

The Reader in *London Fields*

An In-Depth Analysis of *London Fields*, Emphasising the Play Between Text and Reader and the Consequent Implications for Narrative Authority.

Authors: Bo A. Græsborg and Thorbjørn Lind

Master thesis at Aalborg University, Denmark, March 3rd, 2000

E-mail: thorlind@hotmail.com

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	2
METHODOLOGY	2
MARTIN AMIS'S LITERARY CAREER	7
THESIS OUTLINE	10
CHAPTER 1: BUILDING A GENRE	15
1.1 THE OPENING	18
1.2 THE DEDICATION	20
1.3 THE TABLE OF CONTENTS	22
1.4 THE NOTE	25
1.5 THE TITLE	26
1.6 THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR	28
1.7 THE ENDING	34
CHAPTER 2: THE HUMOUR OF <i>LONDON FIELDS</i>	40
2.1 MAKING STRANGE	46
2.1.1 ANTHROPOMORPHISM, HYPERBOLE AND REPETITION	47
2.1.2 COMIC REVERSALS	52
2.2 IRONY	55
CHAPTER 3: THE COMPLICATIONS OF <i>LONDON FIELDS</i>	62
3.1 TEXT AND READER	63
3.2 BLANKS IN <i>LONDON FIELDS</i>	67
3.2.1 REPETITION OF SCENES	70
3.3 'PROBLEMS'	73
3.4 THE COMPOSITION OF <i>LONDON FIELDS</i> : DIARY AND NOVEL	75
CHAPTER 4: NARRATIVE AUTHORITY IN <i>LONDON FIELDS</i>	81
4.1 SAMSON YOUNG	83
4.2 NICOLA SIX	84
4.2.1 NICOLA'S CONTROL	84
4.2.2 NICOLA'S DEATH	91
4.3 MARK ASPREY	95
4.4 MARTIN AMIS	97
CONCLUSION	101
WORKS CITED	106
APPENDIX A: ABSTRACT IN DANISH	112
APPENDIX B: LIST OF RESPONSIBILITIES	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

INTRODUCTION

Methodology

I'm all for this intense relationship with the reader. I really want the reader in there. I don't know who the reader is, but I really want him close. (Martin Amis in interview with Susan Morrison 65).

The subject of the present thesis is the nature of this desired 'intense relationship' between author and reader as it is carried out in Amis's novel *London Fields*. Starting with its origins in the text, we seek to account for the effects it has on the reader, and the consequences it has in a wider perspective regarding narrative authority and the borderline between fiction and reality.

The text itself being if not our only, then our only persistent guide, we have structured the thesis around the novel's two main characteristics, which are that it is 1) funny; it makes us laugh and 2) difficult; it sends us on an incessant search for clues to its puzzles. Through an examination of the rhetorical devices employed to bring out these responses, we are led to consider the two other figures of narrative, which, apart from the text, include the reader and the writer. No preconceived intention was responsible for this development, which arose from speculations regarding the text itself.

In different ways, the nature of the novel's humour and its difficulties, while inherent traits of the text, both call upon heavy reader participation. The text foregrounds its reader. When we say 'reader' we have in mind not the actual, historical individual, whose reading is determined by his or her psychology as much as by anything in the text, but rather the reader shaped by the text. The 'ideal' reader, one might say, the reader who gets the hints and understands the irony. Created by the text, this reader has no psychological existence outside it. We have in mind, in other words, something like Wolfgang Iser's 'implied reader' or the close reader of New Criticism.¹ Our aim in this sense, our focus on the text and the aspiration

¹ See Maclean 132. Referring to the model of communication in literary works proposed by Seymour Chatman, David Lodge distinguishes between three logical levels of discourse in the novel. There is the speaking voice,

to let it guide the analysis, follows well established critical guidelines. As David Lodge says, ‘each real reader tries to become the implied reader that is inscribed in the text’ (Indeterminacy 145).

Since we propose to do a rhetorical study in the sense that we examine the devices and uses of language with which the reader is created, the author as the logical originator of the text and the cause of its effects comes into the picture. When we use the word author in our analyses to designate the originator of effects, we do not mean to refer to Martin Amis, the real author, whose intentions behind and meaning with the text are but sparingly used and only, as M. H. Abrams says of the practice of the New Critics, in relation to the ‘“internal” realization of that intention in the language of the text itself’ (94). Rather we have in mind the literary incarnation he has created of himself in his text; the author implied by the text, so to speak. Its ‘internal speaker’, or with Wayne Booth, ‘the implied author.’² As a kind of personification of the text, we refer to the implied author alternately as ‘Martin Amis’, ‘the author’ or, simply ‘the text’. When we say that ‘the text plays with narrative authority’, that ‘a play is staged between author and reader regarding the meaning of the text’, or that ‘the author reasserts his power’ it is to be understood that we attribute these ‘messages’ to the implied author.

In our efforts to find the right set of analytic tools for *London Fields* we have not followed any established theory of interpretation. There are several reasons for this decision: the novel’s mix of genres and its persistent disruption of reader expectations, as well as our general lack of affiliation as readers to any particular theory or method have certainly all made their influence, but in the end it was our reluctance to reduce the novel more than necessary that prompted our eclecticism. We found that the gains of applying any of the well-tested sets of analytic tools would not match the losses suffered by a reduction of the novel to the point of view of a given critical theory. The necessarily limiting view of one’s own

the narrator (in *London Fields*, Samson Young), and the recipient of this voice, the ‘narratee’, a term coined by Gerald Prince to designate the reader who takes the narrator’s words for granted and does not question his reliability. Both Chatman and Lodge agree this term to be optional. On a higher level of knowledge runs the communication between the implied author and the implied reader. Particularly obvious and useful in works with unreliable narrators and with irony as a main mode (as *London Fields*), these figures are still ‘in the text.’ Outside the text, are the real author and the real reader. The reading in this thesis concentrates on the level of the implied versions of reader and writer. For criticism which deals with the real reader, see the subjective criticism of Norman Holland.

² See *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 67-77.

perspective was felt to be reduction enough. Instead we have chosen eclectically to use whatever theorists might help us explain the features of the novel.

The obvious advantage of this approach is the liberty to use theories from different literary traditions as tools to further our understanding. Whenever an interpretative problem or a significant feature that demands explication is encountered, we have found it most appropriate not to limit ourselves to a particular field of theory or method but to stay open for the best explanation to the specific problem or feature at hand. Alternately aiding, prompting or contradicting our explanations, reviews and critical essays as well as interviews with Martin Amis have been consulted in this spirit. Generally, we have not paid much attention to where the critical comments come from, but focused on the arguments themselves in their capacity of providing various degrees of illuminating information. The extra-textual comments are not to be understood as ‘evidence’ justifying our reading as the only correct one; indeed, such evidence is purely circumstantial compared with references to the text itself. While the sources to the findings presented in the thesis are multiple: Critical comments, reviews, interview comments and own ideas, common to all is that they have been checked against the novel itself. The text remains the object for analyses and the foundation against which their probability should be tested.

The critical direction which probably influenced us the most is the one known as ‘reader-response’ criticism (see 3.1). Shared with this loosely organised direction of criticism is our focus on the reader in the text, and the influence from reader-response criticism is detectable in at least two other aspects.³ First, our analyses are informed by an understanding of the reading process as basically temporal, occurring in time. While banal, this fact has nevertheless been consequential in that it has drawn inevitable attention to the fact that while the text can be viewed as ‘a whole,’ we need to consider it as a collection of parts, as well. As such, recognising the temporality of the reading process correlates with our determination to do close reading and encourages a kind of interpretative activity with clear affinities to the hermeneutic circle (see 16). It also leads us to construct a dynamic view of the concept of genre (understood as a frame of understanding from the point of view of the reader rather than as an objective classification of the text). The key concept here is that of the reader’s

³ For a listing of established ‘critical moves’ of reader-response criticism, see Mailloux.

expectations. Throughout we look at the effects of the text in terms of how they shape, disrupt and reshape the reader's expectations: the theoretical discussion in chapter one regarding genre and expectation; the micro-analyses of comic devices in chapter two; and our explication in chapter three of the difficulties with a fragmented narration only make sense with the understanding in mind that the reading process is temporal.

The second procedural characteristic that we share with reader-response criticism is, paradoxically enough, an implicit emphasis on the dominance of the text. The responses brought out by the text are viewed precisely in that capacity: brought out by the text, rather than determining its meaning. We look in the text for explanations to our responses. The rhetorical element of this procedure is further sharpened when we argue (in line with the conventions of reader-response criticism (Mailloux 49)) that *London Fields* is about learning to read *London Fields* or, at any rate, that this education is taking place. The opening of the novel, which we go through in chapter one, is important in this respect since it sets the stage for all later complications and forces the reader to pay attention.

Seen in the repeated gifts presented by the text to the attentive reader in the shape of clues to the novel's puzzles, the demanded attention is not viewed as an end in itself but as a necessary part of learning to read the novel. When the novel breaks in the middle, for example, with the narration becoming more fragmented and the shifts in points of view occur more frequent as well as unmarked, we are not caught off guard and do not, at first, even perceive the change as dramatic (see 80). The reason, we argue, is that we have learned, unconsciously at first, through the first half how to deal with shifts in points of view and apparently unmotivated breaks in the narration.

So much about the recognised influences from theory. Before we turn to a brief account of Amis's literary career and a detailed outline of the thesis, one more note on our methodological procedures. As we argue in chapter one, all understandings are preceded and influenced by an expectation, an assumption. The so far repeatedly mentioned 'text' deserves some explication in this respect (and not least so because it will prepare the ground for our thematic analysis in chapter four and for the final comments in the Conclusion): what is implied by our extensive focus on the 'text' and what kind of entity are we talking about in the first place?

In some ways we think about the text as autonomous, or rather, we must think so; if we did not, why devote so much energy to a close reading of it? The practice of close reading was brought into circulation 1929 by I. A. Richards in *Practical Criticism* and further established the following year by Richard's pupil, William Empson in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Taken over as a distinctive feature of New Criticism, the procedure of close reading has outlived this movement as its main legacy. While New Criticism lost its dominant role by the late 1960s (Abrams 246), close reading was still in 1993 an 'established part of English literature courses in Britain' (Robey 79). And it is not only on teaching level we see the influence; major theories of interpretation and criticism, despite their differences otherwise, claim close reading as an integral part of their theories. Debates may concern the right approach to the text, but a common underlying assumption behind a variety of critical approaches from Holland's subjective and psychoanalytical method, over the eclecticism of Iser, to the 'positive' hermeneutics of Booth and E. D. Hirsch and the 'negative' hermeneutics of someone like Stanley Fish, has been 'a belief in the text's existence as an autonomous, identifiable, and unique entity: *the text itself*' (Suleiman 40).⁴

There seems, in other words, to be general consensus about the feasibility of doing close reading while taking a critical view on the assumptions upon which it was first based. Taking issue with the New Critical view that 'the linguistic signs can speak their own meaning', Hirsch argued in *Validity in Interpretation* in 1968 that meaning is inevitably bound with intention. It presupposes consciousness, and since texts do not possess consciousness, they cannot *mean*; the meaning of the text is really the meaning of someone else; its author or its reader. *Something* really does not mean; *someone* means. We do not regard the text as having 'its' meaning hidden in it, waiting to be dug out by the proficient reader. Rather we think

⁴ For Hirsch, the meaning that we reconstruct by close reading is the meaning of the author. Concerned as he is to locate a stable element with which the most probable of conflicting interpretations can be identified, Hirsch argues that if we want to talk about meaning, it must be the author's meaning. The text itself is the expression of the author's meaning and should as such be studied carefully. Drawing the almost diametrically opposite consequence from Hirsch of the contention that meaning is not 'in the text,' Stanley Fish nevertheless stresses close reading as the primary tool of interpretation. The meaning of the text, according to Fish, is the meaning of its reader. To adjudicate between interpretations Fish talks about 'reading communities' which are formed by any number of people agreeing on a particular interpretation which, however deviant it may appear, achieves status as the right one according to conventions set by the community. Thus heavily compromised, the autonomy of the text survives as an implicit assumption behind Fish's insistence on close reading. A significant exception to the vague consensus built around ascribing the text some kind of autonomy is deconstruction, which sets in precisely at the idea of the unity of the text. Part of a 'metaphysics of presence', going back to Plato, which must be rejected, the idea of the autonomous text cannot be upheld when considering that every element, every sign in a text bears the mark of the other signs in the system. There is no 'presence' according to the deconstructionists; only signs referring to other signs.

about meaning along the lines of Iser, who holds that ‘meanings in literary texts are mainly generated in the act of reading; they are the product of a rather difficult interaction between text and reader and not quantities hidden in the text’ (Indeterminacy 2-3,4).

So what happened to the textual autonomy implied by our close reading and our aspiration to ‘become implied readers’? Since we are not attempting to uncover the author’s intention and are wary of ascribing to the text the necessary intention for it to *mean*, the meaning we find in *London Fields* must be ‘our meaning’. But it is the meaning which the words in the text have impressed upon us and is in this respect representative. We try, in other words, to take the step from the subjective impressions to objective statements by arguing that while we are talking about ‘our meaning’, this meaning is representative because it is shaped by the text. In a sense we attempt to see what we do as what everybody necessarily does; to cast our criticism as an account of the universal reading process.⁵ Our reliance upon the text, then, is more a pragmatic guard against solipsism than the expression of a firmly rooted theoretical standpoint. Rather than as a timeless, autonomous object containing an unchanging meaning, we view the text as a co-operative effort of the author and the reader, and we argue, most explicitly in chapters three and four, that this is what *London Fields* illustrates as well, what it ‘teaches us’, in its insistence on the reader’s participation.

Martin Amis’s Literary Career

Born on August 25th, 1949, son of novelist Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis ended his educational career in 1971 with a formal first in English from Exeter College at Oxford University. While reviewing for the *Observer*, the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *New Statesman*, Amis published his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, in 1973 to general acclaim. Several of Amis’s trademarks are in place from the beginning, most notably a very self-

⁵ Hirsch has been influential in emphasising the difference between meaning and significance. Meaning for Hirsch is the author’s meaning, as we have seen; it can be apprehended in an act of *understanding*, and formulated in *interpretation*. Significance, on the other hand, is the impact the meaning has on something or someone else. As such, significance is an act of *judgement* and translates itself into the public realm as *criticism* (*Validity* Ch. 4). Valid criticism is the kind of criticism which is based on a probable interpretation. We see that *meaning* is the deciding factor in both activities. Since Hirsch equates meaning with the author’s meaning, we cannot transfer his ideas onto this thesis. We might be said to be doing *criticism* in the sense that we are relating to a meaning – but it is the meaning of the text which, in turn, is created in the reading process. For a critique of Hirsch, regarding the distinction between meaning and significance, see Robert Crosman who argues that, contrary to Hirsch’s assertion, readers do, in fact, make meaning. Fish, of course, argues that we are always already doing significance.

conscious way of narrating and a preference of style over content. The narrator and main character of *The Rachel Papers*, Charles Highway, illustrates both when he addresses ‘one of the troubles with being over-articulate, with having a vocabulary more refined than your emotions.’ ‘Every turn in the conversation,’ he says, ‘every switch of posture, opens up an estate of verbal avenues with a myriad side-turnings and cul-de-sacs – and there are no signposts but your own sincerity and good taste, and I’ve never had much of either’ (154).

Dead Babies, a satirical comment on modern, rationalist society, appeared in 1975. Amis shows in this shockingly explicit and dark tale of a weekend of sex, drugs and violence, his tendency to subordinate the building of character to the illustration of standpoints and clichés. Like the Menippean satire to which it alludes in the foreword, *Dead Babies* marks the most explicit example of Amis’s emphasis on the structure of the work over its characters. As the narrator at one point says to one of the truly appalling characters: ‘Well, we’re sorry about it Keith, of course, but we’re afraid that you simply *had* to be that way. Nothing personal, please understand – merely in order to serve the designs of this particular fiction’ (162). The preference of style over content is also, as we shall see, useful to bear in mind with respect to *London Fields*.

Success, from 1978, further penetrates and anticipates the yuppie culture of the eighties and marks the end of an informal trilogy of ‘apprentice works’ (Diedrick 20). Also introduced here is the use of the patently unreliable narrator. In fact there are two narrators, who both compulsively tell their stories and compete desperately for the reader’s trust. In the process, their reports contradict each other, and we are left unsure which version to believe, if any at all. Disregarding ‘Johnny’, the shadowy alter ego of Quentin Villiers in *Dead Babies*, *Success* also marks the appearance of the first of the many ‘doubles’ that crowd Amis’s work (see note 35, page 42). One (in this case Gregory) has money, sex appeal and success, traits which are set off by the total lack in all three departments of the other (here Terry). In *London Fields*, Guy Clinch is explicitly cast as the double, the ‘foil’, to Keith Talent and while we may see some significance in the fact that upper class Guy finally beats lower class Keith, the shift of fortunes in *Success* goes the other way and can be read as an allegory of the decline of the established class system in Britain.

In 1980 Amis became a full time writer and published *Other People: A Mystery Story* in 1981. The novel reads as Amis’s exercise in the ‘Martian Technique,’ the adoption of a

foreign, or strange, perspective to defamiliarise readers with the everyday world otherwise taken for granted (see 46). The self-reflective style evident in the first three novels is further foregrounded in *Other People*, which takes the opportunity to comment upon the power of the writer and initiates as such the theme of narrative authority which is seen in the next two novels, *Money* from 1985, and *London Fields* as well. The powerful narrator of *Other People* is subtly identified with the murderer of the main character, Mary Lamb (who also has a double, Amy Hide, a dark alter ego like Johnny to Quentin in *Dead Babies*), and the correlation between authorship and murder, between creating and destructing, foreshadows a later treatment in *London Fields* (see note 22, page 31; 4.2.2).

