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England Calling: A Narratological Exploration of Martin Amis's "London Fields"

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Abstract: This paper will explore connections between fictional narrative methodology and contemporary conceptions of Englishness by applying aspects of Gerald Prince's (2005) conceptions of a 'postcolonial narratology' to Martin Amis's "London Fields" (1989). Amis has commented that 'it's almost an act of will on my part trying not to be an English writer'. However, this paper will suggest that the novel under consideration here exhibits methodological tendencies which have their roots in a protracted engagement with problematic notions of English identity (principally, instability and disengagement) and that postcolonial approaches to narrative technique can lead to very interesting results, even when applied to the work of writers not typically identified with such constituencies. The central point of investigation will be the novel's exhibition of metafictional tendencies. In "London Fields", Amis narrates via an authorial surrogate, Samson Young, who purports to be the author of the text, yet becomes implicated in the events of the novel to the point where his actions, rather than his imagination, determine its outcome. It is interesting also in this connection that the novel is voiced by an 'outsider' to England, an American. Prince is intrigued by the possibility that a postcolonial narrative discourse might emerge 'free of any narratorial introduction, mediation, or patronage.' He also points to the significance of narratological features such as hybridity, migrancy, otherness, fragmentation, diversity and power relations. Amis's novel exhibits all of these features, and takes the ambition of authorial invisibility to a paradoxical extreme. Voices, characters, reliability and even actantial events are brusquely 'disowned' by the author, resulting in a textual instability and uncertainty which, it will be demonstrated through close textual analysis, is intimately linked to England's postcolonial condition.

Keywords: Nationalism, Postcolonialism, Identity, Narratology, Martin Amis, Narrative Technique, Contemporary Fiction

THIS ESSAY SETS out to explore the inter-relationships between narrative methodology and conceptions of contemporary national identity, drawing upon the discipline of narratology in its broadest sense (what might more accurately be termed 'fictional technique'). In this case, the identity under investigation is the highly troublesome (and troubling) one of Englishness; indeed, the topic becomes especially challenging when the novelist who will be cited in this connection has commented that for him it is almost an act of will not to be an English writer.

It will be important straight away to fence off Englishness from 'Britishness' in this context. It is, of course, beyond the scope of this essay to disentangle such a complex issue with anything like the thoroughness and rigour required; suffice to say that an underlying assumption here is that novel to be examined, Martin Amis's *London Fields* (1989), is very much, in both milieu and character, a 'state of England' novel, and confronts issues of instability, hybridity and fragmentation peculiar, in the context of Britain at least, to that country. It is an assumption of this paper that these themes resonate particularly with reference to England rather than to Scotland or Wales. It is also suggested here that broad 'London-

centric' pronouncements about 'British' fiction (which, after all, implies the inclusion of Scottish and Welsh literatures too) would muddy and further distort some already imperspicuous waters.

It is an intriguing side-issue that these very issues surrounding instability of identity find a paradigm in the tensions between Englishness and the wider identity of Britishness (intriguing and revealing, too, that Microsoft Word's spell check refuses to recognise the latter word). An underlying premise of this paper is that narrative fiction – its structures, its engagement with discourse and discourse types, its central conceits – can shed light upon these themes. The central thesis of this essay, then, is that a narratological/methodological analysis of contemporary fiction can be appropriately focused to draw significant conclusions about the society or culture from which that narrative springs. (Of course, a multitude of theoretical literary approaches will aim to achieve similar outcomes; however, a purely narratological one has been to date less frequently applied). *London Fields* will be viewed here, then, through the lens of its fictional technique and, more specifically still, through what Gerald Prince has termed a *postcolonial narratology*¹.

