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PARATEXT AS MEANS OF NARRATIVE GENERATION IN M.
AMIS'S HOUSE OF MEETINGS

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Abstract

The purpose of the research lies in the cognitive interpretation of the paratextual elements viewed as such capable of narrative generation. The study was based on the novel *House of Meetings* (2006) by a prolific modern British writer Martin Amis known for his exuberant, narrative-oriented and stylistically experimental writing. The article focuses on the three main paratextual elements that specifically stand out in the story, i.e. the preface, the epilogue and the acknowledgements. The preface and the epilogue are compared and analyzed in terms of formal organization, narrative independence, unity and mutual expository properties. Both feature metatextuality, repetitive narrative elements and a question – answer type of interdependence adding to the interpretation of the plot development. The acknowledgements are primarily viewed as a paratextual element which is not inherently a part of the main story, yet as such that offers a greater perspective on the spectrum of multilayer textual and supra-textual relations that would remain hypothetical if the acknowledgements were not available. Hence, the cognitive interpretation of the acknowledgements allows building a broader picture of the variety of narratives involved in the story and tracing the cause-and-effect relations, which approximates a construction of more or less logical and comprehensive model of a certain narrative hypertext. For instance, the cognitive interpretation of the acknowledgements in *House of Meetings* helped to anatomize the narrative as a collective product of multiple perspectives, or ideas adopted, digested and integrated within the system of the novel, the influences ranging from Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky to Anne Applebaum.

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1. Introduction

In modern literature, paratext acts as both textual and supra-textual construct establishing numerous heterogeneous connections which guide the narrative and generate new sub-narratives shaping and enriching the conveyed messages, design of storytelling and stylistic patterns. Putting cognitive interpretation on the paratext allows for detecting and defining such connections in terms of their nature and significance for further interpretation of the intentionality of the integral text.

2. Problem Statement

The formal (synergetic) function of the paratextual elements in the text lies in its organization and systematization; nevertheless, in fiction such formalization is determined by a writing concept, which accounts for the syncretic nature of paratext. Thus, in fiction paratextual elements may acquire stylistic and conceptual meaningfulness depending on the kind of connections established between the paratext and the text, its separate fragments or different texts within one corpus. The phenomenon of paratext raises considerable interest in terms of its expository nature in relation to the literary text, which contributes to the productive interpretation of modern texts and authors committed to the textual multilayered ambiguity. In such cases, paratextuality can be a means of narrative generation and aestheticisation (Mikhilev, 2016).

3. Research Questions

Thereof, this paper targets the problem of revealing the expository potential of the paratextual elements in a literary text in relation to one another and to the narrative.

4. Purpose of the Study

We undertake to carry out the cognitive interpretation analysis of the paratextual elements in the novel *House of Meetings* that have potential for narrative generation.

5. Research Methods

The paper draws upon the structural and pragmatic approach to the literary text which is defined as an organized complex (construct) of elements dealing with literary communication. The study is, to a certain extent, related to the ‘pact of reading’ theory, i.e. examines the explicit character of the “conventions regulating reading of the narrative” (Spiridonov, 2012, p. 102) which primarily manifest themselves in such paratextual elements as the preface, the epilogue and the acknowledgements. In this case, the focus is placed upon the study of the peculiarities of the literary organization of the paratext “responsible for the intentionality of the text” (Turysheva, 2015, p. 157). The analysis of the paratext is based on the method of cognitive interpretation, which corresponds to the nature of literary communication aiming at the projection of an image characterized by “its objective-subjective and subjective-emotional integrity” (Novozhilova, 2009, p. 56).

6. Findings

Traditionally the following elements refer to the paratext: the author's name, the subtitle, the title, the contents/the table of contents, the dedication, the epigraph, the preface, the introduction, the epilogue, the endnote and the acknowledgements (Oliz'ko, 2008). In Martin Amis's novel *House of Meetings*, it is first and foremost necessary to consider such paratextual elements as the preface, the epilogue, and the acknowledgements, which, in our opinion, are of the greatest value from the point of view of the expository and narrative-generating potential.

