Establishing a Convention at the Beginning of the 21st Century: James Wood's Hysterical Realism and Stefano Ercolino's Maximalist Novel

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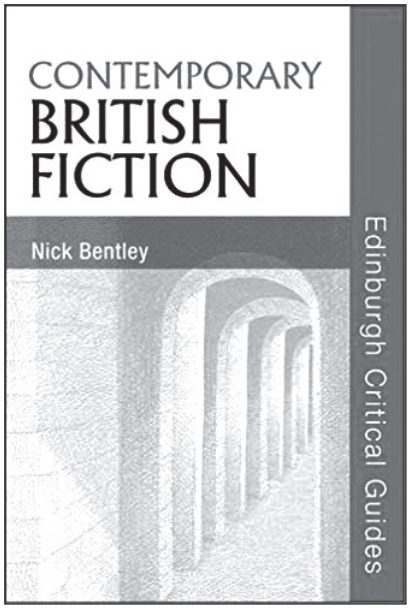
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Hysterical Realism is a term coined by James Wood, used to describe novels such as David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, or, the novel that stands at the foundation of this paper, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. *The Maximalist Novel* is a book Stefano Ercolino wrote in 2014, where he refers to a "hybrid genre" that appears in the second half of the 20th century, goes further into the 21st century and is characterized by ten fundamental elements. In attempting to offer a definition of the Maximalist Novel, Ercolino works with seven novels, most of which coincide with Wood's novels. These rich, ambitious novels encompassing a plethora of characters and a multicultural reality have been incredibly popular at the end of the 20th century and well into the 21st century. Using *White Teeth* as case study in order to provide clear examples and useful guidelines, this paper sets out to identify the reasons behind the inefficacy of Wood's attempt at defining a new literary genre and Stefano Ercolino's successful attempt.

Keywords: hysterical realism, Zadie Smith, White Teeth, James Wood, 21st century literature, multiculturality, Maximalist Novel, Stefano Ercolinos

In a 2000 article from the New Republic, James Wood, English literary critic, essayist, novelist and former senior editor at the New Republic, gathered five of the most popular novels of the 1990s and presented the similarities he found between them under the name of "hysterical realism". But really what prompted this quasi-callous think piece was the recent release of Zadie Smith's debut novel White Teeth, which appears to be the actual subject of the article. At times it almost feels as if James Wood used the other novels as a pretext to point out what he disliked about Smith's novel. The novels Woods uses in his article are Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet,* Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and the one I am going to use as a case study for this paper, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Wood's term is never, throughout the article, fully explained, it is never clearly defined. We understand it is somewhere between magical realism and realism, but the distinction between hysterical realism and magical



realism is never drawn in bold. However he does get close to a definition: "This is not magical realism. It is hysterical realism. Storytelling has become a kind of grammar in these novels; it is how they structure and drive themselves on. The conventions of realism are not being abolished, but, on the contrary, exhausted, and overworked." (Wood, "Human, All too Inhuman", para. 4). This could easily pass for a definition of magical realism, if taken out of context and it is, in fact, presented in contrast with it, precisely because Wood is aware of the similitude. At a time when there were uncertainties about the direction in which literature was headed after Postmodernism, the beginning of the millennium delivered multiple changes in how authors and critics approached literature and many critics attempted at officially discussing and naming these new directions. Thus, I will take two different systems of ideas, James Wood's system of ideas that he presents in his *New Republic* article against Stefano Ercolino's system of ideas, which he presents in his study the *Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666* and I will try to explain why Wood's system could not hold up at the beginning of the 21st century and Ercolino's could, even if it was published decades after the publication date of the novels to which it refers.

Throughout his article Wood lists, in a snarky, audaciously disrespectful manner, the characteristics of the term he introduces. One that he always insists upon is caricature, as all of the writers he mentions sometimes offer parodied or satirically-constructed characters or situations. He feels that by caricature, a character may be robbed of a sense of personal identity, of human depth. He often gives Dickens as an example of a writer who could do both: "Mr. Micawber may be a caricature, a simple, univocal essence, but he feels, and he makes us feel." (Wood, "Human, All too Inhuman", para. 16). He therefore wants an author who can do both, but he often fails to see that most of the authors he discusses in this article use humor as a sort of *defense mechanism*, a strategy to hide deeper, more troubling issues behind an amusing facade.