With its depiction of cultural depravation, excess, greed and self-destruction, *Money* revisits thematically known ground. Together with *Other People* and *Time's Arrow* (see below) it is Amis's most remarkable technical achievement. The challenge Amis has set himself is to let his own voice be heard through the ramblings of his inarticulate, unreliable drunk of a narrator. Together with *London Fields* and *The Information*, *Money* forms a kind of

informal trilogy [...] they are just long novels about the same kind of things - shifting identities, writer figures. They've all got dogs in them; they've all got pornography in them; they all have credulous characters who are affected the wrong way by what they read. Either it's a kind of trilogy or it's just my stuff, and I'll be like Graham Greene and go on writing it forever until I'm dead (Amis in Fuller interview 5).

With *Money* and *London Fields* the self-reflectivity of Amis's style reaches its highpoint. Famously symbolised by the appearance in *Money* of a character called Martin Amis, self-reflectivity is treated as a point of comparison on pages 25 and 97 between the two novels.

Minor works appeared in 1986 and 1987. *The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America* is a collection of essays taken from Amis's journalistic career. The theme holding the essays together is America, and Amis faithfully details his fascination with this object of love and hate alike. Like its later counterpart, *Visiting Mrs Nabokov and Other Excursions* – another collection of essays published 1993, *The Moronic Inferno* is most interesting for the clues it contains to Amis's own fiction. *Einstein's Monsters* is a collection of short stories, or parables, about the consequences of living under the threat of nuclear annihilation, and about how life might be after such a holocaust. Containing as its introduction the essay

‘Thinkability’ in which Amis voices his concern of the nuclear arms race, *Einstein’s Monsters* is indispensable to anyone wanting to explore the subtheme in *London Fields* of impending nuclear disaster.

In between the ‘main contributions’ (Fuller, *Murder He Wrote* 5) of the trilogy mentioned above, Amis published *Time’s Arrow* in 1992, remarkable mainly for its technical experiment: it is told backwards. Starting with the death of a Nazi doctor who fled to America after the war, the novel traces the steps of his life back to and before his participation in the holocaust, the description of which becomes disturbingly uncanny with cause and effect reversed.

Like *Other People*, Amis’s latest novel, the philosophical noir crime story *Night Train* from 1997, is told from a female point of view, this time in the first person. In some ways it departs from Amis’s previous novels; though self-destruction is in its place, the graphic and shockingly detailed descriptions of all kinds of violence, sex and body functions is absent from this novel which foregrounds its story rather than the telling of it. Furthermore, *Night Train* is told ‘straight.’ There is no irony against the narrator and the self-reflectivity is toned down. Amis suggests that *Night Train* marks a new direction: ‘I feel I’m at a kind of turning point. [...] I do feel that I have always been playing the devil’s advocate, I have always exulted in people’s discomfort [...] Now I’m just wondering whether it is going to go on like that’ (Miller 4). The germ of this change away from self-reflectivity is laid in *The Information* where the narrator disappears in the second half ‘to let them [the characters] get on with it without me’ (Wachtel 57) Amis relates it to a feeling, coming from having survived his mid-life crisis, of wanting to prepare his leave, starting to say ‘bye’, whereas he in the majority of his works has been obsessed with saying to his readers: ‘Hi! You know, I can do this, I can do that, I can be funny, I can amuse you, entertain you, delight you, all these things’ (Wachtel 57). Due to appear 2000, is another collection of short stories and a memoir.

Thesis Outline

Written in 1989, *London Fields* takes place in 1999 toward the end of the millennium and has a correspondingly apocalyptic setting. The nuclear arms race is heading for an explosive conclusion; the weather is behaving strangely and so is the earth itself - a ‘new tilt’ means

that London will experience a full solar eclipse on November 5th. With the nuclear tension, the weather, and the Eclipse (the combination of which is enigmatically referred to as ‘the Crisis’) as frenzy and mysteriously interconnected background decorations, Samson Young, an unproductive and dying American writer, comes to London and finds his twenty-years writer’s block dissolving as he meets Nicola Six, the heroine and creative murderess, who is plotting her own death, meant to coincide, on her 35th birthday, with the Eclipse and the culmination of the Crisis. Samson tags along and writes down her story with the intention of eventually publishing it as his first work of fiction. *London Fields* is Samson’s story of Nicola Six, written from different points of view in the third-person, interspersed with his diary entries, which are written in the first-person and loosely organised around his writing but also filled with private details, anxieties, and hopes. Enlisted in Nicola’s drama are Keith Talent, working-class anti-hero and designated murderer, and his double: ‘The Foil’, Guy Clinch, antiquated upper-class good guy and possible murderer in a ‘surprise ending’. Unwittingly, Keith and Guy are being framed by Nicola. And so is Samson; in the end he is the one who steps into the story he is writing and performs the role as Nicola’s murderer.

Forced by time and space to limit ourselves, but at the same time desiring to provide a representative, if not exhaustive, discussion of the novel as a whole, we have decided to let the novel’s two main characteristics, its humour and its complications, constitute the limiting focus of the thesis.⁶ Both the humour and the complications have to do with how the text is told rather than what it is about, whereas in the third major aspect of the novel we focus upon, the play with narrative authority, style and content come together. In our effort to illuminate the narrative strategies employed to produce the effects of the humour and the complications, we are continually drawn close to the text, whose demand of the reader’s participation lead to our consideration of narrative authority in chapter four.

⁶ Though we do investigate its cultural criticism, we do not read *London Fields* as social criticism, nor do we pursue the nuclear war theme and its influence on fiction as such. For critics who have tuned into the social criticism of Amis’s writing, see Stein; Yardley. Characteristic for Amis’s ironic style, he has been criticised both for ‘mounting the pulpit’ (Yardley) in outrage at the state of the world, as well as for failing to put enough distance between himself and the malevolence he depicts (Fuller, *Murder He Wrote*; Mills). In the opening essay of *The Moronic Inferno*, the polemical ‘Thinkability,’ Amis spells out his fears and his outrage concerning the nuclear arms race. He also considers the consequences for fiction of the possibility that it ‘could all end tomorrow.’ In his review Julian Symons calls *London Fields* Amis’s attempt to translate the ideas from ‘Thinkability’ into fiction. The most convincing reading of the millennial theme and its nuclear anxiety is provided by Penny Smith.

Directed by a highly diversionary novel, our thesis has not been allowed to follow a straight course to its conclusion. Our main interest throughout is the interrelationship between author and reader. Formulated in the final chapter as a playful battle for narrative authority over the text, this relationship is in different ways the centre of all chapters, the focal point around which analyses and interpretations are carried out. Diverting from the centre, however, are different points of analytic interest which take us on detours round the novel. While keeping the main argument in eye, this procedure gives us the opportunity to comment on elements such as: the ending; Nicola's death; the excessive symbolism; issues of double-voicing and sentimentality, the inclusion of which illustrates, we hope, the richness of the novel as much as the whimsicality of our interest.

Before any responses are allowed to settle and become expected, *London Fields* takes its readers through an opening of contradicting signals, metafictional hints and a plurality of voices. We have sought to summarise the kind of work the reader is asked to perform under these conditions under the heading of Genre in chapter one. By genre we mean the necessary formation of some frame of understanding through which the different elements can be understood. Through the devices mentioned above, the novel frustrates this process, which it also thematises by explicitly offering itself as a murder story, a love story and a mystery story, among others.

The general force exerted by expectations on the understandings they precede is investigated in this first chapter, and we argue that the novel teaches us to keep our minds open to a continual revision of whatever understanding it has led us to adopt and from which we build our expectations of what is to come. These expectations are consistently being disrupted, and with the demise of Samson, the narrator, the novel displays the consequences of blindly living by understandings once conceived, and now deemed immune to change, and teaches its reader indirectly to stay open for a revision of expectations.

For a number of reasons, the humour of *London Fields*, which we investigate in chapter two, does not allow the reader to remain passive. On a thematic level, because Amis writes about things like murder, rape, violence, and child abuse that are bound to invite moral engagement from the reader. On a technical level, because Amis's comic repertoire, which includes tropes like anthropomorphism, hyperbole and repetition, and a device we have called 'comic reversal', works to unsettle any inclination the reader may have to sit back, relax, and be

passively entertained. By urging us to be actively involved, the humour in *London Fields* works as part of the novel's overall play with the reader, while also providing a significant relief from the complications that otherwise abound.

The stress of intellectual over emotional appeal in *London Fields* is an important prerequisite for our attempt in chapter four to read the novel as a theoretical statement. Throughout the reading we are called close to the text, whose gaps call for the reader's analytical skills. The nature of the involvement being intellectual rather than emotional, we are primed as readers to tune into the novel's theoretical layer, which regards narrative authority. Nowhere is the intellectuality of the appeal more obvious than in the novel's humour, which discourages identification of the reader with the characters by continually showing them (with Nicola as the important exception) to be unable to correctly assess the situations they find themselves in. Ineluctably we search for the knowing voice behind the irony. In *London Fields* the dramatic use of irony works to turn the attention away from the characters to the author.

Chapter three opens by addressing one of the issues we have touched upon in the methodology, namely that of the relationship between text and reader. We are searching here for tools to help us account for the significant amount of work asked of us in the reading *London Fields*, and we are led to consider in what sense the reader can be said to contribute to the production of meaning in the text. By 'letting the reader in' this discussion points forward to the discussions in chapter four as well as backwards to the methodology.

Having mentioned some sources of complication in chapter one, we focus in chapter three on the disrupted way in which *London Fields* is narrated; on its composite nature as part 'diary' and part 'novel', and on the frequent repetition of scenes from different perspectives.

Ostensibly the result of the narrator's peculiar position without control of his material, the repeated scenes make for a discontinuous way of narration and require considerable attention from the reader if anything more than superficial understanding is to be reached. Chapter three is the analytical centre of the thesis and demonstrates the indispensability of close reading. In that it rewards the reader's patient, analytical efforts by actually containing solutions, however hidden they may be, to its puzzles, the text *teaches* us to do close reading.

In chapter four we take a step back and think about consequences of the play we saw in the first three chapters which the text enacts with the reader. Whether in the shape of arresting

comic reversals, shockingly funny descriptions of bad behaviour, or disruptive obstructions to the reader's sense making efforts, both the humour and the complication have the engagement of the reader as a vital component. The nature of the humour and the complexities engage the reader to the extent that justifies a view of the text as a co-operative effort between author and reader rather than a product of either one. As a direct consequence, both figures can reasonably aspire to the narrative authority; in a sense the text is the text of the reader as well as the text of the author.

Chapter four is not only a theoretical superimposition on chapters two and three. The question of narrative authority, which is how the relationship between author and reader is formulated in the last chapter, does not only spring from a consideration of the structure of the novel, but constitutes one of its most important themes as well. The narrator dies; so does the heroine who is in charge of how the events progress, and the third author figure in the text is a shadowy character, whose initials, M. A., invite identification with author Martin Amis. One by one we go through the narrative layers and point to the ambiguous effect obtained from 'killing' a narrative voice. While such an operation suggests a relativisation of the author's power, it also leads inevitably to the next and higher level of narrative authority.

The same ambiguity arises from Amis's attempt to inscribe himself in his narrative. On the one hand, it is a powerful compromisation of the omnipotence he could naturally claim if he had stayed aloof and ontologically separate from his story. On the other hand, there will *always* be an 'implied' level of narrative authority in the text, behind which we can only come by going outside the text's boundaries. Whatever the amount of confusion, we have to consider some organising force behind it. Having established what *London Fields* 'says' with regards to narrative authority, we widen the scope in the Conclusion, and place this 'statement' in a broader, more theoretical discussion about the status of the author in general.

CHAPTER 1: BUILDING A GENRE

Understood simply as a 'literary type or class' (Cuddon 280), the concept of genre is of limited use to our exploration of *London Fields*. Our aim is not to show in what senses the novel, as has been suggested, is a 'satirical allegory' (Gowrie), an 'end-of-the-world-melodrama' (Rifkind), 'a mutant form [...] an unstable mixture of millennial murder mystery, urban satire, apocalyptic jeremiad and domestic farce' (Diedrick 147), or whether it plainly 'defies categorisation' (Yardley). Our treatment of genre is on a microlevel; we seek to explore the ways in which the reader is dragged into the novel by being invited constantly to form expectations which are then distorted. Expectations, used in this manner, are the preliminary guesses about the whole which the reader makes by projecting the traits of the text in the ongoing process of reading. Very simply: picking up, say, James Joyce's *Dubliners*, one will expect the short stories to be about people from Dublin. Arising from what we know, or think we know, our expectations are guesses, more or less qualified, about what we do not know. If we understand 'genre' dynamically and from the perspective of the reader, i.e. not as an objective categorisation to be made after reading but as an ongoing process occurring during reading, 'genre' is well described as the set of 'reader's expectations' formed by the encounter with the novel.

The degree of influence exerted by our expectations on our eventual understanding has been subject of intense debate in hermeneutic philosophy. This paper does not enter that discussion but will quietly assume, in alliance with common sense, that our expectations to some extent do shape our understanding. In literature this means that our understanding of the way the butler handles the letter knife in a murder story will be influenced by our expectation that he is the murderer in the story. As mentioned in the Introduction, the analysis in this paper are informed by a view of reading as an essentially dialectic process between text and reader. In this view neither the Text nor the Reader is particularly interesting as isolated entities; whether they can be defined at all, except in relation to each other, is an open question (see 3.1).

In *Validity in Interpretation* Hirsch offers a description of the reading process that explicitly equates ‘genre’ and ‘reader expectations’.⁷ Rather than viewing it as pre-established, Hirsch opens up the genre concept and makes it the name for the reader’s expectations when he encounters a text. Hirsch can still operate with traditional, pre-established genres such as comedy, tragedy, elegy, and so on; equating the concept of genre with reader expectation means including into it less well-formed and articulated responses to the text as well as expectations regarding its tone, style and theme. Hirsch’s dynamic view of genre in terms of reader expectations is helpful here because *London Fields*, through its play with the genre concept, seems to endorse a similar understanding. The reader’s alertness as called for by the text is the central theme of this thesis and will be dealt with in the following sections as well. In this chapter we look at it in terms of how the opening of the novel disrupts easy genre definition, thus forcing the reader to stay alert and pay attention.

According to Hirsch, the initial choice of genre is so crucial that many misconstructions of meaning in the reading of literature stem from an initial mistaken guess about genre. The mistake can be hard to detect precisely because of the nature of ‘genre’: what does not fall into the expectations defined by the genre tends to be overlooked or bent to fit the choice of genre first made. While crucial, the choice of genre is not, and indeed should not be, necessarily determining. Since we can sometimes identify a *mis*understanding, Hirsch reasons, there must also be understanding, ‘right’ understanding. The genre guess is to be used heuristically, as a preliminary starting point, and is to be revised, not occasionally but continually, as the traits found in the text disturb the initial expectations. Hirsch proposes this oscillation between genre and trait as a more appropriate formulation of the hermeneutic circle which traditionally is seen to run between the whole of a text and its parts, a formulation which according to Hirsch ‘clouds some of the processes of understanding in unnecessary paradox’ (*Validity* 76).⁸ While the whole is understood only in terms of its parts, these parts retain a kind of independence in that they continually suggest a vision of the whole to which they in the next moment propose amendments. The ‘vision’ (a kind of

⁷ Jonathan Culler presents a similar view in *Structuralist Poetics* when he says that genre is a ‘conventional function of language, a particular relation to the world which serves as a norm or expectation to guide the reader in his encounter with the text’ (136, qtd in Glasgow 20).

⁸ The hermeneutic circle is a concept widely used in hermeneutic philosophy by philosophers such as Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer. It was traditionally seen as a connection between the whole of a text and its parts in the studies of the Bible and legal documents from the 15th to the 18th century.

preliminary version of the whole) which the parts continually project is what Hirsch calls genre, and what he calls traits are the parts of the text.

Whereas the classical formulation of the hermeneutic circle is better suited to account for reading after it has taken place, Hirsch's alternative formulation is an adaptation of the circle to the ongoing process of reading, its temporality. By talking about the projection (the genre) of the parts, Hirsch hopes to avoid the consequence of the classical understanding of the circle that the reader *only* knows the parts after having read the whole. Such a conception would mean that everything that happens during the (first) reading process is put on stand-by until the end, when the discovery of the whole throws its illuminating light back onto the parts. The parts can only be understood in their relation to the whole, so when the whole is not yet available the parts remain mysterious like signs waiting to be decoded. Hirsch avoids this by ascribing to the reader the ability to extrapolate from the parts a suggestion of the whole, an operation which in effect starts the dialectic from the first page, the reading of which will project a whole to be amended by the traits of page two, to be amended by page three, and so on.

The two formulations of the hermeneutic circle lead to readings that differ in focus. Hirsch's conception of the hermeneutic circle inspires to close reading of the parts and what they project. A reading inspired by the classic formulation is driven by a sense of the whole and how the parts relate to it. This reading is the less immediate of the two and the difference corresponds to the difference between a first and a second reading of the same text. The reading inspired by Hirsch fits the initial, first reading. The dialectic runs between the traits, or parts, and the projections (genre) these parts suggest to the reader of the whole. Since there is yet to come a stable 'whole', the traits, or parts, will dominate. The second reading, on the other hand, seeks, with the whole in mind, to explain the traits that constitute that whole; here the whole is dominant.

