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María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro

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A Look into the Abyss: The Unsolvable Enigma of the Self and the Challenges of Metaphysical Detection in Martin Amis's *Night Train*¹

María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro

Although its origins are traceable to the 1930s, the greatest surge of the metaphysical detective story and of the critical inclination to examine detective narratives within this framework coincides, to a remarkable extent, with the emergence of postmodern culture. The metaphysical detective story shares its heritage with the mainstream detective story—especially the influence of Poe—but it differs from the latter in many ways. Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney explain that “[a] metaphysical detective story is a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions [. . .] with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot” (2).

Other critics have devised other names for this genre. Thus, in 1972, William Spanos referred to what he called “the anti-detective story” as the literary paradigm of postmodern thought. To Spanos (17–18), anti-detective fiction constitutes the postmodern genre *par excellence*, in that it reflects better than any other genre what postmodernity no longer has: a solid, monolithic certainty that experience, either historical or personal, can be approached as a version of the Aristotelian well-made plot, a plot

that is always intelligible on account of its being grounded on an utterly comforting cause-effect logic. It has been argued, though, that the term chosen by Spanos—later on rescued by Dennis Porter and finally refined by Stefano Tani—describes only partially the kind of works it intends to label. Referring to these narratives as “anti-detective” may give a view of them as a kind of fiction that is just, in Tani’s words, “a deliberate negation of the fundamental purposes of the genre” in something that “is no longer a detective novel” (24). The term “anti-detective” emphasises the oppositional thrust of this fiction at the expense of a similarity that must equally be taken into account.

It seems, though, that there is no designation devoid of contradiction or controversy. The label “metaphysical detective fiction” had already been used before Spanos and Tani popularised that of “anti-detective story” and it can certainly be said to have taken roots, being now the most frequently used to refer to this kind of literature. Widespread as it is, it is also a quite paradoxical designation, in as far as it may seem paradoxical to speak of metaphysics in connection with postmodernity. Be it as it may, Patricia Merivale used it in a 1967 essay focused on Nabokov and Borges, and shortly afterwards, in 1971, Michael Holquist refined it in an article often regarded as the first consistent study on the genre. In “Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction,” Holquist analyses Robbe-Grillet’s *The Erasers* (*Les Gommages*) and Borges’s “Death and the Compass” (“La muerte y la brújula”) as self-conscious and paradoxical rewritings of the classical detective formula. In these narratives, the reader’s expectations are partially or totally thwarted and the epistemological doubts inherent in the genre become more and more radical. Holquist points out that modernist fiction already thematised these doubts, but it also looked for certainties that might soothe them—by a recourse to archetypes and mythical symbology, or the incorporation of brief but regenerating epiphanic experiences that emerge amidst the chaos of experience as a vehicle for transcending it, however temporarily. By contrast, Holquist argues, the metaphysical detective story does not try to fill the void. It rather dramatises it, it uses it for aesthetic purposes and, in the process, one may add, it also dramatises how the solid metaphysical principles of the classical detective story have been replaced by a weak and decadent metaphysics. Like so many other things in the postmodern era, the metaphysical certainties of the past have become mere *simulacra*, im-

ages with no real referent. Thus, what the metaphysical detective story underlines is a thorough questioning of metaphysical truths, and this must be kept in mind when considering the genre's designation, a designation which is, from this perspective, a bit of a misnomer in that metaphysical detection is precisely about the impossibility of any such detection.

In *Detecting Texts. The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Post-modernism*, Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney throw further light on the term "metaphysical" in "metaphysical detection" as they explain the reasons why they have chosen it instead of other possible designations. Thus, they point out that the term indicates explicitly how the authors who have written works in this genre have used

Poe's ratiocinative process to address unfathomable ontological and epistemological questions: What, if anything, can be known? What, if anything, is real? How, if at all, can we rely on anything besides our own constructions of reality? In this sense, metaphysical detective stories are indeed concerned with metaphysics. They evoke, moreover, the oddly abstract conceits of seventeenth-century "metaphysical" English poets and the eerie images of twentieth-century "metaphysical" Italian surrealist painters: works which use fabulous symbols, elaborate ironies, incongruous juxtapositions, and self-reflexive pastiche to indicate that "reality" is ultimately unknowable or at least ineffable.
(4)

Like the authors of other studies on the genre, Merivale and Sweeney also insist that this kind of fiction is built on parody, paradox, uncertainty, and unsolvable mysteries. One of the most dramatic shifts from the traditional to the metaphysical detective story is that of the ending, which they define as one in which the detective becomes the murderer s/he has sought, or, alternatively, one in which the sleuth fails to solve the crime or, if s/he succeeds, s/he does so only by accident (2). What the metaphysical detective story brings to the fore, then, is its intense questioning of the limits of knowledge, the nature of reality, subjectivity, fiction, narrative, interpretation. . . . As I will show in what follows, it is in this light that Martin Amis's *Night Train* can be best approached.

