis character shows up briefly only to be told by Self to abandon it again. And so Amis's status as an artist, and creator, which has just been affirmed is vehemently rejected by his own creation. By doing so, Amis parallels himself with John Self whose attempt to make a film version of his early life fails similarly to Amis's struggle to impose artistic order on his life. This motif of the protagonist's attempt to turn his life into art is explored not only in *Money*, but also in *London Fields* (as I will try to show later) and in *The Information*.

The writer thus both rejects and asserts his responsibility for what he has written which is jut another paradox of the postmodern poetics. Assuming, on the one hand, the death of the concept of the artist as unique and originating source of final and authoritative meaning proclaimed by Roland Barthes, on the other hand, it establishes the position of the producer of the text, discursive authority encoded in the writer-reader encoding/decoding process. As Hutcheon puts it: "the position of the producer of the text is being rethought. After all, readers – however free and in final control of the act of reading – are also always constrained by what they read, by the text". As a result of that, "the producer of the text (at least from the reader's point of view) is never, strictly speaking, a real or even an implied one, but is rather inferred by the reader from his/her positioning as enunciating entity" turning the reader into a "collaborator instead of a consumer"[10]. Therefore, the novel can be read as a contextual web of various, by no means only verbal, discourses in which the urban milieu plays a highly shaping and influential role.

London Fields – The Theme of Narrative Authority

In *London Fields*, similar postmodern narrative devices as in *Money* reappear,

10) Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1992), pp. 80, 81

yet they are far more developed, complex and profound. Moreover, the novel's overall atmosphere is not only, like in *Money*, mediated by the pertinacious commercial culture of mass media, but also by the omnipresent threat of nuclear catastrophe. Set in the future, though not a very remote one – at the end of the millennium, the novel's environment, no matter how hilariously comical and swift it might be, is permanently doomed by the apocalyptic vision of modern civilization which has, in the end, utterly destroyed itself.

The idea of uncertain authorship corresponds fully with the structuralist and post-structuralist rejection of the notion of the self as a conscious subject that is 'dissolved' as its functions are taken up by a variety of intertextual forces that operate in the narrative. Such self can no longer serve as a primary source of any kind of meaning; and so an act of enunciation or text can only be created in relation to other acts or texts as well as conventions and other strategies of a given system that are required for their comprehension. "In the case of the literature ... we can construct an 'author', label as 'project' whatever unity we find in the texts produced by a single man. But as Foucault says, the unit of the author, far from being *a priori*, is always constituted by particular operations. Indeed, even in the case of a single work, how could the author be its *source*? He wrote it, certainly; he composed it; but he can write poetry, or history, or criticism only within the context of a system of enabling conventions which constitute and delimit the varieties of discourse. To intend a meaning is to postulate reactions of an imagined reader who has assimilated the relevant conventions"[11]. Such understanding of a text's authorship, thus, requires a different, more conscious and attentive reader. A good example is the narrative duality of Amis's earlier novel *Other People* that makes reading of the story more demanding as he turns out to be not a mere narrator but a character with crucial influence in the story. Mary's attempts at rediscovery of her earlier self are described and commented on by the all-seeing narrator who enters the action in the form of a police detective called John Prince. However, it takes the reader a great part of the book to realize that Prince and the narrator are the same person. It is because Prince, like Mary, has a past as her murderer, the past the reader has to rediscover, simultaneously with Mary's rediscovering of her identity, to understand the

11) Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (New York: Cornell University Press 1988), p.2

story properly. But although the narrator's power and control over Mary's life in the beginning seem omnipotent, throughout the novel that control diminishes as Mary approaches her true, independent self. Finally, in the epilogue he admits that he is not in control anymore which immediately poses the question about the relationship between the author and the narrator and, consequently, the implied authors and the possibility of authorship as such.

The narrative complexity of *London Fields* is distinctively reflected in its characters who are far more narrative functions than genuine humans. The character of Nicola Six can be interpreted as a symbol of the morally exhausted modern civilization that is unavoidably approximating its destruction in consequence of nuclear armament and the liquidation of the natural environment. Then there is Keith Talent, probably the most comical and simultaneously despicable character Amis has ever created, whose function in the novel is to represent the very essential vulgarity and shallowness of the pseudo-reality created by the media culture, as well as the pitiable but unforgivable nature of senseless and unreasonable violence. Guy Clinch, the archetypal gentle giant, then, with all his moral values, personifies the dying out humanity trapped, literally caught in clinch as his surname suggests, in the world controlled by the tough, dehumanized and cynical (Nicola) and inhabited by the narrow-minded, deceived and happily ignorant (Keith). However, the crucial postmodern element in *London Fields* is the highly thought out and developed concept of the unreliable narrator, since there are as many as three personas who aspire to become the ultimate narrative authority in the novel, so that they can finally surrender to the presence of their creator, Martin Amis's larger structure, the metafictional hide and seek with the readers.

The distinction between various narrative authorities is kept right from the beginning when, in the Note, the author with the M.A. initials refers to his narrator with whom he 'kept ironic faith' by doing which the distinction between the author who disposes of some higher level of knowledge than his narrator is ironically implied. Consequently, we cannot be sure whether the narrator's views will correspond to those of the author. What the reader deals with, then, is an unreliable narrator, a narrator who does not inevitably have to lie but is by the novel, for some reason or other, shown as someone one can hardly trust. Having technically established himself an authority, Amis

seemingly clears away the stage and invites the characters to take up this role and thus creates confusion in the text and dramatizes the aspiration to authorship. Apart from Sam Young, there is Nicola with her power over Sam and consequently over his story, and finally, the mysterious Mark Asprey whose role in the narrative is made explicit no sooner than in the last pages of the novel.

The first person who aspires to be the narrative authority is the narrator of the story, Sam Young, a New Yorker who hopes to break his writer's block in London by writing a kind of 'documentary novel' in the best realistic tradition – as the omniscient and omnipotent narrator who, paradoxically, claims that he puts things down exactly as they happen. At the beginning of the novel he expresses self-confidence and even gratitude for the story that is to happen: "Novelists don't usually have it so good, do they, when something real happens (something unified, dramatic and pretty saleable), and they just write it down?"[12] by doing which he also shows his incomprehension of the writer's true role. His lack of imagination and artistic creativity makes him wait until something 'real' happens that he can transcribe into a novel, and also causes him never to be able to assume the position of an omniscient narrator. It is not surprising then that his attempt to write his story gradually changes into a process of painful realization of his folly.

The fact that Sam is dying prevents him from keeping the necessary distance he should keep from the story itself to remain reliable enough and causes his overall knowledge of the events he wants to narrate to be limited. Unlike M.A., the implied author who is thinking about the most suitable title for the novel he has before him, Sam is forced by the unfortunate conditions of his life to report the events as they happen instead of inventing a story of his own, and, therefore, he soon finds himself trapped by the events he is trying to catch up with and record:

> Real life is coming along so fast that I can no longer delay [...] I think I am less a novelist than a queasy cleric, taking down the minutes of real life. Technically speaking, I am also, I suppose, an accessory before the fact, but to hell with all that for now. I woke up today and thought: If London is a spider's web, then where do I fit in? Maybe I'm the fly. I'm the fly.[13]

12) Martin Amis, *London Fields* (London: Penguin Books 1990), p.
13) Ibid., p.3

Such a position of the 'narrator' is logically reflected in the structure of his narrative. By fancying himself a kind of historian, he is taking a vow to write as objectively as possible, which is quite far from the requirements of fiction as it is defined and understood. What he writes is, in fact, a kind of fictional documentary or diary, the present transformed into the written form, in which the writer describes the events as they happen, and therefore must come as close as possible to these events if he wants to gather enough materials for his narrative. Moreover, to get his story completed he becomes dependent on what its protagonists tell him.

Sam's whole idea is so naive and preposterous that Amis does not even bother himself and the readers with an eloquent gradual disclosure of his role and gives him away even before the novel starts, in the Note, assigning the status of a narrator to him, a fictional character who has been created by someone with the M.A. initials. Only Mark Asprey in his letter conceitedly reminds him of the foolishness of his presumptions: "You don't understand, do you, my talentless friend? [...] It doesn't matter what anyone writes any more. The time for it mattering has passed. The truth doesn't matter any more and *is not wanted*"[14]. And when Sam eventually gets involved in Nicola's plot, no matter how moral and ethical this act might be, he inevitably fails in his presupposed artistic project since he no longer maintains the ability to finish his novel – he decides to influence or change the reality instead of just writing it down.

Due to his limited understanding, he is unable to abandon the position of a mere witness to the story projected and controlled by Nicola, with the minor and unwilling co-actors Guy and Keith. Sam is overwhelmed and fooled by Nicola in both literary terms as well as those of practical life: "She outwrote me. Her story worked. And mine didn't. There's really nothing more to say. Always me: from the first moment in the Black Cross she looked my way with eyes of recognition. [...] Imagination failed me. And all else"[15]. He admits her superiority over both his work and life experience. The two main causes of that are his inability to avoid taking any moral stance toward what is happening in his story, resulting in keeping an insufficient distance from it, together with the wrong understanding and evaluation of Nicola's strategies. The latter cause,

14) Ibid., p.452
15) Ibid., p.466

which may also be described as the inability to change or adapt one's initial expectations to the conditions and development of the action, can be taken as an illustration of the "false reading". As a misled reader, Sam becomes a victim of his limited imagination and creative experience resulting in the inability to stay open to more possible interpretations of the events and to spot the hints and change his rooted vision of the whole, remaining locked in his only interpretation of reality.

Therefore, once again, Sam utters the persistent phrase of the novel: "I failed, in art and love"[16]. The fact that he fails in art is more than obvious. The novel is finally completed as a work of art, but with a new ending and the addition of Sam's diary it is no longer his novel – it is a new book in which he is not the disembodied narrative voice but a mere character who once and forever resigns all his literary aspirations realizing they are more than he is capable of fulfilling, as he himself notices in his final diary entry: "I feel seamless and insubstantial, like a creation. As if someone made me up, for money, And I don't care."[17] In fact, by killing Nicola, Sam destroys his own novel. His sudden appearance as the murderer absolutely destroys the narrative coherence of the version of the story he is writing – *London Fields* without the diary entries - since it is in a sharp conflict with his idea of himself as a reliable narrator who records everything just as it happens.

Another source of information about how Sam discovers the true nature if his story and his own role in it is his diary. We must not forget that the diary was not originally intended for the reader of *London Fields* and, therefore, what we learn from it is as if behind his back, against his will. On the one hand, he ensures the reader that he writes the true story just as it happens, but on the other, from the diary parts we learn that he in fact permanently helps the events along by active interventions to keep the story going on. As a result, by adding Sam's diary to his novel we are allowed to enter the secret chamber of his creation and, thus, gain definite proof of his unreliability as a narrator despite all his attempts to persuade us otherwise.

The character who is obviously much more in control of the story from the beginning, then, is Nicola Six since she differs from the other characters in the way she

16) Ibid., p.467
17) Ibid., p.470

is treated by the author – she is entirely independent. Unlike Sam, she neither becomes a target of irony because of her ignorance of the postmodern narrative structure nor a victim of other characters' manipulation or control, unless she herself wants to be manipulated as a part of her tactics. Although she cannot be the last person in the chain of narrative authority in *London Fields* since the novel does not end with her death, she bears many features of an implied author.

The fact that it is Nicola who gives Sam the idea of following and writing down her story makes clear who is in control of the novel from its very beginning. Moreover, unlike Sam, who is always quite unsure about the future of his novel since he has to rely on what its protagonists are willing to tell him, Nicola is endowed with the capacity to see into the future, so she knows how the story is going to end up which enables her to plot the actions according to her overall plan, while Sam is left only with temporal speculations. Never throughout the story does Nicola lose her control over the events, nor has she become a victim of someone else's mockery or manipulation. As a result, thanks to her independence, Nicola is the character who can most aspire to narrative authority in *London Fields*. However, although she is given certain privileges and abilities other characters in the narrative lack, it is more than obvious that she is not the last link in the chain of narrative authority – the novel does not end with her death, and, quite paradoxically and maybe also ironically, it is Sam who, though having been 'outwritten' by Nicola, is given the last voice on the closing pages of the novel.

Nicola's power lies in her self-reflexivity, she comes to understand the nature of self and text in the postmodern narrative. She knows that her identity is an artifact, a set of various roles she can immediately assume and change, a dynamic fictional device as opposed to something stable and context-free. And so in true postmodern spirit, she can represent the code of high art and ethics for Guy as well as that of popular culture, low art and even pornography for Keith, both to serve her own purposes. Her awareness of this unstable self enables her to be free in her distance from other characters, including Sam. Yet there is a question why she uses her freedom, her superior position for self-destructive purposes, to plan her death. There is more than one answer to this question since the character of Nicola Six itself allows more interpretations, from the embodiment of modern culture which has exhausted itself and is morally collapsing to

the role of a implied author who knows what is going to happen simply because he or she has planned it, and, driven by purely aesthetic motives, paradoxically presents and performs her death as an act of artistic creation.

Unlike Sam, who believes he can avoid the postmodern condition in his book, Nicola is well aware of the impossibility of separating the author's self from his or her piece of art. The fact that Sam has not realized that he, in fact, features as a character in Nicola's story, which he is writing, is the most crucial cause of his downfall. Therefore, when he finally decides to step into the story, the lesson he learns is that of the impossibility of an entirely remote self as well as of the narrative as such. Nicola, on the contrary, understands the postmodern notion of the unstable, dissolved self and, moreover, is able to apply this knowledge in practice which grants her not isolation, but a sufficient distance and freedom from other characters, the freedom she can use for whatever artistic purposes. Her fragmented personality is reflected in the various roles she skillfully assumes to fit the other characters' fantasies which enables her to control the events as an authorial authority. Nicola thus can be taken as a writer disposing of the knowledge of the impossibility to escape the fragmentation of real life identities which opens her to the possibility of gaining freedom and creating a coherent fictional self. Driven by purely aesthetic motives like a postmodern writer, perhaps like Amis himself, Nicola is entirely in control of the protagonists or plot and manipulates them only to suit the overall plan of her story. However, she cannot resist the temptation to intervene in the story and assert her control, be it at the expense of the destruction of the illusion of her authorship.

The character of Mark Asprey, despite his physical absence in the novel, is another person aspiring to authorial control in *London Fields*, another person whose narrative we might be finally reading. Throughout the whole novel he remains a ghostly, mysterious figure whose precise role is never revealed. The reader is given just pieces of information about him in Sam's diary where Sam describes his conversations with Nicola or Asprey's house keeper or from his letters to Sam. Yet, even from these bits, it is obvious that Asprey is a strong personality; he is successful and self-confident but also arrogant, which are the qualities Nicola appears to be attracted by. He is the only man about whom she speaks in positive terms or even with respect:

> The only one she [Nicola] kept going back to, the only one who was half a match for her, 'the only one I've ever been *stupid* for', the handsomest, the cruellest, the best in bed (by far): he's called MA.[18]

He is also the only man who is not directly included in her plan unless the whole action is meant as a punishment or revenge for something that happened between them. Although his role in Nicola's life is not entirely clear, one thing we know for sure – she still feels attachment to him as she confirms about her relationship to MA: "Some things are never over"[19].

Asprey stands third in the line of the possible narrative authorities in the novel. When Sam eventually handles his writing to him, he loses the last chance of maintaining a bit of authorial autonomy. Asprey demonstrates his newly gained power over the text by ignoring Sam's wish to "throw everything out"[20] and, moreover, adds Sam's diary to the novel against his will. With both Nicola and Sam out of his way, Asprey is left with the opportunity and material for a new novel. And so the question remains: are we reading his novel? When the initials M.A. from the introductory Note reappear in Nicola's diary attributed to Mark Asprey, the reader is led to think of him as the ultimate author figure. Asprey's function in the novel is underlined by his enigmatic identity whose existence the reader has to trace attentively since he remains a ghostly character.

It is important to say that the function of the Mark Asprey character gains full significance only when we consider the initials shared with Martin Amis - that of a reminder of the fact that both Sam and Nicola, despite their narrative or control over the plot, are only narrative fictional devices with limited authority. It is above all Amis who is in control of the novel, who is the ultimate author figure and who, through Asprey, never lets the reader forget this fact. Therefore the Mark Asprey character can be understood as Amis's means of control through which he steps into his narration to demonstrate his power over his writing.