To present the two views of reading as complimentary of course partly obscures the idea of circularity that is inherent in both; there is no a priori starting point from which the reading will proceed. The reader's historicity is what precedes the dialectic between part and whole which truly does not 'start' and 'end' at designated points but which is constantly taking place inasmuch as the parts and the whole cannot be defined less it be in relation to each other. Since the reader never starts from scratch but always has a certain 'pre-understanding',

it is misleading to talk of a genuine ‘first reading’. When we say ‘first reading’, we mean literally the first reading of a particular text, and the common sense claim is that this reading will differ from the second reading of the same text in the very banal sense that the knowledge obtained through the first reading is incorporated into the second reading which, in this respect, is less ‘naive.’⁹ The classic understanding of the hermeneutic circle unequivocally states the interdependence of part and whole; what we need Hirsch’s version for is to account for how the dialectic can occur when the whole is not yet in sight. The answer is simple: the dialectic can take place when the reader in an act of imagination extracts a sense of whole from the first parts.

1.1 The Opening

The following section deals extensively with the opening of *London Fields*. We will try to show how the necessary process of genre building, understood as the search for a frame of understanding into which the traits of the text can be understood, is frustrated by the novel. Instead of a tempered introduction to how the novel should be understood, Amis gives us a novel that opens like a Pandora’s box of contradicting signals and provokes confused questions like ‘Who’s talking?’, ‘Can we trust the voices?’, ‘Are we reading diary or a novel? Or a report-like non-fiction?’ While this thesis is, unavoidably, written with a view of *London Fields* as a whole in mind, we examine the traits of the opening to make explicit the temporality of the reading process, i.e. to show how the vision of the whole is projected from the parts during the reading. It is important to keep in mind that the creation of a whole is a continual process of projecting and revising a vision from the parts, and the aim of this chapter is to illustrate how this process works in the opening pages of *London Fields*. As mentioned in the methodology, the underlying view of reading in this thesis is a hermeneutic movement between the parts and the whole, and this is also the case in the present chapter; the parts will be illuminated by drawing lines to and from the whole. That we structure this chapter around the traits is meant to illustrate how the initial encounter with the novel is experienced, how the process of building a genre is played out.

⁹ Iser also distinguishes between a first and a second reading. According to Iser, the difference between the first and second reading is not that the second is somehow ‘better’ or ‘more complete’. Iser rejects the premise that an objective meaning is gradually approached and argues that all we can say about successive readings is that they differ. The second reading will be affected by the connections made during the first reading, but can in no way be said to be more correct (The Reading Process 56).

The opening of *London Fields* engages the reader by thematising the very process the reader is going through of building and adjusting initial expectations. On page 1, Samson Young, the dying narrator, tries to assess the nature of the story he is about to tell: '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.' Appropriately placed at the very beginning, these sentences function as explicit guides to the reading process. Each of the three categories, or genres, ('true story', 'murder story', 'love story') with which Samson tries to fix the narrative have their own conventions and by invoking them Samson is telling the reader what to expect.

Calling a story 'true', i.e. claiming, as Samson does, that it is 'really happening', introduces a set of rules, a set of standards to which the reader will expect his story to conform. To call a story 'true' or 'real' is to discourage the reader of fiction's willing suspension of disbelief by making it unnecessary and to submit the story to an evaluation based on how well it corresponds to the life the reader is likely to experience when he puts the book down. Samson is quick, however, not to let the acceptance of the entire story rest on its verisimilitude: his 'it's a true story' is qualified by 'but I can't believe it's really happening' which in effect asks the reader to keep his suspension of disbelief while accepting the story as real. As we shall shortly see, the realist ambitions behind Samson's contention that he is telling a 'true story' are compromised by a number of elements.

The reference to 'a murder story' invokes an expectation of a murder and perhaps a mystery about who the murderer is, what the motive is, or how the murder is carried out. Also roughly included in the 'murder story' genre is a convention saying that the story will have a climax when the mystery is solved. Whereas the murder story has generical limitations, it is hard to think of any story that could not also be a love story: 'a classic love story,' 'a modern love story,' 'a true love story' etc. For our present purposes it suffices to say that Samson's 'it's a love story' creates the expectations of a story with a dominant love theme. Whatever shape it takes and whatever is done with it, love must constitute a significant theme in the novel as a whole. Just before letting his narrative begin Samson takes another shot at determining its nature. It is 'not a whodunit,' he says, 'more a whydoit' (3). The comment is a clue to the interpretation of the ending which rests crucially on the question of *why* Samson decides to

step into his narrative, thereby destroying it. As we shall see below, how this *why* is interpreted has major implications for how the novel as a whole is seen (see 1.7).

1.2 The Dedication

Samson's genre suggestions on the first pages need to be put into the context of the opening in general which includes other elements significant to shaping the reader's genre expectations. Four such elements can be identified as relevant to our purposes here of showing how the opening shapes and plays with our expectations: the dedication, the table of contents, the Note, and the title.

The dedication, 'to my father', will undoubtedly be ignored by many readers, while others might attribute to it all kinds of significances. Whatever the right proportion of attention might be, it is certain that no reader with biographical knowledge of Amis will dismiss it as irrelevant. Martin Amis's father is the renowned novelist Kingsley Amis whose debut novel, *Lucky Jim* from 1954 won the Somerset Maugham award (as did Martin's first novel, *The Rachel Papers* from 1973) and brought instant fame to its author who remained productive and successful to his death in 1995. While a deeper account of the similarities and differences between father and son goes beyond the scope of this paper, a brief mention of some of the aesthetic differences might illuminate aspects of the dedication, 'to my father', in *London Fields*.¹⁰

Martin Amis has never expressed any particular wish to dissociate himself from his father's writing or tried to deny the influence he has received from him. Indeed, both father and son seem to agree that the major difference between them is simply one of time.¹¹ Martin has said that 'if our birth dates had been transposed I would probably have written something like his novels and he might well have written something like mine. The difference is just one of time' (Bigsby 170). And Kingsley: 'I think that if anyone's reading us both in fifty or a hundred year's time, we shall seem like very much the same kind of writer. We're more

¹⁰ For more extensive treatment of the relationship, private and literary, between Kingsley and Martin Amis, see Kerr; Stout.

¹¹ Martin cites with approval a reviewer of his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, who suggested that Amis had exorcised his father's influence by imitating him (Bigsby 170).

similar than we seem in some ways; we have a similar sense of verbal, spoken humour. We compete with each other on that, always have, in a family-joke way' (Stout 4).

The aesthetic difference is basically the difference between the classic realism of Kingsley (Diedrick 6) and the postmodernism¹² of his son. Kingsley Amis's criticism of experimental writing (modernist and postmodernist) also includes the work of his son. Though he considers his son outstanding among his contemporaries ('they should be doing what Martin is doing' (Stout 5)), he has little understanding for the postmodernist tricks that crowd his son's narrative. Two characteristics of postmodernism are especially unbearable to Kingsley: involution (the author's presence in his tale), and the conflation of high art and mass culture. In Kingsley's world there are taboos, things which literature cannot, or should not, treat. On the fair amount of sex in his son's novels, Kingsley comments 'nobody says that fiction should be able to discuss everything; he thinks he can do it, but I wonder if he can' (Stout 5). This difference between the generations is confirmed by Martin Amis in the following quote, from the essay on John Updike in *Visiting Mrs. Nabokov*. The characterisation of Updike applies just as well to Amis's own working method: 'the novelists of yesteryear would gallantly take leave of their creations at the bedroom door. Updike tags along, not only into the bedroom but into the bathroom. Indeed, he sends a little Japanese camera crew in there after them' (51).¹³

¹² 'Postmodernism' is a highly debated term, sometimes used to designate specific literary techniques (see Hawkes 27), other times as a broader term to specify the period of modern literature (from the 1950's up to the present), and also at times as a general move away from the Enlightenment idea of the individual, seen as having a stable identity and being guided by reason, towards a 'dissolution of the I' and a focus on the external, socio-economic forces that work on and shape our identities. In order to avoid confusion, we will try to be precise about what we mean with each mention of 'postmodernism'. Here the term is used in accordance with Martin Amis's views on the matter, aired in a number of interviews. Amis talks about postmodernism mainly as a collection of stylistic 'tricks of the trade' of literature today. These include playing with formerly stable notions of linear time (as seen in *Time's Arrow*, which is told backwards), involution, selfreflexivity, and the conflation of high art and mass culture. In section 4.2.1 we will return to the idea of the dissolution of the I. For more on Martin Amis's works in connection with postmodernism, see Diedrick 10-14.

¹³ Amis has openly said that he sees no need for literature to respect any 'Do Not Enter' signs (Bigsby 174). In the Morrison interview, Amis defends the amount of sex in his work: 'My father, for instance, says that sex is a dead end in fiction. But I think that just as you find out something about someone when they laugh – when they really laugh – you find out a lot by seeing them in a sexual situation. Almost the first thing I ask about a character that I am about to get going on is "What are they like in the sack?"' (Morrison 66). See also Bigsby 174 and Haffenden 5. In *London Fields* we are offered indexes to the characters's personalities through their visits to the bathroom as well: Guy's bowel movement is 'deft and speedy' (85) as if to take one's time here would be blamefully egoistical. Nicola 'micturate[s] angrily, as if trying to drill a hole through the hard marble' (192), half offended that she has to perform this activity, which she makes characteristically destructive. And Keith is condemned by his heavy diet of pork pies and hot currys to periods in the bathroom of 'groaning extremity' (407) like the character he is: physically weak and totally out of proportion.

The difference is not only one of theme, that Amis Jr. writes scenes from the bedroom and the bathroom and Amis Sr. does not, there are also differences in the way the stories are told. There is a similar sense of humour but the speed of narration is different. Answering to his father's complaint about a 'compulsive vividness' of style, Martin calls it a 'question of taste. [Kingsley] said that there should be more sentences in my books which go, "He finished his drink and left". Well, I think there should be *fewer* sentences like that in his books [...] There should be no dead areas' (Bigsby 179). Kingsley Amis's reluctance to accept the stylistics of postmodernism, defined by Martin simply as the 'drawing attention to the fact that you are writing a novel' (Bigsby 171), led him to immediately stop his reading of *Money* the moment 'Martin Amis' enters as a character (Stout 4). This anecdotal incident is wittily parodied in *The Information* where one of the main characters, Richard, writes novels of such complexity that readers get routinely and very literally sick from attempting to read them. When *London Fields* is dedicated to Kingsley Amis it could be seen as a similar, internal, joke ('guess what Dad. I'm still doing it, and it's all for you'). Alternatively, it could also be a kind of argument ('look how well I'm doing it now and see if that doesn't convince you') or perhaps a peace offering ('I know we disagree and do things differently, but I still want to acknowledge that you have taught me a lot of what I can').

1.3 The Table of Contents

Samson's contention that his story is 'true' is contradicted by the table of contents, whose strict organisation invokes a strong sense of artificiality incongruent with the chaotic 'real life'. The division into twenty-four chapters may be seen as a reference to the neo-classic idea that plays should not cover more than one day, or the time it takes to act it. One chapter for each hour. As the reading progresses, this expectation is disappointed; the action stretches over some three months. Still Samson seems to think he (or the events which he just takes down on paper) has corresponded to the dramatic unities which apart from the unity of time include the unity of place and the unity of action. On page 388, Samson and Nicola discuss the progress of the plan which requires Guy to 'go away for a while.' Samson's comment, 'there go my unities,' refers to the unity of place (here: London) which then can be upheld no longer, but more broadly it also hints at a general realisation that 'organizing fiction according to the time-honoured rules laid down by tradition is not only impossible but mendacious. It insinuates a harmony that can no longer be described convincingly' (Stein 126). Samson's comment can also be interpreted in a broader perspective as the impossibility

of copying life into writing, of writing realistically at all. The ‘unities’ are then used metonymically to invoke the aspiration of Realism to reflect life truthfully and the fact that they are ‘gone’ suggests the impossibility of Realism, of catching life ‘as it is’.

The sense of artificiality is strengthened by the titles of the chapters: ‘The Murderer’, ‘The Murderee’, ‘The Foil’ through which the impression is conveyed of a well staged play with unambiguous roles assigned to the characters. Apart from typecasted actors embodying stylised characters on the scene, there will be a director behind it controlling the events. The reader is invited to join the audience in escape from the disorderly reality which begins again when the play ends. Framed like this in textual surroundings that suggest the manufactured construction of a stage play, Samson’s insistence that ‘it’s really happening’ is seriously put into perspective.¹⁴

Few places is the fictionality of *London Fields* exposed as clearly as it is in terms of the names of the characters, to which attention is explicitly drawn when Samson’s publisher’s secretary comments: ‘We’re unhappy about the names, sir,’ (160). From the sacrilegious and outrageously inappropriate ‘God’ or ‘Shakespeare’ (assigned to two regulars of the Black Cross); to ‘Hope’ and ‘Faith’ (where we see a clear subordination of character to the wordplay offered by their names), the names in *London Fields* are all, in one way or another, suggestive of the characters that carry them. Keith Talent is talentless and Guy Clinch is ‘the good guy’ caught (in a clinch) between forces he cannot understand and ‘burned’ in the end (the Guy Fawkes dolls (451)). Furthermore, ‘to guy someone’ means to ridicule by comic imitation, exactly the treatment Guy receives throughout the novel. The possible connotations of Nicola Six are almost inexhaustible. Keith predictably mishears her last name as ‘Sex’ (37) – a hint to Nicola’s most powerful weapon, and as ‘seeks’ (37), which alludes to her search for a murderer. ‘Nicola Six’ sounds like ‘Nuclear Sex’, and we are led think of Nicola’s destructive capacities, the description of her as a black hole and her preference for sodomy.

With ‘Old Nick’ (404) Nicola is compared to the devil himself and again it is Nicola the destroyer which is hinted at here: ‘she really did a number on him. What was that number? It was Six. Six. Six’ (97). As Diedrick mentions (*Understanding* 154), the repetition of ‘Six’

¹⁴ The structure of the table of contents will be further commented on in section 3.4.

yields 'sick' and takes on as such special significance considering Nicola's symbolic connection to the planet and their 'shared' death wish. But 'Six. Six. Six' is also a reference to the 'number of the beast' in The Book of Revelation (13.13), and we are invited to consider to view Nicola in light of the havoc wrecked by the beasts in the apocalypse envisioned by John.

'Samson' carries biblical connotations as well, of course. The Book of Judges tells the story of the powerful, but gullible, Samson who is double-crossed no less than three times by the cunning Delilah, who finds out at last that the key to Samson's power lies in his hair. Though excuses can be made for the intelligence of Samson in *London Fields* that would not work for his biblical namesake, who does not only overlook clues but stubbornly refuses to accept the evident proof of Delilah's treason, the comparison holds; Samson Young too is framed by the beautiful woman and realises too late that he is as much a pawn in Nicola's game as any of the other characters. Appropriately foreshadowing his demise, this Samson loses his hair as well (301), and his last name, 'Young', is an ironic attachment to the terminally ill and deteriorating narrator.

Insofar as the fiction reader from the very beginning expects what he reads to be 'not real,' the contrast between fiction and reality is an easy one to gain. The claim that a story is 'real' is never likely to make its reader confuse a novel with an autobiography; the initial genre building is already made by the signs in the bookstore, dividing the books according to pre-established genres: fiction, non-fiction, hobby, children's books and so on. Samson's story is not 'real' in the sense that we can go out and meet the characters he writes about; we do not need structural disclaimers to tell us that. Their presence, the fact that the structure works against Samson's wishes to convince us that he is telling a true story, is exactly what distinguishes *London Fields* from realist novels which claim to be real and depend on the reader's willing contribution to the illusion. This kind of contribution is discouraged in *London Fields*, whose opening is styled and organised in a way that contrasts with the characteristics of disorder and chaos normally attributed to 'real life'. On Samson's level, the events portrayed by him are real (Nicola, Keith and Guy are on the same level as Samson, so to speak), but this 'reality' is framed in a fiction.

1.4 The Note

Another element serving to call attention to the fictionality of the work, is the short ‘Note’, written by ‘M. A.’, significantly inserted between the table of contents and Samson’s first diary entry, i.e. ‘inside’ the novel.¹⁵ Readers are in this manner invited to take the note as part of the book’s design and not as exterior wrapping, whose bearing on events *in* the work is only accidental. First to be noticed is the signature, ‘M. A.’ – Martin Amis of course: Martin Amis wrote *London Fields* and ‘M. A.’ refers in the Note to *London Fields* as his work too. It is customary, however, for Amis to play with the notions of authorship and narrative authority. Most prominently in *Other People* and of course in *Money* where the self-reflectivity of Amis’s writing reaches its pinnacle with the appearance of Martin Amis as a character.¹⁶ The signature of the note in *London Fields* is a hint that readers may expect more of this.

Martin Amis’s most obvious incarnation in *London Fields* is the writer Mark Asprey (M. A.!) with whom Samson has switched apartments. Asprey’s success in art and love sets off the comparative failures of Samson in the same departments and foreshadows the more extensive treatment of literary jealousy in *The Information*, Amis’s novel from 1997. Asprey gives Samson a novel to read, *Crossbone Waters*, ‘now that’s non-fiction’ he comments, but the categories ‘fiction’ and ‘non-fiction’ are not to be taken too seriously. The novel was published as fiction, but this was only a thin disguise on its strong autobiographical elements seized upon by a woman who sees herself in the female character and objects to the way the events are portrayed. The author, ‘Marius Appleby,’ (M. A.!!) who is, of course, Mark Asprey, holds his grounds: ‘What happened happened,’ (433) he states in disagreement with Cornelia Constantine, the real life model for *Crossbone Waters*. In the end, the tables are turned again. Asprey admits to Samson that ‘[Cornelia Constantine] was telling the truth when she said that *Crossbone Waters* was “all lies” ’ (452). Speaking of the seduction in the novel, ‘she says they didn’t. He says they did’ (433). The truth is (or is it?) that they did little else; Asprey’s lie consisted in making her breasts ‘magnificent’, inventing sandy lagoons, and pretending there was a seduction period at all before they started ‘doing it’ (452).