Described by James Diedrick as a "neo-noir detective novella" (160),

Night Train raises more questions than it answers. The story, set in an unnamed American city, is narrated by a police officer called Mike Hoolihan: a tough woman in her forties, with an unhappy childhood (she was sexually abused by her father till the age of ten and then raised by the state) and a past as an alcoholic and an ill-treated woman. Everything begins with the death of Jennifer Rockwell, which Mike is asked to investigate by the dead girl's father. Tom Rockwell is now retired, but he used to be Mike's Squad Supervisor while she was in Homicide and he is also the closest to a father that Mike has ever known. Thus, we learn that Colonel Rockwell helped her to give up drinking and even took her to his home so that she would not be alone during the most critical phase of the process. Jennifer was not a stranger to Mike, then, and, from what she knew of her (in fact, from what everybody knew of her), she was perfectly happy: young, beautiful, popular, well-off, she had been raised by caring parents, she lived with her loving boyfriend, worked as an astrophysicist, and had a promising future in each and every aspect of her life. The circumstances of her death are inexplicable: she is found naked in her apartment, sitting on a chair with three shots in her head. Abhorring the notion of his daughter's suicide, Colonel Rockwell asks Mike to conduct a quasi-private investigation with a view to proving that she was murdered. She accepts, although she is no longer in Homicide: at some point she entered what she refers to as her "end-zone,"² and left. Jennifer's death finds her in Asset Forfeiture (a sub-division of Organised Crime) and takes her back to that dangerous ground she had felt the need to keep away from. Little by little, Mike falls apart and ends up becoming one with the victim by doing exactly what Jennifer is supposed to have done: taking "the night train," the novel's recurrent metaphor for suicide.

Night Train is a good example of fiction stemming from the "negative hermeneutics" that Patricia Merivale ("Gumshoe Gothics" 103) associates with metaphysical detection. As a metaphysical detective story, *Night Train* does not comply with, but rather subverts the features of the traditional whodunit. The plot of the novel foregoes teleology by *not* providing a neat ending that solves all the riddles raised in the course of the narrative. The lack of solutions the reader has to cope with parallels the lack of answers to any question of essence, knowledge or meaning typical of metaphysical detection. Moreover, *Night Train* reveals a persistent preoccupation with the question of identity, a preoccupation that is far from

being alien to the classical detective tale, where distinctions between roles (detective, murderer, and victim) are recurrently blurred. In the metaphysical detective genre, however, the protagonist's reflection in his/her double or a fusion with the double are symptoms of what Susan Elizabeth Sweeney describes as "a more modern anxiety about identity: a fear of being trapped within one's self, on the one hand, and of being without a self, on the other" (249).

In *Doubles. Studies in Literary History*, Karl Miller refers to Martin Amis as "the latest of Anglo-America's dualist artists" (410). Amis's novels are usually about extremes that touch: complex relationships link pairs of characters who are opposites in terms of fortune, talent, social class, etc., but who are doubled in manifold subtle ways. This is indeed the case with *Night Train*. And yet, there is something in Jennifer and Mike that set them apart from other similar pairs in novels by the same author. As Natasha Walter points out, in *Night Train* we have "the usual Amis pairing of an ugly, unlucky protagonist set against a beautiful, lucky one; the same pairing we see in *Success* or *The Information*. But here it leads to empathy, not enmity. [. . .] It is impossible to overstate the difference that this current of ordinary sympathy makes to Amis's imaginative world."

According to Dominique Vinet (21–22), Jennifer is the Other of Mike's self: she is the positive that forces the detective to see her own existence in the negative and she does so in a way that is reminiscent of the dynamics of a mirror. The mirror, explains Jean Lepaludier (9–10), is what separates two symmetric worlds connected by an inversion, that is to say, it reveals a resemblance which can only be seen through an opposition or an opposition which emerges from a resemblance. The mirror is an archetypal image connected with self-knowledge, as in *Snow White*, and also a hermeneutic object *par excellence*: it shows what is invisible about appearances, the face of those things which can only be seen indirectly. As Mike points out, Jennifer is "trying to reveal what I don't want to see" (NT 67), that is, a truth about the self that can only be perceived comparatively, in an indirect way.

Jennifer was a heavenly being and, in this sense, it is just appropriate that she should be an astrophysicist. She worked on things like the Milky-way Virgo infall velocity and the age of the universe, while Mike works in another, much more sordid universe, "also real, also there, [. . .] and with all its primitive passions" (NT 93). Jennifer and Mike cannot be more dif-

ferent, both physically and psychologically, but when Jennifer dies, a bond is established between her and the detective. Mike delves into what she is through her discovery of all that makes her different from Jennifer, and within the frame of all these differences resemblances also emerge. Jennifer and Mike, the beauty of the solar system and the ugliness of everyday crime, constitute the basis of this novel as a double biography, one life being the mirror image of the other: playing with difference and identity, opposites attract and blend with one another in a mixture of fairy tale and existential angst.³