¹ Gerald Prince 'On a Postcolonial Narratology' in *A Companion to Narrative Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 372-381



The novel is set in a (not *the*, and the distinction is important) London of 1999 and is both an upside down murder mystery and the author's personal vision of a city:

...this is what I try to do with London: I don't want to know too much about it. Of course, I soak it up willy-nilly, but I have to push it through my psyche and transform it. So it isn't, in the end, London any more. It's London in the patterning of my cerebellum.²

1999 is ten years into the future at the time of the novel's publication, and a millennial, almost apocalyptic atmosphere permeates the text; indeed, there are broad hints of an approaching nuclear holocaust. The author/narrator of the novel (and it is absolutely key that this distinction is blurred) is the American Samson Young, a failed writer, (tellingly) terminally ill, terminally blocked, and on a kind of sabbatical in London with the aim of writing something, anything. Young is staying in the flat of a far more successful English novelist, Mark Asprey (the initials MA are important, and begin a gradually accelerating process of authorial 'disownment' which will be returned to shortly).

Immediately upon landing at Heathrow, Young meets Keith Talent, a small-time criminal and obsessive darts player, and, accordingly, Young is sucked into the beer-stained, smoke-choked centre of the novel: the Black Cross public house. Here, Young (and Talent) meet the anti-heroine, the 'murderess' Nicola Six, and the 'fall guy', Guy Clinch, a rich, bored banker. Thus, the central triumvirate of the novel is established: Keith the Thug, Nicola the Femme Fatale and Guy the Yuppie, gloatingly overseen and shadowed by the authorial surrogate Samson Young (and, lurking in the background, the mysterious Mark Asprey). Young undertakes to 'write the story' of these three characters as it happens and, accordingly, there is throughout the novel a calling into question – a problematising, perhaps – of the fiction-making process itself. Young catches Nicola Six in the act of dumping her diaries into a litter bin; he retrieves them, and it transpires that Nicola is plotting her own murder for the early hours of November 6th, her 35th birthday. Young, delighted to find at last some material he can use to write, chronicles these 'facts' as 'fiction'. The only 'mystery' in the novel's plot is the identity of the murder-

er, as his victim is already established (the plot is a 'whodunit' in reverse: a 'whowilldoit').

To turn now to the theoretical framework from which this analysis will proceed: Prince, along with others³, contends that the ideologies which underpin a fictional text can be unearthed by examining various narratological features of that text; amongst others, and of principal interest to this essay, the relationship between the author, narrator and character (in terms of levels of mediation and questions pertaining to who 'controls' the text), and modes of discourse representation (discourse types, point of view and so on). Prince implies that postcolonial theory in general constitutes a useful approach to narratological analysis as it helps test the appropriateness of narratological categories and distinctions by seeing immanent in them a concrete expression of an underlying ideology or set of assumptions. 'By wearing a set of postcolonial lenses to look at narrative'⁴ a mutually-enlivening interrelationship between the various 'touchstones' of narratology and those of postcolonial theory can be sketched out; e.g. hybridity, migrancy, 'otherness', liminality, fragmentation, diversity and power relations.

Specifically, Prince discusses the central role of characters and events⁵ in any such analysis, referring to Greimas's model of actantial functions⁶: the 'stability' of characters, their thoughts, feelings and emotions, interactions with other characters, and how these can be accounted for – to a certain extent, then, the way in which they measure up to 'real life'. He also mentions the significance of narrative discourse itself and the level to which it is mediated by the author: what discourse types and registers do characters and narrators use? What level of mediation is implied or signified (i.e. what is the relationship between a character and a narrator, and does the latter attempt to 'speak for' the former, or, rather, allow the character to speak through them)? To what extent, if at all, can the text world 'arrive' in the reader's imagination with as little intervention as possible on the part of the author?⁷ Of course, these three facets (characterisation, discourse, and levels of mediation) are intimately connected, but they will be separated as far as is possible in the ensuing analysis. Indeed, Prince envisages a hypothetical narrative situation which would arise should all three of these facets of narrative method be appropriately reconceived:

One possibility that has been neglected and that a postcolonial narratology might focus on and

² [quoted in] Will Self, *Junk Mail* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 417

³ See, for example, R.C. Caldwell, Jr., 'Créolité and Postcoloniality in Raphaël Confiant's *L'Allée des soupirs*', in *The French Review* 73, 30-11 (1989)

