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Dolce Agonia, Nancy Huston's last novel, focuses on a Thanksgiving dinner, to which the host has invited his best friends. The novel interweaves the protagonists' dialogues with their interior monologues, which reveal their intimate problems and obsessive memories. The original aspect of *Dolce Agonia* is, however, its narrator – God himself, who discloses his identity in the opening "Prologue au ciel". The time of the narration with its frequent flashbacks is interrupted by passages in which the God-narrator outlines in succinct flash-forwards the scenario of each protagonist's death.

The results of this unusual narrative technique, covering the characters' present, past and future, are puzzling and ambiguous. There appears a striking contrast between the dinner scenes full of life and the God-narrator's dramatic scenarios. Since we are never allowed to forget that the protagonists will die (*are* actually dying), we become the more attached to them. The knowledge of their inevitable death, which the reader shares with the God-narrator, renders the protagonists more vulnerable and, paradoxically, more alive. Critics have emphasised the philosophical depth of Huston's last work. The omnipresence of the lurking death in the novel foregrounds the fragility of life, ephemeral, precarious and cruel; *dolce agonia*, "la douce agonie de la vie", is indeed the theme of Huston's novel. The ambiguous final scene showing a child blinded by the morning light can be interpreted as a sign of hope and renewal.

In an interview with Christine Brulé, speaking about *Dolce Agonia* Nancy Huston emphasised that she wanted to write a "human" book, for "écrire, c'est donner la vie". However, my first impression is that *Dolce Agonia* is above all a cruel book. This is mostly due to the monologues of the God-narrator, who treats human suffering with a cynical and sarcastic condescension. This is a God who makes it clear that he is too perfect to love the imperfect human beings. Human life is reduced in the novel to a series of facts. Furthermore, we soon confuse the numerous details concerning the protagonists' lives and deaths and quickly forget about them. Huston's negative scripts are all variations - macabre, ridiculous or mundane - on the theme of death. Her characters are entirely subordinated to God, who mocks their illusion of freedom. Love, a phenomenon that evades all forms of control, appears momentarily to guarantee existential freedom. Yet if *Dolce Agonia* seems to suggest that love is the only source of ethics in an absurd world, the God-narrator rejects this illusion, since feelings can be reduced to chemical reactions. And he himself is like a voyeur, watching them and toying with the idea there is at least one thing that is outside his control.

Huston's characters are all puppets in the hands of the God-narrator, who plans their destiny just as a novelist outlines the scenarios of his heroes' lives. In fact, the God-narrator of *Dolce Agonia* reminds the reader of the exaggerated authorial presence in traditional realist narration. Huston seems to refer ironically to the conventional omniscient narrator, who will not begin *in medias res* but will start with a thorough

introduction of his characters. The “death-scenarios” appear an ironic allusion to the nineteenth-century convention of epilogue, which aimed to erase all traces of ambiguity and uncertainty concerning the protagonists’ fate, and thus to reassure the reader, by limiting his freedom of interpretation. However, in contrast to the traditional omniscient narration, the Author-God’s macabre scripts in *Dolce Agonia* do not comfort the reader but produce a profound sense of ontological insecurity. The equation between God and Author in Huston’s novel is another example of that analogy between plot in fiction and the plot of God’s creation that can so often be found in contemporary metafiction. The fact that Huston’s characters are the Author-God’s puppets, deprived of existential freedom, seems to imply that we are all enclosed within an order that is someone else’s.

The analogy between God and Author in *Dolce Agonia* proves even more disturbing if we accept the premise that in a fictional work language subsumes all - worlds, texts and authors. If, as Roland Barthes claims, the author is dead, paradoxically the more he appears in a text, the less he exists, since he or she becomes a product of the language of the text. *Dolce Agonia* suggests that we are all subordinated to God’s script, but if God himself is a construction, we must therefore be fictions as well.

Much interested in literary criticism, Nancy Huston seems to excel in ambiguous narrative games. Her *Instruments of Darkness* consists of a novel-within-a-novel and a diary recording the thoughts of its creator. *Plainsong* challenges the conventions of a saga by beginning in the moment of the hero’s death and ending with his conception. *The Goldberg Variations* turns out to be a metafictional construction on the subject of art, in which, although the heroine-narrator seems in control of everything, much is left unsaid. However, in her last two novels, *The Mark of the Angel* and *Dolce Agonia*, the narrator is increasingly present and has an ironic, sarcastic voice. In a critical age, which has accepted the death of the author, Huston, a former student of Roland Barthes, appears to play with the idea of Author-God. The concept of the death of the author implies, as Barthes has said, that “the true place of the writing ... is reading ... A text is made of multiple writings ... but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not ... the author.” In Huston’s latest novel it seems indeed that the Author-God has returned. *Dolce Agonia* emphasizes that, like God, the writer creates an autonomous world. Huston’s God-narrator is even more in control of the story than the traditional omniscient narrator. Nothing is left unsaid as to the protagonists’ fate and, despite the ambiguous ending, the destiny of the child has been determined as well. Not only does *Dolce Agonia* suggest that our existential freedom is an illusion, but it also limits our freedom as readers, leaving no space for imagination, revealing all the details of the protagonists’ end. This technique certainly reinforces the profoundly philosophical message of the novel, which makes us reflect upon ephemeral life, unexpected death and illusory freedom, but it takes away much of the joy of reading, that experience which Roland Barthes called *jouissance*.