

VISITING RUSSIA: MARTIN AMIS'S HOUSE OF MEETINGS

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Abstract: *House of Meetings* shows the author's knowledge of Russia. The aim of this paper is to find out to what extent Martin Amis knows the Russian culture. In order to do so, we have analysed and explained some Russian words and English neologisms formed from Russian stems, allusions to Russian literature, historical data and geographic references that are found in the novel. *House of Meetings* reflects the author's great knowledge of the Russian literature. As regards Russian vocabulary, there are some misspellings and incorrect proper names in the novel; probably Amis did that on purpose or due to the absence of some patterns in the English language. Nevertheless, the research shows that Amis is an excellent connoisseur of the Russian culture. Some of his remarks can be understood only by Russians, since a deeper cultural knowledge is required. That is why the novel could be difficult for an uninitiated reader.

Keywords: culture, Russian legacy, uninitiated reader, fiction, knowledge.

Resumen: *House of Meetings* refleja el conocimiento que Martin Amis tiene de Rusia. El objetivo del presente artículo es analizar el conocimiento de la lengua y la cultura rusas. Se examina y se explica el vocabulario ruso, los neologismos formados a partir de las palabras en ruso, referencias a la literatura rusa, datos históricos y elementos geográficos que tanto abundan en la novela. En obra se ve que Amis tiene un conocimiento profundo de la literatura rusa. En cuanto al léxico ruso, encontramos algunos errores de tipo ortográfico o conceptual que pueden ser hechos a propósito, o debido a la ausencia de tales estructuras en la lengua inglesa. Sin embargo, y en lo general, hemos llegado a la conclusión de que Amis es un gran experto en la cultura rusa. Algunos términos o detalles de tipo cultural o histórico pueden ser comprendidos solamente por los lectores rusos, ya que requieren un conocimiento cultural más profundo. Por esta razón la novela puede resultar difícil para un lector no iniciado.

Palabras clave: cultura, legado ruso, lector no iniciado, ficción, conocimiento.

Résumé: *House of meeting* reflète la connaissance que Martin Amis a de la Russie. L'objectif de cet article est d'analyser la connaissance de la langue et de la culture russes. On y examine et on y explique le vocabulaire russe, les néologismes formés à partir des mots en russe, des références à la littérature russe, des données historiques et des éléments géo-

graphiques si nombreux dans ce roman. On voit avec cette oeuvre qu'Amis a une profonde connaissance de la littérature russe. Quant au lexique russe, nous trouvons quelques erreurs de type orthographique ou conceptuel qui peuvent avoir été faites à dessein ou qui peuvent être dues à l'absence de structures semblables en anglais. Cependant, et en règle générale, nous sommes arrivés à la conclusion, qu'Amis est un grand expert de la littérature russe. Certains termes ou détails de type culturel ou historique ne peuvent être connus que des seuls lecteurs russes car ils exigent une connaissance culturelle plus profonde. C'est pourquoi ce roman peut sembler difficile à un lecteur non initié.

Mots-clés: culture, héritage russe, lecteur non initié, fiction, connaissance.

INTRODUCTION

Martin Amis is an English novelist, essayist and short story writer. He has written twelve novels, eight books of short stories and more than four hundred essays. His novels are full of playful experimentalism; they show the mixture of the real and fictitious offering blends of styles and genres, in their attempt to picture our complex and chaotic present world. Sometimes these features make the books difficult to understand and interpret. Even more, some of his publications do not depict England or The United States, they deal with other countries, (Russia is one example), in such a way, that cultural and language peculiarities of the country in case become reflected in the books, making them more difficult for an uninitiated reader: *Koba the Dread* (2002) and *House of Meetings* (2006) are two examples. Both books deal with Russia; *House of Meetings* is, in some way, a sequel to *Koba the Dread*. The thematic connection between both books is evident: both deal with the Soviet period; both describe the horror of the Russian experiment. In *Koba the Dread*, Martin Amis does it on a large scale –he also gives us an approximate number of the people who were tortured, exported, ruined and killed. In *House of Meetings*, he exposes the consequences of the Soviet regime on the individual. From the description of the tragedy of millions, Amis goes on to describe the tragedy of three people: the narrator, his brother and Zoya. As Kakutani (2007) wrote: “a novel takes all the knowledge he [M. Amis] accumulated in the course of researching *Koba the Dread* and transforms it, imaginatively, into a deeply moving story”.

The purpose of this paper is to find out to what extent Martin Amis knows the Russian culture. By culture, we understand “the customs and beliefs, art,

way of life and social organization of a particular country or group” (Hornby, 2001:306). We will comment on such elements of the Russian culture as, its literature, language and history in order to carry out the study.