18) Ibid., p.160
19) Ibid., p.305
20) Ibid., p.466

The Authorship Questioned

Although, unlike in *Money*, Martin Amis does not show up as a character in *London Fields*, the chain of the three potential authorial figures makes the reader aware of his presence within the text even more. When we gradually discover that Nicola is behind Sam's acts and that Asprey is behind Nicola's, it is unavoidable that we expect Martin Amis behind Asprey, which reduces him to just another fictional creation. Undoubtedly, in concord with the postmodern condition, the novel questions the notion of stability of literary authorship as well as the clear borderline between fiction and reality by maintaining, as Diedrick notices "a balance between the two perspectives – that of the character(s), and that of the godlike author's fictional incarnation, the narrator [...] the connection between the presence of the manipulative, self-conscious narrator within the fiction and the fictional characters who are ultimately seen to be victims of the capricious narrator"[21]. Amis, like other postmodern authors, explores the very borderline between the discursive nature of reality and fiction through the ironic juxtaposition of narrative voices, characters, or whole fictional, semi-fictional, and so-called real worlds. Such strategy not only wipes off the difference between reality and fiction, but also reasserts the close connection between the writer and his or her work, claiming the inseparability of the writer's voice from the fictionally discursive milieu it creates.[22]

With postmodern fiction, thus, there is always the possible danger, caused by the ultimate dissolution of reality in fiction and vice versa, that the author might avoid any responsibility for his or her novel and its characters at all. Yet, although narrative authority is thematized and problematized in most of Amis's novels, we must interpret the problem entirely as an expression of the one who constructed the problem. The borderline between fiction and reality is eventually restored as the producer of the text returns to assert his authority by reinserting the distance between himself and what he writes. Therefore, in the overall disorderly, confusing and chaotic fictional world of his novels Amis manages to establish some kind of order through asserting his discursive position.

21) Jamed Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis* (University of South Carolina Press 2004), p. 27
22) See Stanley J. Grenz, *Úvod do postmodernimu* (Praha: Návrat domů 1997), pp.35-38

What is most of all questioned, then, is not the very existence of the authorial figure, but his or her role with respect to the act of writing. The traditional omniscient writer may well be dead, yet another one must necessarily have been born. This new author's role more and more, rather than in presenting stories, lies in his or her assuming a position in the contextualized web of written texts and other forms of discourses, and the consequent handling of the narration. However, the author's role is far from mechanical production of texts composed of what has been said and written before for it means, above all, a skillful combination and confrontation of these discursive forces through choosing narrative strategies which do not sterilize them by making them dumb but, on the contrary, allow and urge them to "talk" to one another. From this point of view, Amis's literary city with its diversity serves as a rich source of such discourses which Amis manages to let speak in his novels. Therefore, his characters are shown as more or less powerless participants in the perpetual process of production and misreading of these discourses, due to which they find themselves trapped victims of the urban milieu, lacking the essential capacities to decipher what the city tries to tell them.

IV. IAN McEWAN – FROM THE HAUNTED TO THE MORAL CITY

Unlike Martin Amis, Ian McEwan is not an exclusively urban writer yet the urban environment frequently occurs in his works. Although McEwan's novels differ substantially from Amis's in both style and subject matter, there are elements and motifs their narratives have in common and the use of the city as the crucial setting is one of the most significant one. While in Amis's novels the role of the urban environment is more or less similar and it differs mostly in its intensity or profundity, McEwan's use of the city in his works is more varied as the enigmatically symbolic cities of his early works differ substantially from those of his later ones. This chapter focuses on McEwan's four works in which the urban milieu appears most – *The Cement Garden*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, *The Child in Time* and *Amsterdam*.

4.1 THE CITY'S BAD DREAMS – *THE CEMENT GARDEN*

Ian McEwan's short novel or novelette, *The Cement Garden* (1978), is a modern form of a gothic story with various elements of mystery, fear and cruelty. The idea of four children living together alone after their parent's death, overcoming their sorrowful situation by means of loyalty and mutual care seems almost like a fairy tale story. However, what the reader is offered is a kind of lunatic dream which eventually develops into a nightmare.

McEwan gradually creates an atmosphere of perfect isolation and loneliness, a world, or maybe better to say a pseudo-world, in which the four children feel happy and safe, but also a world which is, thanks to its moral and emotional regression and decay, so at odds with the outer one that there is absolutely no chance or hope of returning to normal life for its inhabitants. There are many aspects which contribute to the creation of that world, especially the location of the house the story takes place in, the parents and the way they bring up their children and the four children themselves. In

combination, they form a bizarre atmosphere of perversion and distorted values and norms in which even the most unpredictable situations are suddenly quite likely to occur. And as they pile up, the reader is left with the feeling that in the characters' world nothing is certain, stern or under control, and that simply anything can happen without any further explanation.

Although the characters live in London, the fact that the story takes place in a city seems, at least at first sight, rather insignificant. There are almost no streets, no crowds of people, no traffic or other things typical of the city life. On the contrary, almost all of the story is set in or around one family house. Yet the city, not only through its absence, plays a much more significant role in the novel than it might seem. It is only in a big city where such a story is possible to happen.

The Urban Wasteland

The setting of the novel plays a very significant role in the development of the story. The action takes place in London, but in a suburban part of the city and, moreover, in the demolition zone where all the houses, with the exception of the one in which the family lives, have been pulled down because a new motorway was to be built there. However, for some reason, the original plan failed, the demolition was stopped, and the place was left in the form of a vast area of deserted houses in ruins with the only one remaining.

Such location has its obvious consequences, both physical and psychological – there are no other houses, no streets or people. There are no neighbours you would meet and talk to everyday, no people to be friends with, no shops, places for entertainment for either the parents or their children, simply no social life at all. Under such circumstances, you have only two possibilities – either to move your house if you have a chance to do it or to put up with the situation as it is. In the case of the latter, even a more sociable and outgoing person is inevitably forced to withdraw into his or her privacy and spend more time at home. Yet there is one more important consequence of such lack of social life and peopled neighbourhood – as there is no one to watch over

you, no instance of social control or surveillance in either positive or negative sense, and you are to take the whole responsibility for your acts.

It is not necessary to point out that people who live in cities are generally more isolated, more alienated than people in smaller towns or villages. Because most of their time they spend in company of other people, mostly those whom they do not know, especially crowds of anonymous people in the streets and means of transport, it is comprehensible that they often prefer to spend their free time either alone or only with their families in their homes or outside the city. In most cases, city inhabitants do not tend to form any local communities and are not very interested in what is happening in their neighbours' house or flat. More than anywhere else, the claim to privacy contained in the saying 'my house is my castle' can be applied to them. Thus, as a result, the rate of social control in big cities is quite low.

If there is only little mutual social control in an ordinary city with houses, streets and everything, how much social control can we expect in the place into which McEwan introduces the reader? The characters of *The Cement Garden* live in a part of the city which ceased to bear any features of a neighbourhood a long time ago. The only house in the abandoned area can therefore easily be changed into a mysterious place in the middle of a wasteland where anything could be going on without anybody's knowing, noticing or even suspecting:

> Our house was old and large. It was built to look like a little castle, with thick walls, squat windows and crenellations above the front door. Seen from across the road it looked like the face of someone concentrating, trying to remember.[1]

The Happy Nightmare

After their father's death, for a short time, and also for the first time in their life, the four children experience a sort of a family idyll. The atmosphere has changed a lot. Now it is rather peaceful and, although the children still have rows among themselves,

1) Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden* (London: Vintage Books 1997), p.23

they all enjoy the feeling of relative freedom, the feeling of not being commanded, mocked and controlled. This atmosphere can probably be best demonstrated at Jack's birthday party. The party turns out to be quite successful, the four children all having performed something to entertain their mother. However, he does not recognize that this idyll is not far from changing into a bad dream from which it will not be easy to wake up. One would hardly call these good conditions for a happy childhood. Life in the house seems smothered, flattened, all the feelings, emotions and joys which are quite usual or even necessary for a healthy family life, for the children's development as well as for the development of the interpersonal relationships, are ignored or suppressed.

Under such circumstances it is very difficult to enjoy one's childhood with all its possibilities, secrets and adventures, or at least to find some pleasures one would remember for the rest of his or her life. For Jack, his two sisters and his little brother, the only pleasures are those that erupt beneath the rigid surface, pleasures of a bit surprising character with the regard of the children's upbringing based on strict discipline and ultimate control – more or less infantile and joyless sexual games. These games only serve as a substitute for all ordinary games and activities with their friends or schoolmates in which the children's suppressed emotions, curiosity and sense of adventure could normally be employed.

Having learnt all this, the reader might feel astonished by the fact that, in spite of everything, all the children still prefer staying at home to going out. What prevents them from escaping from the oppressive environment of the household? What holds them back in the house? The answer to these questions is not an easy one since there seem to be causes of this seemingly incomprehensible fact.

At first there is the model provided by their parents. As far as Jack remembers, they have never left the house to visit anybody, nor have they invited any of their relatives or friends, and so he doubts if they ever had any:

> No one ever came to visit us. Neither my mother nor my father when he was alive had any real friends outside the family. [...]
> As far as I could remember, the last people to visit the house had been the ambulance men who took my father away.[2]

2) Ibid., p.23

In addition to this, the children's isolation is strengthened by the family rule which says that none of the children is allowed to bring any of their friends into the house. And it is quite possible that little children, who see great authority in their parents, easily adapt to such rule and consider this isolation as an ordinary norm of human behaviour.

The only occasion when the children are left home alone is when their parents have to attend a funeral. The whole situation is strange from the very beginning – the children do not know exactly who died in the family because their parents, for some reason, do not talk about it. Instead, they are instructed about this single afternoon as if the parents should be away for at least a week. The several hours immediately change into a few stolen moments of wild and willful disobedience, the only moments of Jake's childhood worth remembering.

The second thing is that, in fact, the children, with the exception of little Tom, have no friends either in the further neighbourhood or in school. As a result, they all spent their leisure time in the house. In addition to this, the story takes place during summer holidays, a time when no control from the side of school can be expected, which also contributes to creation of the obscure atmosphere of isolation and rather easily abused freedom the abandoned children must suddenly cope with.

However, what makes the story really weird is the personality of the narrator, if we can talk about personality in his case at all. Although Jack is not willing to accept it, he is very much like his father whom he detested. He is a person who is closed into a world of his own not because, unlike his sisters, he wants to, but because he has no other possibility. He is a selfish boy full of complexes who is unable to find his own self. In his search for identity, which consists of various protests, he permanently hurts or offends somebody, being it his mother when he refuses to wash himself, or his sisters when he demands their attention, by using either verbal or physical violence. When his mother dies, he feels sorry not for her but for himself because he knows he has just lost the only person in the family who really cared about him and who paid attention to him and his wishes. He cries because he feels cheated that his mother did not tell Julie that they both should be in charge of the household.

Jake's attempts at gaining attention make him choose between two possibilities - to be 'included' among the others, which for him means his two sisters, and in their

activities, being those of whatever kind, or to remain 'excluded', left alone in his own world of emptiness. Since he does not know what to do with himself when he is alone, he deliberately decides for the first possibility even if it is against his conviction and what he considers natural. In the case of his sisters, it usually means activities he does not understand or agree with or which he even considers humiliating, but which might bring the expected effect – he becomes the centre of their attention, simply he is being watched.

Jack's struggle to be included complements other novels' male characters attempts to be accepted by the female natural authority. As David Malcolm points out: "As with the family tensions [...] exclusion seems to be male-driven in *The Cement Garden*. The father's manic orderliness and desire for authority, Jack's boorishness and violence, and Derek's desire to play the 'big smart daddy' and lead to the exclusion from others, from the female family members. Only as a naked child, and in terms of gentleness and equality (or even submission, for Julie initiates their intercourse), can Jack find inclusion. In this respect, too, *The Cement Garden* shows itself to be clearly critical of traditional male behaviour"[3]. The novel thus introduces one of McEwan's favourite themes – ridicule of the illusory belief in the male dominance in the world. On the one hand, the novel can be read as a study of modern people's deprivations – the children's wish for a complete and functioning family, Jake's and Derek's struggle for a place in the world of women, or all the children's desire to live an ordinary urban life. However, on the other hand, it can be understood as a warning picture of the unnatural and devastating effects of the exclusively male-dominated patriarchal social order.

However strange, incomprehensible or ridiculous the children might be at the beginning of the novel, the more the story moves towards its end, the less real they seem. The are consistently growing more unpleasant, unlikable and bitter to the point that the reader can hardly believe in them or identify with any of them. By taking up social roles different from their own, the children gradually form a very special community, members of which could never play such roles in the outer world. Though in a rather absurd or even perverted way, his community eventually looks like what the children, often subconsciously, miss and long for – a family with emotional

3) David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (University of South Carolina Press 2002), pp.62-63

interpersonal relationships.

In the last chapter the children change completely; they are no longer nasty and callous, if not downright cruel, with one another. They cease to argue and call each other names and create a specific, harmonic family-like community which is no longer probable to appear in reality. The only thing which remains is their hostility towards the outer world. As a result, the unreal atmosphere of the novel resembles daydreaming in which it is as if time stopped long ago and no longer matters. Therefore the question arises if it is still the same story or just a dream. Jack himself describes the state as a sleep:

> Except for the times when I go down to the cellar I feel like I'm asleep. Whole weeks go by without me noticing, and if you asked me what happened three days ago I wouldn't be able to tell you.[4]

However, like every dream, this one is very fragile and is quite easily smashed into pieces by the first intruder from the outside world. Although Derek is not a strong rival, he still manages to break into the children's territory and spoil their "happiness". Their quiet passivity at the end of the novel shows that they can neither understand what is really going on nor realize the consequences of their acts. They get stuck in their dream till Tom is awaken by the police and Julie symbolically concludes the story:

> "There!' she said, 'wasn't that a lovely sleep."[5]

The Urban Nightmare

Above all, the novel depicts a collapse of norms, rules and order which have been replaced by various forms of their violation. Therefore, at the end of the novel, three of the children are naked, Jack has joined his little brother by his retreat to babyhood, Jack and Julie have committed incest and she also reveals how much she despises Derek for his following the rules. Yet Malcolm suggests a more complex, allegorical reading: '*The Cement Garden* presents a striking picture of how people can

4) Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden* (London: Vintage Books 1997), pp.134-135
5) Ibid., p.138

behave not immorally, but in ways that are indifferent to normally accepted standards. In doing so, it offers what one can view as an even more frightening image of human potential. The children are not evil or immoral; they simply seem indifferent to the rules and norms of their wider society and of most readers' culture.' Therefore, he suggests to read the novel "not just as a highly generalized account of childhood indifference to social norms, but as a depiction of a specifically British rejection of a sterile authoritarian and patriarchal past. In this respect, it is worth noting that the restoration of order at the end by the police eerily prefigures the attempted recovery and reimposition of traditional values that marked British political life in the 1980s. *The Cement Garden* aims for, and achieves, a timelessness, but it is also a text very much for its own time, a kind of mini twisted 'Condition-of-England' novel"[6].

The Cement Garden is a story set in the atmosphere of a dream, a dark dream which gradually changes into a nightmare. It is a story which only a city could invent, the urban nightmare of alienation, isolation and loneliness of its inhabitants, with all the possible consequences they can cause in their behaviour. What Ian McEwan offers us is a devastated, perverse urban scenery where there is no hope for the characters. Nevertheless, the story could be, in my opinion, understood as a warning against the possible dangers of city life, a stressful and hectic existence among crowds of other people, and the phenomena it can accompany it – human indifference, anxieties and emotional deprivations, flatness and emptiness, which could drive their victims to deeds they would otherwise never commit.

6) David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (University of South Carolina Press 2002), pp.64-65

4.2 THE CITY'S BLIND SPOTS – *THE COMFORT OF STRANGERS*

The Sleepwalkers

Published in 1981, *The Comfort of Strangers* is, after *The Cement Garden*, McEwan's second longer prose. Although both these works are developed around similar, in fact identical, motifs, that of the nature of violence, evil, cruelty and fear in modern civilized human society, the later novel is much more difficult to grasp, as well as open to various interpretations. While *The Cement Garden* can be understood as a myth, an allegory or a gothic fairy tale with quite a simple, yet absorbing and original, plot, *The Comfort of Strangers* is a lifeless and almost motionless story which lives and operates more outside the narrative than in the actual fabric of the text.