⁴ Op. cit. [Prince], p. 373

⁵ Ibid., p. 375

⁶ See Louis Hébert, 'The Actantial Model', www.signosemio.com/greimas/a_actantiel.asp (retrieved 10 August 2008)

⁷ Op. cit. [Prince], pp. 375-6

explicitly allow for is that of immediate discourses (whereby characters' utterances and thoughts are free of any narratorial introduction, mediation or patronage) issuing from a group or collectivity rather than a single individual, from a (more or less homogeneous) 'we' instead of an 'I'⁸

This suggestion is intriguing, and its exemplar can be found (for example) in certain recent writing from Scotland, which arises out of what some critics have termed a postcolonial context: a sense of linguistic dispossession, and an attempt to renegotiate the very structures and conventions of narrative fiction and to write back against the perceived dominance of the English centre. Lewis Grassie Gibbon and, later, James Kelman, have taken on this challenge, and in Kelman's novel *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994) combines free indirect discourse and *skaz* in a narrative technique which aspires to allow a character to narrate himself, while refusing on one hand the 'hegemony' of third-person, omniscient discourses or, on the other, the implicit assumption that is possible to 'speak for' another person (inherent in first-person narration, or *skaz*)⁹.

Having sketched out the theoretical backbone of this approach, it will be useful now to isolate and analyse these potentially 'postcolonial' aspects of narrative technique (characterisation, discourse representation and levels of mediation) in Amis's novel. The text constitutes a kind of elegy for the past and a castigation of the present and future, and there is a very English air of melancholy inherent throughout. However, upon closer inspection this melancholy transforms into something approaching vitriol, and the novel into an extended discourse of contempt, disgust and repulsion. This disgust is to a certain extent self-directed (both towards the author himself and towards his text), and, by implication, towards the 'dirty business' of writing novels. One of the most obvious impressions that the reader will get from the text, then, is an overriding sense of *disownment* on one hand, and *contempt* on the other. These two qualities of the novel will be integral to the analysis which follows.

The first narratological facet to be considered relates to the relationship between the author, the narrator and the characters (corresponding in Prince's terms to modes of characterisation and levels of mediation) and will encompass consideration of what could be termed the text's 'metafictional' aspects. To define metafiction, it will be useful to turn to Patricia Waugh:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.¹⁰

This kind of writing typically centres around a familiar and enduring metaphorical trope, that of world as 'book' or 'story' and, in its stressing of its own 'fictionality', plays on notions of the world as artificial construct. The situation in *London Fields* is more complex, though, and concerned, arguably, with the production and status of literature itself. The metafictional framework of the novel is established early on, when it quickly becomes evident to the reader that the text is being 'written' at the same time as it is being narrated. The first sentence in particular, mentioning a 'true' story which cannot be believed, is instructive:

This is a true story but I can't believe it's really happening. It's a murder story, too. I can't believe my luck. And a love story (I think) of all strange things, so late in the century, so late in the goddamned day. This is the story of a murder. It hasn't happened yet. But it will. (It had better.)¹¹

It would be reasonable to expect an open-palmed disavowal of reliability to accompany metafictional narratives, scoring highly in Prince's category of levels of 'mediation'; i.e. the narrator mediates heavily, or intervenes explicitly, between the 'world' of the novel and the reader's apprehension of it, and the latter is coloured, dictated to and shaped by the narrator's intervention. Paradoxically, however, the opposite appears to be the case:

I can't make anything up. It just isn't me. Man, am I a reliable narrator . . . [I am] less a novelist than a queasy cleric, taking down the minutes of real life. (p. 25)

The text aspires to a form of hyperrealism, then – verging on 'anti-fiction'. Young sees himself as a faithful recorder of events outside of his ken and control. However, the reader, of course, very soon realises that Young is not taking down the minutes

⁸ Ibid., pp. 377-8

⁹ See James Kelman, *How Late It Was, How Late* (London: Vintage, 2008)

¹⁰ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: the theory and practice of self-conscious fiction* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 2

¹¹ Martin Amis, *London Fields* (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 1 [all subsequent references to this edition]

of real life – in fact, far from it – and this is made explicit by the text's metafictional scheme.

