VERA NÜNNING (BRUNSWICK)

Ages after Value and Virtue? Ethics and Aesthetics in the Novels of Three *Fin de Siècle* Writers, Oscar Wilde, Martin Amis and Tibor Fischer*

As anyone who has ever done work in comparative history will know, comparing any two historical phenomena like nations or epochs is a tricky business. The historian Erich Angermann pointed out that, in order for such comparisons to make any sense at all, one should be able to answer at least some of the following questions: Are the people we wish to study sufficiently alike in terms of ethnocultural homogeneity, including sexual and racial prejudices, religion, and moral values? Is it possible to marshal the potentially enormous quantities of data? How can the literary or cultural historian construct a conceptual framework consistent in itself, and adequate to the phenomena to be compared? (cf. Angermann 1991 4f.; 9).

Given the many unresolved issues surrounding comparative history, I present the following comparison between two different *fins de siècle*, the 1890s and the 1990s, with utmost trepidation. In order to cope with the mass of material and get rid of non-issues and side-issues, I have chosen a point of comparison that is sufficiently general to be applicable to works originating from two in many ways incomparable periods, and sufficiently specific to afford insight into key cultural issues of the two decades under scrutiny. The paper seeks to examine the ways in which selected novels of the 1890s and the 1990s deal with and explore widely established norms and values, paying particular attention to the relevance of aesthetic form and narrative technique.

As far as questions of morality and aesthetics are concerned, the 1890s seem to be so different from the 1990s as to forestall any further investigation. But a cultural historian on the lookout for similarities will find plenty of evidence for parallels as well. It is true, of course, that the pressure put on authors to confirm established values in their works was far higher in the 1890s than at the end of the millennium, when almost any offence to decorum and morality seems to find its way into print. If one focuses on what may be called an ethical backlash in contemporary culture at the expense of aesthetic appreciations of literature, however, significant similarities come to the fore. One might even go so far as to argue that the age of political correctness has managed to come up with interesting equivalents of what Keating has called "a gigantic moral conspiracy" in which late-Victorian novelists acquiesced "with [...] reviewers, [...] and easily-shocked readers" (1989: 252). Though the notorious 'National Vigilance Association' is no longer what it used to be, value and virtue have once again become words to galvanise men and women into activity, especially when questions of gender

* I should like to thank Rüdiger Heinze, Annegret Stegmann, Bruno Zerweck and Jens Zwernemann, who were all helpful in various ways.

or the hybrid identities of postcolonial peoples are concerned. And though the depiction of, say, homosexuality is unlikely to raise an outcry of indignation among critics nowadays, one may well wonder whether what has been called 'ethical criticism' is really such a far cry from the Victorian concern with the morality and especially the alleged immorality of novels.

Using this as a point of departure, the paper attempts to gauge the relation of ethics and aesthetics in four *fin de siècle* novels, focusing on the ways in which the form of the works underscores their refusal to conform to the prevailing moral standards of their day. In order for such a comparison to make any sense, I have chosen novels by a somewhat homogeneous, albeit not politically correct, group of authors, all of whom are white, male and at the hub of the literary scene of their day. I hasten to add, however, that, since Martin Amis and Tibor Fischer are still alive and kicking, only one of them belongs to the infamous group of dead white males, and Oscar Wilde might be partially redeemed by the fact that he was both homosexual and Irish.

It is argued that the novels to be discussed exemplify Wilde's plea for the separation of morals and art, locating themselves in a sphere beyond ethics. Like Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which a host of contemporary reviewers decried for putting forward poisonous views, Martin Amis' and Tibor Fischer's novels of the 1990s run counter to the ideals of our time because they are deliberately not politically correct, they eschew identity politics, and they strike one as being amoral.

The Wilde-story is so well known that it does not require any lengthy rehearsal here. How he rose to fame as a notorious dandy; how he was fêted as one of the most gifted critics, prose writers and dramatists of his day; how he was taken to task for his many provocations, dragged to court, and sentenced to two years of hard labour after three trials which negotiated questions of aesthetics as well as morality. The commentator of the *National Observer* was not the only critic to celebrate Queensberry's "destroying the High Priest of the Decadents [...] [and] their hideous conceptions of the meaning of Art" (quoted in Foldy 1977: 55). Even during the trials, however, Wilde had stuck to his opinion that "there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book" (Wilde 1981 xxiii).