Both stories might be imagined as bad dreams - nightmares - but dreams of different kinds; the first has a story, narrative continuum, which the reader can, in the great majority of cases, deduce straight from the text. Therefore the narrative functions not only outside the text as a whole, but also through its individual parts, sequences, events or actions, which are related to one another and thus progressively contribute to the development of the overall story. The latter, on the contrary, is built as if on the absence of any action with the exception of the final murder. Rather than events or actions the narrative consists of individual still images and therefore the reader is provided with a set of lifeless episodes which can be, more or less, replaced by one another since they follow a cyclic pattern in which the same motifs are repeated over and over again. In these episodes it is the atmosphere rather than the action that affects the reader and influences his or her reading – it is the gloomy atmosphere of passive vulnerability caused by mechanical stereotypes and indifference or even apathy that foreshadows the tragic ending of the story. In both the novels the characters often find themselves in a state similar to that of between sleep and vigilance, acting and speaking mechanically as if they were somnambulists trying to find their beds, sleepers forced by some unknown invisible outer forces to wake up and keep on living their lives against their will. The result is that not only the protagonists of the novel but also its readers perceive the story as if through a translucent glass.

The creation of the overall atmosphere of the novel is based on a mixture of four main sources. The first are the smells and noises that appear throughout the story – the omnipresent odour of dead fish "mingled with the sharp smell of strong coffee and cigar smoke", the "cloying sweet scent of [Robert's] aftershave"[1] or cologne, the noises from the piers, pontoons and boats, and the human voices of the local workers or tourists in the streets, cafés or other hotel rooms. The second are the various effects and consequences of the phenomenon of massive tourism. The third is the peculiar nature of the relationship between Colin and Mary, the fourth then the setting – the city and its mysterious environment.

The Tourist Siege

All of the first and a large part of the second chapter can be understood as a narrative essay on the phenomenon of mass tourism and its impacts on both the tourists as well as the local people. Bauman in his works *Úvahy o postmoderní době* and *Globalizace*[2] clearly defines the most crucial characteristics of tourists and global tourism. At first, he distinguishes a postmodern tourist from the pre-modern and modern character of a tramp – unlike the tramp who is permanently forced to move from one place to another, the tourist differs in the fact that he or she does not have to travel, it is entirely a matter of his or her free choice. Tourist's journey is well planned, organized, often thought out in detail a long time in advance, its destination selected before the actual journey starts.

Therefore, what the tourist does is exclusively influenced by his or her own will and motivation. He or she pays and therefore demands and sets conditions and expects submission, compliments and services from the locals – the tourist lacks any humbleness and suppleness towards the local world. The tourist consumes this local world and therefore should never feel at home there or make close friends with the local

1) Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden* (London: Vintage Books 1997), pp.30-31, 15
2) See Zygmunt Bauman, *Úvahy o postmoderní době* (Praha: Slon 1995), pp.49-53 and *Globalizace* (Praha: Mladá fronta 2000), pp. 93-120

people. Mass tourism thus reduces the local inhabitants of the tourist's destination into poor and helpless natives whose only task is to make the tourist's stay as enjoyable as possible.

Yet there are several paradoxes mass tourism logically brings. The majority of such tourism is rather passive and is reduced to gathering ready-made experiences which have been torn out of the context of the original culture and remade into an attractive facade which can be easily expressed in monetary terms. What the tourist then brings home are standardized souvenirs manufactured in hundreds or thousands without any trace of the unique authenticity of the real artifact and the country reduced to a series of photographs. Another problem is that tourism in its modern form has lost its original purpose or function – to explore the unknown places, to encounter and experience the otherness in all its various forms since majority of mass tourists demand on their travels the same, or at least very similar, comfort they are used to from their homes. We can mention yet one more significant paradox (although still not the last one) resulting from mass tourism and it is how it affects the local culture. The local people find themselves in the position of the poor whose would-be prosperity depends on how many tourists they are able to draw and tempt into their country. The result is then that the tourist, in search for an unknown, exotic place, enters a world which has lost its originality and does not differ much from his or her home environment.

McEwan's Tourists

If we take into consideration the facts mentioned in the previous section and have a look at the quotation by Pavese at the beginning of the book (that 'travelling is a brutality' because you are far from your home and friends and you have to trust people you have never seen and who usually do not speak your language) then we immediately realize that Colin and Mary are almost perfect prototypes of mass tourists. They soon pick up all the basic habits of such tourists and their stay falls into some internally, yet not quite consciously, organized stereotypes and routines; all their activities have their given time, being it sleeping or smoking marihuana. As a result, their life in the

attractive city, instead of exciting, spontaneous and exotic, appears rather monotonously cyclic, rationally structured, and controlled due to their inability or unwillingness to give up the comfort these stereotypes offer them:

> It was mid-summer, and the city overflowed with visitors. Colin and Mary set out each morning after breakfast with their money, sunglasses and maps, and joined the crowds who swarmed across the canal bridges and down every narrow street. They dutifully fulfilled the many tasks of tourism the ancient city imposed, visiting its major and minor churches, its museum and palaces, all treasure-packed.[3]

Tourism as rendered by Colin and Mary is a duty reduced to a series of mechanical acts, deprived of all the possible joy that springs from spontaneity. They dully and obediently behave as they believe people in their place should do, following the instructions from the official guidebooks.

Like other tourists, Colin and Mary develop in themselves attitudes towards the local inhabitants. At first they try to protect their privacy and feel uneasy even when the maid tidies their beds. However, they gradually become so indolent and accustomed to the locals doing everything for them that they are willing to sacrifice anything to their comfort without much hesitation. They soon realize that the best local person is that who does some service for them but whom they, at the same time, do not see or do not have to deal with. Massive tourism controlled by money has altered the local people into commodities. What the phenomenon of tourism thus ruins is the possibility of natural dialogue between the local and the stranger since that is reduced into terms of money, commodities and services. Moreover, such people no longer represent the local culture for they stand as some kind of mediator between their culture and the visitors. The tourists' natural longing for contact with some "genuine" local person is also one of the reasons why Colin and Mary at first welcome Robert's company, no matter how strange his behaviour and monologues are. And so when Robert takes them into his bar they "in turn asked the serious, intent questions of tourists gratified to be talking at last to an authentic citizen"[4].

3) Ian McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers* (London: Vintage Books 1997), p.3
4) Ibid., p.17

The City's Scapegoats

The two main protagonists of the story are lifelong daydreamers who wander aimlessly not only around the city on their holidays but also in their own lives. After seven years of their relationship not only passion but also mutual tolerance have been exhausted and their co-existence has altered into a chain of routines, habits and stereotyped acts which they do just because they have been doing them for too long to change anything. Thus the result is that as a couple they are weaker and more vulnerable than as separated individuals. Yet they are not able to get separated even for a short time, maybe because they are afraid they might not find their way back to each other anymore. However, the fact that they have lost the capacity to think and act as individuals proves fatal in the end.

As if in an eternal dream or marihuana ecstasy, Colin and Mary walk helplessly round the relatively lucid city. Like their lives, their walks lack direction or a proper destination and so they often change into aimless wandering along abandoned side streets and looking into shop-windows. Colin and Mary are quite like the two dummies they see in one of them – hard to distinguish one from the other, lifeless, their relationship reminding one of the posture of the two figures – painful, cramped liking. They live their still, monotonous life in the comfort bases on material background together with the certainty and safety of everyday routines and thus can only be forced into action, or, better said, disturbed in their monotonous comfort, by some 'imperfection', something unexpected, unusual or strange.

It is hard to say which of them is in a deeper sleep, less in control of their lives, but Colin is the one who remains ignorant and manipulatable up to the very end. Colin is an example of one of McEwan's weak men, although, unlike Robert or the narrator's father from *The Cement Garden*, he does not show any despotic or violent tendencies. Colin's weakness lies in his passivity, lack of determination, practical reasoning or intuition. He is a man without individuality and masculinity which are both reflected in the narrative – he is depicted as a vague figure whose personal data are ostentatiously ignored and the only thing the reader learns is that he is an actor, a fact mentioned as if without any relevance to the character or his fate. What the reader is given, on the contrary, is a detailed description of his body and face which are described as a peculiar

mixture of male, female and childish features that it reminds one of some androgynous being. It is no surprise that he becomes the scapegoat of Robert's perverted cruelty and that he, having ignored all the warning signs and hints, willingly, though as if absent-mindedly, comes to his house, unable to take any active stance even when his life is endangered.

When Colin seems to be hopelessly caught in Robert's hands, one more opportunity of escape appears in the form of a tiny narrow street leading away from Robert's house, but once again Colin 'misreads' the opportunity like he fatally misreads the overall situation he finds himself in:

> Colin turned round to look behind. A narrow commercial street, barely more than an alley, broke the line of weatherbeaten houses. [...] It asked to be explored, but explored alone, without consultations with, or obligation towards, a companion. To step down there now as if completely free, to be released from the arduous states of play of psychological condition, to have leisure to be open and attentive to perception [...] to step down there now, just walk away, melt into the shadow, would be so very easy.[5]

It is apparent that the only chance to avoid his destiny lies in an active stance and the will to influence it. Staring at the street which might lead to safety and freedom, Colin ends up unable to wake up into a state of full consciousness, resigns once and for all to take control over his life and by doing so enables Robert to do it instead of him.

Mary also lives in her dream-like world of listlessness. Although she does not like the idea of walking round the hot crowded city, she obediently follows Colin on their never ending tiresome expeditions to more and more ancient architectonic wonders. However, unlike her partner, she shows at least some signs of independent opinion and will, and, most importantly she has the capacity of intuition as opposed to Colin's cold rationality. And so she sympathizes with the local feminist movement and defends their suggestion for a more severe legal punishment for rape against Colin's vague argumentation, manages to be ironic with him when he suggests that Caroline might seem quite content despite Robert's beating, and keeps on urging Colin to leave the city where her "commitment was to museums and restaurants", where it "can be

5) Ibid., p.83

terribly suffocating sometimes" and where "it's like a prison"[6] to which he pays almost no attention. Mary's fault lies in the fact that despite knowing what should be done and being aware that Colin will never be made do it, she remains passive and submits to the conviction that destiny is given and can never be changed.

Just as the imperfection in the department store window causes the illusion that the figures in there move, the sinisterly disturbing element in the form of the mysterious local inhabitant Robert unexpectedly breaks the atmosphere of paralysis and the burning out syndrome in Colin and Mary's relationship – it becomes intensively emotional, passionate. The initial fascination appears once again. They are also suddenly able to restore their capacity to communicate naturally, as if the sudden flash of intensity shows them what their life might have been like but was not. Under the invisible, unspecific, yet strongly-felt fear of the unknown, the other, which can take on even the form of death, they understand how precious and important they are for each other for as individuals they are very vulnerable in the strange environment.

It becomes quite obvious that only their intensive and sincere relationship migh protect them against the dangers of the hostile city represented by Robert and his wife. For several days it works, yet Mary still suffers from the irrational fear that this atmosphere should be somehow destroyed. The scene on the beach ends their idyll dramatically. While Mary enjoys swimming in the sea and feels perfectly free and happy: "It's so wonderful out here after those narrow streets", Colin with his cumbersome style suffers – he keeps stopping to catch his breath, his feet are "numbed by cold" and arms "water-logged, too heavy to lift out of the water"[7], and nearly drowns. Out of the city, Colin feels uneasy, insecure, he lacks the rational order of his maps and the firm structure of the streets and squares. He also feels that there he loses his supposed dominance over Mary and so when he suggests to walk back to the city, he willingly sacrifices their fragile harmonic idyll to his own feeling of confidence.

The change of the atmosphere when they find themselves back in the city is immediate and evident. It first occurs in the tone and content of their discourse:

> They conversed rather than talked, politely, casually, like old acquaintances. They avoided references to themselves or to the holiday. Instead they

6) Ibid., pp.5, 34, 35
7) Ibid., pp.73, 74

> mentioned mutual friends and wondered how they were, sketched out certain arrangements for the journey home, talked about sunburn and the relative merits of the breaststroke and crawl. Colin yawned frequently.[8]

The emptiness of their conversations reappears and Colin's yawns suggest that they are slowly falling back into their sleeps, into the state of absolute emotionless listlessness and resignation, as if the city environment prevented them from acting like a couple, but like two alienated individuals held tight together by some unknown forces.

The City's Snares

Robert is another example of a weak man who compensates for his frustrations through despotic and violent tendencies towards other people. However, unlike the first, the latter is active, able to fulfill his threats. With Robert we also know the cause of his frustration – having been painfully humiliated by his sisters as a little boy, he simultaneously fears and hates women and is willing to take revenge on them for the abasement and embarrassment he had to go through. Blinded by the ferocity of his anger he does not realize that his sisters are not the primal cause of his humiliation, but that he, in fact, is a victim of his despotic father who, very likely, was similarly a victim of his despotic father. Therefore, although he himself would never believe it, Robert is both a typical product of the rigid patriarchal society he has been brought up in and inspired by.

Robert's loyalty to his male ancestors' principles is reflected both in his dogmatic opinions as well as in the interior of his house which is furnished like a museum in honour to his father and grandfather, the representatives of the old good times of patriarchy when men "were proud of their sex" and "women understood them too"[9].Robert treats his wife, Caroline, according to his conviction and ideals. Thus, she becomes the unfortunate scapegoat of her husband's trauma from childhood, the first victim of his long-planned revenge on women since, for him, she personifies the guilt

8) Ibid., p.75
9) Ibid., pp.16, 54, 55

itself.

It is quite clear from the beginning that it is Robert who is entirely in control of the action since he finds Colin and Mary, takes the photographs of Colin, deliberately meets them and, as if by accident, lures them into his house. Yet Caroline is not as passive and helpless as she might seem at first sight. She, for example, dares to doubt his reliability, his version, his unquestionable truth. She also takes an active part in Robert's plotting as she invites Colin to come to see them again pretending the hopelessness of her desperate situation, and she puts the sleeping pills into Mary's tea to prevent her from trying to help Colin later. She has her own motivation for doing so, though different from that of her husband.

Robert's motivation for the homicidal act is ambiguous and can be interpreted in several different ways from which we can mention the three most significant. The first and also the most straightforward interpretation is that Colin, with his androgynous face and body becomes an ideal object of his wildest sexual fantasies. The second is, as we have already mentioned in this essay, the fact that effeminate and irresolute Colin personifies the sort of weak men unable to assert their dominance over women and therefore he must be punished as a demonstrative victim in the trial in which Robert is the prosecutor, judge as well as executor. The third explanation might be Robert's hatred for tourists who ruin the local people's lives when they have to leave their original jobs and work in the tourist services because "pollution from the city affected the livelihoods of fishermen, and forced them to take jobs as waiters"[10], as well as the fact that they import there the elements of their culture which penetrate and thus alter the traditional local culture and habits. From this perspective, Robert can be understood as a radical patriot who tries to prevent the local cultural heritage from the effects caused by one of the phenomena of globalization, a desperate protester who can see the last and only chance in his private violent struggle.

10) Ibid., p.82

Beyond the Maps

The city and its environment plays a dominant role in *The Comfort of Strangers* since it appears in two different roles, on two different levels – the first is the actual city as such combined with the phenomenon of tourism, and the second is the metaphoric meaning of the city. The whole novel takes place in a strange city which is a crucial condition for the development of the story, and the fact that this city is anonymous is absolutely insignificant, though it reminds one of the Italian Venice.

The role of the city, in the physical meaning, as the actual setting of the story, is to help to develop the overall atmosphere of the novel and from this point of view we have to distinguish one key quality attributed to it - the fact that the city is a popular tourist destination, a place for which the income from the tourist industry has become a crucial part of the budget. As such, the city has two faces, one elegant, polished and shining for the tourists, and the other one of normal everyday life of the ordinary local people which often differs dramatically from the first one. The city is also divided into two zones – the main and shopping streets with sights, museums, bars, restaurants and shops where the tourists are expected to move and are therefore welcome, and the territories, especially various dark and narrow side streets and other places far from the centre, on the edge of the city, which are not considered as representative, usually inhabited by the poorer local people, where the tourists not only are not expected but the inhabitants of which are rather indifferent if not hostile to them. Still, some of the locals' verbal hostility towards tourists is much more understandable, justifiable and less alarming than Robert's exaggerated care and friendliness.