Jennifer had the beauty of Snow White and her life seemed to be an improved version of the latter's, with loving parents replacing the hideous step-mother and a Prince Charming with whom she lived that "happily ever after" with which the tale ends. By contrast, Mike has felt, at her lowest, as a sort of degraded, embittered amalgam of Snow White's dwarves, "seven terrible dwarves rolled into one and wedged into a leather jacket and tight black jeans: Shouty, rowdy, sloppy, sleazy, nasty, weepy, and horny" (NT 30). In the course of the narrative, Mike fantasises with having Jennifer's name (Mike does not only look like a man, but also has a male name), Jennifer's father ("I've never wanted a kid. What I've wanted is a father. So how do we all stand, now that Colonel Tom doesn't have a daughter?" NT 87), and, last but not least, Jennifer's boyfriend. Interestingly, Trader Faulkner, Associate Professor of Philosophy of Science, started working on philosophy of language and, more specifically, on conditionals. Later on, he switched to the study of parallel universes. Thus, Trader remains an impossible "if" to Mike, a man with whom she perhaps could have a relationship in a parallel universe, but not in this. It is precisely Trader Faulkner who comes up with a contrived theory about Jennifer's death when everybody seems so desperately in need and so incapable of finding answers. His hypothesis is far from plausible, and not even Trader seems to think it deserves any serious consideration. However, it interestingly contributes to strengthening the link between the detective and Jennifer.

When Trader explains this theory to Mike, he takes into account the conventions of detective fiction, a fact which is far from being unusual in works within the tradition of the classical whodunit: detective stories often include conversations between the characters in which they reflect on a mystery that to them is real in the light of the established traits of the

genre. Thus, Trader's hypothesis is that Tom Rockwell killed Jennifer: "[H]e's the least likely guy, so it has to be him" (NT 114). Colonel Rockwell is pressing Mike to solve the case, so the possibility that he might be the murderer does not make any sense. That is what Mike says, but Trader answers that there are always blinds, and this is one: he shows all that concern for catching the murderer so that nobody will suspect him. Mike asks about Colonel Tom's possible motive, there has to be a reason why he did such a thing. It is then that Trader refers to a "terrible secret from her [Jennifer's] past, a memory she tried to suppress. [. . .] When she was just a little girl . . . she asked her daddy why he came into her bedroom. Why he made her those terrible things" (NT 114). Trader breaks off at this point, thinking perhaps that his "joke" is getting too far and showing by his words that he is not being serious. However, the connection has been made: if Mike fantasises with replacing Jennifer as Colonel Tom's daughter and sees the latter as a father, now Trader toys with the idea of incest, which is, as the reader knows, the traumatic experience Mike went through as a child.

Trader's theory not only allows for a switch of roles between Mike and Jennifer, but also between their respective fathers. Thus, while Colonel Tom waits for Mike to solve the case, he starts going mad, his fear growing till it becomes "a primitive panic, a low I-Q panic" (NT 15). Tom Rockwell's panic is described in a way that echoes what Mike says about her father when she at last rebelled against his abuse and literally ripped part of his face off one night (NT 87). Colonel Tom feels guilty, as if he had broken some unspoken rule that had undermined her daughter's wish to live, which is precisely what Mike's father did. Mike's attempts to soothe Colonel Tom's pain become one with her own desire to forgive her father, whom, as she herself admits, she has never stopped loving (NT 106). Mike wants to rescue that love and definitely bury the pain, the fear. That is why, in the end, she lies to Colonel Rockwell about the real causes of his daughter's death. But if Mike fills the void inside him, partially at least, with a white lie, she cannot find anything to fill her own. As she concludes, echoing the words of Jennifer's Welsh grandmother, the Rockwell case/Jennifer's suicide is "all hole"⁴ to her (NT 110).

If Jennifer's case escapes the analytical frames that the detective initially tries to impose on it, the novel can likewise be said to escape the reader's interpretive patterns. *Night Train* does not work if read as a tradi-

tional whodunit, but many reviewers have read the novel as a (failed) detective tale. Gail Caldwell, for instance, points out that when you get “a literary convention on your hands [. . .] you need to deliver some kind of goods,” at least, something better than “a gauzy little shroud of a novel posing as a whodunit.” To John Updike, the “trouble with *Night Train* is the unmentionable way the plot proceeds. My trouble is with the solution of the mystery and the point of the book” (1). Moreover, to him, Amis “writes out of a sensibility uncomfortably in the edge of the posthuman. His characters strikingly lack the soulful, wilful warmth that he admires in Saul Bellow” (2). Updike’s alarmed invocation of the post-human is echoed in Anita Brookner’s review. As she puts it, *Night Train* “may be post-modern. It is certainly post-human [. . .]. To read it is to undergo a temporary brain dysfunction” (36). The repeated reference to the post-human theme suggests that these reviewers are perhaps applying humanist criteria to *Night Train* which may be inappropriate. In contrast to this, it may be worth looking for rifts, gaps, distances and differences in Amis’s treatment of the classical formula, since, through them, the novel may provide a more accurate (and sincere) rendering of modern man’s awareness of the incompleteness of the self and the incommensurability of the world.