First of all, let us start with the vocabulary of the book, focusing our attention on the Russian words and English neologisms and puns derived from Russian. Then literary allusions will be analyzed by distinguishing between the Russian writers and poets on the one hand, and the literary works cited and mentioned on the other hand. Brief notes will be presented on allusions to Russian geography. After that, an explanation on historical data of the book will be given. Finally, we will present our analysis and commentary on some of the remarks made by M. Amis in his reference to the Russian language and culture.

House of Meetings is, in some way, a supplement and development of the main theme studied in *Koba the Dread*. Nevertheless, M. Amis also touches upon the theme of Russia in his book *Visiting Mrs. Nabokov*, where one of the chapters, titled the same as the book, is dedicated to the Nabokovs, and another to the Russian famous chess-players, Kasparov and Karpov. The writer continues his study of Russia in his book of essays and reviews, *The War Against Cliché*, when he constantly refers to Russian literature and mentions famous Russian people, such as chess-players, ex-presidents, among others. In general, there are more than twenty Russian writers and poets introduced in the book. For example, M. Amis dedicates a whole chapter of *The War Against Cliché* to one of his favourite writers, Vladimir Nabokov: he studies his life and his literary legacy (his letters, novels, short stories and plays). Other remarkable Russian people (Y. Zamyatin, Kasparov, Karpov among others) are also allotted subchapters of the book. After discussing the books that in some way deal with Russia, it is logical to suppose *House of Meetings* presents his accumulated knowledge of Russia brought to perfection.

VOCABULARY

Russian words

Semiotics defines culture as a group of the languages, according to which different social values are organised. These languages produce a number of

texts. Therefore, literature, when seen as language, is an active part of culture. We can say that, in some ways, literary works reflect cultural and language peculiarities of a particular country.

When writing about Russia it is logical to think that Martin Amis uses a great range of Russian words in his texts (*Koba the Dread* and *House of Meetings*, as examples). Sometimes he offers his readers a translation into English but mainly he does not. Let us list these untranslated Russian words and give them English equivalents:

- Dacha (*HM*, 140) –country cottage or summer cottage;
- Duma (*KD*, 42) – Representative State Assembly;
- Glasnost (*KD*, 48) – publicity;
- Kombinat (*HM*, 58) – a group of enterprises;
- Molodoi Komunist* (*KD*, 49) – Young Communist;
- OGPU (*KD*, 76) – organized state political administration;
- Perestroika (*KD*, 257) – reorganization, reorientation;
- Pravda* (*KD*, 8) – Truth;
- Rossiya* (*HM*, 144) – Russia
- Spetsnaz (*HM*, 57) – Special Forces;
- SPID (*HM*, 192) – Aids;
- Spirit (*HM*, 176) – alcohol;
- Sud (*KD*, 42) – law-court;
- Urkas (*HM*, 21) – (offensive) general word for prisoners;
- Visti* (*KD*, 4) – news;
- Zeks (*HM*, 115) – (offensive) prisoners.

Neologisms and puns

The presence of new words is one of the core characteristics of Amis's works. *Koba the Dread* and *The House of Meetings* are not an exception. More than that, the influence of the Russian language on English is quite strong here and it is reflected in the presence of a special kind of neologism. New English words are created from Russian stems following the English language derivation rules. Let us see the examples from the texts: **re-Russifying**¹,

¹ Bold letter type marks derivation; whereas underlined part of a word marks a Russian stem.

deCossackised, dekulakised, de-Russified, non-nomenklatura citizen (means 'ordinary'), **oblomovism**. The last neologism is an interesting word. In Russian, 'Oblomov' is a surname of the main hero of Goncharov's novel *Oblomov*. Apart from that, nowadays, the word is used to describe someone who exhibits the personality traits of sloth and inertia.

As it refers to puns, several examples can be easily found in *House of Meetings*. I think, the most interesting puns are those created on the base of two main things. One, Russian geography versus Europe, and two, sound and meaning contrasts of Russian and English:

- a) *I would Easternize your Western eyes, Western heart (HM, 27).*
- b) *I fondly see myself kitting with Katya, mushrooming with Masha, bob-sleighing with Bronislava (HM, 51).*

Russian names 'Katya', 'Masha' are diminutives for 'Catherine' and 'Maria' respectively.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS

John Banville (2007), *The New York Review of Books*, defined *House of Meetings* as "a remarkable achievement, a version of the great Russian novel done in miniature, with echoes throughout of its mighty predecessors" (<http://www.pwf.cz/en/features/172.html>).

This definition is based on the text itself as it abounds with literary allusions. Most of them are references to Russian writers and literary works. Let us list these allusions as they appear in the book and make a brief comment on each of them.