This division of the city is also reflected in the maps the tourists can buy there. The most frequent ones yet "the least significant were produced by commercial interests and, besides showing the more obvious tourist attractions, they gave great prominence to certain shops and restaurants. These maps were marked with the principal streets only"[11]. There are also some other maps but these are either inconvenient to use or too involved or confused that the tourists get lost easily with them. In return for its comfort and warm-heartedness the city demands from the tourist just one thing – that they would

11) Ibid., p.9

behave and look like tourists, according to the standardized model of the nice, indulgently generous and almost permanently excited person with a camera.

The tourists then are expected to play the role of kind intruders who respect that they are allowed to move only in territories the locals ask them to move in and spend money generously in given places located around these territories. In return they are provided with the simulacra of the genuine local culture either preserved in museums or in the commercialized form of various souvenirs. The relationship thus created between the tourists and the local inhabitants of the visited place is logically very fragile - it is enough if one of the participants of the game fails in his or her role and the atmosphere of mutual liking disappears. As a result, what suffers most is the original idea of tourism since the only otherness the tourists encounter is in how their hotel differs from those they stayed in before. The real otherness which lies in the still maintained everyday habits and rituals of the local people is purposefully kept hidden from the visitors. McEwan presents this aspect as even more worrying since he makes the otherness his tourists encounter fatal for them.

The other interpretation of the meaning the mysterious city in the novel assumes is that of a metaphor. A metaphoric reading of the text is enabled not only by the deliberate vagueness of the main protagonists of the story, but especially by the strange, unnatural character of the city which, although it is presented as a real-life urban environment with a labyrinth of streets and crowds of people in them, disposes of attributes and creates the atmosphere of incredibility around it.

The city, though seemingly lucid, embodies a maze in which one easily gets lost. What you can find in the maps are either the main commercial zones of the city or only fragments of the whole, while the gaps between these fragments remain mysterious, unpredictable (and when you find a map which shows the whole city in details, it is too large and fragile). As a result, once you get into the city streets, you lose the possibility to perceive it as a whole, to overlook it, keep distance, an objective and non-aligned stance. Moreover, the lack of reliable or available maps and other means which might help you orient yourself in the unknown environment makes you walk helplessly round the city and there is a danger that gradually you might fall, like Colin and Mary, into the

state of half-sleep, a state of entire passivity and indifference, in which you lose control over your life.

The city in *The Comfort of Strangers* can thus be understood as a remarkable metaphor of the world in which each person is just a stranger without a proper map. The maps then represent human knowledge as the product of learning and gaining experience, the essential combination of rational reason and often irrational intuition, and emotions. McEwan claims the impossibility of this human knowledge to cover and comprehend the whole world and, by doing so, to reach absolute control over it. The idea of the ultimate knowledge is so preposterous and immense that it, like the fragile map in the novel, can never be put into practice. A person can know or understands fragments, or parts of the whole, but there are still gaps, empty spaces in between these parts which remain within the reach of the capacity of human brain. Moreover, this metaphor can also be applied to language. While the modern world, inspired by the Enlightenment, believed in the unequivocal and unambiguous relationship between language and the world it describes, postmodernism, inspired by the earlier linguistic theories, denies that individual elements of the outer reality could be attributed certain elements of language and vice versa. In other words, that no language, since all of them are human constructs influenced by social conventions, represents a reliable "map" of the world.[12] McEwan suggests the consequent impossibility and naivety of assuming the distant, objective and definite stance towards the universe. Each person is just a part of the whole and his or her understanding of this world should be reflected in his or her humble acceptance of the role an individual is allowed to aspire to.

Through the characters of Colin and Mary the story also symbolically shows the attitude towards one's own life a person should assume to cope with the troubles and difficulties it can bring along as well as to avoid the situations in which evil, in whatever form, gets the opportunity of gaining superiority. According to McEwan, it lies in the acceptance of the fact that rational reason cannot control and satisfactorily explain the world without the contribution of the irrational components such as intuition or emotions, as well as the fact that the basic condition of this healthy attitude towards the outer reality is the person's self-understanding, finding his or her identity and

12) See Stanley J. Grenz, *Úvod do postmodernismu* (Praha: Návrat domů), pp.46-50

consequently his or her role as a mere part of the perceived whole. This identity, McEwan suggests, is based on the person's active approach to his or her destiny and the will to change it in case of its adversity.

Whose Comfort is It?

The basic story of *The Comfort of Strangers* is relatively simple, yet there are three major aspects which prevent the reader from reading the novel as an ordinary thriller or murder story. These aspects should make the reader think of and look for other interpretations of the story and they include the two main protagonists, the urban setting and the overall atmosphere of the novel.

The characters of Colin and Mary are the first obstacle to a straightforward interpretation of the novel. Because of their deliberate lack of psychological depth and development combined with their inability, or even resignation, to avoid paralyzing stereotypes even in the most intimate parts of their lives and relationship (such as love making or intimate communication), they are deprived of the potential of characters as they are traditionally understood for it is almost impossible to identify with either of them. Therefore, rather than real-life persons they should be taken as a personification of various principles of and attitudes to human life, certain functions in the text as well as in its interpretations.

The second puzzle when interpreting the novel is its mysterious setting, the attractive seaside city. Due to the impossibility of being mapped out properly, the relatively small city becomes an enigmatic labyrinth, in which the mythical Minotaur hides and waits for its human victims, and the anonymity of the place only empathizes that. As a result, the city soon loses its physical character as the wandering becomes more significant than the actual streets and thus allows a metaphoric interpretation rather than that of a mere setting of an act of perverted atrocity. Moreover, the title's ambiguity springing from the double meaning of the word "comfort" (allowing thus both the couples to aspire to be the "strangers") also contributes to this effect.

The third then is the novel's apparent intertextuality. David Malcolm points out to its intertextual nature by calling it a 'deeply allusive work, allusive to a whole range of twentieth-century and earlier texts that have chosen Venice as a setting' and continues: 'As critics have noted, McEwan's city is the macabre Venice of Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* (1888), Daphne du Maurier's *Don't Look Now* (1971), and Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912)'. While in the first the 'death's-head-like appearance of Miss Borderau and the two women protagonists' secluded life are echoed in Colin's macabre murder and in his and Mary's attempts to cut themselves off from life', the second 'contains motifs of ambiguity, of getting lost, of bizarre death and murder that all recur in *The Comfort of Strangers*', McEwan's novel seems most allusive to Mann's famous novella since the "combination of death with homoerotic elements is common to both texts"[13]. Therefore, the novel challenges and undermines not only the notions of universal knowledge or one-to-one correspondence of language and the phenomenal world, but also the very origin of meaning, the possibility of a grand narrative.

4.3 THE DYSTOPIAN URBAN VISION – *THE CHILD IN TIME*

After two collections of short stories *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) and *In Between the Sheets* (1978), and the two shorter texts, novelettes rather than novels, which I discussed in the previous chapters, *The Child in Time*, Ian McEwan's first longer prose, published in 1987, immediately became the author's greatest achievement up to that time. Having all the necessary attributes of a quality novel, *The Child in Time* represents one of the most complex of all McEwan's works and foreshadows the further direction of the author's literary career. As Eileen Battersby has pointed out, "McEwan has shifted away from the grotesque extremes and has instead become concerned with

13) David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (University of South Carolina Press 2002), p.76-77

disturbed and disturbing psychological trauma"[1].

The novel develops, deals with or touches on three crucial themes and a great variety of sub-themes. The main theme the novel is successfully obsessed with is the notion of time. In fact, it might be called a profound artistic meditation on the nature of this most inscrutable phenomenon. Connected with time is the question of human memory as the link to and means of interpretation of the past and its subsequent reflection on and influence of the present. The ambivalent nature of the phenomenon of time is also reflected in the untraditional or experimental narrative chronology of the novel. Through this contemplation over the phenomenon of time McEwan repeatedly contests, interrogates and undermines not only the illusion of objective knowledge of the past, but also other traditional humanist values and beliefs, such as continuity, originality or universality, embodied, above all, in science represented, quite symptomatically, by a woman. Like most postmodern fictions, *The Child in Time* "challenges science in particular as a dominant totalitarianizing system, as the positivist adjunct to humanism [...] through an investigation of the role language plays in both knowledge and power"[2].

Another theme are the relations, similarities and differences, between childhood and adulthood, especially the question of the presence of childish attributes in the adult life, the conflict between innocence and experience, the problem of complex and quality childcare and the mysterious and essential relationship between children and their parents.

The last of the major themes is politics reflecting both the political culture in general as well as the political situation in Britain in the mid 1980's, which includes the question of public policy and individual liberty, political manipulation, the arrogance of power and the abuse of language in the political rhetoric. The socio-political discourse in general has become one of the crucial concerns of postmodern narratives that attempt to "foreground the way we talk and write within certain social, historical, and institutional (and thus political and economic] frameworks. In other words, [they have]

1) *The Irish Times*, 23rd August, 1997
2) Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1992), p.186

made us aware of 'discourse'"[3].

One aspect that contributes significantly to the development of the novel's story and themes is its setting. Most of the novel takes place in London, either in central London where the main protagonist lives and works, or in his parents' house in the suburban part of the city. However, there are, quite symptomatically, certain scenes or actions which deliberately happen outside London, in the countryside, creating thus a symbolic contrast between the two settings which helps to maintain the awareness of the omnipresent polarity in the characters' lives. Since the novel is based on permanent encounters of these polarities, be it child-adult, male-female or innocence-experience, the tense atmosphere of the urban environment, in contrast to the calmness of the countryside, forms one of them.

For the Nation's Welfare...

McEwan's new, and it must be said exclusively urban, theme which is quite explicitly mentioned and dealt with in the novel is politics and the political situation in Britain in the mid 1980's. However, while the prevailing tone of the story is serious and the plot even tragic, the treatment of the theme of politics is not far from a Swiftian satire. The world of high politics is shown as one which lives its own life regardless of the outer world of the common people who are not supposed to aspire to any deeper comprehension of what is going on in the political circles. It is depicted as a show in which form far overweighs the content and where gaining power is the primary motivating force of any human activity. As David Malcolm observes: "The personal and the historical are fused in *The Child in Time*. The national political process is marked by change and loss, and this new Britain is experienced very directly by characters, especially Stephen. In addition, the features of national history are paralleled in characters' private lives"[4].

The character through whom the world of high politics is ironized the most is

3) Ibid., p.184
4) David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (University of South Carolina Press 2002), p.105

undoubtedly Charles Darke whose entrance into the governing party, the name of which remains unmentioned but its resemblance with the Conservatives, is more than striking. With no previous political life and a complete lack of any proper political convictions, it reminds one of the instant rise of a movie or music star. As a person without any proper concern for politics and with "only managerial skills and great ambition"[5], Darke becomes, in fact, an actor of a given political role, and, it should be noted, an enormously skillful actor who causes even the professional and experienced politicians not to know what to think about him.

Although Charles's political behaviour is rather unusual, its shocking effect together with two other aspects characteristic of his personality – the awareness of the importance of rhetoric and self promotion – enable him eventually to reach the position of a serious candidate for the post of future Prime Minister. What is even worse is the fact that Charles is well aware of how easily he has become one of the most powerful people in the Government and what special skills and abilities it requires to become a generally respectable and successful political representative.

Another example of political satire is the work of the committee Stephen himself participates in. The sessions are monotonous and formal and nobody seems to be willing to take an active stance on the matter being discussed, with the exception of some experts occasionally invited to express their opinion to the committee and whose entries are received with taciturn disinterest. It is little surprise then when we learn that the real report was written long before the official one is due to be published. What is more alarming is the way all the traces of the disclosure and threatening political scandal are, slowly but certainly, covered, and the subject matter gradually changes from the question of the Government's trustworthiness to how adequate and innovative the real report in fact is. Stephen realizes too late the theatrical nature of the political culture and that any potentially successful attempt to change anything in the high politics would inevitably require "constant and active stage management of a kind he knew was beyond him"[6].

Politics and political culture in *The Child in Time* differ distinctively from other

5) Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time* (London: Vintage Books 1992), p.37
6) Ibid., p.182

legal branches of human activities, and to be successful in which means to dispose of a very special kind of character – loyal but confident, theatrical, smiling but unscrupulous, with a special instinct to recognize what to say, what not, where and how, and when to suppress one's dignity in favour of some "higher" political concern or aim. Politicians are depicted here as people who, under the mask of public service, follow their private and selfish goals motivated by their ambitions and hunger for money or power or both.

Westminster is thus presented as a town inside a town with rules, principles and values incomprehensible for other Londoners and consequently all other uninvolved people. It also follows that language in such discourse is used, or better said abused, in a particular way – it is not taken as a means of conveying the meaning of the actual content of an utterance, but as a specific form in which whatever message is uttered and simultaneously covered. In other words, language is not used as an instrument of communication but of the demonstration of power and the presentation of the only possible and thus unquestionable opinion, which makes politics a superficial commercial show for masses rather than a responsible service for the public welfare.

The City in Time

Although the city itself, unlike in *The Comfort of Strangers*, does not straightforwardly represent one of the novel's major themes, as a setting it significantly contributes to their development as well as the overall atmosphere of the story. Due to the serious and rather dark mood of the narrative, the urban environment is presented as one that is essentially lonely, alienated and hostile, and as such is put into sharp contrast with the rural, or even pastoral, atmosphere of Charles's woodland life or Julie's countryside cottage.

As the novel opens with a scene of Stephen's dull and boring work in the committee pervaded by the pertinacious thoughts of his lost child, the pessimistic atmosphere is reflected by the description of central London, stuck in one big "dead time" traffic jam from which there is no way out. Despite the wonderful May day,

Stephen observes 'double and treble files of trapped, throbbing cars, each with its solitary driver' whose 'pursuit of liberty was more resigned than passionate'[7]. Like these drivers, he is trapped by his world of sorrow and self-pity from which he is fruitlessly trying to get out, and, like them, he feels absolutely alone in his troubles. The hostility of the city streets is reinforced by the omnipresence of groups of licensed beggars who permanently cause the uneasy feelings of fear and embarrassment in the passers-by, mixed with their inner struggle between the refusal of the Government's public policy and their humanity, conscience, and the "intimate feeling, the instinct for what was right"[8]

The first contrast the city is put in is when Stephen and Kate are taking a routine Saturday morning trip to the local supermarket. Stephen eventually gives up the idea of making love with his wife to cave into duty and decides to leave the warm, quiet and safe intimacy of their home and venture out into the hostility and noise of the streets. The tragic event of the day is foreshadowed from the first moment as they "stepped outdoors as though into a storm". Through the front door they enter a completely different world of crowds of other people and traffic rushing "with adrenal ferocity"[9]. The anonymity of the city life breaths on the reader on each line, yet the incident in the supermarket discloses that, in most cases, it serves just as a protective mechanism of typical city dwellers through which they try to protect their privacy in the everyday encounters with crowds of strange, unknown people. And so when Kate has disappeared, the atmosphere of listlessness in the supermarket changes dramatically:

> The faces of mothers were strained, alert. Several people had seen the little girl riding in the trolley. Someone knew the colour of her sweater. The anonymity of the city store turned out to be frail, a thin crust beneath which people observed, judged, remembered.[10]

McEwan claims that the traditionally valued human qualities such as altruism, empathy, solidarity or the ability to share other person's trouble or grief can also be found in urban people, though not at first sight since they are often concealed by their deliberate

7) Ibid., p.7
8) Ibid., p.9
9) Ibid., p.14
10) Ibid., p.18

anonymity which provides them with the minimally sufficient privacy in the environment which does not allow them to avoid frequent and close contacts with other people.

The city thus becomes not only the scene of the harrowing event but also the place where Stephen is yet to experience all its sorrowful consequences of losing his wife and undergo the dramatic change of his personality through better self-realization When he returns home from the supermarket and gazes down at his sleeping wife, here calls how promising their future should have been but when he looks out of the window of their Edwardian apartment block bedroom, there is no future since what he sees is just "the mess of South London, the hazy curvature of the earth"[11]. In spite of this sinister view into the future, Stephen still believes that the city will help him bear and overcome the tragic loss, and that in his comfortable apartment from which he can overlook the city, he would be able to handle the situation the best.