The main reason why I have decided to reopen the negotiations is to argue that the great alarm *The Picture of Dorian Gray* caused among many reviewers was not primarily due to its content but rather to its form.[1] In the highly charged atmosphere of the 1890s, in which many cherished Victorian ideals came under fire and even the naval supremacy of Great Britain seemed to be threatened, traditional values were again accorded great importance. In the face of internal and external crises novelists were expected to inculcate sound moral values into the population. And this, of course, was precisely what someone like Wilde, or Thomas Hardy or George Meredith, refused to do.

---

[1] For a more extensive discussion of Wilde's novel see V Nünning (2001).

Let me now turn to Wilde's novel and look for possible answers to the question of why its morality or immorality has been a major issue in literary criticism ever since the 1890s. Whereas many contemporaries were ready to pronounce the book immoral, critics today rather tend to emphasise what they regard as the "conventional moral" of the novel.[2] After all, Dorian does get punished in the end. Such a reading of the book, which is based on the criterion of poetic justice, is in keeping with Oscar Wilde's own defence of his novel; to quote Wilde himself:

> And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment. [...] Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure, tries to kill conscience, and at that moment kills himself. Lord Henry Wotton seeks to be merely the spectator of life. He finds that those who reject the battle are more deeply wounded than those who take part in it.[3]

The plot of the novel indeed almost resembles that of a morality play. A beautiful and promising youth, who is threatened by a corrupt male cynic and then nearly rescued by the love of a pure, innocent girl, gives in to temptation and suffers accordingly. From the point of view of the story one can imagine why Wilde thought that the moral of the novel might even be too obvious.

The continuing discussion about Wilde's novel shows, however, that things are by no means as simple as that. In order to come to grips with the question of the morality of the book, one has to take into account its form and its structure of values. An analysis of the perspective structure of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can therefore help to cope with its implied normative framework.[4] In Wilde's novel, there are two types of perspectives to be considered, the values and attitudes of the characters, and those of the narrator.

As far as the characters are concerned, the perspectives might be situated on a sliding scale between the poles of accepting and rejecting conventional Victorian values. Lord Henry is quite important in the first part of the novel, as he initiates Dorian into his theory of the 'new hedonism' and teaches him that one should give in to temptation. Sybil, on the other hand, tends to offset Henry's influence on him. As Dorian says to Henry, "When I am with her, I regret all that you have taught me. [...] the mere touch of Sibyl Vane's hand makes me forget you and all your wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories" (Wilde 1981 77). This admission illustrates an important feature of the novel. Even Dorian, who lives according to Henry's theories, knows that they are "wrong" and "poisonous." Another character whose

---

2 For a selection of contemporary reviews see Beckson (1970). The morality of the novel is stressed, for instance, by Gagnier (1986: 7; 57f.) and Werner (1998: 237), while Gillespie (1997: 58) emphasises that the novel "eschews any move toward closure."

3 Letter to the editor of the *St James's Gazette*, 25.6.1890, quoted in Rupert Hart-Davis (1962: 258f.).

4 For a more detailed account of the category 'perspective structure' and its heuristic usefulness for the interpretation of novels see Nünning/Nünning (2000), especially chapters one, two and four.

values and virtues contrast favourably with Henry's and Dorian's is the painter Basil, who even tries to help Dorian, despite being disgusted by his immorality. Thus Sybil and Basil conform to Victorian moral values, while Henry and Dorian do not.

In order to assess the characters' authority within the structure of norms and values, there are at least three other factors that need to be taken into consideration. The first issue that has to be addressed is the question of which are the dominant characters, that is, who do we get to know about most? With respect to the length of the descriptions of characters' thoughts and actions, and with regard to the amount of time the characters are present in the consciousness of others, Dorian is clearly the central character. Lord Henry, Basil and Sybil follow in order of descending importance, with the latter figuring only very briefly. The perspectives of those characters who tend to conform to Victorian moral values are thus not nearly as prominent as those of Dorian and Henry.

Secondly, the extent to which the reader is given insight views of the characters has to be taken into account. The presentation of consciousness is especially pertinent to the evaluation of the protagonist, for his pangs of conscience and his struggle to better himself are described in great detail by means of psycho-narration and free indirect discourse.[5]

Third, it makes a difference whether morally laden issues are given ample coverage, or are just mentioned in passing. It is important, for instance, that the reader does not get to know anything about the suffering Dorian causes. Just think of what Dickens would have made of Sybil's death! But in Wilde's novel, Sybil dies off-stage, and the fact that Dorian ruins several promising young men is just briefly mentioned. Thus both the selection of information and the distribution of inside views tend to favour Dorian: Whereas his tribulations and fears are amply recorded, we get to know very little about the devastating consequences of his deeds.