Propped up before me, a book of poems. Not Mikhail Lermontov or Marina Tsvetaeva (HM, 9).

Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841) is a Russian romantic writer and poet. He is the most important presence in Russian poetry after A. Pushkin. His earliest poems were extremely pornographic with elements of sadism. He published only one collection of poems. Patriotic and pantheistic veins of his poetry had immense repercussions throughout later Russian literature. For his novel, *a Hero of Our Time* (1839) Lermontov deserves to be

regarded as one of the founding fathers of Russian prose. The innovative structure of the novel was very modern, and has inspired several imitations, i.e. *Pnin* by V. Nabokov. His poems “MTSYRI” (“The Novice”) and *Demon* are the most famous.

Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941) is a Russian poet and writer. She dated most of her poems and published them chronologically. Some cycles are dedicated to poets, i.e. the “Poems to Akhmatova” and the “Poems to Blok. One of Tsvetaeva’s best-known cycles *Bessonitsa (Insomnia)* and the poem *Lebedinyi Stan, (The Swans’ Encampment 1917-1921, published in 1957)* celebrate the White Army. She also wrote folkloric narrative. “The target of Tsvetaeva’s satire is everything petty and petty bourgeois”. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marina_Tsvetaeva.html)

The spatial relationship between the two continents, Venus, has best been evoked by the exile Nabokov... (HM, 38).

Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) is a Northern American writer of Russian origins. Being from a rich, highly cultivated family, he was forced to immigrate to Europe when the Bolsheviks seized power. His novels *Laughing in the Dark, Invitation to a Beheading* and *Lolita*, among others, made him world-famous.

As mentioned before, Vladimir Nabokov is one of M. Amis’s favourite writers. We can find a chapter dedicated to him in *The War Against Cliché*. Apart from this, there are more than fifty allusions to Nabokov’s works in the book.

Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy: each of them insisted on a Russian God, a specifically Russian God (HM, 116).

Almost the whole Russian literature, the Russian great literature, is a living document, witnessing to this God-seeking, to an unquenchable spiritual thirst. The three writers mentioned are great figures in the Russian literature.

Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852) is a Russian writer of Ukrainian origin. He is a novelist, dramatist, satirist and founder of the critical realism in Russian literature. He is best known for his *Dead Souls* (1842) and his play *Revizor* (1836, *The Government Inspector*). His prose is characterized by imaginative power and linguistic playfulness.

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) is a Russian novelist, journalist, short-story writer, whose psychological penetration into the human soul greatly influenced 20th century novels. His most known works are *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1868–1869) and *The Brothers of Karamazov* (1879–1890). *Crime and Punishment* is an account of an individual's fall and redemption; *The Idiot* depicts a Christ-like figure, through whom Dostoevsky reveals the spiritual bankruptcy of Russia; the last novel present three aspects of man's being through the three brothers: reason, emotion and faith.

Lev Tolstoy (1828–1910) is considered one of the greatest writers in Russian literature. His major works include *War and Peace* (1863–1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1875–1877). *War and Peace* is an epic tale that depicts the story of five families against background of Napoleon's invasion of Russia. In *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy juxtaposes the crises of family life with the quest for the meaning of life and social justice.

When Pasternak was silenced as a writer, he turned to translation –of Shakespeare, among others. (HM, 135).

Boris Pasternak (1890-1960) is a Russian poet. His books *Over the Barriers* (1917) and *My sister – Life* (1922) made him famous in Russia. In his works he explored historical and moral problems and he also was interested in ethical-philosophical problems. Besides, as it was mentioned in *House of Meetings*, he translated Shakespeare, Goethe, Kleits, Rilke and Verlaine. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for his novel *Doctor Zhivago* in 1958. *Doctor Zhivago* has been recognized by many as the greatest novel of the 20th century. It is partly autobiographical and partly epic novel. It was made into a film by David Lean in 1965.

There is also an allusion to Pasternak in *Koba the Dread*, we find: “He endured Pasternak; he silenced him, he took a lover and a child from him; still, he spared him” (*KD*, 15).

I used to think with Mandelstam, that that was the measure of a man, of a woman: how they responded to poetry (HM, 136).

Osip Mandelstam (1891-1838) is a Russian poet and essayist. He was hostile to the Communist government and his poetry never conformed to the official doctrine. Two main themes can be traced throughout his poetry: one

is alienation from the comfortable bourgeois world of established forms and values, and another is love. Mandelstam was arrested for writing a critical epigram on Stalin and died in a labour camp. A reference to this destiny can be found in *Koba The Dread*: “He [Stalin] destroyed Mandelstam” (KD, 15).

Right from the start I had fingered Zoya for a decimator of the poets, and a poet (Acmeist, Mandelstam) was what Lev was in some sense hoping to be (HM, 39).