Symptomatically, Stephen's long and complicated journey to self-understanding and finding his childish self begins when he leaves Central London for Julie's cottage in a pine plantation. As he rides on the crowded underground and then gets on the train, he sees how he leaves the crowds of people behind him. When he meets a friendly villager and finally reaches the calm countryside, he feels the immediate satisfactory effect the change of landscape and atmosphere has brought:

> He was marching across a void. All sense of progress, and therefore all sense of time, disappeared. The trees on the far side did not come closer. This was an obsessive landscape – it thought only about wheat. The lack of hurry, the disappearance of any real sense of destination, suited him.[12]

Stephen does not understand yet that a similar change of living environment and lifestyle might help not only Julie but also him and consequently help to restore their marriage. However, at this point he is too weak and trapped by self-pity to take such a demanding step as leaving London, where he has been living for years, unquestionably represents.

Generally speaking, those characters in the novel who, for some reason, mostly some kind of trouble or personal disaster, decide to leave London for the countryside

11) Ibid., p.21
12) Ibid., p.52

appear to be happier, or at least more content, than Stephen, who is persuaded that life in the city contains enough routines to keep him busy and make him forget Kate. He only gradually discovers how unhappy he in fact is, as television watching and alcohol do not prove to be anything but mere simulacra of reality, deceiving ways of escape from the sad truth. Nor does he understand how his parents feel in their suburban house, the first one they were able to purchase, one of those "squat, grubbily rendered houses dreaming under their hot roofs of open seas"[13], how much happier they would probably feel in the country where his mother could devote herself to her favourite gardening and his father would be far enough from the modern urban world, with "the filth on the streets, the dirty messages on the walls, the poverty"[14], he no longer understands and is willing to accept. McEwan suggests that a big city is not a suitable place for people in trouble or those who, for whatever reason, be it age, economic background or conviction, find such living conditions more demanding than they are able or willing to bear. And so it is not surprising that the audacious begging girl to whom Stephen gave some money and who reminded him of Kate so much is now, ten months later in cold winter when he decides to give her his coat, lying dead on one of London's railway stations.

The person whose disappearance from London looks at first most shocking is Charles Darke because he is not one of those who should worry whether they cope with the hectic and stressful city life or not. On the contrary it appears that nowhere else can his talent be fully employed and his aspirations fulfilled. Yet his secret schizophrenic psychosis makes him more vulnerable than he in fact seems and the retreat to the country is not a mere therapy because of his regressive transformation, but also a means of preventing him from going insane or committing suicide. What Charles looks for is innocence which he feels can by no means be found in the monetary urban society in which he, as one of its prides, has long personified business and political achievement. However, he does not find it that easy to suppress the other part of his self and resist the temptation of becoming one of the most prominent politicians. Thus, he lets the city trace him, penetrate into and fatally harm the fragile security and genuineness of his

13) Ibid., p.85
14) Ibid., p.177

eerie world of childish fantasies. Once again the world of childish innocence is shown as one that is completely incompatible with the modern urban environment of the Western type which is predominantly controlled and inhabited by the grown-ups, their ideas, needs and ambitions, and in which there is little space and opportunity left for children to assert their points of view and values to be accepted as equally significant with those of their parents and teachers.

The role of the city is also manifested through its absence in the narrative since the majority of the pleasant and soothing events seem to happen as if outside of the reach of London – it is out of the city where Julie manages to recover from the loss of her only child, where Charles eventually, though only for a while, feels happy and enjoys being a carefree innocent woodland boy, whom he was denied to be during his boyhood, where Stephen, though through the mysterious time-hopping pub experience, realizes the importance of re-evaluating and re-developing his relationship with his parents which has long been maintained on formal and rather superficial basis, and finally, but by no means less significantly, it is in the calm and safe environment of the countryside cottage where Stephen and Julie's second child is conceived and given birth.

The description of the cottage suggests home and comfort and its atmosphere reminds one of that of their home from before the supermarket event. The whole scene thus represents not only a kind of repetition, but mainly an answer to, a healing of, and a liberation from all the pain that has come before. However, although McEwan allows Stephen and Julie a second chance and thus, through the happy ending, creates a sense of completeness to the conclusion of the novel, he does not let himself miss the opportunity of leaving a sinister remark of the planet Mars visible through the window beyond their bed, "a reminder of a harsh world"[15] out there. The ambiguity springs from the fact that in Roman mythology, Mars was the god of war as well as the agricultural god, suggesting thus the conflict between the unavoidable struggle to preserve one's identity and privacy in the modern urban world, and the possibility of resisting the tempting promises of wealth, career and entertainment this world offers and retreat into a maybe not so attractive but definitely more secure and natural world of rural life in the

15) Ibid., p.220

countryside.

The Fictitious City

The Child in Time undoubtedly represents a breaking point in Ian McEwan's literary career. The book is more open to the wider reading public since, on one hand, it develops the major themes and thoughts dealt with in the author's previous novels, but, on the other one, it avoids the macabre elements as well as the polarized vision of the world so characteristic of McEwan's earlier works. Moreover, in comparison with the rather straightforward narratives of *The Cement Garden* and *The Comfort of Strangers*, in *The Child in Time* McEwan managed to employ a complicated narrative techniquecombining two narrative levels without losing the unusual emotional and sensitive intensity of the novel's overall atmosphere.

In accordance with the postmodern condition, the novel 'constantly foregrounds the notion of the partiality of any account or description, emphasizing in this way its own limitations as such. It is, thus, connected with history in a second (and older) sense of the world – with history as an account of events and processes, rather than as the events and processes themselves. It also focuses on the possibility of any account (or history) through one of its generic aspects – the dystopic element in the text." Moreover, there can be also found many reminders of the novel's fictionality: "Things have not quite come to such a pass in the documented extratextual world of the late-twentieth-century Britain. The police are not yet generally armed. Licensed begging has not yet been introduced. A world has not hitherto been threatened by a dispute at an Olympic Games. [...] Throughout, *The Child in Time* via such features advertises its own status as a work of fiction and raises issues about the reliability of any account, such as it is itself"[16]. As a result of that, the London setting of *The Child in Time* is far from the story's mere background but assumes the role of the dystopian urban vision of future not much remote from the time of the novel's publication. As such, it expresses the artist's

16) David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (University of South Carolina Press 2002), p.108

concern and anxiety for the corrupted status quo of contemporary Western civilization. From this point of view, the novel's central motif of irretrievable loss gains essentially wider significance for the novel can be placed among the greatest twentieth century political satires or dystopias.

Like in the previous works, the city appears to be the main environment of *The Child in Time*. It is presented traditionally as impersonal, selfish, dominated by money and the idea of success and power. However, it functions rather in contrast with the homely pastoral environment of a little cozy countryside cottage, or the soothing and safe world of the idealized childhood memories. McEwan also introduces the major theme that every great novel is at some level about – time and the subjectivity of human perception of this phenomenon – and he presents it in a great variety of its forms as well as a mighty force to which only human love can be compared, and that any attempt to control or trick it must inevitably fail. Despite all the city's dark sides, political arrogance and sinister prophecies the novel appears to conclude optimistically, yet McEwan does not forget to add an ambiguous note that the child's gender is not revealed. This withholding is also the author's final comment on his major theme – time is always contingent, susceptible to human interpretation, but though time is partly a human fabrication, it is also a phenomenon from which no human existence is immune.

4.4 THE URBAN MORALITY – *AMSTERDAM*

Published in 1998, *Amsterdam* represents probably McEwan's most enjoyable and absorbing book of the decade. In spite of this, the fact that the novel was awarded the 1998 Booker Prize evoked disagreement and discontent among many literary critics and reviewers who claimed that it did not reach the depth and innovative power of some other McEwan's works, especially that of *The Child in Time*. However, *Amsterdam* is a typical modern morality about the ever-present struggle of human conscience with

temptations and snares of life, altruism and selfishness, and one's private and public self.

The loaded and fateful moral choice has always been the centerpiece of the modern novel since the works of writers such as Henry James or Joseph Conrad. As in real life, there is mostly not just one dramatically wrong or immoral choice but rather a whole series of more or less mean and ignoble ones which consequently trigger the characters' moral degradation and disintegration. When Clive and Vernon face a similar challenge to social responsibility and moral or ethical values, they both fail unforgivably through the process of their moral rather than professional disintegration. Their success has spoilt and rotted them to such a degree that they are completely unable to see how illusionary and rather deceptive their considerable self-esteem and confidence in fact are and so when it comes to the most crucial points in their professional careers, their illusions appear to be overestimated if not thoroughly fake. The two men part in rage, each to his own particular hell: Vernon to the newspaper's editorial meetings, hilariously rendered by McEwan, and Clive to solitary and tortured composition. From this point of view, their mutual murder which results from their preceding agreement to euthanize each other when the time comes ad one of them is convinced that the other has gone mad, and arrangement they believed would honour their friendship and trust, gains very ironic or even cynical connotation in which McEwan's dark comedy bitterly but successfully culminates.

While *The Child in Time* shows how much is needed to harm a good, solid marriage, *Amsterdam* is a contemporary morality depicting how little it takes to destroy the lives and friendship of two vain, shallow and self-absorbed characters as well as how deceptive and corrupting the modern city milieu can be. Moreover, this morality is ultimately an urban one since its city settings play an inseparable and eventually essential role in the story development.

The Universal City

Amsterdam, as well as many other McEwan's novels yet more apparently, shows that the natural milieu of the writer's fiction is not only Britain but whole Europe – he writes novels that embody the progressive, internationalist ideals of the new, rapidly developing European Union. His books are usually set in London or its immediate surroundings, but they could just as well take place in any other Western European metropolis. Their protagonists – writer, editor, publisher, scientist, professor, composer – are new intellectuals, members of the global knowledge class, the sort of people who are most at home when they can move freely, realizing and developing their intellectual potential by attending or taking part in various international events abroad. Therefore, the urban environment McEwan's novels are set in is generally, yet not ultimately, since the city of Amsterdam, for instance, has been chosen as a deliberate symbol, more important than the actual city itself.

The urban setting in *The Child in Time, Enduring Love* or *Amsterdam* is thus much more universal than that in Amis's *Money, London Fields* or *The Information*, in which the very specific London environment, which is also described there very precisely and in much more detailed way, represents an inseparable and irreplaceable ingredient of the novels' overall atmosphere. The city environment of McEwan's novels is always very thoughtful and well-depicted, yet it is often shown in rather general terms and therefore could be universally applicable to almost any European city.

This, as we have seen, has not always been true about McEwan's books since such tendency first appeared in *The Child in Time* and it influenced the plot of the novels dramatically. McEwan's later novels show a new tendency as far as both the plot and setting are concerned. The plot breaks free from the former limited confinement and gets more propulsive and less enigmatic, owing more to the international medium of the moment – the thriller – than majority of his British contemporaries. The plot is not broad but deep, involving the reader into somebody else's personal calamity, and that somebody is an expert whose specialization colours the narrating of the story. As a result of that the characters become specific, there are almost no local heroes fatally bound to their native territory, and the story can move freely from one place to another not only within one country's boundaries. Therefore, the novels' setting assumes new

roles and connotations since it is no longer linked only to the plot's limitations, it becomes a wide space of the characters' restless movement. On one side they still take place in the city, on the other one the novels like *Enduring Love* or *Amsterdam* have definitively lost their bounds to a particular one and so the urban setting becomes largely international.

Amsterdam's title signals its internationalism. Through deft references to centerless Europe (since Clive's symphony will be produced by an Italian, performed by the British Symphony Orchestra, and rehearsed at Amsterdam's Concertgebouw), McEwan develops the idea of the new Europe, the ideal of the allied European Union. While the novel is set in London, its final destination is the Dutch city whose liberal euthanasia policies allow the story's poisonous final twist. In his own way McEwan contributes to the multinational nature of the contemporary British novel. Although he was born in England and has lived there ever since and makes no direct relentless comparison of his native country with someplace else like many other writers of his generation do – Martin Amis (America), Salman Rushdie (India), Kazuo Ishiguro (Japan) or Julian Barnes (France), his novels acquire their international character due to the fact that they are written and streamlined to be translated, published, read and understood across the new Europe and, consequently, all over the world.

The City Behind One's Acts

The fact that the story takes place in London is known to the reader from the very beginning of the novel. It also seemingly does not intervene into the story and remains only its background. However, at the end of Part I the reader learns that Clive cannot wait to leave London for the Lake District where "he would be restored, he would see clearly"[1]. The city with its hostile freezing weather has become a bitter and persistent remembrance of the lost friend's sudden death, a reminder of their own mortality for the grieving ex-lovers, as well as an obsessive thought about how much

1) Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam* (London: Vintage Books 1999), p.26

fragile and vulnerable human life is.

It is not surprising then, that the city is first directly mentioned when Clive is leaving it by train heading to the north, and that the very feeling the sight of the urban areas behind the window evokes in him is that of "a familiar misanthropy [...] he saw in the built landscape sliding by nothing but ugliness and pointless activity"[2]. For conservative Clive the city embodies the rather pessimistic material face of the world, the dark side of the development of modern civilization which he compares to his ideal image of this civilization consisting of a sum of various arts, sciences, unique human skills and experience, he perceives the city as:

> ...square miles of meagre modern houses whose principal purpose was the support of TV aerials and dishes; factories producing worthless junk to be advertised on the televisions and, in dismal lots, lorries queuing to distribute it; and everywhere else, roads and the tyranny of traffic. It looked like a raucous dinner party the morning after. No one would have wished it this way, but no one had been asked. Nobody planned it, nobody wanted it, but most people had to live in it. To watch it mile after mile, who would have guessed that kindness or the imagination, that Purcell or Britten, Shakespeare or Milton, had ever existed?[3]

Such thoughts indeed do reflect a contemporary intellectual's view of civilization which, in its effects, has lost many of its original ideals of humanity and spirituality, and has become a dehumanized set of various devices created not to make life fuller, deeper, to extend people's horizons, but to make it easier, more comfortable, more lucid, to reduce it into just one dimension in which living means passive acceptance and reception, from overconsumption up to hours spent mindlessly in front of the TV set. As a fierce defender of high culture and promoter of its values, Clive also finds himself perpetually haunted by the shadows of his great precursors which remind him how easy it is in postmodern culture to fail and create, instead of a memorable piece of art, what Roger Scruton calls "preventive kitsch" – unoriginal, intentionally conventional, at once legitimizing and mocking at its ignorance.[4]

There is also a touch of historical optimism or preposterous belief in human

2) Ibid., p.63
3) Ibid., pp.63-4
4) Roger Scruton, *Průvodce inteligentního člověka po moderní kultuře* (Praha: Academia 2002), pp.125-6

nature in the statement that results from Clive's false and rather supercilious presupposition that everybody must be thinking of and perceiving reality the same way as he does. In his haughty self-esteem he is not willing or able to accept that what he can see out of the window has not arisen by itself, that there must have been other, though not necessarily entirely noble or humane, motives driving human activities than those he has ever experienced.

As the train is moving away from the city and the first natural places begin to occur, Clive's thoughts signal a slight indication of optimism and hope. Seemingly paradoxically it is only the nature that has never be dramatically touched by people that is capable of evoking and reviving the spirit of humanity, belief in the humankind, hope for future. Compared to nature the artificial civilized world represented above all by the city looks like a bad joke:

> Occasionally, as the train gathered speed and they swung further away from London, countryside appeared and with the beginnings of beauty, the memory of it, until seconds later it dissolved into a river straightened into a concreted sluice or a sudden agricultural wilderness without hedges or trees, and roads, new roads probing endlessly, shamelessly, as though all that mattered was to be elsewhere. As far as the welfare of every other living form on earth was concerned, the human project was not just a failure, it was a mistake from the very beginning.[5]

Clive's pessimistic mood results not only from his disillusionment from modern civilization and its impact on the landscape. The human project he is contemplating of also involves natural and friendly interpersonal relationships the right conditions for which seem to have been extinct in the alienated urban environment and its isolated, distant way of life. Therefore, disappointed and disgusted by his friend's behaviour, Clive hopes that only the touch of nature can bring him peace and help him restore the dying friendship. And so as 'on the edges of a rusty-looking town, an expanse of industrial wasteland was being returned to forest' Clive eventually starts to believe in the goal of his journey – "the long and studied redefinition of a friendship"[6].