On reading the autopsy report which reveals that there was “blowback” on Jennifer’s right hand and forearm—that is, there were microscopic particles of blood and tissue which proved that she had pulled the trigger—Mike says: “Jennifer, you killed yourself. It’s down” (*NT* 59). But, in fact, the case is far from being “down” (solved). Finding proofs that Jennifer killed herself only makes the case more complex, the sign constituted by the crime becoming even more uninterpretable as the focus of the investigation changes from the attempt to find a murderer to that of finding a “why,” a motive for her suicide. As Chris Wright puts it, Amis’s manipulation of the classical formula of the whodunit transforms the novel into a “whydunit.” The three shots in Jennifer’s head do not only rule out the possibility of an accident, they also suggest a strong determination and an important reason for wanting to leave this world (*NT* 27).⁵ But why? We do not have a why, but, in a sense, we do not have a “who” either. The mystery of the “who” remains, and in a more disturbing way than in the classical whodunit. If Jennifer had such powerful reasons for doing what she did, then she was not the Jennifer that everybody thought she was. It is Jennifer’s mother Miriam that points to the mystery of Jennifer’s identity:

“See, Mike [. . .] suddenly we don’t have a who. Who was she Mike? [. . .] Answer that. Do it. If not you, who?” (NT 64).

In a sense, the story suggests that it is impossible to put the “who” back in the whodunit, that, in other words, no amount of information can reveal *who* other people are. As Adam Phillips puts it in his review of *Night Train*, there is something about this novel that can be compared with the discoveries of modern science and its claim that at least ninety per cent of the universe consists of dark matter. While in the past a person could be likened to a planet and defined as a microcosmic replica of the macrocosm, now character seems more like a black hole: “people are disappearances, self-consciousness becomes cloud cover” (3).

Unity lies at the heart of the classical detective tale. The rift introduced by the initial murder is later on closed by the discovery of the criminal, the multiple suspects are eventually reduced to a single, certain culprit; the detective meeting with his double in the criminal is finally superseded by the victory of good over evil, and so, by the subduing of the detective’s “darker” facet, which is figuratively overthrown through the criminal’s defeat and expulsion from society; the story of the investigation recovers the silenced story of the crime and its articulation on the detective’s part closes the perfect circle of the narrative. *Night Train* insistently refuses to adjust to these parameters, which the narrator explicitly refers to more than once. Thus, she repeatedly complains about people’s misperception of police work and blames the television for it: “TV has fucked us police. No profession has been so massively fictionalised” (NT 18). The real crimes she has to investigate every day have led her to view motives as something relative, or utterly nonexistent. It is only with “TV you expect things to measure up. [. . .] But with homicide, now, we don’t care about motive. [. . .] *Jurors* want a why. They want reruns of *Perry Mason* and *The Defenders*. They want *Car Fifty-Four*, *Where Are you?*” (NT 107–108, original emphasis). One may hear Amis’s voice behind the narrator’s, the voice of an author who has acknowledged elsewhere that modern life is “so mediated that authentic experience is much harder to find [. . .]. We’ve all got this idea of what [life] should be like—from movies, from pornography” (qtd. in Morrison 102). This observation throws light upon Amis’s much quoted assertion that motivation, an essential element in the traditional novel, is “a shagged-out force in modern life [. . .]. A. C. Bradley and that whole school of humanistic criticism tell us that people

behave for reasons, whereas [. . .] you see that motivation has been very much exaggerated in, and by, the novel: we have something much woollier than motivation” (Haffenden 5).

And what can a detective story be without motivation? The challenge that the author took in writing *Night Train*, and which also poses a challenge to the reader in turn, is not only that of writing a detective story without denouement, or that of creating a character without motive, but rather, that of coupling both things and giving it a further turn by forcing us to consider the almost unthinkable possibility of a motiveless suicide. The death of Jennifer Rockwell stands for the death of motive, at least in a humanist sense. And upon this death Amis builds his metaphysical detective story, one in which, as is the case with other novels in the genre, traditional structures—predicated on the prevalence of unity and closure—are parodied and subverted, flouting the anticipation of audience expectations and moving the focus of the story away from the solution of the mystery, towards addressing unanswerable questions about identity, reality, and knowledge.

In the course of her investigation, Mike discovers that Jennifer had devised a complex plan to make her suicide conform to the expected pattern. In other words, Jennifer left clues in an attempt to provide answers for an act that would otherwise seem to be inexplicable. But the clues were all blinds (*NT* 146). In spite of being the victim, at least in the most literal sense of the term, Jennifer shares with the criminal in traditional detective fiction the fact that she authors a story—the crime—and manages to rewrite it in an altered form so that everybody misreads it (see Hühn 454). Accordingly, Jennifer faked a “version” of her suicide to assuage the pain of those she left behind, to give them motives, that is, she gave them an explanation they could hold on to. But Jennifer’s suicide does not fit any pattern. It is, rather, “something never seen before” (*NT* 64), radically other. As Mike reflects: “Suicide hasn’t changed. But what if it *did* change? Homicide has dispensed with the why. You have gratuitous homicide. But you don’t—” (*NT* 128, original emphasis). You do not have gratuitous suicide?