What makes these novels similar, according to Wood, is their ability to transform everything into an intricate web of characters and plots that connect to each other in "paranoid parallels" (Wood, "Human, All too Inhuman" para. 8). So in the end, a hysterical realist novel is an "excessively centripetal" novel in which realist conventions are overworked, a lengthy novel that uses caricature as a means of constructing its characters, a novel which consists of stories and sub-stories which "defy the laws of persuasion" (Wood, "Human, All too Inhuman" para. 7). There are a few questions that come to mind when analyzing Wood's article: Is the line between magical realism and hysterical realism too fragile? Why is Salman Rushdie included here? Could it be just to justify Smith's lineage? And, most importantly,: Why has everybody forgotten about hysterical realism so quickly and what was the reason why it is not referred to as a literary tendency?

Zadie Smith herself wrote a heartfelt, very bookish article in the Guardian in response to another one of Wood's articles in which he accuses "hysterical realist" novelists of not telling us "how somebody felt about something" instead of "how the world works" (Wood, "Tell Me How Does It Feel?", para. 14). Smith actually claims that hysterical realism is a "painfully accurate term or the sort of overblown, manic prose to be found in novels like my own White Teeth and a few others he was sweet enough to mention" (Smith, "This Is How It Feels to Me", para. 1) She calls upon the hysterical times we live in and she agrees that we do not need more hysteria in literature, but she also argues that significant dolphins among so much cannable tuna. You cannot place first-time novelists with

> any collective term for a supposed literary movement is always too large a net, catching literary giants, New York hipsters with Kilburn losers, and some of the writers who got caught up with me are undeserving of the criticism.(Smith,"This Is How It Feels to Me", para. 2)

It is true that at the time Wood's New Republic article came out Zadie Smith was a recently published novelist, but this is not the only reason why it was odd to include her in his tirade, as Smith and Rushdie are the only post-colonialist writers there. To combat Wood's article, Smith suggests a David Foster Wallace 10 page masterpiece entitled "Forever Overhead". The story depicts a thirteen year old boy trying to make the queue to a diving board on his thirteenth birthday and it is a short story that does not necessarily have a plot,

but encloses an entire personal history of doubt and insecurity and it is most definitely a story that meets James Woods inquiry and it does *make you feel*. Also to combat Wood's article, I suggest a fragment from Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. The fragment where Smith coins the term "original trauma".

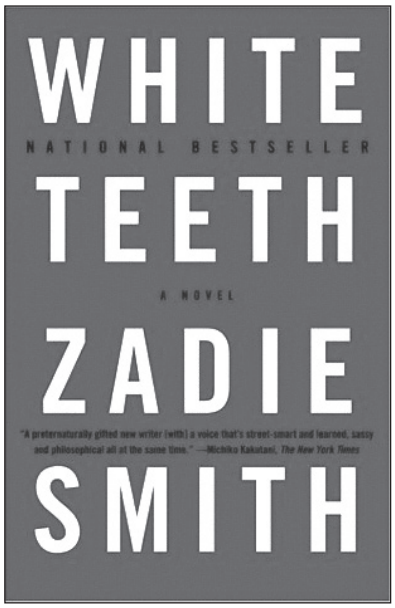
> Unbeknownst to all involved, ancient ley-lines run underneath these two journeys – or, to put it in the modern parlance, this is a rerun. We have been here before. This is like watching TV in Bombay or Kingston or Dhaka, watching the same old British sitcoms spewed out to the old colonies in one tedious, eternal loop. Because immigrants have always been particularly prone to repetition – it's something to do with that experience of moving from West to East or East to West or from island to island. Even when you arrive, you're still going back and forth; your children are going round and round. There's no proper term for it – *original sin* seems too harsh; maybe *original trauma* would be better. A trauma is something one repeats and repeats, after all, and this is the tragedy of the Iqbals – that they can't help but re-enact the dash they once made from one land to another, from one faith to another, from one brown mother country to the pale, freckled arms of an imperial sovereign.(161)

This passage, according to critic Ulrike Tancke exemplifies best how Smith's humour and "caricature" works on the surface, but there is always an underlying serious tone, a strong poignancy within her characters. It is true that Smith's authorial presence is to be felt all throughout the novel, the main reason why Wood argues that she somehow stifles her characters' own consciousness and voice, but, as Tancke notes, Smith uses (in the passage above as well as throughout the novel) the strategy of "indirect focusing" (Tancke in Tew 32). This means that "it is precisely through the powerful gesture of authorial omniscience that the reader is invited, if not convinced, to read the characters' experiences through the lens of violence and trauma". If one sits and connects all the dots in this novel, they will find that there is delusion and terror beyond Samad's comically voicing his conviction that he has been corrupted by the West: "Think: I've killed my son. I swear. I eat bacon. I regularly slap the salami. I drink Guinness. My best friend is a kaffir non-believer. I tell myself if I rub up and down without using hands it does not count. But oh it does count". (Smith, *White Teeth* 149) Or they will find that behind the quirky descriptions and graphic insertions of Irie's visit to the hair salon there is the deeply rooted trauma of the migration experience and the inability to find one's own identity and see past the glorification of traditional beauty ideals.