Acmeist is a member of a small group of early–20th–century Russian poets reacting against the vagueness and affectations of Symbolism. It was formed by the poets S. Gorodetsky and N. Gumilev. Acmeists used language freshly and with intensity.

And he knows his Akhmatova (HM, 137).

Anna Akhmatova is a Russian poet. She wrote with apparent simplicity and naturalness. Her poems are about time and decay. Her most famous works are *Requiem*, a cycle on the Stalin’s purges that is a literary monument to the victims of Stalin’s terror, and *POEMA BEZ GEROYA (Poem Without a Hero)*. *Requiem* is notable mainly for its elaborate musical structure, the variety of its stanzas and rhythms. *Poem Without a hero* was written in 1942 and revised continuously between then and 1962. It has a great semantic density. The 744-line text is divided into three parts. The poem contains lots of complex threads and allusions, as M. Perloff (2005) noted: “*Poem Without a Hero* is a poem without meaningful moral compass, the complexities promised in the brilliant first part never resolved or even addressed. It is as if Akhmatova’s terrible experiences from the early 20’s to the present had made it impossible for her to conjure up anything more than brilliant fragments”.

Earlier, Amis wrote: “*He [Stalin] presided over the grief and misery of Anna Akhmatova (and of Nadezhda Mandelstam) (KD, 15).*”

Apart from the Russian writers and poets, some allusions to literary works can be found in the book:

In the Gulag, it was not the case that people died like flies... by 1948, flies stopped dying like people, and people had gone back to dying like flies” (HM, 60).

It is an allusion to Gogol’s novel, *Dead Souls*, in which peasants were dying like flies because of starvation and extremely hard work. The novel is con-

sidered the great prose classic of Russian literature, more than that, “practically all the Russian masterpieces that have since have grown out of it, like the limbs of a single tree” (http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/dead_souls.html). The very title *Dead Souls* is meant to describe the living of Russia as well as its dead. Earlier, in *Koba the Dread*, we find another allusion to *Dead Souls*: “And the black farce is very Russian, from *Dead Souls* to *Laughter in the Dark*” (KD, 258).

The narrator makes also a reference to one of the most important characteristics of the classic Russian novels:

You have consumed your share of Russian novels: every time a new character appears, there is a chapter break and you are suddenly reading about his grandparents. This is too a digression (HM, 26).

The literary digression is the key to unlocking some of 19th century Russian finest novels such as *Anna Karenina* by Tolstoy, *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky, *Hero of Our Time* by Lermontov and Gogol's *Dead Souls*.

You look like Vronsky when he starts shadowing Anna (HM, 33).

The allusion is to Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* (1873-77). The main heroine left her husband and son as she wants to be with her lover, Count Vronsky. It was considered a scandalous act at that time. Later, Vronsky's coldness and indifference lead Anna to commit suicide: unable to return to a life she hates, she kills herself. Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anna_Karenina) gives us the following interpretation of the novel: “Common way to interpret Anna's tragedy, then, is that she could neither be completely honest nor completely false, showing a Hamlet-like inner conflict that eventually drives her to suicide”.

She recited Eugene Onegin to herself every day (HM, 77).

Eugene Onegin is a great Russian novel in verse, written by Pushkin. It is one of the classics of the Russian literature and its hero served as a model for a number of Russian literary heroes.

“...but some days you don't want to read the ...the fucking Bronze Horseman” (HM, 77).

Bronze Horseman is another Pushkin's long poem. There is also a mention of the poem in *The War Against Cliché*.

Some days you don't want to read the ... the fucking Song of Igor's Campaign. (HM, 77).

Slovo o Polku Igoreve is a masterpiece of the Old Russian literature. It describes an unsuccessful campaign in 1185 of Prince Igor of Novgorod against the Polovtsy (Cumans)

I had just come across the locution "he had the cheek of taking my photograph" in Lolita (HM, 134).

The quotation is taken from a famous Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1959). The pronoun 'he' refers to Quilty who had taken the narrator's (Humbert) photo.