¹⁵ Other works by Amis similarly have a ‘note’ signed ‘M. A.’: *Dead Babies*, *Money*, *Einstein’s Monsters*.

¹⁶ The name, ‘Martina Twain’ of another author character in *Money* suggests a relation both to Mark Twain and Martin Amis: Martina (Martin-A).

The point is of course to play with the borderline between fiction and reality and to unsettle the narrative authority. As Asprey tells Samson: ‘It doesn’t matter what anyone writes anymore. The time for mattering has passed. The truth doesn’t matter and *is not wanted*’ (452). The designation of the initials ‘M. A.’ is subject to undermining play in the novel, and Amis suggests by using the same initials for the Note that the play is not limited to the novel. We are invited, in other words to, include Amis in the talk about the instability of narration and authorship. However, as we shall see below in chapter four, this is a two-edged sword. By telling readers that they ‘only’ read fiction, Amis is also telling them to look at the creator of the fiction, the author. As Victoria Alexander points out in a comparison between Amis and one of his literary heroes, ‘Amis and Nabokov both emphasize the fact of fiction via involution. Amis includes himself as a character in *Money*, a character who is actually responsible for designing the plot. The reader’s willing suspension of disbelief is discouraged, his awe of the artist writer encouraged’ (4).

1.5 The Title

In the Note M. A. is bent, like Samson on the opening page, on shaping the reader’s expectations; most explicitly by relating to us his list of options for a title. There is *Time’s Arrow* which Amis was later to use for his 1992 work; the slightly sensational *Millennium*,¹⁷ the (anti-)love story title: *The Death of Love*; a title placing one character unambiguously in the centre: *The Murderee*, and also *London Fields, or The Murderee: Final Version*, which develops the impression from the table of contents of a story which has been controllably staged by directing attention to the fact that it has also been written, and even rewritten (‘Final Version’). Calling attention, in other words, to its own status as fiction.

In the end M. A. settles for *London Fields*. It is not a name for something explicit in the text, he assures us, but rather it ‘lives and breathes, or it tries to, on every page.’ Contrasting

¹⁷ The German translation of *London Fields* incidentally bears the title ‘1999’, which arguably induces another set of interpretations than the English original and consequently invokes different expectations of the text. Hip, in, modern, apocalyptic, this title will appeal to millennium freaks and generally benefit from a general obsession with the millennial change. One could argue that the expectations invoked by ‘1999’ is not inappropriate (just as its English cousin, ‘*Millennium*’, ‘1999’ is ‘already there’ in the text) so much as totally different from the expectations brought out by the mysterious and timeless ‘*London Fields*’.

chiefly with the sharply focused *The Murdereee*, *London Fields* is vague, dreamy and undefining, promising perhaps something big to fill it out. In his *Sunday Times* review, Peter Kemp calls it a 'pastoral' title, whose expectations of a rural setting, perhaps in the style of George Eliot or Thomas Hardy, are effectfully distorted, Kemp implies, by the novel's thoroughly urban setting to which the title is 'savagely inappropriate.'¹⁸

The combination of the words in the title is itself 'inappropriate' or even oxymoronic. As Samson notes: 'This is London; and there are no fields. Only fields of operation and observation, only fields of electromagnetic attraction and repulsion, only fields of hatred and coercion. Only force fields' (134). 'London Fields' is often connected to Samson's childhood and is a symbol of lost innocence. Repeatedly Samson airs a wish to return to what seems as much a state of consciousness as a physical place: 'I must go to London Fields before it is too late' on page 323 sparks off a childhood reverie, featuring Sam and David (Samson's brother) running across open acres. In the beginning Samson seems to think that his current writing process will aid him in his search for innocence: 'I want time to get on with this little piece of harmless escapism. I want time to go to London Fields' (64). But as he partly realises (Samson 'partly realises' things all the time (see 1.6)) this is an illusion. Apart from his insight already quoted that there just are no fields in London, Samson resignedly notes towards the end that he can never return to London Fields: 'So far away. The time, the time, it never *was* the time' (463).

Samson is not led to London Fields by his writing. In fact his very involvement with Nicola sends him on straight course down the antithetical image of London Fields, the dead-end street. All the freedom, choice and air associated with London Fields is countered by the grim, deterministic quality of the inevitable dead-end street where Nicola lives and where she has scheduled her murder to happen. With sheer gravitational pull Nicola, who is described as a black hole (67) or even 'beyond the black hole' (76), tugs the characters toward her and the final scene. In this light the ending is an anti-climax. The narration turns in on itself; unable to resist the pull, the narrator is sucked into Nicola's story and reacts with the resignation appropriate when faced with the inevitable. 'There is no way back,' as one critic said 'from such dead-end "streets" to the mysteriously undefined "Fields" of the title' (Brown 103).

¹⁸ Betty Pesetsky has remarked that the title has a 'sinister twist'. It is suggestive of 'some rural paradise rather than the malignity of Mr. Amis's setting.'

Samson's yearning for the innocent past and his failure to reconstruct it (by going to London Fields) should be seen in the light of what we actually get to know about Samson's background (161); as it transpires, Samson's childhood was only innocent because it was ignorant. Penny Smith suggests (123) that Samson's terminal illness is the price Samson has to pay for the crimes of his father, committed in this period of 'innocence' – in London Fields. Samson's father worked in the nuclear industry and in the original sin theme we have a microcosmic version of the terrible legacy of world wide pollution and the ability to complete annihilation that the post World War II generation has left behind. 'It takes all kinds to make a world,' Samson says, 'it takes only one kind to unmake it. My father was of the latter school' (324). With his illness, Samson is paying the price for his father's sins, and the security and carelessness of his childhood were false. London Fields *are* dead-end streets.

The dividing line between fiction and reality being problematised as it is in *London Fields*, the dedication, 'to my father', can perhaps also allude to Samson's relationship to his father, whereby *London Fields* becomes a documentation of the consequences of living in the nuclear age. The dedication becomes in this light a rejection of the legacy from the previous generation: 'You gave me the bomb. I'm showing you the consequences.'¹⁹

1.6 The Unreliable Narrator

Presenting titles is not all the Note tells the reader in terms of what to expect. In a slightly condescending tone M. A. refers to 'my narrator' with whom he has kept 'ironic faith.' We have the distinction between the author of the note and the narrator made explicit and the mentioned irony makes it clear that the author is on a higher level of knowledge: we cannot be sure that the views expressed by the narrator will correspond to those of the author. In other words, we are dealing with an unreliable narrator as introduced and defined by Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*:

¹⁹ The legacy of the last generations has also consisted in the environmental problems that first came to the public attention with experts foretelling a change in the world's climate. The meteorological changes of the greenhouse effect are satirically enlarged in *London Fields* (see 103-4), and in the same spirit a voice is given to the generation responsible for the 'lack of fresh air': 'Hard to explain that one away, hard to justify it – to the young [...] to those who would come after. How would you begin? Well, we suspected that sacrifices might have to be made, later, for all the wonderful times we had with our spray cans and junk-food packaging. We

I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not (158-9).²⁰

To call a narrator unreliable we do not need to show him lying or deliberately withholding information, though either of these would certainly make him unreliable. Commonsensically, an unreliable narrator is someone the novel shows you cannot trust - for whatever reason. Martin Amis's *Money*, from 1984, is narrated by a drunk who, on that account, has severe troubles remembering the events he wants to narrate. He is unreliable, but not particularly dishonest. Samson, we learn from the first page of his diary, is similarly unwillingly handicapped. His problem is not a physical addiction like John Self's in *Money* but the simple fact that his knowledge is limited. Whereas M. A. has the novel before him when he wonders about a title, Samson is not blessed with that kind of distance. He is on a deadline (in more than one sense) which requires him to report the events as they happen with little or no benefit of hindsight and with the disadvantage of being forced to guess about the future rather than formulating the past. The structure determined by Samson's position bears affinities to the 'written present' in which the writer, writing about events *as they happen*, comes as close as possible to conflate events with their narration. Similarly, Samson has little distance to his story and no opportunity to let knowledge of the whole story influence how he shall write the parts; the whole just has not happened yet.

Samson seems to think his situation leaves him with a choice about how to narrate the story: 'I think I am less a novelist than a queasy cleric, taking down the minutes of real life' (3). That is, he fancies himself in the role of the historian who is bent upon writing objectively 'just what happened, nothing more, nothing less'. Whereas what he is really trying to do, and necessarily so, with his genre suggestions, which are more like guesses (note the '(I think)' and the '(It had better)' on the first page), is to establish a frame of reference in which he can

knew there'd be a price. Admittedly, to you, the destruction of the ozone layer looks a bit steep. But don't forget how good it was for us: our tangy armpits, our piping hamburgers' (156).

²⁰ Booth's definition has survived and established itself in the tradition of literary criticism. One dictionary refers to the unreliable narrator as 'one whose perception and interpretation of what he or she narrates does not correspond or coincide with the perceptions, interpretations and opinions of the author who is or purports to be the controlling force in the narration. Thus, there is a kind of contrived discrepancy between the narrator (what James called "centre of consciousness") and the actual author' (Cuddon 573).

understand the events that are about to happen. He does not yet have a whole but projects one from the traits he knows, rather than aimlessly trying to make a copy of life as it occurs before him. Based on Nicola's diary, for example, Samson guesses that Keith will be Nicola's murderer. 'I found him', it says in her diary, '[on] the Portobello Road, in a place called the Black Cross, I found him' (22), and in this light Samson understands Keith who is put on track for his role as the murderer: 'and murder? The eyes – was there enough blood in them for *that*? Not now, not yet. He had the talent, somewhere, but he would need the murderess to bring it out. Soon, he would find the lady. Or she would find him' (9). The narrative intrusion explicitly works to prepare the reader for Keith as the murderer. And Samson is not inventing it for his story; the following excerpt of wicked parody shows that Samson really believes Keith to be the murderer: 'And what about the other Big Occasion? The other Final? Yeah well cheers, Keith. I know he'll go out there and give me two hundred per cent. Keith a quitter? Keith Talent? You must be – Do you want your - ? No danger Keith will bottle it when the cosh comes down. Pressure? He fucking *phrives* on it' (209).

Disregarding for a moment the fact that Nicola is double-crossing Samson by not telling him of his own involvement, in relation to Keith and Guy they work together. Both Keith and Guy are to be brought on track for murder. On page 202, Nicola spells it out: she needs to 'find out what would move him [Keith] to murder,' and she tells him to rehearse the act:

All those things you wanted to do to girls...Do them to me. In your head.' Keith considered. There wasn't anything, by now, that he had wanted to do to girls and hadn't gone ahead and done – as Trish Shirt, among others, could defeatedly attest. [...] Oh yeah. There *was* one thing that he had wanted to do to girls and had never gone ahead and done. [...] He had never murdered any of them (289-290).

At the same time, Guy is cultivated as the 'surprise ending' (435, 466) and needs to be attributed (subtly, otherwise it would not be a surprise) a capacity for murder. Guy is steered through the action like a mindless puppet by Nicola who can rely on her insight into his pathology to secure his participation. A chapter is entitled 'The Script Followed by Guy Clinch' and we are assured through several tests that Guy will do exactly what Nicola wants

him to.²¹ But is Nicola's power strong enough to move Guy to murder? After all, what she has been exploiting throughout is Guy's goodness and credulity, qualities which dominate his character to the brink of exhaustion.

We need to be shown that Guy is capable of murder too. One hint is given on page 162 where Samson, talking about a scene occurring on page 152, warns Nicola not to rely too much on Guy's predictability: 'Guy is quite capable of surprises, especially when you are concerned. You should have seen him at the darts. Like a lion. I was half-dead with fear.' On page 147 an unconscious and uncontrolled spark in Guy's psyche is allowed to surface. Nicola has just told Guy that she is a virgin and confirmed his sense of a bond between them, 'but where did the contrary impulse come from? What alternate message from what alternate world was telling him to wrench open that chaste white dress, to take that brown body and turn it inside out?' The 'contrary impulse' comes from Guy's slumbering sexuality which slowly awakens: 'Nicola's sitting-room was "much as he had imagined". What, exactly, *had* he imagined? He could claim, perhaps, that his reveries were chaste. But his dreams went their own way. Well, he thought, we can't help dreaming what we dream' (145). Together with Nicola's 'you can do what you like to me. You can kill me if you want' (147) we have all the foreshadowing needed.²²

Samson is right about both Keith and Guy. Both aspire to the final task of murdering Nicola. What he has not figured out is his own role in Nicola's plan. On page 466, after Samson has stepped into his story and acted the role he was unwittingly assigned by Nicola, he wonders

²¹ For more on Nicola's control over Keith and Guy, see 4.2.1.

²² Snyder still claims the 'inconsistency of Guy's turning to murder' (164). And she is right in a way. It is hard to believe that Guy will kill Nicola. But Guy is not so much a real character as a function in the narrative (see 42). Consequently, the psychological probability of Guy's capacity for murder is irrelevant. Since all the characters in the novel are 'types' or 'cliques', psychological explanations in general are dispreferred. The characters act in accordance with the function they have in the overall plan of the novel, and when there is discrepancy between what the structure of the novel dictates and what would be plausible for the characters to do, the character building is happily suffered for the overall effect. To say that some action in *London Fields* is 'out of character' is to miss the point: character is not that important. As Amis has said, we should look at what the author is trying to do and identify with him rather than with the characters (see 44). When we talk below about Samson's reason for entering his story and Nicola's wish to die, we do not intend to argue that their motivations spring from their coherent 'inner natures'. Whether it is psychologically plausible for Samson to destroy his novel for love, which, as we shall see, he evidently does, can certainly be questioned, but to do so would be beside the point. He does it so Amis can play his trick of involution and subvert in the last minute the general gloomy mood he has created in the novel. The same is the case with Nicola whose death-wish only receives scattered psychological justification (fear of middle age (see footnote 76, page 92) and/or the belief in the prophetic power of her dream (see 91) which are secondary to the effect Amis derives from this death wish in terms of the connection between destruction and creativity.

about the novel he has written and in which he is only a disembodied voice and totally improbable as Nicola's murderer: 'I've just taken a casual glance at the beginning – who knows, with a little work, it might accommodate a new ending.' The 'little work' is performed after Samson's death by the simple operation of adding his diary to his novel. In *London Fields* as a whole, Samson's appearance as the murderer is sanctioned by his diary, which establishes him as a character and not only the disembodied voice of the narrator.

Samson is a reader as well as a narrator and *London Fields* is about misreading as well as self-consciously about telling. Not knowing the ending (and faced with the impossibility of writing outside genre, without a sense of an ending, a whole), Samson is led to extrapolate a whole from the bits he knows already. In this sense he illustrates the Hirschian conception of reading, but he does not perform the necessary operation of continually revising the understanding of the whole as traits occur to disturb it. A way to understand Samson's downfall is that he is not able to change the frame of understanding he starts out with, which is that he himself is only a witness to a story orchestrated by Nicola and unwittingly co-starring Keith and Guy. When elements occur that seem to disturb this frame of understanding, Samson can note them rather helplessly as he is unable to incorporate them into the story as he sees it.

Part of this inability can be put down to the deadline Samson is submitted to. Twice the consequences of the connection between Nicola and Mark Asprey surface to his consciousness. 'Now wait a minute' he says (452, 453), but he does not have a minute to wait; as an object in the vicinity of Nicola, the black hole, he only has one possible future; Samson's destiny lies not in the fields of London but down Nicola's dead-end street. Given his ignorance of his own involvement, it is natural for Samson to display a desire to get to the ending: 'I don't know how to get to the dead-end street. I close my eyes, trying to see a way' (117) but this desire, which is essentially creative (he wants to produce a piece of art and searches for his way to the ending), becomes ironic since it is also self-destructive. The ending in the dead-end street will not mark artistic fulfilment but its opposite. In a sense, Samson comes to will his own downfall, but does so very differently from Nicola. Nicola's wish is fully conscious and properly 'willed' whereas Samson's instinct only turns self-destructive due to his misinterpretation of Nicola. Samson has misconstrued Nicola's intentions and projected a faulty version of the ending in which he does not himself occur,

which is why he can look forward to it and why his comment on page 117 turns out to be ironic.

Samson's role as the murderer, or at least his ultimate involvement in the story he thinks he stands outside, is substantially foreshadowed by a number of hints that Samson might have interpreted differently, thereby saving himself the humiliating experience of having been 'outwritten' by Nicola in the end. Samson's understanding of Nicola's plan is not totally off the mark; as mentioned he correctly infers the roles to be played by Keith and Guy, and his constructions of the murder scene are minutely accurate (with the exception of the detail of the murderer's identity). Recurring in the versions of the murder scene is the murder weapon, a 'car tool'.²³ Although he recounts the scene three times with the car tool identified as the murder weapon, Samson fails to notice a clue that would directly involve him in the murder: on page three, in Mark Asprey's car 'on the front passenger seat, under the elegant rag of a white silk scarf, lies a heavy car-tool' (3). While also referring to Asprey's role in Nicola's murder (he probably helps her set it up (see 96)), the murder weapon is from the very beginning in Samson's possession, but despite the hints, Samson never stops to reflect on the strange coincidence.