Lev Grossman also makes an interesting point in his article from Time magazine, What Ever Happened to Hysterical Realism? (2012) , where he actually states that his opinion on Wood's term has changed over the years. He still finds Wood's article a little too aggressive, but he now agrees with the fact that the world has enough hysteria, and enough webs (the Internet) as it is and that literature is supposed to help you manage the hysteria, not make it worse. In light of post-2000 novels, Grossman coins the term "unrealism", which he uses to describe novels such as Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012), Karen Thompson Walker's *The Age of Miracles* (2012) or Marylinne Robinson's *Home* (2008). Unrealist novels are less dense, less heavy and they do not present a multitude of characters whose connections to each other unravel throughout the novel.

If the hysterical realist novel is a synecdoche, the unrealist novel is a metaphor: it tries to represent the world as (i.e. it substitutes for it) a shape, a pattern, a dramatic arc, that reveals the simplicity that underlies the complexity. The Mandelbrot set is infinitely complex, its borders ramify without end, but it still has a shape, an outline that's instantly recognizable. That's the shape of the Unrealist novel. (What Ever Happened to Hysterical Realism?, 2012)

Both James Wood and Grossman seem to think Smith is the type of narrator who smothers its own characters, her narratorial power is overwhelming. As Ulrike Tancke notes in her essay, this is similar to Paul Dawson's belief, who called Smith a "pyrotechnic storyteller". A *pyrotechnic narrator* is "typically humorous or satirical, and relics less on moral introspection or historical research than on a flourishing and expansive narrative voice, a garrulous conversational tone, to assert control of the events being narrated."(Dawson 153) But this is untrue of Smith's novel, because, as Nick Bentley notes in his book, *Contemporary British Fiction*, "Smith uses an omniscient narrator that is able to float between the consciousnesses of a series of characters thus allowing her to present the personal stories of characters with a variety of ethnic cultures and backgrounds: the three interconnected families of the Joneses, the Iqbals and the Chalfens."(55) Zadie Smith *is* everywhere in the novel, her voice is felt in Irie's thoughts and in the twins' thoughts and even in episodic characters like the Niece-of-Shame, but it rarely feels controlling, but rather overshadowing. This brings to mind David Foster Wallace's essay entitled "E Unibus Pluram", essentially an essay about how television plots/narratives affect fiction in more ways than one. In this article, Wallace says that TV is somehow voyeuristic, but the people one watches know that they are being watched, but act like they do not know, because that is what they are taught to do. Fiction writers, though, are the true voyeurs. "One reason fiction writers seem creepy in person is that by vocation they really *are* voyeurs. They need that straightforward visual theft of watching



somebody without his getting to prepare a speciable watchable self" (153). The narrator's presence in *White Teeth* does feel voyeuristic at times, like a surveillance equipment, which is why it can be overwhelming, but she does allow her characters to develop independent of her.

In 2014, Stefano Ercolino came out with his *Maximalist Novel*, which could be another name for what critics like James Wood or Lev Grossman tried to define, a potentially better one. Ercolino includes in his study seven novels and refers to them collectively for the most part: *Gravity's Rainbow* (Thomas Pynchon), *Infinite Jest* (David Foster Wallace), *Underworld* (Don Delillo), *White Teeth* (Zadie Smith), *The Corrections* (Jonathan Franzen), *2666* (Roberto Bolaño), *2005 dopo Cristo* (Babette Factory). The maximalist novel is defined as the "hybrid genre" that appears in the second half of the 20th century, goes further into the 21st century and is characterized by ten fundamental elements: length, encyclopedic mode, dissonant chorality diegetic exuberance, completeness, narratorial omniscience, paranoid imagination, intersemiocity, ethical commitment.

