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BEN MASTERS

The Mid-Atlantics

'I Pitched My Voice Somewhere in the Mid-Atlantic'

In a eulogising essay following the death of John Updike in 2009, Ian McEwan wrote: 'American letters, deprived in recent years of its giants, Bellow and Mailer [and now Updike], is a levelled plain, with one solitary peak guarded by Roth.'[1] Philip Roth would go on to announce his retirement from writing in 2012 and passed away in 2018, thus eradicating the final face from McEwan's literary Mount Rushmore. McEwan's friends and peers, Martin Amis and Julian Barnes, similarly wrote eulogies for Updike; just as McEwan and Christopher Hitchens (another member of their literary set) had done for Saul Bellow in 2005 ('What other American novelist', asked Hitchens, 'has had such a direct and startling influence on non-Americans young enough to be his children?'[2]), while Amis and McEwan both spoke at Bellow's memorial in New York. Amis also wrote an account of Roth's oeuvre the year after his retirement,[3] and followed this with an appreciation after his death, while McEwan remembered Roth on BBC Radio.[4]

Thus, in the early years of the twenty-first century, three of Britain's most acclaimed and criticised novelists – Amis, Barnes and McEwan – found themselves reflecting on the enormous influence of a senior generation of American writers now passed, and were perhaps left wondering where this placed their own generation on the altered literary landscape. Certainly, Zadie Smith, one of the major-voices-to-be of a new twenty-first-century literary generation, regarded Amis, Barnes and McEwan as a collective in its own right: 'Better to cultivate a cipher-like persona, be a featureless squib called Mart, Jules, Ian', writes Smith in her debut novel, *White Teeth* (2000), suggesting her indebtedness in perhaps the way they would most appreciate – ironically.[5] Smith was not the first to identify these writers as a group or gang. Since at least the 1980s the media has imagined them as an exclusive all-male group of cronies and sometimes rivals, also including Salman Rushdie and Hitchens among their ranks (both of whom became American citizens), as well as the poets Craig Raine and James Fenton, and more senior figures like Clive James and Ian Hamilton. Many of these writers were first corralled under the stewardship of Hamilton at

the *New Review* in the 1970s, attending 'boozy' lunches that have become the stuff of literary legend,[6] and worked together in various combinations on publications like the *New Statesman* and the *Times Literary Supplement* through the 1970s and 1980s; some shared agents, editors and publishers (McEwan, Amis, Barnes and Rushdie have all been published by Jonathan Cape for the majority of their careers); and have gone to bat for one another in the media on numerous occasions. Ever since Amis, Barnes, McEwan and Rushdie became four of the headline figures on Granta's influential first Best of Young British Novelists list in 1983, this group has cast an inordinate shadow over the British literary world, often to the irritation of other writers and reviewers. But although journalists have been quick to view them as a peer group (to be gossiped about almost as much as critiqued), Amis, Barnes, McEwan *et al.* have never been formally evaluated as a substantive literary coterie. (In fact, very little critical work has been done on late-twentieth-century and twenty-first-century literary sets at all.) This needs correcting, for Amis *et al.* have fundamentally shaped one another's careers as well as the wider literary landscape. There are, of course, differences in their writing styles, but they do share many intellectual preoccupations, philosophical and political views, and attitudes about aesthetics, and have helped to evolve the novel form in particular directions.

One of the most significant characteristics that binds their work together is the extent to which it has been influenced by American literature. It was a commonplace of literary criticism of the 1970s, when these writers were first establishing themselves, to play the British novel against the US novel. Bernard Bergonzi in his influential *The Situation of the Novel* (1970) contrasted 'the prevalent English non-style' with American 'panache';[7] while Tony Tanner's *City of Words* (1971) implicitly found greater ambition and vitality in the American post-war novel. Certainly, younger British writers coming up in the 1970s recognised a fundamental difference between the home-grown novel and the exports arriving from across the Atlantic. McEwan has recalled how encountering American writers like Roth, Updike, Bellow, Norman Mailer and William Burroughs as a student at UEA had a profound effect on him. 'The American novel seemed so vibrant compared to its English counterpart at the time. Such ambition, and power, and barely concealed craziness. I tried to respond to this crazed quality in my own small way, and write against what I saw as the prevailing grayness of English style and subject matter.'[8] Updike and Roth, McEwan has said, have 'loomed over my writing life'.[9] Likewise, Amis recalls how at the start of his career, 'the English novel was very depressed: it was 225 pages on the ups and downs of the middle classes. The American novel was huge, like a Victorian novel';[10] and Barnes, when asked to distinguish American fiction from

British, says that 'American fiction displays scope, audacity, and linguistic vigor'.[11] Barnes identifies as a European writer and talks far more of the grand European tradition than American literature; but for all his bowing to the great French and Russian novelists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Updike and Roth seem more tangible presences in his work. He is perhaps throwing us off the scent a little when he says: 'American novelists are so different from English novelists. They really are. No point trying to write like them.'[12] Amis, in contrast, has proclaimed that: 'The project is to become an American novelist.'[13]

In the post-war decades, then, American writers seemed to represent verve and gusto as opposed to plainness and restraint; they suggested ambitious ways forward from modernism (for McEwan they 'were free of the shadows of modernism, though they had learned all its lessons'[14]); they were unabashed about grappling with the zeitgeist and what it means to be contemporary; and they exuded the intoxicating gravitas of writing from the centre of power. 'That imperial confidence has now shifted to America', says Amis, 'and you think quite coldbloodedly, quite selfishly, I want some of that. I want the amplitude that is no longer appropriate to England.'[15]