The preface and the epilogue are organized according to the principle of graphic and narrative complementarity; these elements of the novel, being the only ones entirely written in italics, are the beginning and the conclusion of the letter which the nameless main character writes to his adopted daughter Venus; the novel itself is built intricately into these several pages, introducing and summarizing it so that reading the letters on their own can give one a rough insight into the content and purpose of the entire work. Throughout the narration the protagonist occasionally addresses his daughter by name which reminds us of the fictitious nature of the story. At the same time, such a *selective* stylization of the narration imitating the epistolary-autobiographical genre ensures a higher reader's trust in the narrative.

Both the preface and the epilogue of the novel are distinguished by metatextuality. Thus, in the preface the main character gives a detailed instruction how the manuscript should be dealt with, where and in which number of copies it has to be published. He doubts that his daughter will believe the written, explains what provoked him to start writing and tries to make his only reader (daughter) ready for not liking the story of his life, which he calls a product of neurosis:

Still, you won't have to go far: the Gagarin Press on Jones Street.... I'd like a print run, please, consisting of a single copy. It is yours. ... There was a more obscure inhibition: the frankly neurotic fear that you wouldn't believe me... When at first I assembled the facts before me, black words on a white page, I found myself staring at a shapeless little heap of degradation and horror. (Amis, 2007, p. 1)

In the epilogue the character completes the book in his hospice ward and sends it via e-mail: "Any moment now I will click SEND ... Go, little book, go, little mine tragedy" (Amis, 2007, p. 196).

From the point of view of narrative generation, the preface and the epilogue are closely related and complementary (explanatory) to each other. The preface introduces the narrative 'backbone' of the novel, which exposes the destructive essence of the totalitarian regime for the human nature: shared neurosis, shared anxiety, mass emotion – degradation and horror – fatherland... eternally prodigal with anti-illuminations – the Stakhanovites (shock workers and shock writers) – ideology – undesirable asymmetry. The epilogue opens with a quotation from William Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear*: "Oh, slave, thou hast slain me..." which serves as the explanation to one of the key narrative elements of the preface, when the protagonist expresses his confidence in the fact that his adopted daughter, on learning about his past, and being black in America, will not turn her back on him as she understands what being a slave means: "*I don't think you'll do that [excommunicate me]. Because you're black, you see. You understand*

what it means to be a slave” (Amis, 2007, p. 3). Thus, the main character summarizes his story and his fate, considering himself to be a hostage and a victim of his own slave consciousness. The general intention of the whole novel is mirrored (repeated) in the epilogue, and the plot is closed: the character himself answers briefly many questions which earlier remained unanswered:

Closure is ... a nonexistent condition. Whatever doesn't kill you... makes you weaker, and kills you later. I'm doing what Russia is doing [dying]. Joseph Vissarionovich was... a cadaver millionaire [in terms of deaths]. 'We shall work for you, but play we shall not' [in the meaning: we are not going to make people]. You hate hating... you come to hate the hate. You need mass emotion to know how to die. Ideology gives you mass emotion. Ideology of no ideology makes people perfectly free. Russian cross [both in religious and demographic meaning] shall not be kissed. Women die gently because they stop blaming themselves; men die in torment because they start blaming themselves with full male severity. Retrospective sexual jealousy... I'm crypto-queer... which is worse in my case as I was queer for my brother. You could people a good-sized city, now, with the byblows of the rapist army. No power, no freedom, no responsibility, ever, in all our history [history of Russia]. Christ, Russia is the nightmare country. And always the compound nightmare. Always the most talented nightmare. Russia is dying and I'm glad. (Amis, 2007, p. 191 – 196)