At this point, the reader cannot but wonder about the terms in which s/he has to interpret Mike’s achievement. Mike’s realisation that the clues are only blinds turns Jennifer’s design of an understandable suicide into a simulacrum of sorts, a copy without original. Mike has unmasked Jennifer,

but does this amount to saying that she has solved the case? In a sense, Mike can be said to have accomplished her task as detective because she finds out the truth behind the fake story rewritten by Jennifer. In important respects, though, finding the truth here has the opposite effect to that in traditional detective fiction. In Amis's version of the classical formula, finding the truth is infinitely more disturbing than failing to find it because the truth found has no meaning. If gratuitous suicide is possible, then nothing can be taken for granted. The detective cannot explain what Jennifer did, she can only repeat it.

The sleuth's commitment to the search for a narratable truth is only a version of a more-inclusive commitment to truth seeking in our culture. But, as J. Hillis Miller (259–60) points out in an analysis of Henry James's "The Aspern Papers," there are events that are not open to this kind of knowledge. Such events belong not to the order of cognition but to that of performative acts, speech acts or acts employing other kinds of signs in a performative way: they make something happen. They leave traces in the world, but they cannot be known in themselves. Thus, Miller explains that the closest one can get to know them is by a performative act that repeats the earlier one, but, even in that case, the knowledge thus achieved would not be clear or easily transmissible. It would be, he says, the sort of knowledge that Adam had of his wife, an unknowing knowing.⁶

The deaths that the detective investigates in a classical whodunit do have an explanation, this being one of the basic premises of the genre. Even if often not easy to find, there is always a line that links causes and effects. The detective eventually establishes the connection and transforms it into a narrative which s/he produces at the end of the story, thus conferring a closure upon it. But what would happen if the detective had to deal with a death that is not open to that kind of knowledge? Is the detective in *Night Train* in a position comparable to that of the narrator in "The Aspern Papers"? That is to say, is she searching for the truth about a case which centres upon an act—Jennifer's suicide—that does not belong to the order of cognition? In fact, Mike Hoolihan can only understand the girl's suicide by enmeshing herself in a process that retraces Jennifer's trajectory. In important respects, Mike blends with Jennifer, even if, as has already been pointed out, the latter is Mike's antithesis. This doubling reaches its ultimate consequences and, like Jennifer, Mike kills herself, or tries to, at least. Jennifer's death makes something happen. Mike understands what

Jennifer did by repeating it, but what she understands cannot be transmitted in an ordered or clear way. However, the detective fulfils her responsibility towards the reader, whom she tells all that can be told; towards the Rockwells, by accepting the case in spite of the fact that she knows it will take her “through my personal end-zone and all the way to the other side” (NT 64); and also towards Jennifer, by bearing witness to the fact that her death “was offering the planet a piece of new news” (NT 64), while at the same time respecting the girl’s decision to provide a comforting explanation to her loved ones. This is why Mike lies to Tom Rockwell, just as Marlow lies to Kurtz’s fiancée at the end of *Heart of Darkness*. She tells him that Jennifer was depressed, that she was on lithium, and that it was a chemical imbalance, and not anything he did or failed to do, that had led her to kill herself. This is exactly the story that emerges from the false clues that Jennifer had planted.

Before killing herself, Jennifer wrote a note which she posted to her boyfriend and which he gives Mike to read. Significantly, the note ends just as the novel begins and ends, Jennifer’s words echoing Mike’s, and vice versa. This is the final part of Jennifer’s letter: “‘Help Ma. Help Dad. Help Dad. I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry. . . .’ And so it went on, over the page to the end of the sheet: I’m sorry” (NT 117–18). These are Mike’s words at the beginning of the novel: “And I guess I apologize for the outcome. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry” (NT 5). And on the very last page, which contains the telephone conversation between the detective and Jennifer’s father, the white lie that Mike tells Colonel Tom runs: “Listen, I’m fine. I’m good—really. Wait. . . . That’s better. I’m just upset with all this. But now it’s made. And you just have to let it be, Colonel Tom. I’m sorry sir. I’m so sorry” (NT 149). This is what Mike says while she gets drunk and, in this light, the novel emerges as a suicide note of sorts, Mike’s suicide note.⁷

Despite all its unanswered questions, *Night Train* does not leave us in a total vacuum. One of the main keys to the novel is to be found in the conversation between Mike and Bax Denziger, Jennifer’s boss. As he says to Mike, the things that they study at the Institute of Physical Problems may seem strange and distant, unconnected with everyday-life reality, but it is far from being so: “they are as real as the ground beneath your feet. [. . .] The universe *is the case*” (NT 92, original emphasis). So far, “the case”

made reference to the Rockwell case. In that sense, Denziger's words may be seen as an invitation to connect Jennifer's suicide with the universe, a connection which the reader should complete at the end of the novel by adding to them a third "case," that of Mike's (potential) suicide.