Accurate or inaccurate – certainly crude – these generalisations about American and British literature appeared to hold sway for the younger British novelist of the 1970s and 1980s. Rather than falling into the trap of a dubious American versus British essentialism (which Paul Giles's nuanced transatlantic criticism has so persuasively deconstructed), it is worth noting that when Amis, Barnes and McEwan talk of their reverence for the American novel, they are really talking about a very limited pantheon of white male writers – namely Bellow, Updike and Roth[16] – who could not be said to stand for the American novel in general. In fact, they are too individualistic to ever be flag-bearers for anything much at all. Nevertheless, I would suggest that they represent what American influence came to mean for Amis, Barnes and McEwan.

That's not to say that Amis *et al.* are doting acolytes. Indeed, Amis has written many a critical piece on Roth and Updike. But these particular Americans suggested alternative paths for the novel, which had a strong pull for Amis, Barnes and McEwan at the start of their careers and shaped them into the writers they are today. Most importantly, for Amis *et al.*, they had style. Ann Massa and Alistair Stead have noted that Richard Poirier's seminal 1966 study of American literature, *A World Elsewhere*, is subtitled 'The Place of Style in American Literature', and that for such critics 'it is the attention to language and the foregrounding of style that are so frequently perceived as characteristically American'.[17] As we shall see, it is the pure artistry of prose style that Amis, Barnes and McEwan return to again and again in their essays and reviews of their American heroes. Writing about

novels like Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) and *Herzog* (1964), Roth's *The Counterlife* (1986), and Updike's Rabbit books seems to turn them into old-fashioned aesthetes. It is as though American writers provide the model for what it means to be a *stylist* – that most lofty and vague of statuses, which brings with it another vaunted role: that of the moralist.

It is the question of style above all that enables us to trace an important lineage (albeit faint and circuitous in places) from Bellow, Updike and Roth to Amis, McEwan and Barnes. Not only does the latter group's readings of the senior American generation offer indirect routes into understanding their own aesthetic development, as well as revealing deflected self-criticisms and insecurities (as critics like James Diedrick, Gavin Keulks, Isabelle Zahar, Victoria N. Alexander and Brian Finney have recognised in Amis's work in particular); but their absorption of American models also points to one of their own greatest legacies – a quasi-Americanisation of the British novel. Indeed, they are of that first generation of British writers to have come of age during the perceived Americanisation of post-war British culture. Perhaps unsurprisingly, transatlanticism is a recurring theme in their work. They have all gone to America in their novels and Amis has even published an entire essay collection on American themes. But in this chapter I am interested in how America gets into the prose. I'm interested in sentence-level transatlanticism and Malcolm Bradbury's notion that 'Amis's own fictional voice and vital style is itself a midatlantic one, filled with street-talk, wisecrack, American easy speaking, mixed in with the elegances and mannerisms of British literary style'.[18] A central claim of this chapter, then, is not only that we need to think of Amis, Barnes and McEwan as part of a definite literary set, but that the development of a mid-Atlantic style is one of their hallmarks.

Towards the High Style

In 1971, Tony Tanner observed that the 'ambiguous relationship of the self to patterns of all kinds – social, psychological, linguistic'[19] was a dominant trope and structural principle in contemporary US fiction, highlighting the work of Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, William Burroughs and other postmodernists as exemplary. Although Bellow and Updike could not be described as postmodern in any conventional sense, a similar concern about the relationship between the individual and larger governing patterns presents itself in their work – especially the encroachments of 'organised power', global politics, rampant capitalism, scientific innovation and cultural revolution on the local self; while in Roth's more postmodern vein the self's vulnerability (in a fairly ambivalent sense) to

organising powers of narrative and artifice forms a central theme. In Amis, Barnes and McEwan's work, the tension between individual freedom and governing patterns appears to be simultaneously regretted and relished, creating the prevailing ironies of their work. Much of the regret appears to be for the seeming unviability of humanist values and self-possession in a fragmented late-capitalist world that is haunted by the atrocities of twentieth-century history; while much of the relish comes from the opportunities for authorial expressiveness generated, somewhat paradoxically, by the very diminution of the individual's autonomy, as if contemporary threats to possessed selfhood and personality justify an assertion of rampant authorial personality.

Bellow was instructive for Amis in this regard. 'From Bellow', writes James Wood (another British writer who had a close relationship with Bellow), 'Amis gets his streaming syntax and parenthetical interruptions, his boisterous plurals and compounds'.[20] In Bellow we also find forerunners to Amis's sprung rhythms, jazzy repetitions, poetic excess, and that galvanising movement between the universal and the local, between grand statement and complicating detail, which mobilises his prose. For Amis, these kinds of effect taken in sum are uniquely American: '*Augie March* isn't written in English; its job is to make you feel how beautiful *American* is … *Augie March*, finally, is the Great American Novel because of its fantastic inclusiveness, its pluralism, its qualmless promiscuity.'[21] But it is Amis's discovery of what he calls the High Style in Bellow's writing that truly liberates his own style:

> [Bellow's] heroes are well tricked out with faults, neuroses, spots of commonness: but not a jot of Bellow's intellectuality is withheld from their mediations. They represent the author at the full pitch of cerebral endeavour . . . This careful positioning allows Bellow to write in a style fit for heroes: the High Style.[22]

From Bellow Amis gleans a way to justify authorial presence (i.e. the kinds of poetic expressiveness and ingenuity that break the characterological frame), for Bellow gives his characters 'a shove upwards, hierarchically, towards the grand style'.[23] Something similar has been identified in Amis's writing, particularly in *Money* (1984), by critics like Jon Begley and James Diedrick who explore the political and ethical connotations of the novel's ironic interplay between Amis's fecund rhetorical talents and the narrator's (John Self's) limited perspective.[24] In *Novel Style*, I call this a reversed free indirect style that purposefully shifts the angle of vision by ironising point of view.[25] Something similar to Amis's reversed free indirect style takes place in Barnes's first-person narrators too. Take, for example, *Love, etc* (2000), a novel with a transatlantic theme. Narrated by multiple first-person narrators (one of whom has just returned from several years living in America), there are numerous bursts of that jazzy improvisation of high and low, of the

literary and the street-smart, and of the cynically knowing, that we get in Amis, which feels in itself curiously mid-Atlantic. So Barnes's narrators say things like: 'The death of my father, that was a real corners-up day. Some toilsome cyclopaedists of the psyche, earnest calibrators of angst, have apparently estimated that the stress resulting from the death of the father is right up there with the pain of moving house'; 'As I swooped down the sliproad to mingle with the credulous on the motorway, I decided to idle away the dull furlongs with literary genre'.[26] These aren't far in tone and rhythm from Amis's own mid-Atlantic voice. In Amis's adaptation of the Bellovian High Style, and Barnes's comparable first-person overrides, we get the limited point of view of character souped up by the expressive, knowing and often ironising authorial self. This arguably plays out a postmodern take on the illusion of free will, although I will suggest that something more fundamental is going on.

Roth and Updike are equally instructive to Amis, although his relationship to their work is more complex than his assenting devotion to Bellow's. Amis has named their particular kind of writing the Higher Autobiography (an umbrella under which he gathers Bellow too), such that:

> The present phase of Western literature is inescapably one of 'higher autobiography', intensely self-inspecting. The phase began with the spittle of Confessionalism but has steadied and persisted. No more stories: the author is increasingly committed to the private being.[27]

But Amis is suspicious of the writer's life getting into the narrative when it isn't sufficiently transformed from raw experience into some kind of larger artistic form and shape. Through a series of reviews of Roth in the 1970s and 1980s, Amis criticises Roth for being too self-involved.[28] In Amis's estimation, Roth's self-obsession leads to 'compulsive self-circlings'[29] and an inability to sift, select and transform the details that he includes in his prose: '*My Life as a Man*', Amis writes, 'sags with the minutiae that belong to life and not to art; it displays a wooden fidelity to the inconsequential, a scrupulousness about detail which isn't significant, merely true.'[30] Similarly in Updike Amis complains of an 'undifferentiated love of detail'.[31] But Updike and Roth push Amis towards defining his own aesthetic principle. For Amis, style is a writer's essence, so that rather than the Higher Autobiography existing at the level of plot or theme, we get a *higher style*; a personal style.

> [Style is] all [the writer's] got. It's not the flashy twist, the abrupt climax, or the seamless sequence of events that characterizes a writer and makes him unique. It's a tone, it's a way of looking at things. It's a rhythm.[32]

According to Amis, it is the style that carries the moral sensibility of the author: 'When I read someone's prose I reckon to get a sense of their moral life.'[33] And Bellow was instrumental in shaping this philosophy. It's when writing on Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* that he arrives at the conclusion that style 'is intrinsic to perception … And style is morality. Style judges. No other writer and no other novel makes you feel surer about this'.[34] This leads Amis to an aesthetic theory that posits style as intensely personal, but also social in its affective reach. Perhaps this is what he means when he says that Updike's finest writing 'wins one's deepest assent; it seems to enlarge the human community'.[35] The personal style is the transformative element, the *art*, because it offers new perceptions and angles of vision, and it both carries and nurtures sensibility, such that authorial individuality might individualise the reader too.

In many ways, Amis's is an old-fashioned humanistic notion of literary morality and value. It embraces the concept of a moral education that is facilitated by the fine attentiveness and rich expression of an elevated author figure – in this sense not dissimilar from the Jamesian model defended by neo-humanist ethical critics like Wayne C. Booth and Martha Nussbaum. Yet Amis's style, which is so volubly expressive of authorial individuality and autonomy, almost spurns character and the very possibility (or even illusion) of characterological autonomy. This creates ethical and aesthetic tensions that differentiate Amis's writing from Updike's and Bellow's. Indeed, Updike said of Amis that he 'writes out of a sensibility on the edge of the post-human. His characters strikingly lack the soulful, willful warmth that he admires in Saul Bellow; they seem quick-moving automata'; while *Night Train* and its characters are 'pure diagram, on a blackboard as flat as it is black'.[36] For Updike this is a cop out – a 'convenient category of the less-than-human',[37] leaving him hungering for the more challenging demands of human understanding. After reading *Time's Arrow*, Updike says: 'One wishes for more empathy.'[38] Updike levelled similar criticisms at Barnes too: 'The effect', Updike writes, having grappled with the knowing implied-authorial point of view of *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), 'is ingenious but not, quite, moving.' In the same review Updike says: 'Whatever we want from novels, we want more than conversation with the author, however engagingly tricksome.'[39] Bellow's fascinatingly knotty and obscure letter to Amis upon reading his *The Information* (1995) echoes Updike's sentiments: 'Page by page the writing gave me pleasure … The words bowl me over. But I find myself resisting your novel and in the end I back away from it.'[40]