Clive is a person whose attitude to the city and living in it must inevitably be

5) Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam* (London: Vintage Books 1999), p.64
6) Ibid., p.66

ambivalent since it simultaneously gives and denies him what he needs to be happy – the ideal conditions and opportunity to compose music. On the one hand, its anonymity and listlessness provides him with the isolation and tranquility necessary for the act of creation and, on the other one, there are people who help to transmit as well as those who receive the fruits of his effort – producers, conductors, musicians and audiences. His creativity and imagination in fact operate as a contrast to the city's mechanical busy life: "there were moments in the early morning, after the mild excitement of dawn, with London already heading noisily for work, and his creative turmoil finally smothered by exhaustion, Clive [...] looked back at the rich, the beautiful chaos that surrounded his toils"[7]. Therefore, if he finds anything beautiful about his city life it is very likely only the possibility of being within and without at the same time, to be bothered and cared about only when he himself allows it.

As an artist who tends to be immersed in himself, absorbed by his tunes and thoughts, he should appreciate the superficiality of most of the city's relationships and encounters. However, his problem lies in the fact that there are simply too many of them and some of them are not as superficial as he might wish. It is the close and deeper relationship with Vernon that finally turns out to be the most disturbing and disruptive element in both his private and professional life. In his illusionary and self-deceptive image of himself as a great composer who serves higher aims than those earthly ones that permanently disturb his genius, Clive has gradually become an "ideal" prototype of a city dweller who has developed perfect protective mechanisms not to be harmed by this environment – an ultimate egoist endowed with limitless amount of indifference and disinterest in other people's lives.

Vernon also experiences his personal drama yet he is not as complicated individuality as Clive with his struggle to make authentic and quality art for a broad public. Although his personality is less deep and therefore his moral dilemma less convincing than that of Clive's, Vernon's character can be, very likely more easily than any other in the story, related closely to the novel's urban setting. However, unlike Clive, Vernon is not given the potential of distant and striking observations of this setting since he is presented as an inseparable part of its culture and atmosphere, an

7) Ibid., p.133

organ unable to perceive the whole body from the outside.

Due to various circumstances Vernon has become a typical tabloid editor, from the moral point of view a rather despicable character, a person without conscience who is convinced that in order to do good journalism his colleagues "are all going to have to get [their] hands dirty"[8], without having realized it and unwilling to accept this fact. What he does is no longer a service to the public, though he presents it as that and makes himself believe it, but cold, calculating and unscrupulous act of moneymaking through satisfying the readers' lowest desires for scandals and sensational news which have to be neither moral nor true.

Vernon has long betrayed his true role as a journalist and his acts are motivated only by the temporary demands of the commercial culture. Such strategies that are aimed exclusively at drawing the wide reading public's capricious and easily manipulable attention must sometimes become illogical and often lead to ridiculously absurd steps. And so before the publication of the highly compromising photographs Vernon's newspaper sponsors a "televised debate on the need for a privacy law"[9].

It is obvious that a character like Vernon could not exist in any other environment than that of a big city. The city is his natural milieu, the material, the very fabric as well as the consumer of his effort, without which neither his paper nor himself could exist. He is referred to as a nonentity, a typical means of the popular culture, a creator of pseudo-reality, a medial or virtual simulacra for what the ordinary people are 'kind-heartedly forced' to refuse to take as reality. Vernon's existence is a typical modern urban existence with all its attributes – hectic, individualistic, but, above all, desperately lonely. His lifestyle is described as:

> mostly [...] running, weaving dangerously towards taxis across crowded streets, and out of taxis across marbled foyers and into lifts, and out of lifts along corridors that sloped exasperatingly upwards, slowing him down, making him later.[10]

The fact that it is just a dream only emphasizes his seeming physical nonexistence, the shallowness of his character and the consequent lack of identity which has dissolved in

8) Ibid., p.33
9) Ibid., p.100
10) Ibid., p.98

the moral wasteland of the modern city. As he himself observes, he is a hollow man without individuality or identity: "he was simply the sum of all the people who had listened to him, and when he was alone, he was nothing at all. When he reached, in solitude, for a thought, there was no one there to think it. His chair was empty"[11].

The Urban and the Natural

The nature is presented in the novel as a traditional opposition or contrast to the urban world, a place where spirituality still exists, the soothing atmosphere of which enables even the anxious, insensible and morally callous urban people to gain or regain their long lost sense of humanity. As such, it evokes deep and profound emotions and feelings of beauty and harmony, and environment where anybody can find peace of mind as well as rediscover his or her true self. That is also what Clive is looking forward to most as he approaches the heart of the Lake District:

> Soon human meaning would be bleached from the rocks, the landscape would assume its beauty and draw him in; the unimaginable age of the mountains and the fine mesh of living things that lay across them would remind him that he was part of this order and insignificant within it, and he would be set free.[12]

Clive believes that the natural scenery, deprived of all the bounds of modern civilization, might not only set him free from his troubles but also serve as a crucial source of inspiration and imagination. It seems to work as far as the only condition is fulfilled – an absolute isolation, there must be no touch of civilization present at all. When there appears a numerous group of tourists in the rocks, Clives perception of the countryside changes dramatically since it immediately loses its original spirit of purity and immaculacy: "Instantly the landscape was transformed, tamed, reduced to a trampled beauty spot. Without giving himself time to dwell on old themes of his – the idiocy and visual pollution of day-glo anoraks, or why people were compelled to go about in such brutally large groups – he turned away to his right, towards Allen Crags,

11) Ibid., p.29
12) Ibid., p.78

and the moment the party was out of sight he was restored to his good mood"[13]. As an artist, Clive seeks the solitude essential for the act of creation the act of which is too individualistic to be shared with anyone else.

While hiking in the mountains looking for inspiration to complete his Millennial Symphony, Clive chances on a violent disagreement between a man and a woman and witnesses the woman being assaulted. However, he reasons that no one could judge him harshly for sticking with his masterpiece rather than offering assistance. Once again, like in London, he is hopelessly overwhelmed by his own significance, the self-deceptive image of a great artist freed from any moral or social responsibility in favour of his immense genius. As a result, he declines any involvement for fear that it would derail his musical efforts.

Moreover, when Vernon points out that Clive may have been a rare witness to a serial rapist and appeals to him to report what he has seen to the police, Clive refuses to do it so as not to lose his precious time. Apparently doing so in order to finish his symphony, Clive abandons himself to the disease which is starting to grow inside him, paralyzing his mind, will, actions. He gradually loses his self as this paralysis turns his own body into an object he analyses from the outside. His whole life suddenly looks distant and unfamiliar in the light of his newly discovered sensations. Tired and tormented as he is, he no longer recognizes his flat or even his reflection in the mirror and his perception of existence is thus reduced to a kind of documentary film about himself.

On the one hand, we can understand or even sympathize with Clive about how furious and astounded he must be feeling when Vernon, with his discredited tabloid values, gives him lectures on morality and moral responsibility, but, on the other hand, he unforgivably immerses himself into a deliberate and irresponsible egocentric isolation in a situation which demands moral and humane involvement. Therefore, it is not only the human project that has failed but also his own, his retreat to the Lake District, the attempt to restore the friendship through the means of unspoiled nature. His conceitedness and self-centeredness are just too deeply inveterate in his character to beaffected by some outer influences.

13) Ibid., p.83

Clive's stay in the Lake District does not bring the effect he has been searching for since it brings neither peace to his mind nor helps to reestablish the dying friendship. However, Clive feels satisfied for what might be the crucial tune of his symphony has occurred to him although he has kept and developed it at the expense of his moral and social responsibility, a fact he is not willing to accept. Suddenly, nature loses its spirit and even becomes a burden for Clive representing, thus, his absent guilty conscience. He even feels the persistent desire to be back in London, back among the crowds of people he hated and despised just a while before:

> He wanted to be away, he was longing to be on a train, hurtling southwards, away from the Lakes. He wanted the anonymity of the city again, and the confinement of his studio, and – he had been thinking about this scrupulously – surely it was excitement that made him feel this way, not shame.[14]

Clive's self-centeredness and false self-esteem have already grown so vast that they have suppressed any suggestion of human conscience. Even nature, with all the powers of its beauty and magic, appears helpless in evoking a sense of guilt or regret in him. In his egotism he thus fails to take the moral stand, exercising the moral choice and nature becomes the reminder of his guilt, the voice of his suppressed conscience. Clive's desire to be back in the city is natural from his point of view – in its anonymity and much more corruptive atmosphere he can hide easily from responsibility as well as his own conscience.

The City of Amsterdam

Amsterdam, the two protagonists' last destination, has been chosen to suit the plot as a city with liberalized euthanasia legislation but that is not all. There is also a great deal of irony in the fact that such intolerant and selfish characters should meet their inevitable fate in a city known for its tolerance. Therefore Amsterdam proves more difficult to be deceived than London and the pathological elements of the two men's

14) Ibid., pp.89-90

behaviour become much more apparent. When Clive talks to his Dutch doctor about Vernon, he in fact describes his own symptoms as well, those of the final stage of the process of self-decay: "unpredictable, bizarre and extreme antisocial behaviour, a complete loss of reason. Destructive tendencies, delusions of omnipotence. A disintegrated personality"[15].

From the very first moment Clive arrives in Amsterdam, the reader feels the change of the atmosphere in the novel since the city is delineated in terms much different from those used for London or other big cities – as a "calm and civilized city"[16]. The whole environment of the city as well as its dwellers seem to be the exact opposite of those the reader has already got to know in the course of the story. When Clive is walking along a typical Amsterdam street, he observes:

> So consoling, to have a body of water down the middle of a street. Such a tolerant, open-minded, grown-up sort of place: the beautiful brick and carved timber warehouses converted into tasteful apartments, the modest Van Gogh bridges, the understated street furniture, the intelligent, unstuffy-looking Dutch on their bikes with their level-headed children sitting behind. Even the shopkeepers looked like professors, the street sweepers like jazz musicians. There was never a city more rationally ordered.[17]

It is clear that the idyllic and even pastoral depiction of Amsterdam is far from reality and rather serves its symbolical purpose within the plot of the novel. Therefore, the greatest opposition is that between the city and the two characters who arrive there to complete their sinister mutual agreement.

What the reader faces at the end of the story is a highly sarcastic and hilarious contrast. On the one side, there is the city known for its tolerance, open-mindedness and liberal legislation which does not hesitate to provide the dying with the opportunity to end up their lives voluntarily in order to avoid further unendurable suffering, on the other, there are the two pathologic egotists suffering from the obsessive and self-deceptive image of their own greatness, significance and truthfulness, two diseased and emotionally invalid personalities who, due to the process of moral and consequently

15) Ibid., p.156
16) Ibid., p.155
17) Ibid., p.155

mental degradation, have become unsociable and inhumane hollow men capable of only very facile relationships and who have long lost their ability to perceive and interpret what is going on around them. The city of Amsterdam thus represents not only truth but also the only possible relief for the two characters desperately, helplessly and dangerously stuck in an amoral pseudo-reality.

Unconvincing Ending or Playful Twist?

Despite all its criticism, *Amsterdam* is a dark morality tale which aspires to bear the spirit of the best satirical works. McEwan himself called the novel lighthearted, and even the title, though it takes on a more sinister meaning as the story progresses, suggests that this might be something of a creative vacation for the writer. The result is a thought-provoking book and a surprisingly fast read that is marked (which may account for the prize), by its eerie topicality which stretches to the debates over such topics as legalization of euthanasia and the privacy of politicians' and other public figures' intimate lives.

It is true that a great number of literary critics disliked the final twist of the novel considering the ending too malignant, nihilistic or even synthetic with the last pages being so ugly and cynical that the story ceases to be convincing any more since the characters seem too cartoonish to be true. However, the fact that McEwan is not content with just exposing Clive and Vernon but he reduces them to beasts - hollow inhuman creatures, only emphasizes how much he despises his characters who, in their vast self-deception and obsession with their own righteousness and importance, fail to realize the very essence of humanity. Moreover, McEwan brilliantly intensifies his mockery at his characters' malice and vanity by making the dull, guileful, paranoid and imperious George the only real "winner" in this peculiar battle, no matter how deplorable and pitiable the reward for his victory is.

What I perceive as a weaker point in *Amsterdam* is the disproportion between the two main protagonists which results in the very different nature and depth of their inner dilemmas. While Clive gradually becomes an ambiguous character causing the reader to

hesitate in his or her judgement of him, Vernon is too shallow and therefore, less convincing compared to his friend. The ambiguity of Clive's character is caused by McEwan's equivocal relationship to him; although he obviously despises him morally, he attributes him to certain credit as an artist and dedicates the novel's most beautiful passages to the act of his musical composing. Through Clive, the author also plays a guessing game with the reader – he presents him to embody the serious artist in an age of arts councils and commercial culture who aspires to greatness and permanence, but with one eye on the headlines and the market. And so the question of whether he is a genius or a fake remains present until the end. However, the novel undoubtedly contains elements for which it might be praised. David Malcolm points out that "there is enough suspense in the other parts of the novel. There is good traditional 'plotting' in *Amsterdam*. The manner in which Conservative Party Central Office defeats Vernon provides a clever twist to the action. There is even a cunning subplot in which poor Vernon is outmaneuvered by one of his subordinates. And the whole novel comes to a satisfying conclusion, the two compromised friends punished for their hubris and greed"[18]. The morality is completed, the bitter-sweet feeling of sarcasm prevails.

Set in such a borderless Europe, the novel's urban setting is unavoidably connected with this new milieu. This setting thus, though very significant in the novel, is the logical consequence of the story's overall location and atmosphere rather than its presupposition or condition. What is typical of McEwan's urban setting is that it is not firmly bound to any specific city or even country; the story takes place in London but it could as well do so in any other Western European metropolis. The character of the city is therefore international, universally applicable and it should be understood as such. Its perception and evaluation is highly subjective since it has become a symbol of the development of Western civilization with all its pros and cons, the ultimate opposition or counterpoint to nature with everything it is generally assumed to stand for.

18) David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (University of South Carolina Press 2002), pp.191-2

4.5 IAN McEWAN'S NARRATIVE

Ian McEwan is a writer whose work, thanks to his unquestionable literary gift, has not only always been welcomed and impatiently awaited by the reading public, but who has also been taken seriously by critics and scholars, although they have not always liked his books. It would be very difficult and rather over-simplified to evaluate McEwan's fiction as a whole since his writing has undergone a significant artistic development as far as both the subject matter and form are concerned.

Ian McEwan, same as Martin Amis, appeared on the literary scene in a very specific time for British literature, as Malcolm comments: "It is argued by many commentators that the late 1970s and early 1980s mark an important point of departure in contemporary British literature, the clear emergence of a new generation or grouping of writers and of new concerns in fiction. There are four main features of the new literary fiction of the 1980s and 1990s. These are a fascination with history, with historical events and processes both in the distant and more immediate (sometimes very immediate) past; an interest in settings abroad, outside the British Isles, or in characters and experiences from outside that geographical area; a considerable prominence of genre mixture; and metafictional interests"[1]. However, when we ask how McEwan stands in relation to this particularly dynamic period in British fiction, we should say that although he undoubtedly is a part of the dominant literary trends and tendencies, he also shows various significant and notable divergences from the generally assumed characteristics.

In the context of contemporary British novelists, Ian McEwan's narrative has always been technically considerably less experimental as far as the postmodern literary devices are concerned, and his later novels in particular, seem to operate exclusively within the well-established literary traditions and thus to ignore the general tendencies characteristic of British literature in the last two decades, such as historical concern, cosmopolitanism, genre mixture and various metafictional, self-reflexive elements. McEwan is much more deeply concerned with his favourite issues than with some postmodern narrative tricks, as his experiments usually take place within such issues'

1) David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (University of South Carolina Press 2002), p.6

milieu. They involve "his presentation of women, and the role of feminist concerns in his fiction; his concern with rationalism and science; the moral perspective of his texts; and the fragmentariness of his novels"[2], to which we also could add the writer's fascination with various taboo subjects throughout his fiction. Therefore, McEwan's narrative strategies are mostly employed by the immediate demands resulting from his individual and unique treatment of these issues rather than by some overall metafictional aim. In this respect, yet not only in this one, McEwan stands out quite clearly from many other British novelists of the 1980s and 90s including Martin Amis whose dominant concern with the metafictional was our subject in the previous chapter. However, there are still several narrative strategies employed in McEwan's works which class them with the postmodern fiction.