Samson also misreads the clever 'Black Cross' metaphor. The name of Keith's pub, 'The Black Cross' comes to designate in Samson's eyes the interdependence of the three characters in his novel. 'They still form their black cross,' Samson notes with relief after his failed trip to America (238). He does not see that by invoking a cross as metaphor for the alignment of characters in the novel, he is in need of four persons, not three. Samson's assessment at the end ('Imagination failed me. And all else. I should have understood that a cross has four points. Not three' (466)) is foreshadowed on page 209 where Samson struggles with an sneaking suspicion that the distance to events and characters in the novel may not be maintainable: 'This nausea. I am implicated. I can't understand the implication,' and further: 'The Black Cross. A good name, I always thought, sent my way by reality. The cross, darkly cruciform, the meeting place of Nicola and Keith and Guy. A cross has three points. Depending on how you look at it, though, it might be said to have four.'

²³ On pages 15 and 456 two almost identical transcriptions of the murder scene in the future tense are offered which correspond to the 'actual' scene on 465, written in past tense. On 117 we get a version of the scene from Samson's diary and on 192 Nicola dreams her murder. Only in this last sequence is the murder weapon, the car tool, not explicitly mentioned.

The lesson taught here is to keep your eyes open and be prepared to alter the overall understanding of what is going on. Samson's demise illustrates the danger of not staying open to a change of one's initial expectations, and so comes to symbolise the 'wrong' way of reading. The reader of *London Fields* is, through the difficulties of categorising the novel, encouraged to stay alert and constantly revise and reflect on the nature of the novel; Samson's downfall lies partly in the fact that he is unwilling and unable via his lack of imagination to spot the hints and change his preconceived vision of the whole. Just as he has locked himself in an interpretation of his life summed up in the words 'I failed in art and love' which is repeated throughout like a mantra,²⁴ he has insulated himself in the understanding that he stands outside the events before him. The ending of the novel destroys both these understandings. In certain ways, he is *in* the novel *and* he does not exactly fail in art and love. Not only can Samson's novel 'accommodate a new ending' and thus succeed as a piece of art: we are reading 'Samson's novel revised', the revision being the addition of his diary. A closer analysis of the ending opens for an interpretation in which Love, acting through Samson, triumphs against all odds. 'I failed in art and love' needs to be revised though Samson himself does not come to this realisation before he dies. Motivated by love, Samson enters his own story to make a deal with Guy (465, 467), who will provide safety for Kim Talent while Samson in return kills Nicola. Acknowledging that love makes Samson save Kim forces the revision of Samson's persistent 'I failed in art and love' as well as of the general gloomy mood of *London Fields* as a whole. This will be clarified in the following section.

1.7 The Ending

In line with a general disdain for postmodern tricks, the ending of *London Fields* in which the narrator steps into his story thus dramatising the postmodern act of involution has generated limited critical interest from reviewers. 'Knowing who does it is somewhat beside the point, innit' (Pesetsky) seems to be a representative attitude. The situation changes a bit when we turn to the critical essays. Some of these, though by no means all, take up Samson's

²⁴ See 368, 467. On 234 a brief hope ('Having failed in art and love, having lost, I may win through with both, even now, so late in the goddamned day') is allowed to shimmer, fuelled by the prospect of a love mission to America and ex-girlfriend Missy Harter. As it is, Samson ends up spending six days in Heathrow airport trying in vain to get out. He resignedly returns to London: 'I lost. I failed. I lost everything' (238).

suggestion in the beginning that the story is a ‘whydoit’, stressing the factor of motivation, and offer thoughts on what motivates the surprising turn of events at the end. To see that Samson’s motive is significant is no guarantee that it will be interpreted correctly, however, as this example demonstrates: ‘At the end of the novel it is revealed that Nicola has fooled Samson as well. The murderer turns out to be not Keith but Guy, thus ruining the plot of the novel Samson has been writing. To take revenge, Samson persuades Guy to let him kill Nicola instead’ (Hawkes 37). Revenge as motive does not work. First of all because Samson just does *not* want to kill Nicola. His reluctance is nowhere more obvious than during the act itself where he has to be urged on by Nicola herself: ‘Please. It’s all right to do it . . . It’s all right’ (467). Secondly, that Guy ends up the prime contender for the role as murderer can hardly be surprising for Samson who, together with Nicola, has cultivated him all along as the ‘surprise ending’ (see 30) Since Guy has been properly prepared as a possible candidate, it cannot ruin Samson’s story that he takes the place of the more obvious candidate, Keith.

Frederick Holmes similarly ignores the extent to which Samson is controlled by something bigger than himself and equips him with an inappropriate degree of autonomy: ‘Samson is willing to deceive and even to murder in order to complete what he expects to be nothing more than a “pretty saleable” thriller’ (59). Again: Samson obviously does not want to kill Nicola, an act which furthermore does not help the writing of his own novel. In fact, by killing Nicola, he destroys his own novel, as Holmes himself later notes (60). Samson’s narrating voice remains disembodied in his novel until the very end, and the sudden appearance of Samson as the murderer would have to be rejected on grounds of incoherence *if* we only had the novel Samson is writing, i.e. ‘*London Fields*-without-the-diary.’ Samson is stuck in his image of himself as ‘a queasy cleric, taking down the minutes of real life’; he has no choice but to write what happened and he knows that having the narrator suddenly and without warning appear as a character six pages before the end fails to meet standard literary conventions of coherence.²⁵

In this sense, Samson does fail in art. With respect to the roles played by Keith and Guy, though, he gets it right. Both are needed for Nicola’s plan to succeed, and both are prepared to perform the necessary act of closure by killing Nicola. When Keith runs to his car with

²⁵ When considered as a whole, *London Fields* (consisting of Samson’s novel *and* his diary) meets these literary standards, because Samson’s appearance is foreshadowed by his diary.

murder on his mind (462) after the double humiliation at the darts final, he is stopped and beaten to the ground by the jilted lover, Guy, who takes Keith's car, the Cavalier, the 'murderer's car' (75), consistently described as 'heavy', which is necessary to follow the script of the murder scene which also features a 'heavy' car (15, 456). It had to be Guy, or there would have been no reason for Samson to intervene and Nicola's story would not have worked as well as it does. It could not have worked with Keith in Guy's place since there is no basis for a deal between Keith and Samson and so no reason for Samson to take on the role as murderer.

With Guy the situation is different. He is an opportunity for Samson to 'do something for the child' (120) – Kim Talent - who right from the beginning awakens Samson's love and his protective instincts (138, 209, 388) which grow into an 'absolute obligation' (436) to take care of the child, whose greatest dangers come in the shape of her parents: an unreliable and abusive nervous wreck for a mother and a brutal egoist for a father. But Samson is dying, he cannot provide long term safety for Kim. What he can do is perform the act of killing Nicola, and so he and Guy find themselves in a unique position to make a deal: 'In the end, he delegated cruelty. I, kindness, or paternalism, or money,' Samson says (467). 'It was the best I could do.' He delegates the job of providing for Kim to Guy ('I made him swear' (467)) and takes on the task of cruelty, the killing of Nicola, in return.²⁶

Passing the opportunity Guy presents for saving Kim might have saved Samson's novel: 'Of course I could have let Guy go ahead and settled for the "surprise" ending. But she knew I wouldn't. Flatteringly, she knew I wasn't quite unregenerate' (466). The 'unregenerate' refers to the immorality of sacrificing humans for art. Morally, Samson does the right thing and proves regenerate, but by the exact same action with which his moral integrity is asserted, he destroys his piece of art. The fact that Samson steps into his story at the same time saves Kim and ruins his novel. Together with the artistic success of the calculating Nicola, this suggests that an amoral attitude to the characters involved is a necessary prerequisite for an author to achieve artistic fulfilment.²⁷

²⁶ Like Samson, John Self in *Money* resolves to save a child as one of the last acts performed. Speaking of the offspring of the opportunistic and entirely selfish Selina, Self says: 'I wrote to Selina care of her gynaecologist. I intend to raise that child of hers as if it were my very own, even though it'll be a lot more upper class than I am' (387).

²⁷ Asked whether he would agree to 'schadenfreude, or a sort of gleeful superciliousness' in writing the Keith character, Amis answers by confirming the link between amorality and artistic success: 'Absolutely, yes, and in

Saving an innocent child by killing a woman who desperately wants to die is arguably not the worst act to perform as one's last, but in his bitter disappointment at the failed novel, Samson is unable to appreciate what he has done. There is the 'it was the best I could do' (467) but also, just before: 'I was the worst guy. I was the worst and last beast' (466) where the artistic disappointment is allowed to overshadow and even subvert the moral victory. He does what he does almost in spite of himself. As if he really wanted to stick with the story and 'let Guy go ahead' but was somehow commanded to enter his novel, where he is surprised to find himself (464). There is an ironic touch to the 'flatteringly, she knew I wasn't quite unregenerate,' suggesting that Samson just does not have what it takes, no emotional shield, or not a sufficiently strong one, that would allow him to complete his novel. In the aesthetic terms, along which Nicola purely thinks, the emotion that compels Samson to save Kim is a flaw, a weakness. In Nicola's mouth, the 'unregenerate' sentence would be ironic and uttered with condescension from the disinterested and aloof stance of the aesthete.

Samson's 'I failed in art and love' needs to be revised though he does not have the sufficient distance to see it himself. Art and love in *London Fields* cannot be united. To the extent that it is true that Samson fails in art, he succeeds in love, or love succeeds through him. The role played by love in the end forces another revision, a revision of *London Fields* as a whole. One of the alternative titles listed by M. A. in the 'Note' is 'The Death of Love' – a title which would have been appropriate in many respects:²⁸ Nicola has the power to bring love forth, but 'the thing with her was that she had to receive this love and send it back in opposite form, not just cancelled but murdered' (21); on page 132 she wonders that 'perhaps love *was* dying, was already dead'; Samson fails to reestablish the broken relationship with Missy Harter; Lizzyboo's feelings for Samson are unreturned; Guy's marriage has only produced a monster, Marmaduke, supremely able to suck out all love his parents may have been able to generate; and in Keith Talent the 'capacity for love was extinct' (72).

Money I say that the author is not free of sadistic impulses. But it isn't real sadism, because I don't believe in Keith in the ways some readers do. It's double-edged: I do believe in him in some ways, but not in the way that I can believe in real people. The glee might be creative glee of an irresponsible kind.' Amis goes on to remark the 'intoxication caused by the sense of freedom you have as a novelist: there is no limit to what you can do' (Haffenden 12). See also Miller 4.

²⁸ Diedrick calls the novel 'a dark comedy about the death of love' (147).

In the end, however, love is allowed, if not to triumph, then at least to demonstrate that it is still around. Samson's act of love to save Kim is significant in this light, and Cara Lynn Snyder lists other hints that suggest the return of love, such as it is. In his letter to Mark Asprey, Samson asks Asprey to send his love to Missy (468) and Keith is thought to be 'cradled, perhaps, in the loving arms of Trish Shirt' (464). More suggestive is the invocation of Venus, the planet of love, which shines brightly through the Eclipse (444) and so demonstratively survives the darkness of the Eclipse and the nuclear disaster connected to it through their supposed co-occurrence.

The dedication, the table of contents, the Note, the title, the status of Samson as an unreliable narrator and the complications thus added to his various attempts at explicit genre determination are all elements that frame the narrative and are to be somehow dealt with before the novel can 'really' start. Above, we have gone through possible interpretations of these elements. Most of the interpretations depend for their validity on insight into the novel as a whole, an insight the reader does not have in the initial encounter with the novel. What the reader at first sight is confronted with is an extended withholding of information. By so elaborately suspending the possibility for a stable definition of genre, suspending the reader's expectations and talking at length about something, 'the novel', before starting it and allowing the reader to build his own opinion, Amis creates tension and excitement, forcing the reader to consider the novel on a page by page basis, constantly revising whatever expectations may have been built up. The mysteries engage the reader and prevent frustration. When the novel finally begins, it is accompanied by the pleasure of being told a secret which has been teasingly denied.

What are the defining traits of *London Fields*? Chapter 1, it transpires, is *funny*. Considering that 'comedy' is one of the few genres not invoked by Samson's and M. A.'s opening remarks, the fact that chapter one turns out to be funny should constitute a major surprise. One of the implications of *London Fields*'s opening, however, is that the reader is engaged to a point where disruption of expectations *becomes* the expectation. Rather than causing despair, the confusion about what to expect generated by the opening can be constructed as meaningful in itself, and it is possible to throw out a generical understanding which is an abstraction from the local problem of whether the novel is a murder story or a love story. The novel may be a murder story and a love story, or neither; the point is that it is not easy to find out.

The humour of the first chapter is doubly gratifying. Not only is the reader allowed to relax a bit on his attention; by doing so, his expectation of surprise is fulfilled. Right in the beginning we see the fluctuation between humour and complication which repeats itself throughout the novel. In return for what is really a significant note of confidence, Amis shows himself aware of his responsibility to make the changes and the twists plausible and interesting enough to keep the readers' attention fuelled and secure their necessary participation.²⁹ It is not exactly correct to say that the humour is the reward for the reader's patience and indulgence; the other task, that of close reading and clue-finding, has its own appeal and induces pleasure independent of and different from the pleasure of reading something funny. More precisely, it is the alternation between the two modes of laughter and complication, both calling for pleasurable responses, that make up the overall effect of the novel. These two traits of the novel will now be examined more closely.

²⁹ In the Bigsby interview Amis touches on the connection between the humour and one element of the complexity in his novels: 'I think postmodernism – this drawing attention to the fact that you are writing a novel – can be very annoying to many readers. I do it, but I hope I do it pointfully and amusing' (171).

CHAPTER 2: THE HUMOUR OF *LONDON FIELDS*

In an interview from 1985 with John Haffenden, Amis characterises his work as essentially comic in nature (10). Although made before the publication of *London Fields* in 1989, the characterisation is easily expanded to include *London Fields* from 1989 as well as *The Information* from 1995. While some critics (see Gowrie; Rainer) have tuned into this aspect of Amis's writing, he feels compelled to agree in an interview from 1990 (Morrison) that not enough critics have appreciated the humour but have been blinded by the abundance of elements you do not normally find in comedies.³⁰ The reading serving as basis for the present paper takes the comedy seriously, so to speak. This has not been a conscious choice so much as a translation into words of an immediate and dominant response: Laughing.³¹ As said above, the novel fluctuates between humour and complication. The first few pages call for a predominantly intellectual response driven by curiosity; at first the curiosity concerns the building of a genre, seeking an answer to 'what kind of novel we are reading,' and turns then gradually into a curiosity concerning, simply, what is going on, as well shall see in chapter three of this thesis. The humour is similarly present all along. Appearing first as a kind of relief from complication, it develops into a defining trait which can be identified independently of the complexity. A closer look at the kind of laughter elicited and the means to achieve it, reveals a common effect arising from the comedy and the complication: Keeping the reader involved.

The hilarity of *London Fields* could not be farther from the mood of light-hearted comedies with endings in which all complications are resolved and practically everyone gets married

³⁰ 'Comedy' is not used here to place *London Fields* in a specific historical category. By 'comedy' we mean something synonymous with 'humour', very simply the kind of writing that makes the reader laugh. In two interviews, Amis speaks about comedy as opposed to tragedy (see Bigsby; Wachtel). On both occasions the subject matter is how Amis justifies writing 'funnily' about serious matters, touching only peripherally more technical issues about comedy as a specific genre. In line with this, this thesis will be concerned with 'comedy' as the kind of writing which elicits laughter at the characters and actions described, whereas the occasional mention of 'tragedy' refers broadly to literature which elicits sympathy towards the characters. A similar definition of comedy and tragedy can be found in Bennett and Royle 78.

³¹ Not everybody finds *London Fields* 'funny'. Due to 'strong objection' from two members of the jury, the novel was not shortlisted for the 1989 Booker Prize (Lodge, *The Novel Today* 208). Representative of the harshest criticism is Sara Mills's essay in *Feminist Stylistics*. The critical reception in general has not let the allegations of sexism cloud the issue but has remained focused on the novel's obvious qualities. While acknowledging in his review of the novel the 'moral beneath the miasma,' Graham Fuller nevertheless faults Amis for making his rejection of the sexism and misogyny portrayed in his novel ambiguous.

and lives happily ever after.³² There is no ‘successful emergence of some order which mutes all disorderly forces’ (Norton 709). Dealing head-on with themes like the death of love; the threat of nuclear catastrophe; child abuse, misogyny; the disintegrating influence on human identity coming from the mass media, and containing diary parts of the dying narrator set in a tone of resignation and exhaustion, *London Fields* is nevertheless very funny.

For Amis, the choice of theme is not a choice, but a recognition (Biggsby 177). Envy, violence and destruction are not carefully sought out by Amis but rather impinge themselves on his interest: ‘The reason I write about nuclear weapons and about the environment in *London Fields* has nothing to do with an ameliorist attitude towards them. It’s just that they excite my interest. Feminism doesn’t excite me in that way - although I am profeminist’ (Morrison 67). In the same interview Amis echoes Samson’s line from *London Fields* that ‘happiness writes white’ (*London Fields* 23) and admits to the difficulty of writing about ‘happiness in a way that makes you smile’ (Morrison 64). Samson worries about the same thing: ‘When I take on Chapter 3, when I take on Guy Clinch, I’ll have to do, well, not happiness, but goodness, anyway. It’s going to be rough’ (*London Fields* 23). The anxieties prove justified; the ‘bad guy’ Keith Talent is a much stronger literary creation than the good guy,³³ Guy Clinch, whose character made one critic remark that ‘Amis seems unable to equate goodness with anything but gullibility bordering on imbecility’ (Pesetsky). The themes, then, present themselves to Amis according to interest and talent, but why combine it with comedy?