But there is a guardedness to the writing of Amis, Barnes and McEwan (more on whom below) that we rarely find in Bellow, Updike and Roth – what one senses Updike might deem a peculiarly English quality – as if the writer must

take pride in being sceptical, knowing, common-sensical, so as not to be taken in by the idealism of the mystical or transcendental. Often, this means protecting oneself with irony. The illusion of control can never quite be given up. Updike remarks on Barnes's recourse to clever literary language in *Flaubert's Parrot* as if it is a defence mechanism against the risks of true feeling: 'The effect is ingenious but not, quite, moving . . . By the time the narrator comes clean, we are tired of his voice, by turns arch, quarrelsome, curt, cute, and implausibly literary.'[41] And David Malcolm notes how McEwan adds 'formal vocabulary' into an otherwise looser, more plentiful style in his story 'Homemade'[42] (a story that McEwan has called 'a *very* conscious homage to Roth'[43]). Perhaps this is what James Wood means when he describes 'the old English balance between composure and collapse' in Amis's work.[44]

But the 1980s and 1990s fiction of Amis, Barnes and McEwan intentionally exposes what Dominic Head calls 'the absence of foundational beliefs' in late-twentieth-century society;[45] an absence which undermines the moral, humanist values that justifies the lyrical realism and sentiment of writers like Bellow and Updike. Nevertheless, for all their postmodernist credentials (including the rejection of so-called grand narratives), one senses in Amis *et al.* a yearning for the grandness of their American heroes' visions; a grandness that is fortified precisely by the kinds of fundamental guiding principles that postmodern thinking is so sceptical of – whether it be Bellow's humanistic mysticism, Updike's spiritual metaphysics or even Roth's (albeit conflicted) self-reliance. As Amis says of Bellow's High Style: 'The High Style is not a high style just for the hell of it: there are responsibilities involved. The High Style attempts to speak for the whole of mankind, with suasion, to remind us of what we once knew and have since forgotten or stopped trying to regrasp.'[46] It is the ability of writers like Bellow, Updike and Roth to speak in supposedly large universal terms, to craft wisdom (Barnes called Updike's *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996) 'a novel of accumulated wisdom'[47]) at the same time as cultivating an idiosyncratic personal style, which seems to have especial resonance for these younger English writers. This illuminates one of the great animating struggles of their own work: a thwarted desire to speak for humankind, to be moralists in postmodern times when the viability of these positions has been cast in doubt, so that such an aspiration can only ever be a posturing of authority, a pose of universality. As Updike says of Amis's *Time's Arrow*: 'With its cloudy and flirtatious metaphysics, the novel longs for the cleansing old absolutes.'[47]

From Irony to Sincerity

But the longing seems to be half of the point. Rather than being celebratory postmodernists, Amis, Barnes and McEwan are conflicted humanists.

As their careers progress, it is as though their earlier postmodern directions of thought become tempered by a greater faith in the authenticity (though often a conflicted and problematic authenticity) of individual experience; a faith which is partnered by a growing receptiveness to non-ironic modes of sincerity and so-called 'human interest' – what we might call quiddity. This is reflected in their readings of Updike and Bellow, in whose work all three are struck by the flexibility and richness of the free indirect style. 'How masterfully Updike deploys free indirect style', writes Barnes, 'switching us in and out of the main characters' consciousness';[49] 'Like Bellow', says McEwan, 'his only equal in this, Updike is a master of effortless motion – between third and first person, from the metaphorical density of literary prose to the demotic, from specific detail to wide generalization.'[50] It is significant that they are so admiring of this capacity of Updike's and Bellow's prose to render otherness while maintaining its own authorial self-possession (its own authorial high style), especially when this doesn't trigger an ironic interplay between author and character of the kind found in Amis and Barnes's reversed free indirect styles. Updike and Bellow's free indirect style pertains to something more collaborative than combative, such that the attentive depiction of the material world in all its peculiar detail, texture and quiddity can speak to a grander metaphysics without collapsing into a weightless relativism or the despair of isolated subjectivity. And the key to this is how the free indirect style, in Sianne Ngai's compelling paraphrasing of Amanda Anderson, epitomises '[t]he novel's investment in the tension between life and theory'.[51]

The tension between life and theory is characteristic of Barnes's writing of the twenty-first century. In novels like *Arthur & George* (2005) and *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), there is a movement away from the wryness and tricksiness of his previous work towards a quasi-humanistic vision of the world, which relies less on satire and irony (though traces remain) and more on feeling and sentiment. The latter novel tells the story of Tony Webster, a retiree whose life is up-ended when he learns of the suicide of an old school friend. Like many of Barnes's narrators and characters, Tony is an inveterate theoriser: 'Eventually, I came up with a theory'; 'I could only reply that I think – I theorise – that something – something else – happens to the memory over time'.[52] Tony's longing for wisdom cues many familiar Barnesian traits: the perpetual arrivals at aphorism, the barbs of sardonic observation and the rhetorical addresses to an imagined reader or listener. Certainly, Tony is obsessed with logic and knowledge, driven by a dry – sometimes morose – skepticism that feels oddly English, and accordingly he pursues classic Barnesian themes. But it all seems finessed by an Updikean texture and tone that allows for greater doubt, surprise and wonder than in