The Uninvolved Narrator

If we would mention a specifically McEwan-like narrative strategy that appears throughout whole his work, it must be that of the indirect, unstraightforward narration of a somehow detached, willingly or unwillingly uninvolved narrator, a strategy that causes a special effect in the readers who find themselves simultaneously within and without the narration. McEwan thus plays an interesting game with the readers since when it comes to some important moment or event in the story, it is perceived as if from the edge of the viewing angle. "It's a particularly modern and modernist trope in literature. The narrative gives us not the centre, but the margin. Something happens, and we are looking away. We are [...] 'altogether elsewhere'. It's a phrase borrowed from a poem by W. H. Auden, a writer whose critical and oblique world view has had great influence on writers on writers of the succeeding generation. But the phrase contains its own contradiction, both for Auden himself and for McEwan's writing"[3]. The subject of narration becomes thus a de-centered one which enables him better to "recognize differences – of race, gender, class, sexual orientation" as well as to "suggest alternative

2) Ibid., p.12
3) M. Reynolds, J. Noakes, *Ian McEwan, The Essential Guide* (London: Vintage 2002), pp.5-6

notions of subjetivity"[4].

The detached, uninvolved narrative strategy is what differentiates Jack, the protagonist and narrator of *The Cement Garden*, who is otherwise deeply involved in the novel's action, from the classic Dickensian first person youngster narration. Although Jack seems to function as the reader's guide into a hidden enigmatic world, his point of view is, in a sense, far from participatory but rather exterior, one of an excluded, unconcerned witness. The reader's disadvantage lies in the fact that his or her awareness of what is really going on in the story is mediated by a highly self-absorbed, unstable teenager whose ultimate obsession with his own body and discovering his sexuality prevents him from any kind of objective comprehension of reality.

McEwan employs the very same narrative strategy in *The Comfort of Strangers*. As a result, though the novel deploys a third-person narrator, what appears to be the traditional narrative technique gets quite complicated and profound. There are two significant facts which crucially influence the readers' perception of the text. Firstly, as the novel progresses, the narrative point of view alternates between the two protagonists without any shared experience or opinion since for all their co-existence, Colin and Mary perceive the world entirely separately. Secondly, even though they are confronted with reality, their perception and interpretation of it is deliberately so vague, unspecified, uninvolved or even indifferent that it seems as if they were describing some other people's life. The overall effect of such narration, which gives the story through the eyes and minds of the two persistently detached protagonists, is inevitably that of limited omniscience and reliability.

The skillful combination of the third-person narration with the characters' points of view achieves quite a complex effect when moments of strictly objective narration limited to observable, external details take turns with moments of extreme importance and emotional intensity, which are, however, narrated as if from the outside, like the crucial morbid scene in which Colin is killed, from the position of lack of concern. "It [the narration] certainly gives the protagonists' points of view, but also continually withdraws from any kind of full identification with them. It is at once knowing and detached. (This duality is further reinforced by the text's persistent narrational strategy

4) Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1992), p.159

of recounting speech indirectly. Crucial conversations [...] are done in this manner, heightening one's sense of the narrator's detachment and the reader's own partial detachment from character and situation.) The text's narration creates a sense of coolness toward events and characters, a detachment that allows their predicament to be seen in particular and general terms"[5].

In the final scene we thus become witnesses of a cruel, ritualized, slow, torturing but not to intervene. Although the homicidal scene is the only dramatic action and takes, in reality, at least several hours, in the print space of the novel it takes up only two and a half pages as the atmosphere dominates over the action. And so when the scene ends, what the reader is left with, similar to Mary, is the rather self-centred feeling of relief that the nightmare is over rather than consternation at and horror over what has happened to Colin. This effect which Ian McEwan deliberately evokes in his readers is a result of a narrative strategy in literature in which the reader is not given the centre, the actual action, the climax of the plot, but the margin.

As a result, the reader cannot permanently get rid of the depriving feeling that certain information necessary for the full insight into and consequent comprehension of the characters' motives has been deliberately denied him or her. McEwan uses such narrative strategy, together with the motif of maps which can never cover the whole city, to express the general postmodern skepticism towards the limitless power of people's rational knowledge and human reason's capacity. As the narration keeps the firm distance from the novel's characters and events, the reader realizes the impossibility of overcoming the distance to any kind of ultimate understanding of other people's mind and behaviour. The text suggests that there will always remain some form of otherness too unapproachable and detached for us to be rationally examined, and that this otherness means, above all, other people. Therefore, what Amis deploys as a key motif in his *Other People: A Mystery Story*, McEwan emphasizes in *The Comfort of Strangers* (both novels were published in the same year) by his narrative strategy's effect.

The narrative strategy of a detached, uninvolved narrator can also be found in *The Child in Time*, although not with such frequency as in the two previous novels. On the one hand, it is narrated by a traditional anonymous third-person narrator, yet on the

5) David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (University of South Carolina Press 2002), p.69

other hand, the reader who observes the events exclusively from the main character's point of view is presented entirely with Stephen's perspective, perceptions and feelings. Moreover, there are also occasions in the text where the narrator noticeably loses his concern in the story and either speaks directly to the reader using distinctively formal, impersonal vocabulary, or describes the action as if "by the way", in an uninvolved manner. The dominant narrational position is thus disrupted and it is not difficult to notice that these disruptions often occur at moments of some emotional intensity for the protagonists, such as the act of abduction in the supermarket, the mysterious scene at the Bell pub, after which the reader is left with the most obsessive feeling of incompleteness, lack of any proper, or rational explanation. Therefore, when something important happens, the writer lets the readers witness it, but simultaneously he makes them look elsewhere so that the scene, the main event, is happening on the margins of the perception. He evokes the same effect by the account of the moments of Kate's disappearance and those immediately following it. And so like the 'shrouded figure [...] who was always to the side and slightly behind' we observe the scene "at the periphery of vision, like Stephen's our sight is held on 'mundane errands' and the whole event assumes 'shapes without definition drifted and dissolved, lost to categories"[6]. The readers are thus shown the horrendous event which significantly influences the whole novel's plot, but are not allowed to see it. Instead they are given the "relative" margin of Stephen's perception of the situation and his immediate reaction to it.

This technique is, maybe surprisingly, also employed in the very conclusion of the novel. After the detailed description of Stephen helping Julie to give birth to their child, the readers might expect that they would be told more about the child and its parents reaction to it. However, with the appearance of the baby, McEwan's descriptiveness vanishes and we only learn that "it was a beautiful child' and that 'its eyes were open". It is as if the whole scene cannot be perceived by sight and is reduced to various sounds, such as "noises of triumph and wonder" or crying each other's names. Then an unspecified, yet enormously significant, portion of time is left out at all and we learn that "they did not know how much later it was they heard the midwife's car stop

6) Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time* (London: Vintage Books 1992), p.16

outside the cottage"[7]. Eventually, the feeling of incomplete revelation is reinforced when we are once more tempted by Julie's question whether the newborn is a girl or a boy but we are denied this information too since McEwan makes us leave the cottage as Julie reaches down under the covers to find out. While in the first part of the scene McEwan does not allow the readers to disturb the couple's moments of closest intimacy and makes them stay as if behind a closed door, in the latter he deliberately chooses not to give the information that the readers are likely curious to know, suggesting thus that it is not that crucial or relevant for the themes and concern of the novel and that revealing that might open a completely new one. This scene indicates that although the device of the detached narrative voice seems to be distinctively linked with urban milieu, McEwan skillfully manages to apply it to peaceful or even idyllic scenes.

Once again we can ask what the writer's intentions or aims of employing this strategy might be. Malcolm suggests two, yet partly contradictory, explanations: "First, although narrational techniques not as complex as it is in McEwan's earlier novels, it does, as in them, constitute a reminder of the novel's textuality. [...] Second, the narrator's intrusions in the text are quite appropriate to the traditional, third-person, anonymous narrator of the nineteenth-century British-novel tradition, such as the narrators of Charles Dickens or George Eliot novels. Or one can argue that the novel's narrational strategy shares both these functions and maintains them in some kind of compromise formation"[8].

The Genre Mixture

Another feature characteristic of McEwan's longer fictions is the distinctive mixture of various genres which becomes more and more developed and sophisticated with his later, more complex novels. While the first two shorter novels are, as far as the genre mixture is concerned, quite similar, each of the following texts is more or less

7) Ibid., p.220
8) David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (University of South Carolina Press 2002), pp.93-4

unique in involving some new genre. Mixing of various genres is a favourite postmodern device the aim of which is not only to draw reader's attention, but most of all to challenge the modern concept of the universal world and its focus on the unity of artistic work and the cult of the individual artist[9].

The Cement Garden oscillates between at least two genres. On one level, it is a psychological study of adolescence with all the relationships, confusions, tensions, anxieties and complexes usually associated with this mentally unstable age group. On another level, though, it is marked by the clear presence of the gothic elements of ghosts and nightmares. For McEwan, unlike for many of his contemporaries, the function of this genre mixture is not merely to raise metafictional doubts about the possibility of giving a reliable account of events or to express distrust of traditional "children's initiation-maturation" narratives, but also to "suggest, in true Pinteresque fashion, the potential for the seemingly normal, banal, and everyday to tip into the grim and macabre"[10]. By combining the psychological with the gothic, McEwan challenges the concept of norm and normality, indicating how tiny and fragile the borderline between socially acceptable and pathological behaviour might be, and thus questioning the traditional inviolable notions of family or childhood by showing them fundamentally faulty, because even they can never completely avoid the possibility of being exposed to some manifestation of human cruelty and brutality.

A similar motif is developed in *The Comfort of Strangers* where the gothic elements, such as obsession, hatred, sadism or obscure perversion, are even more frequent and transparent. The characters' barbarism is emphasized by having been put into a striking contrast with the city's peaceful everyday life. It is this background, the ordinariness of people's routine actions, the sounds of people at work, in bars and cafés, but also the usual details of a tourist stay. The whole novel, thus, can be read as a remarkable combination of at least two other genres – a psychological story of a couple who, within the long years spent together, have got so used to each other's presence that their mutual and intimate life has altered into a series of matter-of-course mechanical

9) See Stanley J. Grenz, *Úvod do postmodernismu* (Praha: Návrat domů 1997), pp.32-34
10) David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (University of South Carolina Press 2002), p.53

acts, a psychopathological study of a couple whose own deprivation, complexes, invalid self-esteem and consequent self-hatred have taught them to develop defensive mechanisms even more brutal and perverted than the causes of their own suffering and despair were, and a sociological study of mass global tourism, its spiritual shallowness and transience, but also its devastating impact on the local inhabitants' natural lives – with the gothic elements which change the seemingly everyday into a nightmare of morbid perversity.

McEwan's following, and considerably more complex, novels are also characteristic of being much more mixed in terms of genre. On the one hand, McEwan leaves his favourite macabre gothic motifs so frequently used in his preceding works, yet on the other hand he explores new, more profound genres. And therefore, though *The Child in Time* is, to a great degree, a psychological novel, presenting predominantly Stephen's, but also Julie's, coming to terms with the dreadful and unspeakable experience of losing a child, we can also find in it a variety of elements of other literary genres.

The first new element included in *The Child in Time* and adding to the novel's genre complexity, which re-occurs in an even greater degree in *Enduring Love*, is a kind of philosophical contemplation over the notion of time. McEwan skillfully presents the traditional conflict between the purely scientific understanding of time represented, contrary to traditionally assumed male voice, by Thelma's tutorial-like utterances, and the perception of time as metaphysical, supernatural experience which resists any rational explanation, personified by Stephen. The scientific, rational understanding of time is thus directly confronted with the intuitive, or artistic one, and in this confrontation neither side is attributed distinctive superiority.

The Child in Time is also a political fiction containing harsh political-social criticism, a state-of-Britain novel of the late 1980s. The unspecified figure of the imperious Prime Minister, and Stephen's useless involvement in the child-care government committee, whose report had been written long before the committee's work actually started, are clear elements of such criticism. However, the text can also be read as a political dystopia – it is set in a Britain that is both familiar yet slightly different from the country of the late 1980s. When the reader comes across the licensed

beggars, he or she is informed that the novel's setting represents the implied aftereffects of the Thatcherite governmental policy rather than the current Britain. As David Malcolm puts it: "The world of the novel is a dystopic vision of what one might call Thatcherite Britain. The police are armed [...] Education is a 'dingy, shrunken profession; schools [are] up for sale to private investors, the leaving age was soon to be lowered'. Ambulance companies are private businesses [...] The southern English countryside has been turned into a vast conifer plantation so that Britain may be self-sufficient in wood, and the Government has sponsored an inane all-day television channel 'specializing in game and chat shows, commercials and phone-ins'. Only one newspaper does not support a Government that has clearly been in power for very many years. The national malaise is also an international one. Cold war tensions come to boil during an Olympic Games, and the world is threaten with nuclear destruction"[11].

The mixture of genres in *The Child in Time* has slightly different functions from those in McEwan's preceding works since it also contributes to the novel's intensification of the depiction of modern urban life in all its complexity. On the level of the story, its main function is to help create a world that is varied, a rich one in which the characters' lives do not lack intellectual, emotional, social, political or economic dimensions. Moreover, from the point of view of the narrative, it fulfills the metafictional function of the reader's reminder of the existence of different discourses and interpretations which might make sense of the world in a different, if not contrasting way, and that the presentation of this aspect should be one of the crucial attributes of postmodern fiction.

The Narrative of Moments

Another feature characteristic of Ian McEwan's writing is a narrative strategy that might be denoted "the narratives of moments" – "a series of imaginative set pieces which seldom coagulate into a fully realized work"[12], and that has been used in all the

11) Ibid., p.97
12) Ibid., p.161

writer's longer fictions. The basic idea of this strategy is that modern human existence often lacks the smooth linear continuity from one event to another, and rather is constituted by series of fragmentary experiences and episodes which do not have to, and mostly do not, have any kind of causality from one to another, an aspect especially characteristic of contemporary urban life. As a result of that, the action of McEwan's novels is open to the charge of fragmentariness, when certain single moments of an extensive psychological, emotional or physical intensity crucially determine the characters' behaviour and even lives.

Typical examples of such moments are the detailed and emotionally exhausting account of a fatal ballooning accident given in the two opening chapters of *Enduring Love*, or the scene where Joe is going to buy a gun for his contingent self-defense. These scenes seem to stand out as complete in themselves, separate from the novel's main story, without much relevance to the characters' ordinary lives. They also accentuate the unpredictable, fragmentary nature of modern life since they bear the ultimate potential of a disruptive and disconnecting impact on the continuous flow of human existence. McEwan tries to show that no one who lives in the present day conditions is immune to the potential danger of their existence becoming disrupted, suddenly broken into fragments from which the former "idyllic" life is impossible to restore.

Similar moments can also be found in other McEwan novels, though in his first two shorter fictions they are rather rare. In *The Child in Time*, for example, after the beginning evoked by the quite dull and boring atmosphere of the government committee meeting, the scene of Stephen's daughter's abduction, so emotionally intense despite the fact it is described as if from the periphery of vision, in an "uninvolved" manner, disrupts the narration, and consequently Stephen's life, into pieces which he desperately and with much effort tries to pick and put together again in the rest of the story. Yet there is at least one more moment of such nature – the scene in which Stephen is struggling to climb to Charles's tree-house. While the first example is crucial for the novel and literally triggers its action, the latter does not appear to have much relevance to the actual plot since it is so self-absorbing that it seemingly does not help the story move forward. However, the intensity of the moment Stephen experiences there proves significant for his eventual mental and emotional maturity. Therefore, such moments

might make one's life fragmentary and disconnected, yet they could also be, and, as McEwan suggests, should be taken rather as an impulse or challenge not to give up but to try to collect one's powers to restore the very essence of psychological and emotional framework of human life.