Again the appearance of a choice is a mere appearance. Amis writes comedy out of necessity. It is, he explains, the only reliable voice left in today’s literary landscape. Comedy’s traditional opponent, tragedy, has simply ‘lost its slot on the register; the heroic, the epic, are not really very plausible voices for modern fiction’ (Biggsby 172). Tragedy ‘doesn’t exist anymore, it doesn’t resonate – no one is going to believe in it anymore’ (Wachtel 53), and so, left alone, comedy has had to take up the themes traditionally taken care of by the tragedy: ‘the reason that comedy, or at least my comedy, is so odd is that comedy really has to do it

³² In the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English, comedy is defined as a ‘light or amusing play or film, usu with a happy ending.’

³³ The same is the case with Marmaduke (the bad kid) and Kim (the good kid); Marmaduke is a stronger creation than Kim, so strong that Samson even tries to tone Marmaduke down in his novel, in order to avoid him being to overshadowing (158).

all these days... the comedy is full of things that shouldn't really be there, like rape and murder and child-abuse, real sin and evil' (Bigsby 172).³⁴

The following examination of the humorous aspects of *London Fields* tries to answer the question of why we laugh in *London Fields*. But there is another, equally interesting question which is 'how do we laugh?' or 'what in the novel predisposes us to this particular response?' The answer brings the two defining elements of the novel (humour and complication) together: both appeal intellectually rather than emotionally. By discouraging emotional involvement from the reader, Amis narrows down the range of possible responses. Pity, sorrow or sympathy are unlikely to be invoked by *London Fields*, but laughter is not an emotional response. In his small, but influential essay, 'Laughter', Henri Bergson says that what differentiates laughter from other responses is that it only occurs in the absence of feeling. Emotion, according to Bergson is the enemy of laughter (65-68).

The story of Guy Clinch has the potential of a tragedy. Stuck in a dead-end marriage, he strives for something better but his hopes are destroyed and he is left to find his way home, disillusioned. In Amis's version, however, the story is a dark comedy. Guy is not presented as a character so much as a necessary element to make the fiction function. He is the 'foil' to Keith; there for balance. Keith is the bad guy, and so we need a good guy as well.³⁵ Nicola has similar pragmatic considerations. She needs Guy but for reasons purely strategic (119). Her vague pity for Guy (187) carries no corresponding feeling of guilt since Guy's torments are 'destined to come his way.'³⁶ Nicola the determinist wastes no time thinking about what cannot be changed: She 'looked closely into Guy's crippled face. Its weakness she identified

³⁴ Amis airs this view in his fiction as well. In *The Rachel Papers* Charles Highway explicitly warns the reader not to expect an ending like the one traditionally found in comedy: 'In the following phase, with the obstructive elements out of the way [...], the comic action would have been due to end, happily. But who is going to believe that any more' (147). Richard in *The Information* implies in the following statement the possibility that comedy has lost some of its territory to romance: 'Comedy used to be about young couples getting married. Comedy wasn't about that now. Romance, which used to be about knights and wizards and enchantment, was now about young couples getting married – romance, supermarket romance. Comedy was about other things now' (179). In the Haffenden interview, Amis envisions a similar pluralistic situation when he says that 'among the many mysterious processes under way in this century is a breakdown of genre, so that comic novels can take on quite rugged stuff' (10).

³⁵ In the Laurence and McGee interview, Amis comments on the use of doubles, in this case Gwyn and Richard in *The Information*: 'Many writers would just have one writer as the main character, then there would have been a subtle psychological conflict in a writer's mind, but I'm a broad and comic writer, so I get the two and force them apart.' See also Self 7. Amis uses doubles in many of his works: Keith/Guy and Marmaduke/Kim in *London Fields*, Mike/Jennifer in *Night Train*, and Terry/Gregory in *Success*.

³⁶ See 1.7 for more on Nicola's lack of moral commitment to the characters enlisted in her story.

for the hundredth time as something predetermined, already etched, something made for a specific purpose, but too long ago' (341). No wonder that Guy takes a fall, having a character like that in a novel where 'character is destiny' (7, 21).

Amis withdraws the reader's sympathy for Guy by making him very hard to identify with; the degree of his credulity exceeds any reasonable limits and prevents the reader's identification and so removes the basis for sympathy. When Nicola, on top of everything else and in spite of all the trials she has put Guy's trust in her through, gets away with explaining the torn stockings (384), and when Guy allows himself to feel hope at the very end (460) that things might after all turn out well, readers are likely to feel nothing but irritation at his persistent naivety and innocence, which extend much farther than psychologically believable, making him less a character than a function (see 42).

Amis's lack of interest in character development is well documented; it comes from a belief that it is no longer possible to make a coherent description of why people do what they do. The idea that total knowledge of someone's psyche will yield an answer to the question of what he or she will do next is a silent assumption in what one might call 'character-driven' novels, including most of the novels of the 19th century as well as the whole Bildungsromane tradition. But in today's fragmented world where the idea of the Self as a stable entity is disintegrating, it is no longer credible to present a blueprint from which the actions of persons can be predicted:

'I [...] feel that the old nineteenth-century views about motivation have exhausted themselves. Motivation is now nothing more than a literary convention; I don't think people in the real world are coherently motivated. Timothy J. McVeigh, the Oklahoma bomber, thinks he's got motives but they're not cogent; they're very much of someone who sees himself on the outside, as a kind of Rambo figure, full of second-hand paranoid fantasies. Whatever the power of these images, they definitely got into his head and kicked the place apart some time ago. Motivation in the A. C. Bradley nineteenth-century Shakespearean criticism has gone, in my view, it's absented itself from human action.' (Wachtel 53-54).³⁷

³⁷ See also the Haffenden interview: 'Motivation has become depleted, a shagged-out force in modern life' (5); *Money* (359); and *Night Train* (107) where the same idea is presented. *Night Train* incorporates the idea into its

This idea has attracted criticism. Martyn Harris, for example, sees a lot of motivation ‘out there,’ and argues that Amis’s contention that motivation has lost its force ‘reveals a remoteness and lack of human curiosity [...] which can make [Amis’s] novels unsympathetic and snobbish.’ ‘In denying motive,’ Harris writes, ‘Amis denies his characters the capacity for change, which in turn rules out the manipulation of reader sympathy - the strongest lever in fiction.’³⁸

Apart from the presumed anachronism of coherent motivation behind characters, Amis justifies his lack of interest in character development by quoting Nabokov on the job of the reader: ‘what readers *shouldn’t* do is identify with the character. What the reader should do is identify with the writer’. Besides, ‘no matter how much you do to forestall it, the reader will believe in the characters and feel concern for them. That’s an unstoppable thing’ (Morrison 65). Amis’s position is that he sees no reason to make the characters likeable since what he wants his readers to do is identify with the art and its creator rather than the functions of that art. As opposed to Harris, Amis holds that readers cannot help identifying with the characters.

The anti-sentimentality of *London Fields* carries an important effect. Distancing readers from the characters (and drawing them closer to the author) provides an excellent basis for the laughter the novel seeks to elicit. Our ability to laugh at Guy, for example, would have been seriously impaired if we had been led to feel genuine sympathy for him. As it is, he is too gullible to identify with and so clearly shown to be a fictional construct that sufficient distance is provided for the reader to be able to laugh. The implied connection here is the connection, stated by Bergson, between intellectuality and the ability to induce laughter. Sentimental novels, in this view, can also be funny, of course, but they are so to the degree that they take a step back from their material, i.e. sentimental novels are funny only to the

structural design by having the detective, Mike Hoolihan, circle around and significantly fail to find the motive (because there is no motive) behind the suicide of Jennifer Rockwell. See 4.2.2 for more on motivation.

³⁸ See also Luc Sante who identifies the novel’s main weakness in its ‘complete absence of a heart [...] the deadly accurate pinpointing of human weakness has no counterweight in acknowledgment of human value.’ When Sturrock criticises Amis along the same lines, ‘he remains one adjective ahead of his subjects’ (139), he is in fact echoing Charles Highway from *The Rachel Papers*, who talks about the ‘troubles with being over-articulate, with having a vocabulary more refined than your emotions,’ (154) and discloses the fact that Amis is well aware of the price of his preference of style over character. A price he is willing to pay, given the objective to make the reader identify with the author, not the character.

degree they are not sentimental. In *London Fields* we are primed for laughter by being at a considerable distance to the characters.

Before we further explore the comic techniques used in *London Fields*, it is relevant to mention another classic definition of humour. According to Thomas Hobbes ‘the passion of laughter is nothing else but *sudden glory* arising from some sudden *conception* of some *eminency* in ourselves, by *comparison* with the *infirmity* of others, or with our own formerly’ (46, qtd in Bennet and Royle 75). Laughing as a way of asserting our moral or intellectual superiority explains the dominant response to the Keith Talent character in *London Fields*. An outrageous villain whose only finer emotions are invoked by pornography and darts (288), Keith Talent is punished by Amis, not so much by the design of the novel (although he does take a few beatings throughout and a significant one in the end) as by giving readers occasional opportunities to laugh him out and consequently assert their own superiority. Much comedy, for example, is derived from the problems Keith has formulating his thoughts into words. Either the words just do not come as when he searches in vain for puns (57, 58) or when his ‘stream of consciousness simply [stops] flowing’ (108), or the words, when they come, fail to correspond with Keith’s intention in uttering them: ‘“I’m like a dog,” said Keith. “You kick me? I don’t run and hide. I’m back. I’m in there.” Keith didn’t look as pleased by this simile as he thought he was going to be. In fact his sweating face spoke of general disappointment and confusion’ (110). The strain which mental activity exerts on Keith’s mind is above all evident in the pretence literary class Nicola gives him and which makes him all but burst with exhaustion (355).³⁹ By making Keith horribly cruel and outrageously unlikeable, Amis sets him up as an ideal victim for the reader’s (Hobbesian) laughter. We embrace every opportunity to distance ourselves from him and tune into every sign that Keith deserves punishment, which in this novel is executed by laughing.

³⁹ Another comic strategy used against Keith is to contrast sense impressions or lengthy pieces of information with Keith’s futile assessments of them: having read a paragraph from *Darts: Master the Discipline*, Keith’s thoughts only manage to replicate the last phrase of the paragraph with the addition of an exclamation mark: ‘1500BC! thought Keith’ (396). When we follow him into Nicola’s luxurious bathroom: ‘“The toilet,” he announced with savage clarity’ (73). And in a media restaurant, called ‘192’, Nicola has taken him to, Keith relates the unfamiliar experience to the one thing he knows best, darts: ‘“A penny for them, Keith?” Said Nicola gently. He said nothing. 192. The best thing with that is: smack in the maximum. Psychological body blow. Leaving 12.’

2.1 Making Strange

The Russian Formalist Viktor Skhlovsky identified an important function of art when he saw in it the ability disrupt the valuable, but also anaesthetising process of socialisation:

Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged (12).

The purpose of art is a heightening of awareness by making the familiar seem unfamiliar. Skhlovsky suggests wordplay and figurative language in general as means to present the world in a new light, or to illuminate what has been hidden under the conventions of dead metaphors and worn-out language, i.e. to achieve the effect of ‘making strange’ (Russian: *ostranie*). Literature as disclosure is nothing new; Skhlovsky takes most of his examples from Tolstoy, and the British Romantics were on to something similar. Speaking of Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge said that he ‘sought to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us’ (vol. 7, part 2: 7, qtd in Diedrick 57).

When British poet Craig Raine published *A Martian Sends a Postcard Home* in 1978 perhaps the most obvious technique, also dealt with by Skhlovsky, with which to make the familiar seem unfamiliar was seized upon, namely that of adopting the perspective of an outsider to the world portrayed. Around the same time, Amis published his own experiment with what came to be known as the Martian Technique.⁴⁰ *Other People* is narrated by the amnesiac Mary Lamb whose unfamiliarity with things like envelopes, television, pubs, clothes, masturbation, and sexual harassment portrays a world familiar to the reader in a strange, not exactly ‘lovely’ light. Together with *Time’s Arrow* which, being told backwards, forces the

⁴⁰ Amis began *Other People* half a year before the appearance of Raine’s poem (Haffenden 18).

reader to stop and think about such fundamental epistemological operations as cause and effect, *Other People* marks Amis most consistent experiment with the effect of ‘making strange.’ *London Fields* is not a ‘Martian’ novel, but while it does not have ‘ostranie’ built into its narrative foundation, it incorporates nevertheless, as we shall see, a number of techniques that ‘make strange.’

2.1.1 Anthropomorphism, Hyperbole and Repetition

In *London Fields* the making-strange effect is achieved by an extraordinary use of language. Figures of speech like anthropomorphism and hyperbole, together with ‘comic reversals’ (see 2.1.2), serve to suspend easy identification by the reader, who is momentarily put off balance, forced to pay attention and, often, to start laughing. When Nicola first enters The Black Cross, all action stops and all actors freeze, stunned by the presence of the main character. Keith drops his dart, whose fall to the ground is described in this unconventional way: ‘Being a dart, a little missile of plastic and tungsten, it combined with gravity and efficiently plunged towards the centre of the earth. What halted its progress was Keith’s left foot, which was protected only by the frayed webbing of a cheap running-shoe’ (36-37).

The unusual description of the dart falling to the ground is not only used as comic device, whose strength lies in the strange choice of vocabulary for describing a falling object.⁴¹ In a larger perspective the passage reads like a foreshadowing of the upcoming catastrophe, the threat of which dominates the mood of the novel. The ‘missile’ goes for the centre of the earth to annihilate it, taking its time on the way to pay destruction on humanity, whose degenerated and incoherent capitalist culture (‘the frayed webbing of a cheap running-shoe’) can muster up no defence against disaster. Like the missile, the dart aims for centre, the bulls eye. London is the scene of the action in more than one sense. Due to ‘the earth’s new tilt’ (332) London will witness the full Eclipse and as a consequence also the mysteriously connected culmination of the Crisis. It is the ‘bull’s eye in the centre of the board’ with ‘circles of concentric devastation’ around (16).

⁴¹ A more conventional description of the scene is found on page 23: ‘The moment that Keith Talent saw Nicola Six – he dropped his third dart. And swore. The 32-gram tungsten trebler had pierced his big toe...’

Anthropomorphisms like the following abound in *London Fields*: ‘Twenty minutes later, as he strode back up the beach, the wind threw everything it had at him, and with fierce joy the sand sought his eyes and teeth, the hairless tray of his chest.’ We are caught off guard by such descriptions and urged to sharpen our attention to the text. The use of anthropomorphisms is one of Amis’s ways of ‘making strange’; when things like wind, sand, trees, cars, or darts are ascribed human qualities, we see that the preconceptions we have of how everyday reality and language are constructions open for change rather than naturally given.

Taking his cue from Marmaduke, the child of Hope and Guy, James Diedrick has said about *London Fields* that it ‘feeds on the death of all cherished beliefs’ (150). One of these cherished beliefs is that children are nice and innocent, and Amis contributes to this picture by making the other baby, Kim Talent, a virtual angel. Marmaduke, on the other hand, is meticulously stripped of any niceness normally attributed to childhood. After his birth, his parents reflect: ‘for years they had worried about the kind of world they were bringing their child into. Now they worried about the kind of child they were bringing into their world’ (88). Consequently, ‘their last attempt at lovemaking had featured the pill, the coil, the cap and three condoms, plus more or less immediate *coitus interruptus*. That was July. This was September’ (88).

Marmaduke is a child-‘monster’ (28), an oxymoron deepened by the military terminology used to describe him. He is looked after, not by a ‘team of doctors’ but by a ‘platoon of medical commandos’ (29); his diapers are referred to as ‘loaded or unloaded’ (83), and his military toys, ‘the howitzers and grenade-launchers and cartridge belts [...] the plastic broadswords and cutlasses and scimitars,’ reveal a ‘disturbing literalism’ (220) in the nursery by being not miniature but full size. Marmaduke is compared to NATO (220), whose controversial doctrine to ‘strike first’ in event of conflict is repeatedly demonstrated by Marmaduke (82, 156, 224), making Graham Fuller’s suggestion that Hope and Guy’s ‘little boy’ (28, 140) is an incarnation of Little Boy, the atom bomb thrown over Hiroshima, fully appropriate.

Related to the hyperboles found in the examples above, another trademark of Amis’s style is repetition. In the following example, the two tropes are combined by taking a statement (‘this was untrue’) and repeating it gradually into high airs of exaggeration: ‘When Nicola asked Keith about his romantic discretion, about his ability to keep his mouth shut on the subject of

women and sex, Keith coughed and answered in the following terms: “Never do that. No way.” This was untrue. It was by no means the case. He *always* did that. When it came to kissing and telling, Keith was a one-man oral tradition’ (167).⁴²

As in this passage in which Keith and Kath talk about Ibquala, the next door neighbour, repetition is often used to illustrate the limping and disjunctive nature of Keith’s thoughts and speech, which are only fluent when he surrenders to tabloid jargon (91) or when it comes to figuring out the best way to close a round of darts (see 313, 353, 422).⁴³ “You never said anything about the other boyfriend.” Keith fell silent. This was true. He never said anything about the other boyfriend. He never said anything about the other boyfriend because *he* was the other boyfriend. Many times he had slipped next door, one finger raised to his lips. Being indignant about the other boyfriend had proved quite beyond his powers’ (107).