In addition to these narratological issues, the fatal portrait has to be taken into account, for it supports established values. While the selection of information and the narrative mode in which it is presented is favourable to Dorian, the picture provides a very unfavourable view of him. Dorian is shown to be vain, hypocritical, egotistical, and cruel.

Another factor which is important for coming to terms with the moral values in Wilde's novel is the explicit judgements of the narrator. The trouble in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is, however, that these evaluations are inconsistent. On the one hand, the narrator uses words like 'terrible', 'sin', or 'poison', which indicate that he abhors Dorian's actions. On the other hand, he makes several comments in which he tries to evoke sympathy for Dorian. Although he leaves no doubt about the fact that Dorian's actions are immoral, he seems to plead in mitigation by explaining that he does not

---

[5] Cohn (1999: 180) points out, however, that the use of free indirect discourse "can be worked in two very different ways, depending on the positive or negative personality traits that are assigned to the focaliser."

have a choice: "Men and women at such moments lose the freedom of their will. They move to their terrible end as automatons move" (Wilde 1981 190). After this generalisation, however, the narrator continues: "Callous, concentrated on evil, with stained mind and soul hungry for rebellion, Dorian Gray hastened on [...]" (ibid.).

In short: The ambivalent attitude of the narrator towards the main character cannot resolve the moral controversy surrounding Wilde's novel. The ending, the different values embodied by the characters' perspectives, the biased selection of facts, the one-sided distribution of inside views, and the portrait tend to suggest quite different conclusions concerning the morality of the novel, and the narrator increases this ambivalence by giving contradictory value judgements. Wilde's authorial narrator no longer fulfils the central function of Victorian narrators, which, according to Ermarth (1997· 71), was to coordinate all the character perspectives into "the single-point perspective system [...]. This convention is simultaneously an ethic and an aesthetic, the key tenet of which is the idea that any variety of perspectives still can converge in one horizon, one common medium, one and the 'same' world."

In sum: In contrast to the conventional "convergence or *formal consensus* of all possible perspectives" (ibid.. 74), Wilde's novel denies the reader both the "single vanishing point [which] testifies to that agreement" (ibid.) and the pleasure of deriving a clear-cut moral from the book. On the contrary, it is constructed in such a way as to make it impossible to ascribe either morality or immorality to it. This may be one of the reasons why earlier critics were so incensed about the book; challenging a certain grammar of perception common to Victorian culture (cf. Ermarth 1997: 77), it rejected their whole mode of reading. Victorian readers, who were used to looking for the moral aim of literature, were thus baffled: The book can be read as an embodiment of Wilde's conception of art, because it shows that the question of morality cannot be resolved. It was thus not just the content of the novel and its allusions to unspecified sins[6] that alarmed Victorians so much, but its form.

If one looks at contemporary fiction and tries to find authors still capable of alarming today's virtually shock-proof audience, the list of possible candidates seems to be endless: Just think of Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993), Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* (1996), and Will Self's turning yuppies into chimpanzees in *Great Apes* (1997); all of these novels and a host of others seem to have so thoroughly alarmed some parts of the reading public that former *enfants terribles* like Ian McEwan look comparatively mellow nowadays. Given such a plethora of angry, awful, or cynical young men, my choice of Martin Amis and Tibor Fischer is admittedly random to a certain degree. Nonetheless, I would argue that novels like Amis' *The Information* (1995) and Fischer's *The Thought Gang* (1995) and *The Collector Collector* (1997) provide paradigmatic examples of some of the major literary trends of the 1990s, such as the accentuation of self-reference and intertextuality, hybridity, the foregrounding

---

6 As Sinfield (1994: 104) has pointed out, many of the reviews did not even contain veiled allusions to homosexuality. After the trials, however, the situation changed: "Suddenly queerness seemed of the essence."

of language and narrative conventions, wit and parody. Moreover, they refuse to conform to the values political correctness has turned into dogmas, and they do not lend themselves to moralistic readings.