Here, Martin Amis's knowledge of the Russian literature does not end, as a greater number of literary allusions can be found in his *The War Against Cliché* and *Koba the Dread*. Both books contain constant references to Solzhenitsyn and his *The Gulag Archipelago*, to Zamyatin (there is a subchapter "Zamyatin" in Amis's book of essays and reviews), to Bulgakov, Gogol, among others, and also to the Russian politicians of the Soviet Period, etc. Furthermore, we can find allusions to Mandelstam, Babel and Gorky (*KD*, 15), Stanislavsky (*KD*, 16) Turgenev (*KD*, 81), Bunin (*KD*, 155), Mayakovsky (*KD*, 224), A. Blok and Gumilev (*KD*, 226); to A. Kuznetsov (*WAC*, 141; 142), A. Bely (*WAC*, 395), A. Chekhov (*WAC*, 144, 323-324), Rybakov (*WAC*, 385), E. Doctorov (*WAC*, 121), F. Dostoevsky (*WAC*, 80), D. Nabokov (*WAC*, 371, 395), A. Pushkin (*WAC*, 142, 144), B. Spassky (*WAC*, 342, 343), L. Tolstoy (*WAC*, 245, 387, 457), A. Zinoviev (*WAC*, 395) in the two books.

GEOGRAPHY OF THE BOOKS

The geographical territory embraced in *House of Meetings* can be only compared to the territory of the Russian Federation in its size and scope. Different Russian towns and cities appear constantly on the pages. I will place and describe briefly every settlement mentioned in the novel traveling from page to page, according to their appearance in the book:

1. **Moscow.** Many scenes of *House of Meeting* are set in Moscow. It is the capital of Russia and the country's principal political, economic and financial centre. Moscow is the most populated city in Europe. It's architecture and performing arts culture is world-renowned. The city is also well known as the

site of Saint Basil's Cathedral, Cathedral of Christ the Saviour and The Sisters. A number of theatres, concert halls, art galleries and Kremlin of Moscow attract thousands of tourists every day.

To type the word "Krasnoyarsk" still seems wholly grotesque. (HM, 12).

2. **Krasnoyarsk** is the administrative centre of Krasnoyarsk Krai, and the third largest city in Siberia. Krasnoyarsk lies on the Yenisei River and is an important junction on the Trans-Siberian Railway. During the Cold War it was home Krasnoyarsk Northeast air base, which has been turned into apartment blocks since then.

In your nose and mouth was the humid breath of the camp, of Norlag, and, more distantly, the fresh cement of the brand-new Arctic City, the monumental denture of Predposylov. (HM, 23).

3. Predposylov is a fictitious city.

"Dudinka, September 2, 2004" (HM, 49).

4. **Dudinka** is a town in Krasnoyarsk Krai. It was the administrative centre of Taymyr Autonomous Okrug (Region), which was merged into Krasnoyarsk Krai in 2007. It is a port in the lower reaches of the Yenisei River, accessible to sea-going ships. In 2001, Dudinka was declared a closed city, with travel restricted for foreigner, and travel permits required for Russian visitors, as well.

Kitty went on to say that "the flu" was very virulent in the capital, and that Zoya and her mother had gone back to Kazan. (HM, 65).

5. **Kazan** is the capital city of the Republic of Tatarstan, and one of Russia's largest cities. It is a major industrial, commercial and cultural centre, and it remains the most important centre of Tatar culture. Kazan lies at the confluence of the Volga and Kazanka Rivers in central European Russia. It is a large railway, highway and airway knot, the largest port on the Volga River. Kazan is the main economic centre of Tatarstan.

Birobidzhan was a region on the north-eastern border of China – largely, and wisely, uninhabited. Ever since the 1930s there had been talk of resettling the Jews in Birobidzhan (HM, 89).

6. **Birobidzhan** is a town and administrative centre of Jewish Autonomous Oblast, located on the Trans-Siberian railway and close to the Chinese border.

We were told the whole story, that spring, by a group of transferees from Kolyma. (HM, 96).

7. **The Kolyma Region** is located in the far northeastern area of Russia in what is commonly known as Siberia but is actually part of the Russian Far East. The area, part of which is within the Arctic Circle, has a subarctic climate with very cold winters lasting up to six months of the year. The principal town, Magadan is the largest port of Northeastern Russia. The initial efforts to develop the region began in 1932, with the building of the town of Magadan by forced labor.

That October he [Lev] successfully applied for a job in a mine construction project in Tyumen, just the other side of the Urals, beyond Yekaterinburg. (HM, 130).

8. **Tyumen** is a city in Russia, located on the Tura River. It is the administrative centre of Tyumen Oblast in the Urals Federal District. Tyumen was the first Russian town in Siberia, founded in 1586. It is an important centre for the gas and oil industries in Russia. The living standards of Tyumen residents are second only to those of Moscow.

9. **Yekaterinburg** is a major city in the central part of Russia, the administrative centre of Sverdlovsk Oblast. Situated on the eastern side of Ural mountain range, it is the main industrial and cultural centre of the Urals Federal District. Between 1924 and 1991, the city was known as Sverdlovsk after the Bolshevik leader Yakov Sverdlov.

I had walked across town from Rossia, where I had taken a suite overlooking Red Square November 17, 1982, and Leonid Ilych was being laid to rest. (HM, 144).