Barnes's earlier work. Even the list of remembered sense impressions that are detailed at the start of the novel and braid the narrative throughout has a lucid particularity that feels redolent of Updike's way of looking at the world:

> I remember in no particular order: . . . gouts of sperm circling a plughole, before being sluiced down the full length of a tall house . . .[53]

> Lying spent and adrift he listens again to the rain's sound, which now and then quickens to a metallic rhythm on the window glass, quicker than the throbbing in the iron gutter, where ropes of water twist.[54]

Indeed, Barnes was re-reading Updike in the years preceding the publication of *The Sense of an Ending*, as he tells us in the two essays he wrote upon Updike's death in 2009, which feel like cribs for his own novel, especially in their focus on Updike's themes of transience and disillusionment.

There is also something of Updike's tone of spiritual yearning in Tony's search for clarity and meaning, not least in the pathos of his attempts to understand so much unknowability. This gives the novel a different kind of sincerity from the quasi-satirical comedy and gamesmanship of novels like *Flaubert's Parrot*, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989), *Talking it Over* (1991), *England, England* (1998) and *Love, etc*. It is as though Barnes allows for greater sentiment (though his narrator resists it) than in his earlier work – something that Bellow, Updike and Roth seem far more comfortable in expressing in their own work. What we get in *The Sense of an Ending*, then, is a realisation that empathy requires more than intellectual manipulations of point of view. This is a dawning lesson for Tony: 'I sat on the train home not thinking at all, really, just feeling. And not even thinking about what I was feeling. Only that evening did I begin to address what had happened.'[55] Tony's journey is one towards depth and the knowledge that experience will always exceed one's attempts to contain it. But rather than resulting in wry postmodern despair or ironic knowingness, this is something that the novel (and eventually Tony) embraces. As Tony admits towards the novel's end: 'I don't know if there's a scientific explanation for this – to do with new affective states reopening blocked-off neural pathways. All I can say is that it happened, and that it astonished me.'[56] At last, life is allowed to get one over on theory.

There is a subtle shift in style and emphasis in the twenty-first-century work of McEwan too. McEwan himself has contrasted the early and later periods of his career. In the 1970s and early 1980s he 'looked for extreme situations, deranged narrators, obscenity and shock – and to set these elements within a careful or disciplined prose'.[57] In this we sense Roth's influence; indeed, McEwan has called his story 'Homemade' 'a genuflection in the

direction of Roth's Portnoy'.[58] (Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, with its linguistic licence and shock value feels like something of a ur-text for all three authors' earliest books.) But like Roth in his later work, McEwan becomes increasingly preoccupied with the interplay between public and private, between the individual and larger historical forces. This is true of McEwan's writing from at least the late 1980s, but it is accompanied by a denser lyrical realism that reaches its pinnacle in his twenty-first-century work. 'Now I take a completely opposite view', he has said, reflecting on the existential minimalism of his early work: 'I think that the lifeblood of the novel is, in fact, much to do with the specific, the local, the actual, the naming of things.'[59] The change is prominent in 2001's *Atonement* (of which Updike wrote a praising review) and continues in McEwan's most self-consciously Bellovian and Updikean novels, *Saturday* (2005) and *Solar* (2010), which take their tone-setting epigraphs from Bellow and Updike respectively.

The Updike epigraph to *Solar* reads: 'It gives him great pleasure, makes Rabbit feel rich, to contemplate the world's wasting, to know the earth is mortal too.' McEwan has acknowledged the extent to which his antiheroic protagonist, Beard, is a descendent of Updike's Rabbit. Rabbit 'was the example at my side', he says, and refers to Updike's 'heightened realism', which 'gives Rabbit [Updike's] ... thoughts, and yet somehow ... makes them plausibly Rabbit's'[60] – again reflecting these authors' preoccupation with reconciling elaborate authorial rhetoric with limited characterological points of view. But more than sharing Rabbit's appetites and imperfections – and therefore his raw humanity – Beard shares Rabbit's symbolic power, embodying the fraught relationship between the personal and global. Beard's wasting body and failed resolutions (in love and in life) become allegories for large-scale issues (particularly climate change) and our inability to solve them.

As the Updike epigraph intimates, in *Solar* McEwan finds the personal within the universal and vice versa. Bellow's example offers something similar to *Saturday* which takes its epigraph from *Herzog*:

> For instance? Well, for instance, what it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science. Under organised power. Subject to tremendous controls. In a condition caused by mechanization. After the late failure of radical hopes. In a society that was no community and devalued the person. Owing to the multiplied power of numbers which made the self negligible ...