The acknowledgements are important for understanding the ideological and narrative constituents of the novel; in this part of the book Amis refers to a number of authors and works which partly provided the factual material and inspiration for creation of his own book. Besides, we can assert with high probability that the main selection of the material was done when the author was working at his popular science book *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (2002) which features the testimony of the victims of Stalin's repressions including the ones of Evgeniya Ginsburg, Varlam Shalamov, Nadezhda Mandelstam and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The author's attitude to the communist ideology, the October Revolution and, in particular, to the Stalin's period in the history of the USSR proves to be unambiguous on familiarizing with the critical reviews of his novels addressing these topics as well as with Amis's interviews and publications in major newspapers, magazines and other media, e.g. Paul Berman's review *A Million Deaths Is Not Just a Statistic* in *The New York Times* (Berman, 2002), Harrison's *Decline and Fall* in *The Guardian* (Harrison, 2006), Rosemarie Goring's article *Still Life in the Old Dog* in *The Herald* (Glasgow) (Goring, 2006) and Amis's *Martin Amis on Lenin's Deadly Revolution* in *The New York Times* (Amis, 2017).

Drawing parallels between the novel and its “spectral-fragmentary” prototypes referred to in the acknowledgements provides for the analysis of Amis's signature take on the narrative development and intentionality. Among these prototypes is *The Gulag Archipelago* by Solzhenitsyn standing first on the list; this novel became a source of “fact-based” material, namely of the background knowledge related to the system of the corrective labour camps, dishevelled prisoners placed into camps at different time periods and due to different reasons, the transportation of prisoners and life in the camp; the author elaborates such descriptions with much care, the manner adopted from Solzhenitsyn. For example, the

route from the prison camp to the house of meetings is described in detail, including directions, a flight of old stairs, the landscape and the final destination:

You head north from the zona, and after half a mile you strike off to the left and climb the steep little lane and the implausible flight of old stone steps, and there it is: beyond, on the slope of Mount Schweinsteiger, the two-story chalet called the House of Meetings, and, to the side, its envied annexe, a lone log cabin like an outpost of utter freedom. (Amis, 2007, p. 14)

In this way, Amis, who has never travelled either to the USSR or modern Russia, transforms such attention to detail into narrative density which contributes to the effect of credibility. Nevertheless, the example below shows that Amis's descriptions, in contrast to dry, methodical and detailed elaborations of Solzhenitsyn, are subdued to the general intentionality of the narration and acquire veiled undertones: the camp way of life is opposed to the way of life of any average young European including: "...good diet, lavish health insurance, two degrees, foreign travel and languages, orthodonture, psychotherapy, property, and capital..." (Amis, 2007, p. 3); whereas the luxury a prisoner may expect in the house of meetings is limited to a bed, a chair, a clean latrine (a bucket with a wooden lid) and a relatively "generous" ration:

Just one room, of course: the narrow cot with its furry undersheet and dead-weight grey blanket, the water barrel with the tin mug chained to it, the spotless slops-bucket with its tactful wooden lid. And the chair (armless, backless), and the waiting supper-tray – two fist-sized lumps of bread, a whole herring (slightly green around the edges), and the big jug of cold broth with at least four or five beads of fat... (Amis, 2007, p. 14).

The memoirs of Russian journalist and American writer Masha Gessen *Ester and Ruzya (How My Grandmothers Survived Hitler's War and Stalin's Peace)* (2005) was a valuable source of the realia and post-war Moscow atmosphere:

It used to be said that Moscow was the biggest village in Russia. On the outskirts, in winter, there were little paths connecting each house with tram stops and food stores (Milk, said the sign), and everyone shuffled around like rustics in their short sheepskin coats, and you expected mammoths and icebergs... (Amis, 2007, p. 28)

The parallelism between the protagonists of these two works is rather straightforward in terms of geography, time and problematics (the place being the USSR; the time being war and post-war period for Ester and Ruzya, and Norillag till 1953 and the post-rehabilitation period up to the war in Afghanistan for the protagonists of *House of Meetings*; the existential problem being survival and interrelations with the state for both narratives). One of Gessen's grandmothers, Ruzya, choosing between the duty of honour and the duty to protect her family, decides in favour of the latter as tortured by remorse she still agrees to collaborate with the NKVD by accepting an offer to take up the position of a censor of foreign