Though admittedly not the most shocking of the many shocking works written by Martin Amis, his novel *The Information* succeeded in alarming the British audience even before it was published in 1995. When it transpired that Amis was about to garner nearly 800.000 dollars worth of advance on the book, a howl of indignation went through the press. Novelists with completely different aesthetic allegiances like Antonia S. Byatt voiced the candid opinion that Amis' behaviour amounted to "male turkey cocking." In contrast to Byatt, Salman Rushdie put the case in terms which conjure up what happened not only to Martin Amis, but also to Oscar Wilde: "There is a thing that happened to Martin which periodically happens in England when the public print rounds upon the public figure and tries to tear him apart [...]. It's just 'This guy has had it too good for too long–let's murder him'" (Wilson 1995: 102).

The curious "irony of this public Amis-bashing" (Diedrick 1995: 175) is that fellow novelists and critics seemed to be as alarmed about Amis' success as the protagonist of *The Information*, the failed novelist Richard Tull, is about that of his long-time friend and fellow writer Gwyn Barry. Awaking every morning at six, Tull "needed no alarm clock. He was already comprehensively alarmed" (10). There's ample reason why readers might feel comprehensively alarmed about the novel, too, though, given Amis' reputation, it is likely to be "alarm unqualified by surprise" (432). The content of *The Information* amounts to a wholesale rejection of liberal values and humane attitudes. This book, which has been compared with his notorious novels *Money* (1984) and *London Fields* (1989) because of its setting and tone (Mars-Jones 1995: 19), once again illustrates Amis' flaunting of political correctness. The protagonist's major aim in life is to 'fuck up' his former friend Gwyn Barry, whose success as a novelist he simply cannot stomach. Some of the characters delight in violence, and racism is presented as though it conferred subtle advantages on blacks, as the advice the cruel thug Steve Cousins gives to the black driving instructor Crash shows: "'Out there in the little Metro. Some rich flip sits herself down on your courting finger. And if she so much as blinks you go: 'Raciss!' Enjoy it, mate'" (57).

Given the usual plethora of violations of political correctness, critics tend to ponder the question of the morality in Amis' novels. On the one hand there are the Amis-bashers who maintain that his novels were intended "to debauch as many readers as possible."[7] On the other hand, some critics are convinced that they can discern a social and even moral agenda in Amis' works, believing that his novels criticise

---

[7] Diedrick (1995: 115). Some readers apparently think that Amis is "delighting in some awful reality", and are surprised by the humane tone in his new autobiography, *Experience* (2000). In an interview with Tony Jones, however, Amis explained this difference quite simply: "It's just the difference between fiction and non-fiction" Tony Jones, "Interview with Martin Amis," *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* (July 20, 2000) (http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/s154354. htm).

society and teach Christian virtues.[8] It would be jumping to conclusions, however, to believe that either group were right on target. If one wants to come to terms with the alleged morality of *The Information*, the formal features of the novel are again of overwhelming importance.

The most obvious device a novelist can use for supporting moral values in spite of the blatant immorality of most of the characters is, of course, to emphasise the distance between the authorial narrator and the characters. In *The Information*, the narrator indeed takes great care to dissociate himself from the envious protagonist, who is also the main focaliser. Though Richard's way of evaluating the world certainly leaves much to be desired, the device of the distancing narrator, far from serving to promote moral values, highlights the amoral stance of the narrator. The relentless thoughts of Steve Cousins, for instance, are presented without any such disclaimers, as the following quote serves to illustrate: "Steve was still in a lenient mood, after his recent success. He had beaten up the man from the Ten O'Clock News: and, the next night, it was *on* the Ten O'Clock News. You do a newscaster: and they give you a newcast [!] about it. Now that's the way the world's *supposed* to be run" (73). Passages like these create the impression that the narrator implicitly sanctions the distorted views of a criminal character, who has aptly been described as "the quintessential [...] decadent devil" (Bellow 1997: 703).

What is more, the narrator's value judgements do not contradict this impression. On the very first page of the novel the narrator informs the reader that Tull's wife Gina, being a woman, knows how to soothe men, but does not know anything about literature. Such generalisations based on sexual stereotypes are anything but infrequent. Even when the narrator ponders the representational difficulty posed by another woman character in a metafictional aside, he defiantly insists on the difference between men and women: "Demi's linguistic quirk is essentially and definingly female. It just is" (257). It is characteristic of both Amis' notorious reputation as a 'bad boy', however, that a female reviewer observed that this novel was not misogynist by way of exception: "you can't accuse the book of prejudice against women [...] because [...] it is prejudiced against men too."[9] Moreover, the numerous provocative narratorial comments suggest that the narrator deliberately flies in the face of politically correct attitudes.[10]

---

8 See, for instance, Diedrick (1995: 1) and Stein (1992: 123f.). Mecklenburg (2000: 84) argues that Amis is a "wertkonservative[r] Moralist" who wants to teach Christian virtues; she also states, however, that "[d]er ethische Anspruch [...] [wird in *The Information*] in Frage gestellt" (ibid: 93). She also erroneously maintains that the focaliser Steve Cousins is an 'I-narrator' and that he partakes of the voice of the implied author (cf. ibid.. 90).