10. **The Rossia Hotel** was built in Moscow in 1967 at the order of Nikita Khrushchev. At the time of its construction it was the largest hotel in the world, also it was registered in "Guinness book of Records" as the hugest world's hotel; nearly forty years later when it was shut down, it was still the largest in Europe. The Rossia Hotel officially closed its doors on January 1, 2006; demolition began in March 2006 to make room for an entertainment complex whose design will be loosely based on the design of the old Zaradye district it was built over.

As I approached the wavering bank of glass I picked up an adour, sweet but sinisterly sweet; it came, I knew, from the Red October Chocolate Factory across the way, but it reminded me of the smell of humanity in the Arctic thaw. (HM, 145).

11. **The Red October Factory** is, nowadays, one of the most famous fabrics in Russia.

HISTORY OF RUSSIA

House of Meetings is the novel where the real and fictitious historical data are intertwined and where “present and past horrors play against each other in a frightful counterpoint” (J. Banville, 2007). Even more, “House of Meetings is actually an attempt to compress the past 60 years of Russian history into 200 pages” (J. Harrison, 2006). Let us comment the data found along the novel.

References to the tragedy of North Ossetian Secondary School appear several times throughout the novel:

Today saw the beginning of the siege of Middle School Number One, in North Ossetia... Then the van pulled up and out he climbed the killer with the enormous orange beard. ...The authorities are saying three or four hundred, but in fact there are well over a thousand hostages –children, parents, teachers (HM, 11). As the power of the analgesic fades, what was numb will become raw; I keep thinking of the killer with red hair and how his rusty beard with itch and smart (HM, 56).

When I read these lines, images of the disaster come back to my memory –on 1st September (Russian holiday) in 2004, Secondary School Number One of Beslam (North Ossetia) was besieged and, three days later, hundreds of children and teachers were killed in a skirmish between the terrorists and the Russian forces. As regards the personal pronoun “he”, it may refer to Basaev, a head of Chechenian terrorists.

Sixty pages later, the narrator reverts to the tragedy again, now he adds fictitious details to the description:

On the third day... the putrefying bodies of the people killed on the first day are being eaten by dogs. And if captives can smell it, if the captives can hear it, the sounds of the carrion dogs of North Ossetia eating their fathers... (HM, 116).

According to the information presented by the world news on this account, there were not any dogs eating human corpses in North Assetia.

Another black stain of recent Russian history is described and sarcastically described in the novel:

Early on in the siege of the Moscow theatre –Dubrovka– in 2002, the killers released some of children And we remember how Dubrovka ended. With the best will in the world, the secret police ...gassed their own civilians (HM, 56).

The terrorists were Chechen women who claimed that they were “mothers of murdered sons” (their sons were killed by the Russian army for terrorist acts). These women wanted the same to be done to the Russians – they wanted to murder “the Russian sons”. News web informed on that account: “Chechen rebels....took an estimated 900 people hostage, including 90 staff members of the theatre. The standoff ended three days later, when Russian troops raided the building. 129 hostages died in the takeover...” (www.mosnews.com/mn–files/dubrovka.shtml).

Some remarkable events of the Russian history are mentioned by the narrator:

And I don't like the Soviet power, and I don't like the tsars, and I don't like the Mongol overlords, and I don't like the theocratic dynasties of old Moscow and old Kiev. (HM, 12).

Russia was governed by the tsars from 1645 up to 1917, when the Bolsheviks came to power (there is a genealogical tree of the Russian tsars and tsarinas in a webpage, www.bartleby.com/67/russian04.html).

In 1223 Mongols invaded Rus (Old Russia). The Mongol yoke lasted about 200 years and had an uneven impact on the Russian culture and general development. “Although the Russian army defeated the Golden Horde in 1380, Tatar domination of the Russian inhabited territories, along with demands of tribute from Russian princes, continued until about 1480” (http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Russia#mongol_invasion).

“...the Russian soldiers were raping every German woman from eight to eighty ...it was an army of rapists” (HM, 27).

Amis describes the Russian Army in this way without explaining some important details: this treatment of German women from the part of the Russian soldiers was a reaction to the “treatment” that Russian women received from the German army. As it is known, firstly the Germans invaded Russia torturing its soldiers and civilians; then the front moved towards Germany, where the Russians behaved just the same as the Germans did. For example, in the Russian version of *Lolita*, Nabokov noted that both armies

rape: "one of the tenth or twentieth Fritz or Ivan in the raping queue who throws the girl's black shawl over her white face..." (Nabokov, 1990: 348).

...until 1991, when the certificate, frame in Paris, pronounced the death of the Russian experiment. Of that particular Russian experiment. (HM, 55).