For example: on page 154, Nicola asks Guy to ring her 'at six o'clock, at six o'clock precisely'. Then, on page 156 Guy rings her 'on the stroke of seven' and 'nine hours later' it is four in the morning. Keith is in Nicola's flat when the call comes, but in Keith's version, on page 190, the call comes at six o'clock precisely. This reading may seem pedantic, but the effect must be deliberate. It undermines Samson Young's status as 'author' and final arbiter of the truth, as does his alleged American background (there are few unequivocal examples of American English in the text, other than the use of the word 'faucet' and, arguably, 'goddamned' in the opening paragraph). The reader is left drawing the unmistakable conclusion that, despite Young's protestations to the contrary, this text is very fictional after all – as is his status as 'author' within it.

It is interesting to speculate as to the conclusions the reader should draw from all this. Perhaps the metafictional conceits highlight the fact that Young is merely the tool of the mysterious and shadowy Mark Asprey, and, by implication, of Amis himself (once removed). Young becomes a 'fall guy' for the machinations of the true author. As Asprey (or Amis) says to Young: 'The truth doesn't matter anymore, and *it is not wanted*', drawing ample attention to the text's postmodernist credentials. So, rather than that disavowal of *reliability* so familiar to readers of first-person narratives from *Tristram Shandy* to *The Catcher in the Rye*, the reader is presented with a disavowal of *responsibility* – verging on nonchalance, an authorial shrugging of the shoulders. The artist remains indifferent to his creation (as Stephen Dedalus would have had it, 'paring his fingernails'). Yet, of course, the artist underpinning the text is Amis, not Young, nor Mark Asprey; and so, there is a *double*, or even *treble*, disavowal, leading to what might be termed an instability of textual status, a continual problematisation of and play on the fictive status of this narrative. This disavowal of responsibility is intimately connected to the pervasive sense of disownment identified in the opening of this essay. It relates, too, to the text's rendering of its characters.

When it comes to Amis's modes of characterisation, the characters seem icons rather than rounded, organic creations. They have little or no psychological depth, and, it would appear, very little free will. As already noted, Keith is The Wideboy, Guy the Richboy, Nicola the Femme Fatale. The 'heroes' of this piece are very firmly under the thumb of the author. As Young writes: 'Character is destiny; and Nicola knew where her destiny lay' (p. 21). There is little sense of an author ceding control as far as possible to his character; there is, rather, an atmo-

sphere of controlled predestination throughout. For example:

'No doubt there'll be surprises when I start to look around, but I always felt I knew where England was heading.' (p. 3)

And later:

'The black cab will move away, unrecalably and for ever, its driver paid, and handsomely tipped, by the murderee. She will walk down the dead-end street. The heavy car will be waiting; its lights will come on as it lumbers towards her. It will stop, and idle, as the passenger door swings open.'

'His face will be barred in darkness, but she will see shattered glass on the passenger seat and the car-tool ready on his lap.'

'Get in.'

She will lean forward. 'You,' she will say, in intense recognition: 'Always you.'

'Get in.'

And in she'll climb...' (p. 15)

The plot moves forward inexorably like a wave towards its foregone conclusion, and the characters appear swept along on its crest. Except – that by the end of the novel, Nicola Six appears to be on the verge of forcing her own ending upon Samson Young. Like John Self in *Money* (1984), she attains a kind of quasi-independence. However, it could be argued that, rather than simply freeing herself from the machinations of her 'creator', her character also functions as a way of foregrounding how the status of the faux author/narrator is being undermined. She is a signifier of Young's inability to control the events he purports, helplessly, to be writing.