In addition to processing data, Jennifer was, like everybody else in the Department, doing research on questions related to the age and the future of the universe. In an attempt to make these questions understandable to Mike, Professor Denziger explains to her the three different possibilities that are generally considered regarding this issue, which correspond to three views on the universe. If the universe is open, meaning that it will expand forever, then it will survive for an infinite period of time, but it will eventually become cold and dark, precluding the continuation of life. If the universe is closed, the expansion will eventually stop and a contraction will follow. As this "Big Crunch" approaches, the universe will grow hotter and brighter till it implodes and gets crushed out of existence. The third possibility is that of an oscillating universe in which bangs follow crunches in a never-ending cycle, which is what Bax Denziger refers to as "the eighty-billion-year heartbeat" (NT 90–91).

In a novel so concerned with isolation, with the difficulty of relating to others, getting to know them, and even getting to know oneself, the enigma about the future of the universe (macrosom) parallels the enigma about the future of the individual in the postmodern world (microcosm). As Will Norman puts it, the key question here is whether the forces that bind individuals together are stronger than those which pull them apart. This is one of the reasons why bodies are important in the novel, since it is bodies that are affected by gravity. Gravity, then, functions here as a metaphor for the ability to create bonds with those around us and to go on when faced with difficulties. I will try to explain further the connotations that bodies have in this respect by means of a few examples, related to Miriam and Tom Rockwell, and Mike's boyfriend, Tobe. Miriam and Tom both face the trauma of their daughter's suicide, but they react in different ways. Mike, a survivor of past traumas which still haunt her, finds in Tobe an anchor, a longed-for stability, or something close to it. Trauma has often been described as a "black hole" phenomenon (see, for instance, Pitman and Orr) within which the light of awareness, wholeness and peace is absorbed. Those that resist the pull of the black hole (as is the case with Miriam) or help others to do so (as is the case with Tobe) are presented in

the novel as heavy or, at least, as characters with sturdy bodies, as if gravity specially helped them to counteract the forces that threaten to engulf them. They also find it easier to establish bonds with others, this being another force that ties them, that helps them to resist.

On seeing Miriam at the funeral, Mike wonders where Jennifer got her legs from, as Miriam's figure is more similar to Mike's than to her daughter's. Miriam looks sadder than her husband, but also more steady. She fuses with Mike in an embrace, which Colonel Tom never does. When Mike meets him a few days after Jennifer's death, he notices that he is "shrinking," which makes him seem even smaller behind the desk that separates them (*NT* 40). Also at the funeral Mike sees him from a distance and, again, she finds him "obviously reduced, scaled down" (*NT* 62) in a way that his wife is not. To sum up, then, Jennifer's mother is sturdy and steady, she is sad, but keeps her feet on the ground and is able to express how she feels. By contrast, Colonel Tom is "diminished," there is always a distance between him and Mike, and, even if they have a close relationship, he never really shows his feelings. He is "crazy," "gazing [. . .] through the universal fug" (*NT* 62, 63). He is losing touch with those around him, just as he is "losing the story line" (*NT* 36), refusing to accept what her daughter did.

Finally, there is Tobe, whom Mike describes as "totally enormous" (*NT* 20). He fills the room when he is in. Big as she is, Tobe can make her feel slender. The reader does never learn much about Tobe, he does not even say a single word in the whole narrative. What is relevant about him is the effect he has on Mike. Whenever she refers to Tobe, she talks about him as a physical presence, as if Tobe's size was enough to smother her fear of loneliness. She is not in love with Tobe, though. Love destabilises her, she says, and she cannot afford to be destabilised. Mike is herself a woman of heavy build, but it is as if the difficult life she has had—sexual abuse, ill-treatment, alcoholism, her work in Homicide for eight years—had worn her out and left her in need of an extra force to tie her to the ground, above all when confronted with Jennifer's death. Thus, she somehow relies on Tobe, who "suits me right down to the ground. His strategy, I suspect, is to stick around and ground on me. And it's working. But so slowly I don't think I'll live long enough to see if it all panned out" (*NT* 20). She accepts the Rockwell case and does not give it up, although she knows for sure that it will take her beyond her limit. As she puts it at the very beginning

and as she repeats with slight variations throughout the narrative: “of all the bodies I have seen, none has stayed with me, in my gut, like the body of Jennifer Rockwell” (NT 4). The Rockwell case is something that beckons to her and ends up engulfing her. It represents a force which she tries to resist but which leads her to that abyss, that end-zone, which haunted and threatened her. This force is interestingly presented as something very physical, as if Jennifer’s *body*—the one that stays in Mike’s gut like no other before—was something growing inside the detective: “The terrible thing inside of me is growing stronger. I swear to Christ, I almost feel pregnant. The terrible thing inside of me is alive and well, and growing stronger” (NT 97). From the moment she sees it in her apartment and then in the autopsy room, Jennifer’s corpse encroaches upon the detective, weakening her grasp and control of reality. Jennifer is growing inside Mike, feeding off her, becoming one with her while it splits her in two. Thus, sturdy and solid as Mike appears to be, she is somehow being devoured from within. And so it turns out that, as Mike fears, Tobe’s “strategy” does stop working, the gravity that ties him to this world ceasing to be enough to prevent Mike from receding into the isolation whose climax is suicide.