Although the prose here is unusually clipped for Bellow, its inclusion in *Saturday* alerts us to the dawning of a wider perspective in McEwan's work – a scoping of the grand stage, letting the global and the cosmic into

the living room. This is the novel's neuroscientist protagonist, Henry Perowne, looking out of the window from his Fitzrovia home:

> Standing here, as immune to the cold as a marble statue, gazing towards Charlotte Street, towards a foreshortened jumble of facades, scaffolding and pitched roofs, Henry thinks the city is a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece – millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef, sleeping, working, entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly everyone wanting it to work. And the Perownes' own corner, a triumph of congruent proportion . . . an eighteenth-century dream bathed and embraced by modernity, by street light from above, and from below by fibre-optic cables, and cool fresh water coursing down pipes, and sewage borne away in an instant of forgetting.[61]

As well as an enlarging of perspective, *Saturday* reveals McEwan honing an even finer capacity for close-up, for the minute and forensic, as though the novelist can do what scientists cannot: marry the widescreen of general relativity with the extreme zoom of quantum mechanics. And so Perowne – who forms the central consciousness of the novel (a novel that pays fidelity to modernist modes of interiority to a degree that Amis and Barnes's fiction never really has) – watches a burning object lighting up the night sky. This triggers a narrowing of focus: 'In the first moment, in his eagerness and curiosity, he assumes proportions on a planetary scale: it's a meteor burning out in the London sky . . .'; 'In an instant, he revises his perspective outward to the scale of the solar system . . . It's a comet'. Then comes a contraction: 'he revises the scale again, zooming inwards this time, from solar dust and ice back to the local'.[62] And it is with this final revision that he realises he is watching a burning airplane crashing towards earth: 'It's directly south of him now, barely a mile away, soon to pass into the topmost lattice of the bare plane trees, and then behind the Post Office Tower, at the level of the lowest microwave dishes.'[63] In *Saturday*, McEwan relishes the metaphysical possibilities of manipulated magnitudes and proportions. (Amis too, following Bellow's lead, obsesses over the cosmic perspective in novels like *London Fields* (1989), *The Information* and *Night Train* (1997).) These novels assume the grandeur of cosmic and historic scale against which Updikean and Bellovian characters so often bristle. And as McEwan learnt from Bellow: 'These elements are not dealt with in abstract, but sifted through the vagaries of character.'[64] All of this is enabled by the license of a more lyrical and busy prose style than we find in McEwan's earlier work, indulging in the 'heightened realism' of the kind he associates with the great American writers. Most of McEwan's twenty-first-century writing, in fact, is packed with carefully patterned repetitions (double takes, tricolon, hesitations and

feints) and compulsive listing, as well as qualifying interruptions, parentheses and interpolations – some of Amis's favourite techniques – so that the prose takes on a far more improvisatory feel than the hard, cool prose of his first stories and novels. Indeed, the writing feels more Updikean and Bellovian. It feels mid-Atlantic.

Stylists

The evolution of a prose style for these writers is a momentous thing. Reading their literary criticism, one could be forgiven for thinking that everything takes place in style. Again and again they circle back to form, to the sentence, to prose. Barnes calls Roth's *The Counterlife* 'fizzing and formally audacious'[65] and talks about 'the hushed Joyceanism' of Updike's *Rabbit Run*;[66] Amis calls *The Counterlife* 'a work of such luminous formal perfection that it more or less retired post-modern fiction', and proclaims that 'Roth's sentences are dapper and sonorous'.[67] Bellow's 'sentences simply weigh more than anybody else's'; and Updike is 'perhaps the greatest virtuoso stylist since Nabokov'.[68] McEwan enthuses about 'the miraculous lacquer of [Updike's] prose',[69] the 'pulse of [Bellow's] prose'[70] and praises Updike's 'routinely brilliant adjective-noun couplings, and sentence rhythms fine tuned to a poet's ear'.[71] It's as though style is the vehicle for all meaning. In this sense, Amis, Barnes and McEwan are aesthetes. And it is noticeable that their criticism hardly ever reflects (at least not explicitly) on the politics of style; nor does it seriously question where style might come from (i.e. how it might stand for inherited modes of thinking or other unexamined dynamics). For these writers style relates back to the author's vision. They have little time for deconstructive complications like the death of the author.

It is as though in the absence of 'foundational beliefs' the self retreats into individual style. Perhaps such a dynamic has always characterised the novel form. It is fundamental to the novel's ethical secularism. Fredric Jameson recognises something similar in modernist writing (although he would probably deny Amis *et al.* the status of individual style, being writers of the postmodern period), while Geoffrey Hill takes a similar line of thought all the way back to the humanist prose writers of the sixteenth century:

> It is as if the effort 'to translate wisdom into political action' which baffled humanists like Elyot and Starkey translates itself, in the prose of Nashe and Burton, into the praxis of an individual style. The energy has to go somewhere; since it cannot realize itself as a legislative act, it turns back into the authority and eccentricity of style itself.[72]

Like Hill's great humanists of the early modern period, one senses in Amis *et al.*'s fiction – as well as in their extra-literary commentary – the desire to 'speak for the whole of mankind'; to have a kind of authority that is at the very least unfashionable in our current times. And so the energy 'turns back into the authority and eccentricity of style itself'. But it is a question of degree rather than of kind that marks Amis, Barnes and McEwan out. If they are frustrated humanists in search of a greater, universal meaning at a time when such a notion has been radically destabilised, then in place of 'the old cleansing absolutes' we get the near (and not unproblematic) elevation of style to something like an absolute value. As Amis says, '[Style is] all [the writer's] got'.