The focus of the text, then, is firmly on narrative as opposed to characterisation. The characters come across as puppets, drawn onward by the unremitting energy of the narrative itself in the manner of the hero of an Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy (although without the palpable moral energy characteristic of those plays). Amis has commented explicitly on this facet of his work:

I think a whole set of notions, of character and motivation, and fatal flaws and so on, are nostalgic creations ... Would that character were still like that – if indeed it ever was. It's much more jumbled and incoherent now.¹²

After having examined the novel's metafictional tendencies and its guignolesque approach to characterisation, the next area to be considered is its narrative *style*. As has been implied, Amis's text seems

¹² Op. cit. [Self], p. 408

discourse-centred, with an overriding emphasis on style, rather than attempting any psychological evocation of the ipseity of human characters. The style is a riotous (and redoubtably exhilarating) blend of demotic and mandarin language, advertising jargon and poetry, the profound and the profane, the urban and bucolic, of oral discourse and ‘writerly’ affectation – in short, those kinds of novelistic languages which Bakhtin famously described as *heteroglossia*¹³ and saw as a defining characteristic of the novel as genre. In the following example, Keith Talent is reminiscing (mediated all the while by Young) on a bank robbery:

Keith had definitely failed to realize his full potential. He had proved incapable of clubbing the Asian woman to her knees, and of going on clubbing until the man in the uniform opened the safe. Why had he failed? Why, Keith, why? In truth he had felt far from well: half the night up some lane in a car full of the feet-heat of burping criminals; no breakfast, no bowel movement; and now, to top it all off, everywhere he looked he saw green grass, fresh trees, rolling hills. (p. 5)

There is an attempt to occupy a character’s frame of reference, but little attempt to encompass or embrace that character’s idiolect. There is no hint of free indirect discourse (a blend of character and narrator perspectives and voices), or anything in fact that could be construed to have emanated from the agency of character. Instead, the voice here seems unabashedly authorial, blending the demotic (‘half the night up some lane’) with figurative language characteristic of writerly discourse (‘a car full of the feet-heat of burping criminals’). It speaks *for* the character rather than on that character’s behalf. The discourse is authorial, and thus the portrayal of character is heavily mediated.

In a similar vein, the narrative proceeds as follows when introducing the character of Nicola Six:

She had the power of inspiring love, almost anywhere. Forget about making strong men weep. Seven-stone pacifists shouldered their way through street riots to be home in case she called. Family men abandoned sick children to wait in the rain outside her flat. Semi-literate builders and bankers sent her sonnet sequences. She pauperized gigolos, she splayed studs, she hospitalized heartbreakers. ... And the thing with her (what *was* it with her?), the thing with her was that she had to receive this love and

send it back in opposite form, not just cancelled but murdered. (p. 21)

Note in the above example the blend of discourse types and use of ‘literary’ language (for example, linguistic deviation): the alliteration (‘builders and bankers’, ‘splayed studs’, ‘hospitalized heartbreakers’), the mandarin lexical range (‘pauperized’), the demotic cadences (‘what *was* it with her?’), the repetition – a style that is as multifaceted and diverse as it is inherently novelistic and, crucially, *mannered*, idiosyncratic. As reviewers of the novel have pointed out, it is impossible not to be impressed by the raw energy, construction and design of Amis’s prose style. However, it is the style which ‘powers’ the novel, which provides its impetus and momentum, *not* the characters, or even the plot (the outcome of which is, after all, already decided). Style triumphs over matter.

Prince writes about the significance of narratorial language and mediation in any postcolonial narratology. In *London Fields*, the narrative is intensely (and unapologetically) mediated, through an unabashedly author-centred discourse and an author-centred point of view. This discourse is also, simultaneously, undermined and disowned by the metafictional narcissism of the text, to the point where it becomes meaningless to look for any kind of representational ‘truth’ beneath the swirling surface of this torrential narrative discourse, or even to pin down its source. In fact, this narrative is mediated three times over – by Amis, by Asprey, then by Young – becoming, in Genette’s terms a ‘meta-meta-narrative’¹⁴. It is imprisoned within a series of Russian Doll-like diegetic universes, and the reader is left with the impression that even if they were able to get down to the last doll, opening it up would reveal nothing inside.