In the next example notice the stubborn repetition of the verb clause ‘get going’ which sets a staccato rhythm suggestive of Keith’s primitive and mechanical libido: ‘The arguable connections between pin-ups and pornography: just to clear *them* up while Keith is at hand. With people like Keith, a pin-up was enough to get him going, going in that general direction. But almost anything was enough to get people like Keith going. Five minutes in a populated region of Saudi Arabia would get Keith going’ (109). The promised connection between pin-ups and pornography is left unstated in order to make a wordplay on Keith’s predilection to see practically everything as pornographic in essence. At one point it seems that we really are to explore the ‘arguable connection between pin-ups and pornography’; certainly Keith’s indiscriminating taste illustrates the connection, but then again, according to Keith, *everything* is pornographic, so why not pin-ups? The passage trails off into the hyperbolic comedy so frequently used to paint the character of Keith and the case of the connection between pin-ups and pornography is left implied and, contrary to the promise, unstated.

⁴² See also 293: ‘“We all have a dirty little secret, don’t we, Keith?” “Yeah?” Said Keith, with slow hauteur, as if he didn’t have a dirty little secret. In fact, of course, Keith had lots of dirty little secrets. He had dirty little secrets galore. To make no more than a brisk selection, to name but a few: . . .’

⁴³ The essay ‘Darts: Gutted for Keith’ written for the *Observer* 1988, one year before the publication of *London Fields*, and included in the essay collection *Visiting Mrs Nabokov*, reads as field research for *London Fields*. We hear of the importance of lager and the cheers (‘Darts, Keith’) which both feature in *London Fields*. The darting speculations that Keith Talent so often is engaged in, ‘the much-touted “maths” of darts,’ is put into perspective; it ‘can be mastered over a weekend’ (*Visiting Mrs Nabokov* 226).

A joy of language similar to the one above is found on page 320: ‘Nicola poured more brandy. She giggled uglily: ugly giggling. She knew the giggling was ugly but that only made her giggle all the uglier,’ and in the following passage, which is again about Keith but just as much devoted to an exploration of the possible grammatical combinations of the words ‘inaccurate denial’:

He knew all about inaccurate denial. Keith used it a lot, this technique. He was forever inaccurately denying things. Quite recently he had had to do some very concerted inaccurate denial – with regards to his wife. Instead of inaccurately (and routinely) denying to someone or other that this or that was stolen or worthless or broken or ruined, Keith had been obliged inaccurately to deny that he had given Kath non-specific urethritis. It was the sternest test this tactic had ever faced (106).

Do they mean anything, these apparently mindless repetition or are they ‘only’ there to entertain? Consider Chapter 22, ‘Horrorday,’ whose insistence about adding ‘horror-’ to every other noun makes for exhausting and claustrophobic reading (are there no other words left!?). All through *London Fields* Amis (through Samson of course)⁴⁴ demonstrates the vitality of language, but he seems also to be probing the limitations of the vitality by stretching his style to the breaking point. The following segment ends in resignation:

His pimpsuits, pimphats and pimpshoes are made out of bison, turtles, zebras and reindeer. Among the stolen goods in the pimpboot of his pimpear are more pimpclothes swathed in pimppolythene. Every other day, as the pimpwhim takes him, his pimphair is either superfrizzed or expensively relaxed. His pimpfingers are dustered with pimprings. Boy, does Thelonius look like a pimp (208).

The rather flat ending is anticlimactic in relation to our expectation that the repetitions lead to some sort of punch line, the comic effect of which is normally the main justification for the repetitions in the first place. The ‘pimp’ example shows no progress and the tension neither rises nor falls. Nothing happens, and the conclusion: ‘Boy, does Thelonius look like a pimp’ sounds resigned and helpless. The question is whether to understand the resignation as

⁴⁴ Samson is ‘given all the linguistic sophistication of Amis’s developed narrative style’ (Finney 12).

meaningful in itself, or as an instance where the repetitions simply do not work. To answer that question we turn briefly to a similar discussion. The excessiveness of style evident in the above passages of repetition has been criticised in another of its manifestations: the heavily loaded symbolic design of the novel and the corresponding substitution of caricatures for characters.

Considering the nuclear imagery piled upon Nicola, Peter Kemp, for example, talks about an ‘allegorical overkill.’⁴⁵ There is the reference to Nicola as an all-consuming black hole (67); her identification with the planet (69, 70, 264), which confers her death wish to the earth itself, and with the means to destroy the planet: the plane, Enola Gay, that delivered the atomic bomb, Little Boy.⁴⁶ On top of this come the functions of Hope, the name of Guy’s wife, whom he is losing, and Faith, the wife of the American president, saved from her critical disease only in the last minute (207, 349). Guy and Keith symbolise the upper and lower class, respectively, and Nicola ‘the male fantasy figure’ (260) takes on the stylised roles of Madonna and whore which predictably bring both Keith and Guy around (Smith 121). Kemp’s comment implies that the excess of style found in Amis’s writing is simply ‘too much’.

Catherine Bernard takes a different view and constructs the excessiveness as meaningful in itself. ‘Only the degradation of literary codes,’ she writes, ‘may measure up to the degradation of the world,’ and from this realisation springs the attempt to subvert ‘realistic, mimetic or, more widely, meaning-making conventions’ (Dismembering 122). *London Fields* subverts the mode of allegory according to Bernard, who attaches significance to the excessiveness of the imagery which from Kemp’s perspective seems simply strained and

⁴⁵ Critics mentioning the problematic nature of the symbolism include Diedrick (156), Pesetsky, and Fuller (Murder He Wrote).

⁴⁶ Nicola’s identification with Enola comes not only from pretext of searching for her (‘I must bring them back. I’ll never feel whole until I bring them back’ (124); Amis alludes to it more subtly as well by making the names (Nicola, Enola) rhyme and by exploiting that Enola is Alone spelled backwards. Nicola on page 126 to Guy: ‘Help me. I’m so terribly alone. Please help me.’ That ‘Enola’ has this connotation may also be a clue to baby Kim’s repeated ‘Enlah’s (104, 165, 239). En Lah Gai which becomes Enola Gay is Nicola’s made up name for her non-existent soul-mate (124). Kim’s ‘Enlah’s are cries for help: ‘I’m all alone,’ is what she says.

overwrought. We live in an ‘exhausted culture’ (*London Fields* 459), and the exhaustion is reflected in the way Amis probes the limit of his style.⁴⁷

Going back to the repetitions, they may be attributed significance similar to the significance Bernard attaches to the loaded symbolism. On this interpretation, the repetitions bring in the possibility that imagination itself is dying and when imagination dies, so does (figurative) language. In this sense Amis echoes the famous last paragraph of James Joyce’s *The Dead* in which the word ‘falling’ is repeated seven times as the reading eyes fall down the page. The ‘pimp’ paragraph in *London Fields* completely lacks the pathos of the passage from *The Dead*, whose suggestive and slow rhythm is characteristically blown up by the use of the word ‘pimp’ twelve times in only seven lines, which makes for a totally different, highly disjunctive and exhausting reading experience. The passage also lacks the subtle combination of form and content exploited in ‘The Dead’ where the implicit comment on language is mirrored by the snow inevitably falling, like sleep or death, to cover everything under the same suffocating carpet, blurring the merely temporary distinction between the living and the dead. Amis has no time for such subtleties here; the ‘pimp’ passage works on brute force but carries ultimately the same message. With the qualifications mentioned, Bennet and Royle’s comments on Joyce’s story are illustrative of Amis as well: ‘What Joyce seems to be evoking here, through effects of language – repetition, alliteration and assonance, chiasmus – is a fading out, a falling out, of language itself. “The Dead” is about the death of (figurative) language’ (72).⁴⁸

2.1.2 Comic Reversals

London Fields plays with its reader in a number of ways: its structural design, as we shall see in the next chapter, is such that it alternately gives you the feeling of being left alone and firmly led by the hand; it opens by confusing the reader’s attempt to determine its genre; and it is filled with phrases that arrest the attention and discourage easy reading. The play with the reader finds its comic expression in the numerous ‘reversals’ in which Amis provide

⁴⁷ For more on exhaustion as a theme in *London Fields*, see Diedrick 157 and Bernard, *A Certain Hermeneutical Slant* 180.

⁴⁸ The comparison between Amis and Joyce here works on the contention that they both predict the death of language. In this respect it is ironic that it is the vitality of language which Saul Bellow seizes upon in his comparison between the two writers (Stout 5). Not that the first comparison excludes the second, of course.

sentences that promise one thing only to continue by turning it upside down. When we are told on page 6, for example, that Keith ‘earned three times as much as the Prime Minister,’ an expectation is built up which Amis immediately disappoints by ending the sentence ‘and never had any money.’ The contrast between the two clauses is significantly unmarked with an ‘and’ instead of a ‘but’, twisting our sense of the normal relationship between cause and effect. ‘And’ instead of ‘but’ suggests that there really is no contrast at all: earning a lot means having nothing. The logic of the sentence, arresting because reversed, mirrors the kind of logic Keith’s visits to the bookmakers force him to adopt. Another instance of this kind of reversal is found in the introduction of Marmaduke on page 28: ‘Oh, the little boy was perfect in every way. And he was a monster.’

Reversals like the above are not only funny; they engage the reader by not allowing him to relax and mark as such a point of comparison to Oscar Wilde, whose technique, according to R. D. V. Glasgow, ‘startles, jolts, and jars us out of the self-satisfied mental torpor that can hear and respond to an assertion without questioning, interpreting, or thinking about it’ (103). The effect is achieved by Wilde mostly by reversing a cliché or a tautology (‘I can believe anything, provided that it’s quite incredible,’ or ‘ugliness is one of the seven deadly virtues’ (*Dorian Gray* 28, 231)) and is well suited in *London Fields* to Amis’s overall design of the novel which persistently urges the reader to read closely. Amis playfully forces his readers to pay attention. The complicated structural design of the novel, the subject of our next chapter, requires close reading, and the nature of the humour in the novel is such that it assists in this requirement and makes it easier for the reader to meet the standards needed to follow the fragmented narration.

In the following example about one of Keith’s ‘birds’ whose love life has taken to following a scheme of regular disappointment, a sinister reversal is built into a list held together by a repetition of the adjective ‘your’, whose sleep inducing rhythm makes the reversal all the more striking: ‘And when it was over (and it was usually over quickly), well, you were left with your albums and scrapbooks, your poems, your train-tickets, your memories, your dreams, your telephone calls to his wife and children, your letters to the editors of the tabloids’ (49). Up until ‘dreams’ nothing dramatic in the sentence has happened, and for classification we take to the stereotypical image of the naive-and-harmless-lover who dreamily thinks back of yet another lost love. Seducingly contained in, and set off by, the continued rhythm, the marked contrast of the last part of the sentence (the nasty ‘telephone

calls to his wife and children' and 'letters to the editors of the tabloids') replaces one stereotype with another: the-naive-but-not-so-harmless-lover who does *not* go quietly.

A similar reversal, taken from a listing of Keith's infidelities, is funny because of the clash between the romance parodied in the first part and the disclosure of the naked realities in the second: The 'odd chance encounter made possible when fortune smiles on young lovers (closing time, pub toilet)' (48). Like the previous example where the contrasting elements were held together and slurred by rhythmic repetition, here too the contrast is not outspoken. Deceptively hidden in parentheses, which normally illustrate what they follow, the reversal shocks the reader due to its strong contrast with the first part of the sentence.

The element of 'surprise' has long been thought central to the comic. Immanuel Kant defined the phenomenon as 'an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a suspenseful expectation into nothing' (199). Kant's own example is about the man who says that he has enough money to last the rest of his life, provided he dies on Tuesday, and as we have seen, Amis makes frequent use of this kind of reversal. There is a difference, though, to Kant's own example, which ends in 'nothing' by relieving the tension, as the next two examples show: 'Marmaduke: having spent a lot of time noisily daubing his breakfast all over the table, he was now quietly eating his paint set' (394). The second part here is surely a reversal and exemplifies the surprise element, but rather than lifting the tension, Amis seems to be heightening it. He promises falling tension with 'quietly' but then comes the real reversal: 'eating his paint set' which is anything but 'nothing.' We see it more clearly in the tale of yet another of Keith's women, Debbie Kensit. The last sentence of the example, which marks the transformation, is not a neutral remark allowing the reader to laugh with relief. Rather, the transformation goes from 'something' into 'something bad': 'And Debbie? Little Debbie? Well, Debbie was *special*. Dark, rounded, pouting, everything circular, ovoid, Debbie was 'special'. Debbie was special because Keith had been sleeping with her since she was twelve years old' (51). The effect of resolved suspense is here taken to an extreme which almost turns it into a parody. As if it was not enough to have 'Debbie was special' three times in three lines before we get to the *why*, and 'special' foregrounded once by putting it in quotation marks and once by italicising it, the reader is prepared for the rising suspense in the quoted bit by references to Debbie twice before (45, 48) both times with the prefix-like 'special' attached. And it does not end here. Arguably shocked by the revelation of Keith and Debbie's 'special relationship,' the reader is apparently offered a way out, some kind of

softening circumstance. That is the promise of the next line: ‘On the other hand,’ but the hope that things are not so terrible after all, is instantly punctured with the following line of dark humour: ‘so had several other people.’⁴⁹ As the example illustrates, the comedy of *London Fields* is not of the ‘safe’ kind that Kant seemed to have in mind. The comic reversals in *London Fields* spiral downwards in the black humour from which the reader should never feel safe, least of all when there is a promise of a reversal to the better, as we saw with the ‘on the other hand’ in the example above, and again here: ‘The smile did a lot for Debbie: it did things like halving her IQ’ (376).

2.2 Irony

Irony occurs when there is ‘a discrepancy between words and their meanings, between actions and their results, or between appearance and reality: most simply, saying one thing and meaning something else’ (Bennet and Royle 209). Technically, it has been divided into verbal, dramatic and situational irony (Frye et al 250), while other distinctions work according to the attitudes of the author – who implies the ‘something else’ – and distinguish between romantic, modern and postmodern irony (Hutcheon, *Postmodern Irony*), or stable and unstable irony (Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*). This section deals with instances of dramatic irony in *London Fields*, which is one of the chief means to accomplish the humour of the novel. To say that irony is a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant implies the existence of two voices: one that says and one that means. Irony presupposes double-voicing, in other words, and *London Fields* is a double-voiced novel in that what is said is qualified by what is meant. In some places, however, it seems that this ‘second voice’ disappears,⁵⁰ leaving us without a more or less hidden meaning behind what is ostensibly said. The section ends by considering those cases and their significance for the novel as a whole.

Two men look out the window on a cold, rainy summer day. One says to the other: ‘What a nice weather.’ The comment is an instance of verbal irony and will effortlessly be interpreted

⁴⁹ The point, the shock effect, has been made. But it is taken even further. Not only is Keith sleeping with a minor, and not only is he not the only one: it transpires that we are dealing with regular prostitution – with Debbie’s mother as the pimp: ‘... all completely cosher and Bristol-fashion because she’d had her tubes done and you just gave cahs gifts of seventy-five quid to her mum, who wasn’t bad either’ (51).

⁵⁰ Technically, the second voice does not disappear, but rather fuses, or coincides, with the first voice. What we mean by the second voice’s disappearance is that it becomes impossible to isolate it from the first voice, actually making the statement ‘single-voiced’.

as an utterance to the effect that the weather is bad. Imagine the same situation. It is raining and it is cold, only the person talking does not know this. His comment is still ironic but it was not meant to be. This is dramatic irony: verbal irony with the speaker's awareness erased. Readers are shown that the weather is bad and so share knowledge with the author which is kept from the speaker, who becomes the victim of the irony, the one whose ignorance is exposed. Bergson's observation that 'a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself' (71) specifies the instance of dramatic irony where the speaker talks about, and directs his ignorance toward, his own self. The following example illustrates Bergson's remark by showing a discrepancy between Keith's view of himself and what the reader is invited to think. Keith, who is drunk already, muses to himself about his ability to 'hold his drink. No one knew the difference [...] Keith just carried it off.' He is interrupted by Nicola, who reveals Keith's image of himself as pure delusion: 'You're quite drunk already, aren't you, Keith' (57).

Due to the structural design of the novel, the dramatic ironies in *London Fields* mostly display the victims' problems with assessing the facts of the situations they find themselves in. Their interpretations of the scenes are shown to the reader to be sometimes hilariously at odds with the correct circumstances. Guy's first visit to Nicola is rendered from the perspectives of both Nicola and Guy, and the differences illustrate well the possibilities of irony stemming from the scene repetition. Before she goes out in the living room to meet him, Nicola rearranges the bed and puts on makeup to suggest a sexual relationship to Keith, who just left as Guy came. She wants to arouse suspicion in Guy so that he can show her some temper: 'Nicola had been looking forward to the series of good expressions with which she would have greeted his jealous bafflement: dawning comprehension, incredulous disgust, definitive dismissal' (132). As it is, she has to wait with these performances (see 341); we hear from Nicola's version of the scene that things are not quite progressing as she wants ('what would she have to *do* to arouse suspicion in this man' (132)) but only when we get the scene again from Guy's perspective (145), are we presented with the full extent of his credulity.⁵¹ Observing Nicola's appearance, arranged with makeup ('a profound and turbulent postcoital flush was the effect she was after' (130)), Guy thinks: 'I see. She's obviously been crying' (145). And the disarrayed bed ('its satyr heaven of throttled sheets and twisted

⁵¹ As a matter of fact, though it does not show in this passage, suspicion is planted in Guy. Subconscious at first, it does find its way to the surface (309).

pillows' (131)) is taken as a sign of 'deep depression' (145). When Guy starts recounting his bad news regarding his search for Enola Gay and Little Boy, Nicola 'didn't listen at all,' (131) whereas Guy interprets her passiveness this way: 'her presence, her force field, went quite dead as it withstood the first volley of disappointment he had brought her' (146).⁵²

The element of structural design that gives way to such vivid examples of dramatic irony is the frequent repetition of scenes from the different perspectives of the characters, a feature which will be investigated in the next chapter for the complications they imply for the reader. Samson depends on what the characters tell him about what happens when he himself is not there, and since he is on a constant pressure from his publisher to provide chapters, there is little or no time for revision or to wait for all the participants to give their evaluation of a particular scene. This, at any rate, is the immediate reason for the disjuncted way of telling. The obvious gain lies in the possibility of irony when two perceptions of the same thing differs.