The disintegration of the Soviet Union occurred in 1991; Eltzin became the first Russian president. The underlined "Russian experiment" refers to the Communist regime.

Let me tell you what I loved about August 4, 1953, when we stood arm in arm (HM, 193). That day Stalin died.

COMMENTS ON CERTAIN TERMS

Koba the Dread and *House of Meetings* constitute the corpus of this analysis, as they are complementary to each other and present the major number of similarities alluding to Russia. Though, greater attention will be paid to the novel, since it is the nucleus of the present article. There are some things that must be corrected and should be explained for uninitiated readers in both books, although Martin Amis's knowledge of Russia and the Russian language is very good.

I will pay attention to the Russian words, names and cultural peculiarities in the analysis. It must be taken into consideration that I was guided by my own experience and knowledge in carrying out the following corrections and amendings. When I analyze words and expressions from *House of Meetings*, I keep in mind that I am dealing with fiction. Thus, these words and expressions can be written in the way they appear in the text on purpose – the author may change the original forms of spelling in order to follow conventions of the genre. Anyway, the explanations and corrections will be interpreted from a factual point of view, with no intention to correct the author.

Word 'zachto?' appears throughout *Koba the Dread* several times. The spelling, Amis offers us is not correct, although its translation into English is right: 'Why?', 'What for?' (KD, 75). In Russian this expression consists of two parts that are written separately: 'za' (a preposition) and 'chto' (a question word).

In another instance, one can find a translation for the Russian word 'dvorniki': "attendants in white uniforms, who collect the children and take them to

the nearest police station” (*KD*, 140). The word ‘dvornik’ is widely used in Russian nowadays, meaning “a man who takes care of the yard and the pavement in front of a house” (Smirnitsky, 2001: 141).

Another interesting example is “Gorky’s newspaper, *Novaia zhin’* (new world)...” (*KD*, 224). Let us analyze it step by step. Firstly, the word *zhin’*, as it appears in the book, the spelling is incorrect – there is a word *zhizn’* in the Russian language; secondly, the translation given is not very accurate. *Zhizn’* means “life”, not world. Perhaps Amis confused Gorky’s newspaper *Novaia Zhizn’* (*New Life*) with another leading Soviet newspaper *Novye Mir* (*New World*).

In House of Meetings Amis creates a neologism in the English language – composed by a Russian word and an English adverb – ‘the all–babushka village’ (*HM*, 168), that means a village with grandmothers as its population.

As regards proper names, there are some that should be clarified in both books. One of the chapters of the first part of *Koba the Dread* is called “Ten Theses on Ilyich” (*KD*, 25). This ‘Ilyich’ is a patronymic of Vladimir Lenin; when a patronymic is used as a single word it reflects familiarity with which the speaker treats the addressee.

When Amis speaks about Vladimir Nabokov, he, in one occasion, refers to him as ‘Volodya’ (*KD*, 37). It is a common Russian diminutive of ‘Vladimir’.

In another instance, reporting Stalin’s letter to his daughter Svetlana, Amis uses a supposed diminutive ‘Setanka’ (*KD*, 162). As far as it is known, there is not such a word in Russian. The author perhaps misspelled the name, instead of using proper diminutives ‘Svenlanka’ or ‘Svetka’.

Another ambivalent name I find in *House of Meetings*. The narrator calls his brother ‘Dmitriko’ (*HM*, 23), which is “a diminutive”, according to him. This word does not exist in the Russian language. It looks like a patronymic – Lev’s father is Dmitri, so Lev’s patronymic is Dmitrievich. We have derived Dmitrich from Dmitrievich. When *Dmitrich* is used alone in an address, it functions as a familiar, diminutive word. *Dritriko* was perhaps taken from another Slavic language.

At a higher level of subtlety, there are expressions in both books that require the reader’s knowledge of the Russian culture to understand them.

One thinks of the famous phrase that would gain fresh currency in the 1930s: Moscow does not believe in tears (KD, 99).

Moscow does not Believe in Tears is a famous Russian film. Its director, Menshikov received an Oscar for it in the 1980s.

There is a reference to a 'fortified wine' in *House of Meetings*: "there is also an impressive dedication, on part of the customers, to oloroso or fortified wine ("sweet sack"). Oloroso is a drunkard's drink as it is, and this stuff does not come from Jerez" (*HM*, 54). It was one of the cheapest alcohol drinks.

Reading further, I find another remark that should be mentioned: "and it's not an aggregation, as Dudinka is, but something slapped down in its entirety – Leninsky Prospect, House of Culture, Drama Theatre,..." (*HM*, 112). All Russian towns and cities I know, have either Lenin's or Leninsky Street or Prospect. There are also Lenin's squares in almost each municipality.