publications. The second grandmother, Ester, refuses to collaborate with the authorities and is persecuted, but despite her mother's arrest, she considers that should she have acted differently, she would not be able to look in the face of her relatives. Eventually, Gessen comes to the conclusion that, in spite of making different choices, her grandmothers shared many similarities and were merely trying to survive under the circumstances (Pollitt, 2005). Similar dualism is observed in *House of Meetings* on the level of characterization: the protagonists – brothers and rivals in love – are two opposites; this is reflected both in their appearance, and philosophy, first and foremost, – in their attitude to violence. The main character gives himself up to the latter, seeing in the violence the only opportunity to resist the regime; on the other hand, his brother stands on the position of pacifism trying to preserve the grain of human nature in himself; as a result, both lose the highest stake – themselves and the ability to love and enjoy life:

You know what happened to us, brother? It wasn't just a compendium of very bad experiences. The hunger and the cold and the fear and the boredom and the oceanic weariness – that was general, and standard issue... They did more than take our youth away. They also took the men we were going to be. ...- that's when I felt it growing in me, my specific deformation... For both of us, I think, it had to do with our weakened power to love. It is strange that enslavement should have that effect – not just the fantastic degradation, not just the fear and the boredom... (Amis, 2007, p. 188)

Thus, according to Harrison, Amis's novel is not simply a story about a love triangle and not a story of one state; this is a story about losing sensitivity, destruction and decay, which in the novel, and, by and large, in life, do not depend on the choice, but are rather determined by the place, the time and the force of circumstance (Harrison, 2006).

As the second in importance after the novel by Solzhenitsyn, but nevertheless an irreplaceable work Amis names *Gulag: A History* (Gulag, 2003) by Ann Applebaum, admitting simplicity and elegance of her style and correctness of the questions being asked. It is noteworthy that Amis takes from A. Applebaum's work the idea of the framing plot of the novel, at the beginning of which a 84-year-old Norillag ex-prisoner (who is at the same time the protagonist and narrator) sets forth "to the past" – upstream the Yenisei, to the North, to the ruins of the former camp barracks. In the epilogue of *Gulag* A. Applebaum describes a small episode from her sea voyage from Arkhangelsk to the Solovki (the Solovetskie Islands): in the same way as the *House of Meetings* protagonist she was sailing along the rough sea on the threshold of the season of cold and nasty weather, provoking among people who she met at the restaurant a true interest, and the purpose of her research aroused a contradictory reaction (Applebaum, 2005).

Like Ann Applebaum the narrator in Amis's novel awakes bewilderment and surprise among the passengers. But unlike the journalist woman who is considered by the Russians as an extraneous element due to her exoticism (different nationality and language) and the purpose of her trip, the narrator in the novel is "Russian", that is why his extraneity to the ambience is defined by other factors, such as age, eccentricity, bad character, swearing and deep pocket (a habit of giving generous tips):

... by now it is massively established, aboard the Georgi Zhukov, that I'm a vile-tempered and foul-mouthed old man... They also know, by now, that I am a psychotic over-tipper... I always had a lot of cash, even in the USSR. But now I'm rich. (Amis, 2007, p. 8)

In the novel the steamship, aboard which the narrator is travelling, is a symbolic flagship of the past, the name of which is an allusion to the person “who won World War II”, the marshal and commander of the front Georgiy Zhukov, in one of the armies of who the protagonist did his military service:

I'm sitting in the prow-shaped dining room of a tourist steamer, the Geogi Zhukov, on the Yenisei River, which flows from foothills of Mongolia to the Arctic Ocean, thus cleaving the northern Eurasian plain – a distance of some two and a half thousand verst... The brochure describes the cruise as ‘a journey to the destination of a lifetime’ – a phrase that carries a somewhat unwelcome resonance. Bear in mind, please, that I was born in 1919. (Amis, 2007, p. 8)

As if by chance the narrator mentions that Zhukov saved his life in the summer of 1953, apparently meaning Beriya's arrest by Zhukov during the Presidium meeting on June 26, 1953, which heralded the change of power in the USSR, the beginning of the period of the Khrushchev Thaw and subsequent amnesty and/or rehabilitation of many prisoners. And the same *Georgi Zhukov* (now the steamship) is leading him to the end, to the death.