9 Pearson, Allison, "One Man's Hell [rev.: *The Information*]," *The Independent on Sunday* (March 2, 1995), 36.

10 The politically correct attitude towards differences between gender and race is discussed in a conversation beginning twenty pages after the first misogynist reference to women (29ff.). Moreover, a few sentences after a rather obnoxious and not even funny metaphor

The moral impact of such comments directed against widely accepted norms is undercut, however, by the extensive use of parody. One of the most outstanding and funny features of *The Information* is that each and every narrative convention of authorial novels—narratorial explanations, evaluations, appeals for sympathy, generalisations, value judgements, rhetorical questions, etc.—is ridiculed.[11] The narrator, for instance, parodies the heroic style used in many Victorian novels in order to render the heroes' fateful decisions, when he describes the protagonist's state-of-mind after having hit upon an idea of how to harm his rival Gwyn: "Nonetheless, he was decided. He even raised his chin for a moment in simple heroism. His nostrils widened. Richard Tull had resolved to send Gwyn Barry a copy of the Sunday *New York Times*" (66). Such passages serve to create an ironic distance between the narrator and the protagonist, while other parodic and metafictional asides illustrate both the difference between traditional and contemporary ways of viewing the world and the inadequacy of older narrative conventions.

The difficulty of constructing a coherent 'moral' or 'anti-moral' projected by *The Information* is heightened by doubts about the narrator's reliability. The narrator raises the question of his potential unreliability by repeatedly admitting that what he told before "wasn't quite true" (258; 306) and by asking both himself and the reader, "how can I ever play the omniscient, the all-knowing, when I don't know *anything?*" (63). In addition, the narrator contradicts himself even as far as flashforwards are con-cerned.[12] Given the range of textual clues to unreliability, it is questionable whether it is wise to believe that the narrator's value judgements reflect the structure of values of the novel. Although in contrast to Richard Tull's latest novel, another flop titled *Untitled*, *The Information* does not boast of a "rotating crew of sixteen unreliable narrators" (170), it features an omniscient narrator who is deliberately provocative, sometimes contradictory, and anything but omniscient or reliable. The immorality that characterises the fictional world of Amis' novels is neither endorsed nor negated by the narrator.

To the detriment of the Amis-bashers, any attempt to pinpoint the morality or immorality of *The Information* is forestalled by the form of the novel and by the highly self-conscious and parodic interrogation of the conventions of realism. What is more, the numerous metafictional comments, intertextual references, and the foregrounding of genre conventions serve to emphasise the novel's status as a work of art and render

---

discriminating against homosexuals—"Behind him somewhere a police siren started up like a homosexual comedian: Ouuuu." (213)—the narrator draws attention to Richard's inability to use certain metaphors.

11 Cf. Bernard (1993: 123), who stresses that Amis' (earlier) novels "subvert literary conventions from within" and who emphasises "the contradictory nature of these texts [which feature] a paradoxical logic of subversion" (122).

12 See, for instance, the prediction: "And violence wouldn't come for Richard. It would come for Marco" (138). This prediction is borne out by many other incidents, and the fact that Steve Cousins eventually abducts the child. Near the end, however, the narrator reassures the reader: "But comedy has two opposites; and tragedy, fortunately, is only one of them. Never fear. You are in safe hands. Decorum will be strictly observed" (479).

it difficult to draw references to the real world. The extensive use of parody, moreover, highlights the inadequacy of older narrative forms that cannot represent the fragmentation and discontinuity of modern life. Driving a wedge between ethics and aesthetics, *The Information* expresses Amis' belief in the separation between life and art, which his critics are so eager to blur (cf. Haffenden 1985: 18f.; 14).