Amis’s scientific interests and the view of the universe as a metaphor throwing light on the present condition had already appeared in previous novels, most notably in *London Fields* and *The Information*. Amis recurrently seems to describe the interactions among individuals as if ruled by the dynamics of “force fields.” In his novels, each character is a force field that both repels and attracts and, just as happens in the universe, everything depends on the interplay between contraction/attraction and expansion/repulsion. Gravity is the force that attracts, binds, ties, and, in this sense, it is a positive force in the metaphorical universe of these novels, and of *Night Train* in particular. But what happens when gravity is so strong that it becomes deadly? What happens when the disintegrating force of the black hole cannot be resisted?

Put simply, a black whole is gravity gone mad. The density of a black hole is such that it absorbs all matter and radiation that happen to get close to it. This intense gravity force curves the space around the black hole creating a singularity known as “event horizon,” which constitutes the limit beyond which no particle can escape, light included. To Mike, Jennifer’s suicide acts as a black hole, forcing her to go beyond her end-zone, to ex-

amine her life, the traumas of her past, and to eventually face the false comforts that had given her strength to go on, though only temporarily, it seems. What she repeatedly refers to as her “end zone” is but a version of the “event horizon,” the point of no return.

Significantly, Bax Denziger tells Mike that when Jennifer had referred to death in the course of one of their last conversations, it was death in connection with black holes that she had been talking about:

Jennifer asked me: Why was it Hawking who cracked black holes? I mean in the Sixties *everybody* was going at black holes hammer and tongs. But it was Stephen who gave us some answers. She said: Why him? And I gave the physicist’s answer: Because he was the smartest guy around. But Jennifer wanted me to consider an explanation that was more—romantic. She said: Hawking understood black holes because he could *stare* at them. Black holes mean oblivion. Mean death. And Hawking has been staring at death all his adult life. Hawking could see. (NT 95, original emphasis)

Mike is not convinced by Jennifer’s reasoning—“Well, I thought: *That* isn’t it” (NT 95, original emphasis)—and yet, it also applies to her in important respects. Sexually abused by her father, taken to hospital several times on account of her rows with her boyfriends, having gone through the hard and painful experience of alcoholism, and working in the police in a city where crime is an everyday event, Mike has also been staring at death most of her life. Indeed, when confronted with Jennifer’s death, she is the only one that “sees.”

In keeping with this, the last section of the novel is entitled “The Seeing.” Thus, the phrase “The Seeing” takes the reader back to Mike’s conversation with Bax Denziger. When asked by Mike if Jennifer “went up in the telescope much,” Denziger exclaims: “The seeing! Detective. [. . .] Actually it’s a word we still use. The quality of the image. Having to do with the clarity of the sky. The truth is, Detective, we don’t do much ‘seeing’ anymore. It’s all pixels and fiber optics and CCDs” (NT 91). Scientists no longer stare at the cosmos, it is all mediated by computers in our time. But, as Denziger remarks, they did it in the past, and he refers to

Isaac Newton, who stared at the sun trying to figure it out and so blinded himself for days. Jennifer quoted “some French guy” in this respect, Denziger explains, someone who said that “No man can stare at the sun or at death with a, an unshielded eye” (*NT* 95). For a novel that delights in repetition with a difference, it is just right that Denziger (or Jennifer) should misquote François de La Rouchafoucauld’s “Neither the sun nor death can be looked at with a steady eye.” This is, then, what the two characters did, and they both did it with unshielded eyes. Both Jennifer and Mike reacted emotionally, in a complex but instinctive way, to the attraction of the void (the universe/suicide). Jennifer spent her day studying the beauty and the enigmas of the universe, while simultaneously planning her suicide. As Mike investigates her death, she contemplates the beauty of Jennifer’s world, which confronts her with the lacks and the bleakness of her own existence. The enigma of Jennifer’s death leads Mike to the same abyss into which the former had already stared, an abyss that engulfs both of them in the end. Nietzsche’s words come to mind here: “Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process does not become a monster. And when you look into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you.”⁸