It is obvious that the idea of travelling about Russia, post-Soviet life eclecticism, the themes of the nation decline and the Chechen War were taken by Amis from Andrew Meier's *Black Earth: Russia After the Fall* (2003). Meier's travel novel is permeated with year 2000 events when as the outcome of the antiterrorist special operation in the Chechen Village of Aldy there were killed about 60 civilians. The event did not receive widespread publicity either in Russia, or abroad, and in the novel the author combines two existential problems of the Russian society – “what to do?” and “who is to blame?” into the third one – “what to do with those who are to blame?” (Taubman, 2003). Aboard the tourist steamship Amis's character is listening over the radio to the news from Beslan, it is September 1, 2004, and armed people wearing balaclava helmets have already occupied School №1 along with one thousand hostages. In advance the hero is prepared for the forthcoming unavoidable tragedy, the worst outcome, – the predictable result of the traditional Russian «heavy-handedness»:

Today saw the beginning of the siege of Middle School Number One, in North Ossetia. Some of the children happened to be watching when the gunmen and gunwomen came over the railway track in their black balaclavas – and they laughed and pointed, thinking it was a game or an exercise... out he climbed, the killer with the enormous orange beard: ‘Russians, Russians, don't be afraid. Come. Come...’ And why is that we are already preparing ourselves for the phenomenon understood by all the world – Russian heavy-handedness? For what reason are our hands so heavy? What weighs them down?. (Amis, 2007, p. 11)

If in the novel *Black Earth: Russia After the Fall* Meier tries to cognize the idiosyncrasy of the Russian character, to analyze it and to understand what it means to be Russian and how to avoid being non-Russian, Amis in his novel, released a few years later, in a talented way, from writer's and stylistic point of view utilizes Meier's conclusions about the fatal frightening scope of the Russian territory, about growing poverty of its population and, consequently, about the nation's dying (as the symbol of this dying Amis uses the so called Russian Cross – the symbol of the demographic crisis in Russia):

... on the larger scale character means nothing. On the larger scale, destiny is demographics; and demographics is a monster... There it is in front of me on the screen of my computer, the graph with its two crinkly lines intersecting, one pink, one blue. The birth rate, the death rate. They call it the Russian cross... I was there when my country started to die... (Amis, 2007, p. 13)

As an important work in the sphere of history and culture of Russia Amis considered Orlando Figes's *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (2002). In a somewhat idealistic manner Figes treats Russian culture as a source of religion, philosophy and policy, at the same time doubting its proper folk spirit which is represented by a row of mythical images and rites; he also contemplates Russia's attitude to the Western world (Amis, 2007, p. 198). On the first pages of the novel by Amis the character, who has lived for many years in the West, is suddenly spiritually reborn: "My eyes, in the Conradian sense, have stopped being Western and started being Eastern" (Amis, 2007, p. 11). In his interview to Lev Grossman (2007), to whom Amis's hero resembles Nabokov's Humbert Humbert with his words about the Russians and monsters, Amis explains that as the model of his work of literature he used the novel *Under Western Eyes* by Joseph Conrad, the narrator in which is anonymous, therefore Amis decided that his character did not need a name. Conrad himself in his letter to Edward Harnett of 1911 wrote: "... in the book nothing is interesting for me apart from the ideas up to their supplantation of everything other". Conrad's novel to a certain extent resonates with the themes raised by Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment*, as it reasons about the breakdown of the ideals of the revolution, irrationality of human deeds, characters' non-specificity, unjustness of the suffering of the poor and innocent and careless disparagement of the family members' lives. From *Under Western Eyes* Amis takes the interpretation of differences between the East and the West that is crucial for understanding Russia which has not made a choice between Europe and Asia, and can only be understood, according to Conrad, through "tearing out a western person's eyes". On the other hand, similarly to the novel by Conrad, *House of Meetings* by Amis is mainly a conglomeration of narratives "beaded" on the plot.