Applying facets of postcolonial theory to a narratological analysis of an English novel is a reversal, in some ways, of traditional postcolonial approaches to fiction. However, in the light of Prince’s tentative suggestions for a postcolonial narratology, this English text can certainly be read – through its approaches to characterisation, mediation and discourse representation – as unstable, disintegrative, and self-reflexive to the point of a stultifying narcissism. Where other fiction from those contexts and constituencies commonly labelled as ‘postcolonial’ takes energy from exploring questions of identity, belonging, marginalisation and liminality, the text of *London Fields* and its infinitely problematised status as fiction, as narrative, even, bears witness rather to a sense of energy draining away, of enervation, and,

¹³ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, (ed.) Michael Holquist, (trans.) Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981)

¹⁴ See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: an Essay in Method* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980)

as has been suggested, of contempt and self-loathing. Close textual analysis can identify the symptoms of this enervation: the retreat from the characterisation and plot of classic realism into a gallimaufry style of multitudinous discourse types, a sense of fragmentation (of character, of textual status, and of English culture and society as portrayed in the novel), and an extreme disruption of the 'traditional' power relations which lie at the heart of the central conceit underpinning narrative fiction: the symbiotic relationship between *narrator* and *character*, between *author* and *narrator* and, perhaps most intriguingly of all, between the gush, almost a glut, of discourse that constitutes Amis's text and the world that it only pretends to evoke.

All of these features, it is argued here, signal something fundamental about England's postcolonial (or, perhaps, post-imperial?) condition. Firstly, its sense of instability and indeterminacy, unsure of itself as either 'Britain' or something distinct, elided with that wider – and far more recent – national construction or slowly disintegrating as the other nations which constitute Britain edge towards self-determination. Secondly, the liminality arising from its position relative to Europe and North America, with one eye cocked permanently and obsequiously towards the other side of the Atlantic, the other nervously (and often enviously) on its much closer neighbours across the English Channel – but identifying firmly with neither one nor the other. Thirdly, and most obviously, the sense of disownment and indifference, verging on perfidious self-contempt,

which, it could be argued, so often characterises the national discourse as played out in the media. Young speaks (in his feigned outsider's voice) of 'the iodized shithouse that used to be England' and describes as 'quintessentially English' a 'soaked load of white bread, like the brains of an animal much stupider than any sheep' (p. 14). This line is paradigmatic of Amis's unstable vision of post-Thatcherite England: a post-lapsarian age.

Having reviewed the results of an application of Prince's proposal for a postcolonial narratology – to summarise: the author's metafictional disownment of his own creations, the guignolesque approach to characterisation, the authorial mediation of character-centred discourse and the resulting 'torrential' style, and, finally, the all-pervading sense of contempt – it is possible to argue that, after taking a detour away from the emphasis on narrative (or diegesis) so characteristic of Sterne and towards the classic realism (or mimesis) of the nineteenth century and the Edwardians such as Wells and Galsworthy, the long history of the English novel has turned back in on itself and evolved a focus on *ways of telling* and on a gallimaufry-like heteroglossia of discourse. There is something intrinsically postmodern (and, in its almost nihilistic attitude to the act of writing, intrinsically post-imperial) about this attempt at fictional world creation. The reader finds in Amis's novel a palpable sense of 'loose beings in search of a form', but that form turns out to be only the heteroglossia of Amis's torrential, self-conscious and ultimately self-defeating narrative voice.

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I was awarded my PhD in 2005 and teach at the University of Kent in the areas of contemporary fiction, narratology, stylistics, discourse analysis, critical theory and general English literature. I also teach creative writing, and am a published fiction writer. My current research interests include fictional technique, literary representations of dialect, the relationship between narratives and identity, and fictional versions of Englishness. I have published on contemporary British and Irish fiction and a new collection of short stories and a book on demotic narrative voices in contemporary fiction are both forthcoming in 2008.



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