The Effect of Dissolved Totality

All of the above mentioned McEwan literary devices are skillfully combined in his works to create the very effect on readers through the typical McEwan-like atmosphere of his fictional world – a world which is extremely fragile and vulnerable in many respects, though sometimes in spite of all its incomprehensible cruelty, a world of dissolved totality. McEwan, in his novels, focuses predominantly on two aspects of such a world. The first is the fragility of intense human emotions, especially love, as it appears in *The Comfort of Strangers, The Child in Time* and *Enduring Love.* The second is the question of human knowledge, coming to know and understanding the otherness around us, which is frequently presented as highly independent on logical reasoning or authentic experience, and any attempt at some Enlightenment-based ultimate dominance of rational knowledge is shown to be not only illusionary but essentially wrong and dangerous, with devastating effect on lives of those who foolishly believe in such an idea, like Colin in *The Comfort of Strangers* or Stephen in *The Child in Time.*

To sum up, we can say that Ian McEwan is undoubtedly a writer in whose fiction clear elements of the postmodern condition can be traced. However, unlike Martin Amis, McEwan is wary of employing the most revolutionary devices of the postmodern narrative, such as appearing himself in the book as one of its characters, or presenting the story by a highly unreliable narrator or narrators. More than in an experimental prose, McEwan's narrative technique lies in the attempt to catch and depict the essential spirit and atmosphere, without having to renounce the realistic narrative tradition, of what is generally referred to as the "postmodern era" – its ultimate skepticism in the unquestionable dominance of human reason, the awareness of the life's fragmentariness and its consequent fragility and vulnerability, the notion of gender and its changing

effect on understanding women's position and role in society, and the gradual yet apparent absence of morality, abandonment of the traditional moral values in everyday life, in other words the impossibility of understanding our life as a totality of any kind. However, like those in Amis's novels, most of McEwan's typically postmodern devices and strategies result from or reflect the contemporary urban experience.

In accordance with the postmodern poetics, McEwan's works do not deny the real, they rather call attention to the ways we give meaning to the real within the signifying systems of various discoures. Such fictions by no means attempt to change the world but, through their plurality and de-centralized focus on the marginal, suggest alternative, less conceited and self-delusive, views of human existence. As Hutcheon claims: "Postmodernism may well be [...] the expression of a culture in crisis, but it is not in itself any revolutionary breakthrough. It is too contradictory, too willfully compromised by that which it challenges"[13].

13) Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1992), p.230

V. THE LITERARY CITY'S PROSPECTS

The Postmodern Follow-up

Postmodern literature, in order to affirm its artistic status and values, cannot afford to ignore the modernist legacy. In its overtly declared effort to democratize and pluralize, postmodernism not only challenges the elitist concept of modernist culture but also responds to and, not infrequently, assumes some of its artistic principles or strategies. Apart from the patent self-reflexivity, fragmentation, and a concern for history, they share, as David Lodge puts it, a "commitment to innovation and to a critique of tradition, even if the manifestations of these shared values differ" or, as other critics see it, "rising the same kinds of issues as modernism: investigating the cultural assumptions underlying our models of history or challenging the entire western humanistic tradition", or completing "modernism's break with traditional realism and bourgeois tradition"[1]. Whether we tend to incline toward any of these views, we should avoid the mistake of isolating postmodern culture and reducing it only to a consequence of the social, economic and political changes of the second half of the twentieth century. Postmodern art, as I understand it, tries to incorporate and further develop modernism's crucial themes and motifs into the context of contemporary socio-cultural tensions, though not always successfully since it undoubtedly amounts to a truly bold project.

The image of the modern metropolis as a milieu of industrial pragmatism, a world in which culture and art have only very little to do with the everyday life of common people since their main concern is accumulation of material goods and achieving of comfortable life-style, has changed dramatically into that in which the majority of members of the western postindustrial civilization have reached both these aims. Freed from most existential problems and other anxieties of early capitalism, people in the postmodern society want to fill their newly acquired spare time and so logically turn back to culture to provide them with some aesthetic subjects. However, their life experience has had an essential impact on what they seek in culture for

1) In Linda Hutcheon, *A poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1992), p. 51

majority of them, as Terry Eagleton argues, perceive culture and aesthetics as a style and source of delight and entertainment rather than a canonic artifact; the result is what he calls "anthropological" culture which involves, above all, fashionable clubs, shopping malls, pop-music, videotapes, and other commercial elements[2]. The postmodern pluralizing tendencies which often confuse the high and low in art have brought one more effect – unlike the modernist artists, scholars and literary critics who, no matter how much they differed in other matters, were able to agree on the distinction between the serious and the popular, the same issue has polarized the literary and academic circles all over the world.

Nowhere else is postmodern culture and its effects more apparent than in big cities, which is a fact frequently depicted in contemporary literature. The theme of urban life remains very popular among writers, the way in which they differ, however, in accordance with the postmodern plurality and concern with particularities, is the various ways in which and points of view from which they handle it. The works of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan, which I have been discussing in my thesis, offer two slightly different contemporary views of the modern city as a phenomenon which can be perceived as both the cause and the effect of its dwellers' anxieties.

The Tempting Suicidal Tendencies

Martin Amis is probably the greatest contemporary British urban writer. His best novels, such as *Money, London Fields* or *The Information* as well as his latest, *Yellow Dog* (2003), are piercingly precise, satirical probes into the consciousness and conscience of late twentieth century people's. Amis's sharp wit does not spare any of the attributes or effects of the commercial popular culture - its narrow-mindedness, emptiness, preoccupation with itself, and its degenerating impact on language, human character and perception of reality. And since the city and its environment are the nursery of such cultural variants, it inevitably becomes the focus of his attention.

2) See Terry Eagleton, *Idea Kultury* (Brno: Host 2001), pp. 89-90

Although his novels contain the most alarming, and thus often very shocking or unpleasant, examples of how culture, and humanity consequently, can get violated, and his characters represent the worst (mis)products of such pseudo-culture, the lowest forms of human existence, they are, I suppose, far from any absolute condemnation of civilization as such, though in *London Fields* nuclear catastrophe is imminently present. In Amis's fictional world there is always a chance, yet not easily detectable since his tone perpetually oscillates between insinuations of hope and bitter sarcasm.

A characteristic feature of Amis's urban novels is mixing of the "high" and "low" not only as a subject matter, but also as the bearing means of the narrative - from the narrative voices to the overall deceptive atmosphere of pseudo-reality making the confused characters believe they indeed do find themselves in such an environment. Unlike some conservative critics, I do not suppose this device discredits the literary work's artistic value since it was frequently and successfully employed by the most significant founders of the modern English literary tradition – Chaucer and Shakespeare. Harold Bloom even claims that Shakespeare's unique sense of both serious and popular art, and his consequent ability to attract the attention of almost all audiences in diverse cultures, is not only the true cause of his occasional scandalousness, but also the definite explanation of why and how he still assumes the position of the centre of the Western literary canon[3]. What some readers may find unsettling when reading Amis's novels is the degree, the vigour with which these, often ostensibly primitive elements are incorporated into the very texture of the work. The city, thus, might appear to be inhabited exclusively with preposterous fools, mindless criminals, or social and emotional freaks of the worst kind: people like Jock, Trev, John Self, Keith Talent or Steve Cousins. However, it would be a great mistake to reduce Amis's city merely to these negative forces. Despite all the sarcastic and dismal observations in his novels, I am still convinced that Amis suggests there is a hope to be found even in this apocalyptic urban milieu, a hope which is essentially moral rather than ironic.

The city life and its tensions undoubtedly shape most its of inhabitants' experience and perspectives. While in *Other People*, as the title itself suggests, Amis deals with the city as the archetypal place of concentrated and perpetually encountered

3) See Harold Bloom, *Kánon západní literatury* (Praha: Prostor 2000), pp. 55-86

otherness and where, in Sartre's words, hell is other people, in his later urban novels the author's focus shifts onto the very impacts of postmodern culture on our everyday existence. He suggests that it is not only the commercial culture, commodifying all the traditional aesthetic values, but also other aspects aspects of the postmodern era's condition – its preference and desire for the temporal, instantaneous, transient, and passively achievable, as well as the increasing number of particularities which might paradoxically, in its final effect, lead to yet gloomier uniformity[4] – that have become irrevocable symptoms of the contemporary milieu. This globalized uniformity as both cause and effect is most apparent in big cities where it affects, though in a distinct manner, the vast majority of people, regardless of their socio-cultural background. That is the reason why Keith Talent can be taken as an intensified variant of John Self, as well as Richard Tull a more sophisticated one of Guy Clinch.

Amis's chief achievement in this respect is the character of Nicola Six in *London Fields*. As the ultimate personification of the commercial variant of postmodern culture, she is attributed its inner potential to become irresistible for people from whatever social class. And so, due to her ability for immediate and diversified disguise, she can easily represent a pornographic icon or a pub muse of his deceptively self-projected image for the loutish Keith as well as, simultaneously, an immaculate, oversensitive charitable virgin or for the oversensitive Guy. Such culture need not be quality or profound but prompt in reacting and adjusting to the changeable and inconsistent people's desires. Nicola is the city in which one "supra-culture" has been replaced by a heterogeneous cluster of subcultures often intersecting in a contingent manner[5], a big shopping mall which manipulates the customers into an ignorant belief that everything has been done exclusively for their good, and where loneliness and alienation are the inevitable price people pay for what is presented as "bountiful cultural diversity". Yet Amis deploys his metaphor further on – such pseudo-culture, due to its perpetually faster and more temporal character gradually finds itself in a self-destructive circuit resulting from its final exhaustion or drainage. Like Nicola, who feels she has seen and done it all, popular culture might reach the point where it realizes its further unsustainability and projects its

4) See Terry Eagleton, *Idea kultury* (Brno: Host 2001), pp. 85-86
5) Ibid., p. 87

own fall. No matter how unlikely or even illusionary the idea seems, it is where hope can be found. I tis only in those who have the potential to survive this "loss", be it Sam who sacrifices himself to save little Kim, M.A. who eventually outwrites both Nicola and Sam in order to give artistic testimony to what has happened, or Richard Tull with his desire for genuine, difficult literature and his rightful irritation by his rival's dull yet commercially successful, politically-correct fictions.

The (A)moral Choice

Unlike Amis, Ian McEwan is not a distinctively urban writer, yet the city frequently appears as the crucial setting of his fiction. When discussing any attribute of McEwan's writing, we should make a distinction between his early and later works. The former, though including *The Comfort of Strangers* which, as I attempted to show in chapter IV.2, offers several interpretations at once, portray the city symbolically or metaphorically to depict a certain alarming aspect or aspects of contemporary Western society. The focus is laid on dysfunctional human relationships, the consequences of the ostensible and often offensive neglect of the physically, socially or economically weaker ones in particular, be it from the side of the state towards the poor, parents towards their children, men towards women, or the mass tourist industry towards the local inhabitants. The latter, however, though including *Amsterdam* considered by many critics as rather few-dimensional, provide a largely complex view of the ambivalent phenomenon termed 'postmodern civilization'. The author's city, then, represents the very essence of this civilization with all its vices.

McEwan's most mature novel set in a city is undoubtedly *The Child in Time.* Since the novel can be apprehended as a deft political satire, London represents the focus of the conservative policies and its immediate aftermath, a bleak dystopic vision of the right-wing maxims conducted to extremes – in the streets there are armed police, licensed beggars, the "ambulance companies are private businesses", "schools are up for sale to private investors", "the leaving age is soon to be lowered", "the Government has

sponsored an inane all-day television channel" specialized in games, phone-in chat shows and commercials. Moreover, "the world is threatened with nuclear destruction"[6]. It is no wonder that the intelligent and more sensitive characters react to this disquieting reality by retreats of various intensity, even fatal in the case of Charles Darke. As result, the city has become an unbearable place to live in, and physical escape seems to be the last chace. Despite all this, McEwan manages to create a hopeful, though skillfully unsentimental ending – the hope lies in love, sincere and profound human relationships, and perhaps also in future generations.

Amsterdam offers yet another hope in exercising the moral choice, the ultimate human duty and simultaneously one of the fundamental conditions of a functional social community. McEwan's heroes, like Stephen or Clive, captured in the unscrupulous and listless postmodern urban existence, have much in common with the world vision the Marxist critic Lucien Goldman describes when he talks about people "who are lost in a valueless world, accept this world as the only one there is (since God is absent), and yet continue to protest against it – to justify themselves in the name of some absolute value which is always hidden from view"[7]. This absolute value for McEwan is humanity attainable through, though certainly not only, the unconditional submission to moral order, and the self-justification is impossible without one's moral involvement. The responsibility for violation or rejection of this order cannot be avoided, and so Clive gets killed in the "free-thinking" Amsterdam where, as he believes, he is safe from the spectres of his conscience that haunted him in the "corrupted" London.

Ironic Hope or Hopeful Irony?

Mostly due to their urban setting Amis's and McEwan's mature novels can be read as contemplation over the relationship between freedom and culture under the burden of the postmodern condition. The classical literary works dealing with the notion of freedom in the modern world suggest that freedom begins only where autonomy of

6) David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (University of South Carolina Press 2002), p.108
7) See Northrop Fry, *Anatomie kritiky* (Brno: Host 2003), p. 402

culture is imminently guaranteed[8]. In concord with this claim, *Money*, *London Fields*, *The Child in Time* and *Amsterdam* show the possible consequences when such autonomy gets violated, be it through the antithetic tendencies inherent in contemporary commercial culture, the arrogance of political establishment, or some individual's personal failure.

What the two notably distinct writers have in common, like most other distinguished postmodern writers, is their masterful use of irony. It is this irony which makes the position of winner outside the reach of both Richard Tull and Gwyn Barry in *The Information*, and it is also not an accident that the last chapter of the novel begins with the paraphrase of Frye's archetypal mythology: "It was spring: the season of comedy. In comedy, in the end, all is forgiven. [...] Everyone is gathered into the festive conclusion. [...] And everyone attends the nuptials of hope"[9]. It is the same bitter wit which gives the final turn to George, the most pitiable of all characters in *Amsterdam*. On the one hand, the novels' critique of the status quo of the contemporary Western society is not difficult to recognize, yet on the other, neither of the two writers' fictional worlds reminds us of Orwell's meaningless one in *Nineteen-Eighty Four*, just as neither of them consists entirely of negations, non-presence or nothingness. Therefore, in the case of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan, I assume, it is hopeful irony rather than ironic hope employed in their works, a trope which by no means weakens their artistic value or social relevance. For, as Hutcheon claims, "irony may be the only way we can be serious today"[10], and there is always the work's challenge to self-reflectiveness behind the dark laughter it evokes.

8) Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge 2002), pp. 30-31
9) Martin Amis, *The Information* (New York: Vintage 1995), p. 362
10) Linda Hutcheon, *A poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1992), p. 39

VI. EPILOGUE

In this work, I have tried to show that the urban milieu has long represented an inseparable part of the English literary imagination and still appears, though in its logical postmodern variations, as a grateful theme in the contemporary British fiction. With London writers we could always speak of, as Peter Ackroyd calls it, "territorial imperative"[1], the pertinacious impulse or urge to capture the metropolis and its atmosphere and by doing so to express the irresistible desire to comprehend their city in its comprehension resisting diversity.

It is not surprising then that certain themes associated with the urban milieu have been perpetually and persistently discovered, rediscovered and developed in the course of the English literary tradition. The depiction of the city as a place of numerous extremities, from social or economic up to various individual eccentricities, resulting in aggression, vulgarity and cynicism was characteristic not only of Geoffrey Chaucer or Charles Dickens and their use of superlatives and hyperbole mixed with comical pathos of a farce, but also of the most significant London visionaries such as John Bunyan, Thomas More, John Milton or William Blake. The theatrical nature of the city has already become archetypal and can be traced in the works of all great English writers and men of letters. However, the image of the city as a theatre is simultaneously accompanied by that of a prison which is deeply rooted in London imagery of, for instance, Thomas More, John Donne, Henry Fielding, William Wordsworth, Charles Dickens or Mathew Arnold.

In Martin Amis's and Ian McEwan's novels, but also in those of Peter Ackroyd and many others, we can see that a great majority of the literary city's attributes and motifs have survived in contemporary writer's imagination. Despite the different historical, social, economic, philosophical and cultural conditions, the essence of the urban imaginary remains as if untouched – the times might have changed but the literary *genius loci* lives on.

1) Peter Ackroyd, *Albion, kořeny anglické imaginace* (Praha: BB art 2004), p.437

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