Mike keeps on saying that she does not judge, that the police do not judge, and that Jennifer did not judge, either. However, a person that commits suicide is someone that passes judgement on his/her life and decides it is not worth living. The suicide is the person with the highest standards of all (Phillips 7). Thus, Mike concludes that Jennifer “had standards. High ones. Which we didn’t meet” (*NT* 147). By contrast, her own standards are “desperately low” (*NT* 84). The different worlds in which they lived affected those standards. Jennifer’s daily contact with the immensity of the universe made her standards seem low, and she raised them accordingly. Conversely, Mike’s daily contact with the underworld of crime made her standards seem high, and she lowered them to bear what she had to see every day. Thus, she explains, the police “can’t judge you because whatever you have done it isn’t even close to the worst. You’re great. You didn’t fuck a baby and throw it over the wall. You don’t chop up eighty-year-olds for laughs. You’re great. Whatever you’ve done, we know all the things you *might* have done, and *haven’t* done” (*NT* 84, original emphasis). Yet the Rockwell case makes her look upwards, as it were, and see all

that (her) life could be, and is not. Her standards change, and she decides to kill herself.

It is because the novel fails to conform to the generic expectations of detective fiction that it forces the reader into a far-reaching process of reflection on such disquieting issues as our claim to know others, and ourselves; suicide as an ethical or unethical act; what counts as motive; what cannot be put into words; the need and the risks inherent in self-reflection; etc. Like Jennifer's "experimental" suicide, the novel's ending brings us a truth in Alan Badiou's sense of the term: a *vérité* that is not *savoir* (49). This truth is not an object of knowledge, but a kind of hole made in knowledge. It should be so, though, so that the conclusion that the novel provides will be and, at the same time, will fail to be, an answer to the main questions raised by the narrative.

Notes

1. The research carried out for the writing of this paper has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology and the European Regional Development Fund (code HUM 2007-61035/FILO).
2. *Night Train* 4. Hereafter the abbreviation *NT* will be used in parenthetical references.
3. In a review published in *The Seattle Times*, Adam Woog quotes Martin Amis explaining that he began *Night Train* as a short story. Then the work expanded into something that is not "what you'd call a traditional police mystery, but I thought that (the crime genre) would be a good launching pad. [. . .] By the end, I was thinking more about Albert Camus than anything." Indeed, there is something in Jennifer's suicide that puts the reader in mind of Camus' *The Outsider* as well as of Sartre's *Nausea*. Further, Mike examines her precarious existence and falls into the despair which Sisyphus uses as a springing board to resist and overcome the lure of suicide in Camus' account of the myth. In true existentialist vein, the novel questions our place in the scheme of things and gives no definitive answers.
4. Like Jennifer and Mike, the dead girl's two grandmothers, who also died within a month of each other, were "a great double act" (*NT* 109). Rebka had survived the horrors of the Holocaust, while silver-spoon Rhiannon had lived a life of uninterrupted ease. Her only complaint was that she had had fifteen children and that her husband wanted to have even more. "Come on, Billy," she used to tell him when he insisted,

"I'm awl awl as it is" (NT 110). Awl awl, all hole; two different words pronounced in the same way by the old woman.

5. Initially, this fact may reasonably lead the reader to think that she was murdered. How can anybody put a gun in his/her mouth and shoot three times? This has to be a murder that someone else tried to pass off as suicide. But, at least in the context of the novel, this is presented as improbable but far from impossible. Mike explains to one of her colleagues that they have had seven "three-in-the-heads" in the last twenty years, and that there was even one "four-shot," too (NT 33).
6. In James' story, the narrator could have repeated the (alleged) affair between Aspern and Juliana by marrying Tina, which he does not do in the end. But, even in that case, even if he had thus gained access to Aspern's papers, he would not have known what he wanted to know. Moreover, he could not tell whatever he had found out, because he would be a member of the family by then and that would impose on him a duty of discretion and respect. To Merivale and Sweeney, James' "The Aspern Papers" constitutes an important antecedent of the "research novel," this being "by far the most flourishing branch of the metaphysical detective story" (20). Carol Shields' *Swann* (1987) and A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1991) are clear examples of this subgenre where antiphonal pseudobiography is used as a form of metaphysical detection.
7. The style in which the novel is written relies on repetition as a vehicle for bringing home the idea of the double, central to the story. Thus we find sentences like the following: "I don't live alone. I don't live alone. I live with Tobe" (NT 26, emphasis added); "I shed tears for him and tears for her. And also tears for myself I shed" (NT 58); "Feeding the thing inside of me. The thing inside of me—it wasn't calmer" (NT 118); "she seems immune to this laughter—immune, maybe, to any laughter at all" (NT 119); "the trail was cold, the trail was at absolute zero" (NT 123); "This murder was not about race [. . .]. This murder was not about drugs [. . .]. This murder was about a diaper" (NT 126); etc. In addition to this, there are words, phrases and sentences that recur throughout the text, sometimes with the same, sometimes with different meanings.
8. Quoted as an epigraph to *Whoever Fights Monsters*, autobiography of Robert K. Ressler. As the jacket's cover blurb puts it, Robert Ressler is "[t]he Brilliant FBI Detective behind *The Silence of the Lambs*."

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