Ercolino appeals to Viktor Shklovsky who affirms that formal innovation is always the result of an error. That old text accumulates on new text and something new is formed when quantity turns into quality and lengthy pieces of prose are the space for that. This is also what Franco Moretti suggests in his book *Modern Epic*, where he uses the term *bricolage* for this process. Both Moretti and Ercolino agree that the longer form is the preferable form for the maximalist novel, as it allows experimentation to flow more naturally, but also because it is also inviting from a marketing stand point: "the appeal of books of large dimensions to a large reading publicis a phenomenon that does not concern the maximalist novel alone, but also a broad swath of so-called 'popular fiction', where the fascination with length is even more pronounced." (Ercolino 25) Wood always refers to the novels he picks as the "big, ambitious, contemporary novels", a description that does not even begin to cover the reasons why these authors chose to stretch their novels to become lengthy pieces of prose.

Ercolino defines the encyclopedic mode as a *modality of representation* that is characterized by "a particular aesthetic and cognitive attitude consisting of a more or less heightened and totalizing narrative tension in the synthetic representation of heterogeneous realities and domains of knowledge, ascribable, in essence, to the powerful hybridization of maximalist narratives with the ancient epic." If we speak of *White Teeth* in particular, Smith alternates between Oedipal complexes, cross-fertilization and misgenation throughout the novel. Probably feeling attacked by Wood's affirmation that her novel, as well as the other novels he refers to, tend to be overabundant in the author's display of knowledge, filled with sometimes unnecessary information, Smith says she thinks she has the most pointless job in the world: "We are more like a useless irritation; the wrong words, the wrong time, the wrong medium. Obsessed with our knowledge when the last thing people want is the encyclopaedic." (Smith, "This is How it Feels to Me", para. 5). According to Moretti, though, the encyclopedic mode is "a sign of great intelligence – but of an unfree intelligence, which has given itself an impossible task, and labours under the tremendous pressure of history" (Moretti qtd. in Ercolino 47)

The feature of dissonant chirality Ercolino identified could potentially be summarized as what Wood called *stories and sub-stories* intermingled, as none of these novels seem to exercise a *continuum*, but rather a segmentation can be observed, fragments of different length and forms. In *White Teeth* we have chapters entirely devoted to almost each of the characters, where the narrator is still omniscient, but the focus shifts, the voice shifts according to the character. The maximalist novel is dense, it has the ability to completely submerge the reader:

In the maximalist novel, the fragment not only serves as the basic morphological unit located at the core of its peculiar narrative organization, resulting as we know from an inextricable intermingling of chorality and polyphony, but it is also the tool which enables deployment of the novel's diegetic exuberance (Ercolino 72)

"The optimism of all this 'vitality' is shared by many readers, apparently" says Wood, perhaps incapable of understanding these author's creation mechanisms, referring to their most iconic episodes as "props of the imagination, meaning's toys" (Wood, "Human, All Too Inhuman", para. 6). While Wood believes these novels

are all fragmented and chaotic, often making no sense at all, Ercolino argues that although the Maximalist novel is often chaotic and polyphonic, there is a certain order, a certain discipline to it, defined by three main characteristics that lead to its "completeness": *Circularity*, the novel's ability to have be symmetric, *Temporal architectures*, or a certain temporal rigid frame, and *Conceptual structures*, which makes use of *leitmotivs*, *myth* and *intertextual forms.*

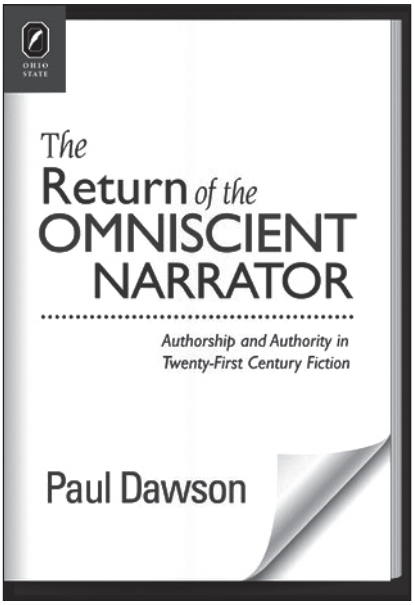
All seven novels have an omniscient narrator, which not only means that they watch over like "oglers", as David Foster Wallace puts it in *E Unibus Pluram*, but, as he says, they also lurk, which indicates that they also anticipate their characters' moves. This kind of overabundant prose needs a narrator capable of multi-tasking at all times and Ercolino talks about "super-omniscience", a term coined by DeLillo himself to describe his managing of the multi-perspective in *Underworld.*