Apart from that, many tourists, who have ever been to Moscow, visited the sightseeing Amis refers to: "Red Square... and Leonid Ilych was being laid to rest..." (*HM*, 144). The place I am referring to is Mausoleum where Lenin is laid to rest. It is open daily for visitors nowadays.

Another of Amis's remarks on Russia: "the nationwide non-existence of double beds" (*HM*, 168), is not correct. I pointed out the inaccuracy of the expression because, as far as I remember, my parents had a double bed since I was three.

Another observation "The northern Eurasian plain ... its lack of any ocean but the Arctic" (*HM*, 53) can be easily clarified by consulting a geographic map: apart from the Arctic ocean, there are also Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and thirteen seas. May be Amis meant the Northern European plain here.

Some ideas and details of the Soviet regime mentioned in other books, (*Koba the Dread* as an example) are reflected in *House of Meetings*. These remarks have been developed or corrected by the author and this fact proves the improvement in his knowledge of Russia and the Russian language. Let me give some notable examples. In *Koba the Dread* I find a brief description of different internal groups of prisoners in a concentration camp: "the 'politicals', ... 'the 58s' (after Article 58 of the Criminal Codex), 'the counters' (counterrevolutionaries), and 'the fascists' – would usually receive their intro-

duction to the *urkas*". (KD, 66). A page later Amis offers us a full definition of the last class: "the *urkas*: this class, or caste, a highly developed underground culture... individually grotesque, and, en masse, an utterly lethal force, the *urkas* were circus cut-throats devoted to gambling, plunder, mutilation and rape" (KD, 68). This is the only reference to the internal structure of concentration camps in *Koba the Dread*. However, in *House of Meetings* I find a detailed pyramid of power distribution. The fact that Amis has enlarged his knowledge on this field is evident: "at the top were the *pigs* – the janitorial of administrators and guards. Next came the *urkas*: designated as "socially friendly elements", ... beneath the *urkas* were the *snakes* – the informers, the one-in-tens – and beneath the *snakes* were the *leeches*, bourgeois fraudsters... close to the bottom of the pyramid came the *fascists*, the counters, the fifty-eighters, the enemies of the people, the politicals..., the *locusts*, the juveniles, the little calibans,... finally right down there were the *shiteaters*, the goners, the wicks..." (HM, 21–22). Such concepts as the *urkas*, the counters and the fifty-eighters are not explained here, as they were already defined in *Koba the Dread*. An interesting fact is that there is a contrast definition of the *urkas* in the novel in comparison with the interpretation given in *Koba the Dread*. And if we read further we find another difference in the name of a group of prisoners: in *Koba the Dread* the *goners* appear as 'garbage-eaters' (KD, 79), while there are 'shiteaters' in *House of Meetings* (HM, 22), this last name is more usual in Russian.

But we are glad to see that Martin Amis has improved his knowledge on the Russian geography as can be seen in the amending he made in *House of Meetings*: first, he wrote "the great imperium with its eleven time zones" (KD, 93), then he returned to this remark and corrected it saying this time "the twelve-time-zone zona" (HM, 60).

CONCLUSIONS

As stated before, the objective of the research was to find out to what extent Martin Amis knows the Russian culture and the Russian language. This research has been carried out mainly on the novel *House of Meetings*, although other books – *Visiting Mrs. Nabokov* (1993), *Koba the Dread*

(2002), *The War Against Cliché* (2001) – were also taken into consideration. Having studied the books, I must admit they reflect Amis's great knowledge of the Russian literature. Besides, in his writings we find allusions to the authors that are not known to an average Russian, because they are often excluded from the official programs of Russian Secondary and High schools.

As regards the language, Martin Amis's dashing intersperses his texts with Russian words, even more he ventures to invent new English words from the Russian stems. Sometimes, he misspells the words, but this may be done on purpose. Some Russian names, as it has been proved before, are a bit incorrect: in the case of diminutives and patronymics it is due to the absence of such forms in the English language.

Geographical and historical data of *House of Meetings* are almost always exact, with the exception of the passages where the real and fictitious are interlaced together, and it is difficult to judge if we deal with History or with fiction. Furthermore, as seen before, Martin Amis is an excellent connoisseur of the Russian culture: some of his remarks can be understood only by Russian readers, since a deeper cultural knowledge is required. That is why, sometimes *House of Meetings* could be difficult for an uninitiated reader, and, even more, the result can be complex for the Russians, as it touches upon very specific details.

Once the research is carried out, I should emphasize that all the data presented here were based on personal experience and knowledge of Russia and the Russian language. Thus, the choice of quotations and explanations are open for a correction, addition and further discussion.

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