**‘Style Is Morality’**

In 'Experience', Martin Amis writes: "Style is morality: morality detailed, configured, intensified." As one reader has commented, "I like this, but I don't know what it means." What does it mean? Readers of literature will have heard this sort of stuff often enough before for them not to be too shocked at its pretensions. Not too shocked, but not entirely unshaken; and, if the truth be known, perhaps not a little stirred. But how seriously can we, must we, ought we to take such encomiums?

Perhaps we are not to take them seriously at all - such claims are after all made in the name of *fancy*, and often made in much the same spirit. This is not to suggest that writers such as Martin Amis don't have their moments of high seriousness, saying serious things in a serious way. But to say ‘Style Is Morality’ would seem at least to ignore Adorno's 1949 dictum—"To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." It is at the very least a provocative statement in our times.

But certainly as provoking to his contemporaries must have been Oscar Wilde's thoughts on art and morality. In his Preface Wilde introduced the readers of Dorian Gray to an encapsulation of his playful, but seriously espoused aesthetic philosophy: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all." At first sight Martin and Oscar seem to be posturing on the same playing field, although closer inspection suggests they may be playing at opposite ends and with differently shaped balls. Oscar can get away with this sort of stuff because he affects an air of insouciance and gravity at the same time, and we expect him to be playful. Martín, with the zeitgeist on his back can hardly afford to risk seeming grandiose, litotes notwithstanding, nor so sure; yet, gaining strength perhaps from the peculiarly modern unsuitability of such a notion (so suitably unsuitable therefore), he still may say it. But when we consider Wilde's strictures about the morality or otherwise of books (they have none) and what he says about them being only well or badly written, this seems miles away from asserting that a well-written book (or a badly written one) are moral matters.

In fact, of course, the two assertions are completely at odds; how could they have been mistaken for each other? Is it their tone? To get at this, we must consider Amis's pugnacious almost-aside against a backdrop of twentieth-century horrors; not least of which was rather solid evidence, if any were needed, that God was dead. Those still hoping to be kept afloat by a sea of faith were going to have to swim quite a way out, observed only by a few onlookers, distracted for the moment by all this waving and drowning; but mostly just eager to quit the pebbly beach once and for all. And without God, to whom else may we turn for supernatural guidance other than - F.R.Leavis? His hope that Eng Lit might save us, or civilise us, or at least keep us off the streets, seems more honoured in the breach. Wilde on the other hand, and with the sea of faith already withdrawing, asserts only that art is moral where it makes perfect use of an imperfect medium, and then tells us that all art is useless.

Wilde built much of his reputation on the paradoxical and the Preface is a case in point, and he seems pretty clear about this, as far as a playful artist can be. So, are Wilde and Amis in different camps? The one, a superficially amoral aesthete where aesthetics are concerned; the other, a superficially moral one where morals are concerned? Notwithstanding the fact that Dead Babies might be taken for a modern Dorian Gray, these bad boys, these golden boys of literature do not seem worlds apart; one simply goes further than the other. Whilst Wilde (at least on that surface upon which he pretends to play) denies that art is anything other than a lovely flimsy and has nothing to do with morality, Amis's version of morality appears to hang on the flimsiest of flimsies - style.

But perhaps that is all that is left to the modern soul; not what you do, but the way you do it. However, I think that there is more to it than that. As Wilde declares: "All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life that art really mirrors." So if we may class Wilde along with Lacan and Derrida et al in their views about the unreliability of various ref's, and if language in pursuit of truth may be likened to a wild goose chase, poetry, art, form, style (call it what you will but don't call it a tract) stand as the most translucent of language acts in that it promises nothing more than to say unsayable things the best way it knows how - indirectly (and where metaphor is concerned, to take language at its word and confuse the seemingly unconfusable).

Good old Poetry - you may not be able to put it into words, but it is as 'self-present' as you are going to get, or it is nothing. What's it about? Perhaps it isn't really about anything (although you are not debarred from finding conventional 'meaning' in it). Like metaphor, it is neither one thing nor another, but something in itself; and if it is 'about' anything, it is about a reality that seems intractably hard to talk about in any other way. Poetry not only does the talking, but by laying its cards on the table (in terms of its often obvious artificiality and obscurity), it gives us a peep up the skirts of language and truth.

To know well we must see clearly, but Art tends only ever to hint, allude and often puzzle. However, it is mostly by art that we may get a glimpse of just what we have to deal with; in short, that which we cannot clearly see, must be viewed in a glass darkly.