In *House of Meetings* the main action takes place in the Norillag of Stalin's period, and also during the prisoners' uprising in 1953 which followed Stalin's death and the amnesty which applied to only non-political prisoners. The most important source of the factual material was the biography by Simon Sebag-Montefiore *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (2003) (Amis, 2007, p. 198) based on the recent archive researches. Nevertheless, Amis makes a caveat that despite a titanic labour and careful work with facts, from his point of view, Sebag-Montefiore gives to Stalin's image redundant complexity and intellectuality. Amis himself is not inclined to poeticize the leader's political figure, though he has to admit to a certain extent his ability to catch imagination and even souls:

Joseph Vissarionovich: I knew his face better than I knew my own mother's. The moustachioed smile of a recruiting sergeant (I want you) and then the yellowy, grudge-hoarding, mountain-dwelling eyes, grazing from the shadows of crag or crevice. He wants you but you don't want him. I use the 'correct' form, Christian name and patronymic, Venus, to establish distance. For many years this distance did not exist. You must try hard to imagine it, the disgusting proximity of the state, its body odour, its breath on your neck, its stupidly expectant star. (Amis, 2007, p. 19)

So, physically and metaphysically, Amis's Stalin is the embodiment of the overall oppressing and all-pervading state control which stimulates the desire for distancing.

Two more names mentioned by Amis in the acknowledgements are the writers of the Soviet period Ginsburg and Grossman. Apparently, the reference was made to Ginsburg's autobiographical novel *Steep Route*, the genre of which she herself defined as "the chronicle of the personality cult", and to Grossman's epic novel *Life and Fate* in which he directly expresses criticism of Stalinism, and, according to Solzhenitsyn's statement, promotes the idea of "the moral identity of the German National Socialism and Soviet Communism"; another question raised concerns the choice between an abetting murder and your own death and opposition of the natural human kindness and hatred to the enemies imposed by the system. These two ideas are also conceptually interpreted in *House of Meetings*.

There is an interesting fact of Amis's personal acquaintance and communication with two GULAG ex-prisoners – a historian Tibor Szamuely who in 1950 was sent to Vorkuta camp on a charge of spying, where he spent eighteen months, and Janusz Bardach found guilty of the counterrevolution activities during the Great Patriotic War and exiled to Kolyma. It was Bardach who Amis exchanged letters with for a brief time shortly before his demise and who Amis names the only real link with the history of that time, and speaks meritoriously about two memoir books by Bardach – *Man Is Wolf to Man: Surviving Stalin's Gulag* (1998) and *Surviving Freedom: After the Gulag* (2003) (Amis, 2007, p. 198).

If Bardach becomes for Amis a ghost witness of the epoch which he writes about, then in the literary sense speaking of his novel Amis mentions the 'pen ghosts' who have influenced him, among them there is Dostoevsky. In one of his interviews to *The New Yorker* (Amis, 2017) Amis compares the Russian and British literature and underlines the fact that in the 1970-80ies it was popular to consider the Russian literature something on the edge of life and death, the stakes in it have always been too high. For instance, Dostoevsky served a sentence, and Akhmatova wrote the following: "The Russian land does love, does love blood". From Amis's point of view, this is the highest degree of tragedy, both in the authors' literary works and fates, which lends a definite weight to the Russian literature and, in particular, to Dostoyevsky's creative work.

7. Conclusion

The cognitive interpretation analysis of the paratext in Martin Amis's *House of Meetings* showed that separate (mostly extended) paratextual elements, such as the preface and the epilogue form certain textual and supra-textual connections of complimentary and expository nature; moreover, these

paratextual elements do not only conform to the compositional and plot patterns, but are also capable of narrative generation being expository not only to one another, but to the whole narrative.

On the other hand, the acknowledgements are considered a foundation, a stratum which is built on in the process of cognitive interpretation adding multiple layers of intertextual and metatextual connections merging in a kind of hypertext, which, hence, contributes to the extensive receptive interpretation of the text and assists in filling in the gaps at the levels of plot and narrative intentionality.

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