In contrast to Martin Amis, Tibor Fischer has not yet been accused of sexism or an intention to debauch the reading public. Given the eccentric characters who inhabit the kinky universes of his last two novels, this is quite surprising. The bisexual nympho- and kleptomaniac Nikky, for instance, is the incarnation of a pornographer's wildest dreams. Moreover, the protagonists of the *Thought Gang* (1994), the former philosopher Eddie Coffin and the one-armed bandit Hube, who turn out to be unbeatable bank-robbers, are living offences to political correctness. In spite of many immoral incidents and comments in these novels, however, several distancing techniques make it next to impossible to read the texts in a mimetic framework. As one reviewer observed, the characters "inhabit a different universe."[13]

Though the flaunting of politically incorrect opinions may induce one to read Fischer's novels in the framework of moral and mimetic approaches like ethical criticism, their aesthetic and linguistic peculiarities as easily frustrate such readings. Eddie's complete rejection of politically correct values, for instance, is illustrated by his attitude towards sexual intercourse with a minor. His razor-sharp logic leads him to conclude that while the girl was with him "there's no possibility of her having a carnal carnival with anyone unsuitable [...]; it's really a foolproof method of safeguarding a girl's morals" (198). Such outrageous statements are set off, however, against Fischer's extravagant sense of humour and his penchant for the grotesque and for word-play. The I-narrator Eddie Coffin, for instance, "hardly ever decline[s] a recline" (132), trying to avoid unnecessary exposure to verticality whenever he can, because, as he points out, "a horizontal position makes you more streamlined for life. Nearly all the trouble in life comes from standing up" (31).

These examples may suffice to suggest that Fischer is in agreement with Oscar Wilde and with Martin Amis, who confessed in an interview that he "would certainly sacrifice any psychological or realistic truth for a phrase."[14] Eddie's digressive and witty ruminations are rendered in a Shandyesque manner, interspersed with many metafictional comments and intertextual references. As Michael Hoffmann observed, "the real hero of the book is language."[15]

---

13 Shakespeare, Sebastian, "To Be Approached With Caution: *Don't Read This Book If You're Stupid* by Tibor Fischer," http://litreview.com/reviews/2000/02/shakespeare_on_fischer.html

14 Ibid.: 16.

15 Hoffmann, Michael, "Heady-headed argot saga [rev. *The Thought Gang*]," *The Times* (December 22, 1994), 35. For a similar opinion, cf. Loewinsohn, Ron (1995), "The Ultimate Bank Job [rev. *The Thought Gang*]," *The New York Times Book Review* (June 25, 1995), 11

The foregrounding of language is even more pronounced in Fischer's latest novel, *The Collector Collector*, in which typographical experiments, puns, neologisms, verbal repetitions, and poetic diction accentuate the materiality of the language.[16] This is further underscored by the ubiquity of the letter 'o', which already features prominently in the second sentence: "Impending owner: old, obese oooooorotund" (1). The countless repetitions of the 'o' reflect the circular structure of many of the stories told in this novel, as well as the symbolic meaning of the circle: "There are those who say a circle is a symbol of no beginning and no end; on the contrary it is a symbol showing that the beginning and the end can be anywhere" (115). The circle also refers to the self-referential character of the book, which is also emphasised by Fischer's exuberant use of self-referentiality on the morphological level. Besides raped rapists and Egyptian grave robbers who are then robbed by someone else who is consequently called a grave-robber robber, there is the all important collector collector, that is, the collector who has specialised in collecting collectors, the narrator of this book.

The highly unusual and unlikely narrator, who characterises him- or rather itself as a 'bowl with a soul', serves to push questions of mimesis or morality into the background. It is impossible to naturalise the narrative situation with regard to either real life frames or genre conventions, because this wise and inventive old bowl, which intersperses the story of what happens to it while it is in the possession of Rosa with many colourful tales of the past, is neither an authorial nor an I-narrator. It is several thousand years old, it enjoys changing its shape, and has witnessed—or claims to have witnessed—many highly improbable events. It tells some of these to the art expert Rosa, who at first is not sure whether she can believe the ceramic or not. The reader has a hard time trying to find out whether the bowl is reliable, too, because it keeps boasting of deeds of glory. Thus it claims to have saved her former collector Odile from being raped by transforming itself into a "leaping Bengalian tiger, life-size, life-detailed, even the fleas" (80).