This kind of principled stylism has been extended in different directions by a younger generation of British writers influenced by American literature, as well as by Amis, Barnes and McEwan themselves. Amis in particular (mostly 1980s Amis) towers over the contemporary British novel. Zadie Smith has described (somewhat facetiously) how she was 'busy plagiarising' Amis as a young writer,[73] and her early novels certainly suggest a degree of influence;[74] and Nicola Barker has called Amis her literary 'Daddy'.[75] Adam Thirlwell, whose early literary mentor, Craig Raine, is another member of the Amis, Barnes, McEwan literary set, has often been compared to Amis, while his personal blend of European and American influences is reminiscent of Barnes's cosmopolitan style. David Mitchell (whose Amisian tendencies I have adumbrated elsewhere[76]) even appears to model one character on Amis in his 2014 novel *The Bone Clocks*, and the compilation technique of several of his books blurs the lines between story collection and novel in a way that recalls Barnes's approach in *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, just as his multi-voiced narratives could draw useful comparison to Barnes's *Talking it Over* and *Love, etc*.

Rushdie also needs mentioning in this context of influence. Rushdie was a later member of the Amis, Barnes, McEwan set and is a writer so tangibly influenced by a larger body of world literature that he exceeds this mid-Atlantic frame of reference, such that I haven't discussed him here. Nevertheless, he too has drawn upon a similar pantheon of US writers (especially Bellow and Roth, but also Pynchon) and, like with Amis, this has contributed to an elaborate style of excess. Rushdie's international style has been a considerable influence on later writers like Smith, Mitchell and Hari Kunzru (the latter of whom has expressed more sceptical views on Amis *et al.*, although Carol Ann Duffy described his 2004 novel, *Transmission*, as 'like the young Martin Amis, only nicer'[77]) – all writers with their own mid-Atlantic credentials. It is also important and refreshing that this broadly conceived generation of younger British writers takes a more diverse and

inclusive position on US literature, calling upon writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Ursula Le Guin and Ralph Elison, in addition to Roth, Bellow and Updike. And whereas Amis *et al.* look upwards to American elders rather than across to US writers that we might think of as their direct contemporaries, many of the younger writers I have mentioned sit comfortably in their own contemporary mid-Atlantic context with American peers like Dave Eggers, Jonathan Safran Foer and David Foster Wallace – often writing alongside one another in the same publications[78] so that twenty-first-century mid-Atlanticism feels more like a two-way, contemporaneous dynamic.

Nevertheless, Amis *et al.*'s limited group of literary heroes remains influential. For example, Smith and Thirlwell have both written and spoken about Bellow and Nabokov, whose impacts still reverberate today. And more generally there is a prevailing interest in the substance and centrality of style, which feels like a continuation of Amis *et al.*'s aesthete sensibility. Smith has called style 'a writer's way of telling the truth' and has argued that '[a] writer's personality is his manner of being in the world: his writing style is the unavoidable trace of that manner',[79] exploring the morality and politics of style in her essays, as well as in novels like *On Beauty* (2005) and *NW* (2012). Thirlwell's *Miss Herbert* (in which he calls style 'a quality of vision; a soul'[80]) is in some respects a five-hundred-page meditation on style, with full chapters on Bellow and Nabokov. In many ways, then, they are extending the discussions and preoccupations of Amis *et al.* before them, although I would argue that this younger generation of writers is more attuned to the political implications of style, particularly as it relates to questions of identity.

Returning to Amis, Barnes and McEwan, what is striking about their work is the fact that they have developed comparable directions of thought while belonging to a distinctive literary set – something which begs more sociohistoric interrogation than I can manage here. For all the explanatory systems of science and politics that McEwan's novels explore, or the weighty themes that Amis is drawn to (the Holocaust, Stalinist Russia, nuclear weapons, environmental crises, the sexual revolution), or Barnes's philosophising over memory, time and death, there is a basic, shared assumption in their work that it is in fact the style that carries the true value; because it is the style that registers the material and embodies an individual's fallible though sincere truth (an assumption expanded upon by the younger generation of stylists in this century). It is also the style that, while being openly expressive of its own conditionality, can make connection with an imagined other. Which is something, I would suggest, they derive from their appreciation of the American writers of the generation before them (remember, Updike's

prose 'seems to enlarge the human community'). All of this could be taken for obsessive formalism. But within Amis, McEwan and Barnes's writerly admiration for Bellow, Updike and Roth's craft – indeed, bound up with it – is a deep respect for their ethical richness and singular authority. Because, for Amis, Barnes and McEwan, the style *is* the authority, the morality, the meaning – or the closest thing possible.