Both Wood and Ercolino approach the "paranoid imagination", but the latter treats it more in depth and with less personal input and more of a fact-based definition:

Paranoid imagination enshrouds, literally infests, the maximalist narrative universe. Is presence shapes and gives substance to the plot, which from novel to novel assumes the most diverse forms: indecipherable and extended conspiracies by unscrupulous multinationals (*Gravity's Rainbow*); political terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism (*Infinite jest* and *2005 dopo Cristo* on the ne hand, *White Teeth* on the other); nuclear psychosis (*Underworld*), corrupt stat apparati (*2666*); psychotic disturbances (*The Corrections* and, once again *Infinite Jest.*) (Ercolino 106)

The Maximalist novel is overabundant in images: "Cinema, television, video, painting, comics, pop icons: the visual dimension cloaks and molds the maximalist imagery".(Ercolino 123) The maximalist novel has a cinematographic quality to it, the narrator often takes the role of a movie director or even of the camera itself. James Wood often fails to see this, as he often mocks this peculiar descriptiveness that these novels have:

"If, say, a character is introduced in London, call him Toby Awknotuby (that is, " To be or not to be"—ha!) then we will be swiftly told that he has a twin in Delhi (called Boyt, which is an anagram of Toby, of course), who, like Toby, has the same very curious genital deformation, and that their mother belongs to a religious cult based, oddly enough, in the Orkney Islands, and that their father (who was born at the exact second that the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima) has been a Hell's Angel for the last thirteen years (but a very curious Hell's Angels group it is, devoted only to the fanatical study of late Wordsworth), and that Toby's mad left-wing aunt was curiously struck dumb



when Mrs. Thatcher was elected prime minister in 1979 and has not spoken a word since. And all this, over many pages, before poor Toby Awknotuby has done a thing, or thought a thought! (Wood, "Human, All Too Inhuman", para. 2)

Finally, in an attempt to determine the literary trend the maximalist novel belongs to, Ercolino concludes that it cannot belong to realism, nor can it belong to any kind of antirealist trends, thus "the intertwining of realism and antirealism gives life to what we could call a *hybrid* realism, a particular form of the representation in which mimesis and antimimesis are inextricably fused." (Ercolino 161) "Hybrid realism" does not have the same aggressiveness Wood's term has and it only represents a characteristic of a genre (which is the maximalist novel). In fact, Ercolino does not even place the Maximalist novel under a new literary movement, he tries not to tear it apart from postmodernism, and place it as a continuation of it: "the ethical commitment of the maximalist novel should be situated within a seam of continuity with the best *engage* literary tradition of the twentieth century" (136)

Conclusions

As Ercolino himself states in his *Maximalist Novel*, James Wood is not wrong when he expresses his concerns about the involution of the *human* quality in literature, but he is not right to attribute the reason for this to the overuse of information in these novels (160). It is rather a natural shift towards the human being "seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines" (Katherine Hayles 3), as the realm of posthumanism is highly explored in more than one of these novels. What Wood tried to achieve through "hysterical realism" could not be achieved in the first place due of

lack of more in-depth analyses of the term (as Wood's study is just an article and Ercolino's is a book), as well as the fact that he tried to include writers who are known to be identified with well-established literary movements, as it happens with Salman Rushdie, whose prose is deeply tied with magical realism. Second of all, Ercolino's *Maximalist Novel* is a more appropriate term to describe what was happening in the literary world in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, as opposed to the ambiguity of the term "hysterical realism". Lastly, had it been transformed into a proper literary tendency, it would have been a fairly short one, since, as Lev Grossman observes in his article in *Time*, the type of prose he calls "unrealism" (i.e novels attempting to represent the world as something more simplistic instead of an infinite network) had already been unofficially established by the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Furthermore, with novels such as Elena Ferrante's tetralogy, *The Neapolian Novels* or Karl Ove Knausgaard's trilogy, *My struggle*, the literary world seems to be trying to recapture realism one way or another, relying on autofiction more than anything else. Even Zadie Smith in her new novel *Swing Time* (2016) is trying a completely different approach, a first person narrative, closer to her own biography than any other of her works. On the other hand, the Maximalist novel is not ascribed to such a specific time in the history of literature – although it treats novels published in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, there could easily be a novel with the same characteristics earlier than that or later than that – nor is it so closely tied (terminologically speaking) to a literary movement.

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