It is not only the idiosyncrasies of the bowl, however, which serve to thwart the readers' attempt to read the novel in a mimetic frame and to evaluate the characters in terms of (im-)morality. The merging of the fictional reality with fantastic elements and fairy tale conventions results in crossing the boundary between fact and fiction and in blurring genre distinctions. Many of the incidents in Rosa's life are at least as strange as any of the stories the bowl tells her. Being on the lookout for 'Mr Right', Rosa has any number of weird experiences with men, which even the knowledgeable bowl cannot make head or tail of. The key symbol for strangeness, however, is the presence of frozen iguanas, which also serves as a prominent leitmotif. It is therefore fitting that the romance-like 'Mr Right', whom Rosa meets in the most unpromising circumstances, happens to carry a freeze-dried iguana with him. In short: the most commonplace is the most fantastic in this novel as well as vice versa.

Like Wilde's and Amis' novels, Fischer's latest novels defy any attempt to pronounce them immoral. Though they violate any number of widely accepted moral

[16] For a more extensive discussion of Fischer's novels see V. Nünning (2000).

standards, such formal features as the foregrounding of language, the merging of realism and fantasy, and the blurring of genres underscore the aesthetic character of his novels, ensuring that they are situated well beyond ethics.

In conclusion, I would like to give a very short summary of what I have been arguing. Differences in thematic scope and narrative technique notwithstanding, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has quite a lot in common with both *The Information* and Fischer's novels. The form of the four novels renders it exceedingly difficult to ascribe to them either morality or immorality. Though they fly in the face of agreed-upon moral values, it can be argued that Wilde, Amis, and Fischer have all produced 'a-moral' rather than immoral novels, which defy readings in terms of ethical criticism and which are a perfect embodiment of both Wilde's aestheticism and postmodern aesthetics. Two other salient similarities concern the use of narrative techniques that thwart mimetic readings and the parodic foregrounding of established literary conventions. These devices serve to forestall the critics' attempt to blur the distinction between art and life and to jump to moralistic conclusions.

Viewed in a broader context, one might therefore argue that what links the two *fins de siècle* is an analogous revolt against both mimetic interpretations of literature and its accommodation to values which are deemed to be politically correct. Just as Wilde refused to put his novel to the service of Victorian values, Amis and Fischer refuse to conform to the kind of identity politics that has become the hallmark of any number of feminist, gay or postcolonial novels.

A comparative literary historian might also draw attention to the fact that the novels of both periods play with literary conventions. As Andreas Höfele observed, it is "a heightened awareness of both the burden and the offerings of the past" (1999: 152) that characterises the use of parody by authors like Swinburne, Beerbohm and Wilde, and the same could be said about postmodern authors like Amis and Fischer, too. As Annette Simonis has recently shown, European aestheticism was not just marked by escapism; it was rather a driving force of literary modernisation. Similarly, the creative power of postmodern parody has been emphasised by a host of critics[17], who agree that parody transforms genres and leads to the generation of new forms. The creative use of parody might therefore prove to be another similarity of the pre- and post-modern *fin de siècle* that is worthy of investigation. And since the parodies of the 1890s led to the narrative conventions of modernism, one might also speculate about what kind of novel the parodies of post-modern authors will serve to pave the way for, and follow up on Richard Tull's question in *The Information*: "whither the novel?" (436).

But doing comparative history is a tricky business, and I do not want to push these analogies too far. There is certainly a great difference, concerning the degree of pressure put on the novelist and the possible consequences if he does not conform to prevailing moral standards. Amis' next book, which, according to the *Sunday Times*, is

---

[17] For a review of such positions, see A. Nünning (1999).

"set to cause shock waves [...] [because it] features an explosive mix of royalty, pornography and paedophilia,"[18] may well induce the critics to mount the barricades once again, but it may just as well only cause alarm because of the immorally high advance he is bound to get for it.

References

Amis, Martin (1996 [1995]): *The Information*. 2nd ed., London: Flamingo

Angermann, Erich (1991): *Challenges of Ambiguity: Doing Comparative History* (= *German Historical Institute Washington, Annual Lecture Series*). Oxford: Berg Publishers

Beckson, Karl (ed.) (1970): *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge

Bellow, Janis Freedman (1997): "Necropolis of the Heart [rev. art: *The Information*, and *Sabbath's Theater*]," *Partisan Review* 62, 699–718

Bernard, Catherine (1993): "Dismembering/Remembering Mimesis: Martin Amis, Graham Swift," in: D'haen, Theo; Bertens, Hans (eds.): *British Postmodern Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 121–144

Brooks, Richard (2000): "Amis writes royals into a porno plot," *The Sunday Times*, May 28

Cohn, Dorrit (1999): *The Distinction of Fiction*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP

Diedrick, James (1995): *Understanding Martin Amis*. Columbia: South Carolina UP

Doan, Laura (1990): "Sexy Greedy *Is* the Late Eighties: Power Systems in Amis's *Money* and Churchill's *Serious Money*," *The Minnesota Review* 34/35, 69–80

Ermarth, Elizabeth Deeds (1997): *The English Novel in History 1840-1895*. London: Routledge

Fischer, Tibor (1995): *The Thought Gang*. London: Minerva

Fischer, Tibor (1997): *The Collector Collector*. New York: Metropolitan Books

Foldy, Michael S. (1997): *The Trials of Oscar Wilde: Deviance, Morality, and Late-Victorian Society*. New Haven: Yale UP

Gagnier, Regenia (1986): *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*. Stanford: Stanford UP

Gillespie, Michael Patrick (1997): *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity*. Gainesville: UP of Florida.

Haffenden, John (1985): "Martin Amis," in: Haffenden, John: *Novelists in Interview*, London: Methuen, 1–24

Hart-Davis, Rupert (ed.) (1962): *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde*. Oxford: Oxford UP

Höfele, Andreas (1999): "Oscar Wilde, or, The Prehistory of Postmodern Parody," *Postmodern Parody. European Journal of English Studies* 3.2, 138–166

Hoffmann, Michael (1994): "Heady-headed argot saga [rev. *The Thought Gang*]," *The Times*, December 22, 35

Hornby, Nick (1996): *High Fidelity*. London: Gollancz

Jones, Tony (2000): "Interview with Martin Amis," *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, July 20 (http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/s154354.htm)

Keating, Peter (1989): *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875-1914*. London: Secker & Warburg

[18] Brooks, Richard, "Amis writes royals into a porno plot," *The Sunday Times* (May 28, 2000).

Loewinsohn, Ron (1995): "The Ultimate Bank Job [rev. *The Thought Gang*]," *The New York Times Book Review*, June 25, 11

Mars-Jones, Adam (1995): "Looking on the blight side [rev. *The Information*]," *TLS*, March 24, 19f.

Mecklenburg, Susanne (2000): *Martin Amis und Graham Swift: Erfolg durch bodenlosen Moralismus im zeitgenössischen britischen Roman.* Heidelberg: Winter

Nünning, Ansgar (1999): "The Creative Role of Parody in Transforming Literature and Culture: An Outline of a Functionalist Approach to Postmodern Parody," *Postmodern Parody. European Journal of English Studies* 3.2, 123–137

—. Nünning, Vera (eds.) (2000): *Multiperspektivisches Erzählen: Studien zur Theorie und Geschichte der Perspektivenstruktur narrativer Texte im englischen Roman des 18. bis 20. Jahrhunderts.* Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, chapters 1–4

Nünning, Vera (2000): "Spiele mit Erzählkonventionen: Die Balance zwischen Fabulierkunst und Formexperimenten in den Romanen Tibor Fischers," *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* XXXIII, 3

—. (2001): "*An immoral book?*: Oscar Wildes *The Picture of Dorian Gray* als Paradigma für den Wandel der Erzählkonventionen im englischen Roman zwischen Spätviktorianismus und Moderne," in: Fludernik, Monika (ed.): *Fin de siècle.* Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Pearson, Allison (1995): "One Man's Hell [rev. *The Information*]," *The Independent on Sunday*, March 2, 36

Shakespeare, Sebastian (2000): "To Be Approached With Caution: *Don't Read This Book If You're Stupid* by Tibor Fischer," http://litreview.com/reviews/2000/02/shakespeare_on_fischer.html

Self, Will (1997): *Great Apes.* London: Bloomsbury

Simonis, Annette (2000): *Literarischer Ästhetizismus: Theorie der arabesken und hermetischen Kommunikation der Moderne.* Tübingen: Niemeyer

Sinfield, Allan (1994): *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment.* London: Cassell

Stein, Thomas M. (1992): "From Purgatory to Full Inferno: Martin Amis's Novels of the Eighties," *anglistik & englischunterricht* 48, 115–130

Welsh, Irvine (1993): *Trainspotting.* London: Secker & Warburg

Werner, Klaus (1998): "Oscar Wildes Roman *The Picture of Dorian Gray,*" *Praxis*, 45.3, 236–245

Wilde, Oscar (1891; 1981): *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* Murray, Isobel (ed.): Oxford: Oxford UP

Wilson, Jonathan (1995): "A Very English Story," *The New Yorker*, March 6, 96–107