Notes

1. I. McEwan, 'On John Updike', *New York Review of Books* (2009), p. 4, www.nybooks.com/articles/2009/03/12/on-john-updike/. Note that the quote in the heading above is taken from M. Amis, *Money* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), p. 196.
2. C. Hitchens, 'Giant Steps', *The Guardian* (2005), www.theguardian.com/books/2005/apr/10/fiction.saulbellow1.
3. M. Amis, 'Martin Amis on Philip Roth', *Guardian, 26 May* (2018), https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/26/martin-amis-on-philip-roth-the-kind-of-satirical-genius-that-comes-along-once-in-a-generation.
4. M. Amis, 'His Subject, Himself', *New York Times* (2012), www.nytimes.com/2013/10/20/books/review/claudia-roth-pierponts-roth-unbound.html.
5. Z. Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000), p. 251.
6. See J. Barnes, *Nothing to Be Frightened of* (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 79; C. Hitchens, *Hitch-22* (London: Atlantic, 2010), pp. 168–73; and C. James, *North Face of Soho* (London: Vintage, 2007), pp. 138, 187.
7. B. Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 69.
8. R. Roberts (ed.), *Conversations with Ian McEwan* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), p. 91.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
10. M. Amis, 'Martin Amis: I Wasn't Trying to Impress My Father', *Salon* (2013), www.salon.com/2013/07/23/martin_amis_partner/.
11. V. Guignery and R. Roberts (eds), *Conversations with Julian Barnes* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), p. 76.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Z. Leader (ed.), *On Modern British Fiction* (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 3.
14. Roberts, *Conversations with Ian McEwan*, p. 160.
15. M. Bradbury and J. Cooke (eds), *New Writing* (London: Minerva, 1992), vol. 1, p. 182.
16. A. S. Byatt has observed how this obsession with the glamour of American prose seems to be a strangely male impulse (Leader, *On Modern British Fiction*, p. 3).
17. A. Massa and A. Stead (eds), *Forked Tongues* (London: Longman, 1994), p. 3.
18. M. Bradbury, *Dangerous Pilgrimages: Trans-Atlantic Mythologies and the Novel* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 481.
19. T. Tanner, *City of Words* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), p. 15.
20. J. Wood, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), p. 187.
21. M. Amis, *The War against Cliché* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), pp. 468–9.

22. M. Amis, *The Moronic Inferno* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986), p. 5.
23. Amis, *The War against Cliché*, p. 454.
24. J. Begley, 'Satirizing the Carnival of Postmodern Capitalism: The Transatlantic and Dialogic Structure of Martin Amis's Money' (2004) 45(1) *Contemporary Literature* 79–105; and J. Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, 2nd edn (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 24–7.
25. B. Masters, *Novel Style: Ethics and Excess in English Fiction since the 1960s* (Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 111.
26. J. Barnes, *Love, etc* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), pp. 28, 156.
27. Amis, *The Moronic Inferno*, p. 200.
28. 'Will the vision re-expand, as it seems to yearn to do, or will it squirm deeper in to the tunnel of the self?' (*ibid.*, p. 45).
29. M. Amis, *Experience* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), p. 176.
30. Amis, *The War against Cliché*, p. 286.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 374.
32. Gourevitch 2008: 347.
33. M. Amis, *Koba the Dread* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), p. 90.
34. Amis, *The War against Cliché*, pp. 466–67.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 378.
36. J. Updike, *More Matter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1999), pp. 364–5.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 358.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 359.
39. J. Updike, *Odd Jobs* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1992), pp. 631–2.
40. B. Taylor (ed.), *Saul Bellow: Letters* (London: Viking, 2010), p. 523.
41. Updike, *Odd Jobs*, p. 631.
42. D. Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), p. 25.
43. Roberts, *Conversations with Ian McEwan*, p. 161.
44. Wood, *The Broken Estate*, p. 193.
45. D. Head, *Ian McEwan* (Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 15.
46. Amis, *The Moronic Inferno*, p. 5.
47. J. Barnes, 'Grand Illusion', *The New York Times Book Review* (1996), www.nytimes.com/1996/01/28/books/grand-illusion.html.
48. Updike, *More Matter*, p. 362.
49. J. Barnes, *Through the Window* (London: Vintage, 2012), p. 211.
50. McEwan, 'On John Updike'.
51. S. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 7.
52. J. Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), pp. 94, 120.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
54. J. Updike, *Rabbit Is Rich* (London: Penguin, 1981), p. 111.
55. Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 129.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
57. Roberts, *Conversations with Ian McEwan*, p. 91.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
60. 'Ian McEwan on the Books that Shaped His Novels', http://fivebooks.com/interview/ian-mcewan-on-books-that-have-helped-shape-his-novels/.

61. I. McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), p. 5.
62. *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.
63. *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.
64. I. McEwan, 'The Master', *The Guardian* (2005), www.theguardian.com/books/2005/apr/07/fiction.saulbellow.
65. J. Barnes, 'Philip Roth in Israel', *London Review of Books* (1987), www.lrb.co.uk/v09/n05/julian-barnes/philip-roth-in-israel.
66. Barnes, *Through the Window*, p. 214.
67. Amis, *The War against Cliché*, pp. 296, 285.
68. M. Amis, *The Rub of Time* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), pp. 21, 291.
69. I. McEwan, 'Updike's Intimations of Mortality', *Financial Times* (4 February 1995), p. 13.
70. McEwan, 'The Master'.
71. McEwan, 'Updike's Intimations of Mortality', p. 13.
72. G. Hill, *Style and Faith* (New York: Counterpoint, 2003), pp. 54–5.
73. Z. Smith, *On Beauty* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005).
74. See Masters 2012: 142.
75. N. Barker, 'A Glorious Confusion', www.powells.com/fromtheauthor/barker.html.
76. B. Masters, 'From the Family', Times Literary Supplement (26 September 2014), p. 19.
77. C. A. Duffy, 'Our Planet, Speeded Up', *Telegraph* (2004), www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3618420/Our-planet-speeded-up.html.
78. See *The Book of Other People* (2007) edited by Smith, and magazines like *McSweeney's* and *The New Yorker*.
79. Z. Smith, 'Fail Better', *The Guardian* (13 January 2007).
80. A. Thirlwell, *Miss Herbert* (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 308.