In all of the novel sections, the irony is easy to notice. Behind the voice that *says*, usually the voice of Keith or Guy, we constantly hear a voice that *means* and qualifies the ostensible understanding of the voice that says. The second voice is what makes for the irony conferred on Keith, for example, when his rather simple thoughts are coupled with expressions suitable for more fruitful mental activity, as when Keith *improvises* his 'exactly' (355); when he 'grew preoccupied' by the 'certain enigma' of how come you saw black guys with white girls but never white guys with black girls (5); or when his 'she wore an itsy-witsy teeny-weeny' is *volunteered* (127) as if it was important information arduously procured. In order to fully understand the workings of irony in *London Fields*, however, we must also understand 'voice' in a broader sense as the 'power,' or 'presence' that arranges the dramatic irony for us via the repeated scenes. When Keith or Guy are shown in these scenes to misunderstand Nicola or each other, we must assume the presence of someone, another 'voice' – be it the narrator or the (implied) author's - in the background, responsible for this 'show.'

When Samson, in his diary, lays out evidence of his talks with Keith or Guy, or describes either of them, it is most often with great comic tales. The story of how Samson met Keith

⁵² Later when Guy, having called Nicola on the phone, thinks fondly of 'the delightful carnality he seemed to have awakened in her' (440), we know that the carnality should be attributed to the sack artisty she is

(10-14), and when Samson contemplates Keith's voice (26) are as funny as any of the novel parts describing Keith's excursions. Self-irony is also present. Here is how Samson describes the inevitable way to his death: 'Me I'm in a rattletrap lurching much too fast over bumpy ground. I have left the road. I am out of control. The hood flies up. There goes a wheel. Only one outcome' (119). And the more immediate effects of his disease: 'Death seems to have solved my posture problem – and improved my muscle tone. What jogging and swimming and careful eating never quite managed, death is pulling off with no trouble at all. [...] for the present I flatter myself that death is having a good effect on my appearance' (182). These are instances of verbal irony; Samson addresses a reader who knows about the general undesirability of disease and death and who will manage to appreciate the detached attitude with which Samson also occasionally describes the Crisis: 'Will it reach the conclusion it appears to crave – will the Crisis reach the Conclusion? Is it just the nature of the beast? We'll see. I certainly hope not. I would lose many potential readers, and all my work would have been in vain. And that would be a *real* bitch' (64). Instead of worrying about what the Crisis would do to himself, the planet, or humanity, he worries about the outcome of his novel and counts on the reader to restore the right order of priority and acknowledge Samson's ability to play it cool.

But there are also places in which Samson's irony towards himself seems to disappear momentarily, leaving him standing naked without the protective layer of irony. In other words, *London Fields* is not only a two-voiced novel but incorporates instances of earnest single-voicing which appear problematic in the context. In the diary sections, Samson's voice is given full range, and although, as we have seen, there is certainly irony involved in some parts of the diary, there are others in which Samson comes through in attempts at honest concern. Consider the 'awkward sentimentality' (Kakutani 2) of this: 'Now they're briefer still, but animals have always lived brief lives. What we take from animals, what we take from our pets (without trying and without asking), is a lesson about death: an overview of the shorter span.' Or the transported description of Kim Talent's eyes (210). Or see the last paragraph on page 327, where Samson's voice is transformed from the distanced, ironic stance the reader is so familiar with, to a sincere, concerned cry for sympathy. Or take his decidedly un-ironic attitude to the failed relationship with Missy Harter ('We felt safe. More than that. We felt solved. We were *solved*' (282); 'I call her everywhere and nothing

performing with Keith at the time Guy calls (431).

happens.’ (367)) Or the concluding Letter to Kim Talent where the irony is completely absent, replaced by an earnestness which presents a strong contrast to the comedy of the rest of the novel.

Speaking of *The Rachel Papers*, Diedrick says that ‘all of the potentially serious emotional scenes [...] are [...] curtailed, or inadequately realized,’ and calls this ‘a weakness that will continue to plague Amis’s fiction’ (30). But why do emotional scenes pose a problem for Amis? The answer that he just ‘can’t do it,’ is not quite satisfactory. In an essay on John Updike in *The Moronic Inferno*, Amis identifies a problem in Updike’s writing which is similar to the problem of awkward sentimentality in *London Fields* and which points to a possible explanation as well: ‘At its best the narrative is a rollocking comedy of Rabbit’s [the main character of Updike’s ‘Rabbit trilogy’] pitiable constructions. Conversely – and this is the difficult part – the empty corners and hollow spaces of the story fill with pathos, the more poignant for being unremarked’ (156). We are taught by Amis in *London Fields*, just as Amis feels he is taught by Updike in his fiction, to identify with the author, that disembodied voice that lies behind the other voices and presents them in an ironic light. When this second voice suddenly disappears, or fuses into indistinguishable unity with the ostensible voice of the narration, and the novel (briefly, so we do not have time to really adjust our expectations) turns single-voiced, it is likely to have an uncomfortable effect on the reader, who expects a tone of irony behind.

The passages in themselves are perhaps not terribly sentimental, but they appear uneasy due to the persistent ironic distance of the context. Due to the design of *London Fields*, with its extensive ironic treatment of characters, sympathy is an unusual response for the reader. When Samson suddenly drops the ironic stance, looking for sympathy in the reader, the tone adopted is in strong contrast to the rest of the novel. We have little islands of single-voicing which stick out because they occur in a context overwhelmingly dominated by double-voicing. The instances in which Samson’s voice shines through in this way are bound to appear strange and uneasy to the reader, who is used to always seeing things through the thoroughly ironic eyes of Samson. Although rare, these places have been noticed by reviewers, who claim that Amis is mounting the pulpit by preaching on the troubles of

today's society.⁵³ What actually takes place is that the second voice 'disappears,' and Samson comes through nakedly alone. The effect might be considered stark moments of honesty and sincerity but tend to appear awkwardly sentimental to the readers who have been invited throughout to match the ironic distance of the novel and are consequently unprepared for the emotional response proper for honest cries like the ones Samson occasionally lets out.

The humour is a defining trait of *London Fields*. In terms of the response it invites in the reader, it seems at first to stand apart from the novel's other major characteristic, the complexity. As we shall see below, the complicated aspects work constantly to engage the reader in the necessary sense-making process, the configuration process, of the novel. Laughing, the response invited by the comedy, on the contrary, would appear to be a passive response, and to surrender to it would consequently mean relaxing the attention and so run counter to the objectives of the complicated aspects to which the comedy might be seen as a kind of lubrication: a series of comic reliefs. As we have seen, this is not the main function of the laughter in *London Fields*, whose comedy is an integrated element of the novel as a whole. Rather than viewing the comedy split up into momentary, albeit prolonged, instances of comic reliefs, we see that the comedy is vital aspect of the voice, or 'tone' of the novel and as such present all along.

To understand that the effects of the humour do not run counter to the effects of the complexity, two things should be noticed. First, the way we laugh, the kind of laughter provoked by the novel. From the surprising imagery, over the sometimes shocking verbal reversals, to the persistent irony, the best way to summarise the quality of the laughter is to say that it engages the reader. Rather than finding ourselves in the alienating, passive position of the entertained but detached observer, we find conventional expectations continually disrupted and any kind of 'light reading' discouraged. The main explanation to this is the inclusion of themes which due to their serious nature are normally not treated with the irreverence of a comic voice. When we are asked to laugh at Keith's outrageous behaviour, we cannot sit still and contentedly giggle. The laughter is tormented and tortured, but first of all engaging, by means of asking the reader to perform the act of judgement based on the irony involved in the descriptions of him. In other words, its effects are very similar to those

⁵³ See Rifkind; Yardley.

occasioned by the complications, namely that of keeping readers involved, and forcing them to stay alert and close to the text.

Secondly, the strains of humour and complexity run together in a key element to the structural design of the novel: the repetition of scenes from different perspectives. These scenes will be investigated shortly for their complexity and how they invite the reader's co-operation. As we have seen above, the second effect of these scenes is the opportunity they offer to explore the workings of dramatic irony. By seeing a scene first through the eyes of one character and then later through the eyes of another, we are given very vivid illustrations of Nicola's successful manipulations, and the utter failures of Keith and Guy to see through the manipulation and correctly interpret the situations they find themselves in. As we turn to the structural complexities in which the repetition of scenes plays a significant part, we will start with a partial rethinking of the role the reader of *London Fields* is asked to play.

CHAPTER 3: THE COMPLICATIONS OF *LONDON FIELDS*

In his review of *London Fields*, Melvin Bragg makes two comments that capture the novel's two main features: 'Taken all in all, *London Fields* is a rare achievement. In terms of old-fashioned accessibility, it is his best read since *The Rachel Papers*.' 'Sprinters will find good turf,' Bragg continues but then goes on to formulate the novel's second major characteristic, 'but the patient, even a plodder, will get more reward.' This duality is the key to the novel's 'rare achievement': other novels provide more entertainment, and others again offer more difficulties for the reader to solve. It is the mix of appeals that sets *London Fields* apart from other works. In the previous chapter we looked at the cornerstone of the novel's 'accessibility' - its humour; the present chapter takes on the invitations of the text to read it closely and so tunes into the its complexity.

The basic story is not complicated: Nicola Six somehow knows she is going to be murdered. She finds two possible candidates for the role as her murderer, spends some 400 pages arranging them into the right position and finally completes her plan by having herself killed by the narrator instead, whom she has been secretly cultivating all along. Whereas the story may seem trivial, or at least very straightforward, it is told in a way that is complicated rather than trivial and discontinuous rather than straightforward.⁵⁴ The novel is a maze of gaps, discontinuities, and unsuspected repetitions of scenes.⁵⁵ In addition to these complications, we investigate in this chapter *London Fields* in terms of its composite nature of 'diary' and 'novel', which is a salient feature readers have to discover for themselves.

⁵⁴ The distinction used in this thesis between 'story' and 'discourse' corresponds to the distinction made by the Russian Formalists between 'fabula' and 'syuzet'. 'Story' (fabula) is the chronological order of events referred to in the narrative. 'Discourse' (syuzet) is the order of these events as they are presented in the narration. The translation of fabula and syuzet into story and discourse has been proposed by Seymour Chatman and taken over by David Lodge. The other translation in use is 'story' and 'plot'. For an overview see Brooks 330n.

⁵⁵ A number of scenes in *London Fields* are seen from different perspectives: The meeting in the Black Cross (22 from Nicola's perspective; 23 from Samson's perspective, 36 from Guy's perspective); Keith's first visit to Nicola's (56 from Keith's perspective; 72 from Nicola's perspective); Guy's first visit to Nicola's (130 from Nicola's perspective; 144 from Guy's perspective; 162 Nicola and Samson talk about the scene; 309 Guy thinks back and partly revises his previous understanding (144)); Guy's phonecall to Nicola's 'answering machine' (156 from Guy's perspective; 174 from Keith's perspective, 190 from Nicola's perspective); Nicola's pining (176, 178, 190, 217 – see treatment below); Nicola's visit to Keith's (256 from Keith's perspective; 265 from Nicola's perspective); Keith's visit to Nicola's (after Nicola's visit to Keith) (267 from Nicola's perspective; 288 from Keith's perspective).

Common to the structural complexities (and contributing considerably to their complexity) is the fact that they occur without warning to the reader who searches, largely in vain, for markers signalling that an upcoming passage will deviate from its immediate textual environment. *London Fields* is full of passages that appear structurally deviant and resistant to the reader's attempt to organise them into a meaningful whole, but depending on the indispensability of the reader's urge to make sense where apparently there is none, the novel can frustrate the sense making efforts without losing the reader. The amount of necessary reader participation in 'making sense' of *London Fields* calls for theoretical approaches that widen the scope of narrative to include not only text and author but also the reader.

3.1 Text and Reader

Turning the attention to the receiving end of literature is a relatively recent development in literary criticism. Since 1968, when Scholes and Kellogg stated that the two main characteristics to narrative are story and story teller, there has been a major shift of emphasis (Suleiman 3). Although the general field of literary criticism is much too broad to talk reasonably about a paradigm shift, enough attention has been invested in investigating the reader's role in the production of meaning to talk about another paradigm being added to the field. Various labels for reader response or audience oriented criticism, the focus on the reader has attracted attention from phenomenologists like Roman Ingarden and Wolfgang Iser as well as from hermeneutic theorists as diverse as Wayne Booth and Stanley Fish. The issue has been approached subjectively by David Bleich and Norman Holland and from a sociological/historical angle by Ian Watt and H. R. Jauss and, in effect the approaches remain too diverse to justify talk about a paradigm proper; they are only precariously held together under one label by a recognition that the reader plays a role in the production of meaning of texts. Ways are parted again according to traditional debates between subjectivism and objectivism and between theorists who see meaning as an ideal, ahistoric object, and historicist theorists who view meaning as a historical, context-determined event.

Not only within the strict circles of literary criticism has the role of the reader in the generation of meaning preoccupied theorists. From a more philosophical starting point, Roland Barthes works in *S/Z* with a separation between 'writerly' and 'readerly' texts, or writerly and readerly components of texts. As opposed to the 'readerly' text, the 'writerly' text is open, or non-configured, and leaves it to the reader to bring it together, to make it

make sense. Similar thoughts have been put forth by Paul Ricoeur who separates the reading process into three distinct events, labelled mimesis 1, 2, and 3.⁵⁶ A text is a ‘creative imitation’ of real life on mimesis 1 by the author; on mimesis 2 an act of configuration takes place in which the reader makes sense of the text according to the complex notions and expectations that make up the reader’s preunderstanding; and on mimesis 3 the text is ‘taken back’ into the world by the reader who appropriates the world of the text to the world already known. *London Fields* exemplifies that ‘making sense’ is a collaborative process between text and reader. This chapter deals with reading in its mimesis 2 stage, the configuration of the text, by clarifying the reader’s involvement in making the novel make sense.

What specifically makes the reader go through the sometimes arduous job of configuring ‘writerly’ texts has been explained by Wayne Booth who refers to three kinds of ‘interests’ that motivate reading. There are qualitative interests, which comprise the demands of the reader’s expectations taken very generally. There is, for example, a strong interest in seeing the effect when we have been presented with the cause. Expectations of conventionality, for example that the novel conforms to a known genre, can be set aside if the novel builds its own conventions, as is the case with *London Fields*. One of the most important conventional expectations is the expectation that the novel is internally consistent. We expect in other words, and this is independent of whatever convention the novel is following or breaking, that it is, at least to some degree, explainable. Promises made must be kept. Thus if a novel opens by breaking conventions and shows open disdain for established views of what a novel is, we are unlikely to accept it if it does not somehow take the consequences and at least attempt something new. Every word, in a sense, is a promise for the next.

Since our reading is always guided by sym- and antipathies toward characters, Booth identifies a ‘practical interest’ as part of the reader’s motivation to read. In some novels this is common sense; the emotional component in novels by Dickens is undeniable, but Booth also claims that we would not get past the first page of Joyce’s intellectual and aesthetic *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* if we did not care for Stephen Dedalus. The third kind of interest Booth mentions has immediate relevance to our purposes in this chapter. Apart from the qualitative and practical interest, readers have an ‘intellectual’, or ‘cognitive’,

⁵⁶ See ‘Mimesis and Representation’. The concept of ‘mimesis’ is borrowed from Aristotle and is used by Ricoeur to designate the composition of a text as a process of ‘creatively imitating’ life and not as simply

interest in the text. We want to find out what the text means, what kind of world it presents us with. On a more basic level, the intellectual interest motivates the reader to solve complexities in the text. Before speculations can be made about its 'meaning', the text has to make sense.

Applying these ideas to the thoughts in the last chapter about the kind of overall responses invited by *London Fields*, we get that the main appeal of the novel is to the reader's 'intellectual interest': solving complications as well as laughing are intellectual responses. But do we not have a 'practical,' i.e. emotional interest in seeing Keith Talent punished for his behaviour? This must be so; Booth argues for the indispensability of the practical interest and Amis agrees that readers cannot help being driven by sympathy and antipathy (see 44). The crucial point is how this interest is satisfied in *London Fields*. We do not see Keith punished to a degree that can satisfy anyone's ('practical') sense of justice. Instead, the rejection of Keith is provided by the distancing and intellectual response of laughter. The practical interest, which is there as a necessary human impetus is displaced, so to speak, by the intellectual nature of the response we are invited to make. Two reasons are easily identified: by making the novel complex, thus appealing intellectually rather than emotionally, Amis works in accordance with his declared aim of directing attention from character to author. Secondly, as we saw in the last chapter, the intellectual response elicited and the corresponding distance to the characters are important as background for the novel's humour.

Whereas Ricoeur is interested in the reading process as such, Iser is more oriented toward literary criticism and offers helpful tools for analysis. Iser's concept of 'blanks' provides perhaps the best way of describing a large number of the structural complexities of *London Fields*. According to Iser, what sets literature apart from other textual discourses is that it is not constative of its object; literature does not describe an object to which these descriptions can be judged as right or wrong. The literary text does not refer to an external object, a 'reality', against which its quality can be measured and remains therefore essentially indeterminate. What the text does, in a performative act, is to offer new perspectives on the world, and the only thing the readers can compare the literary text to is their own experience

copying or depicting it.

of the world rather than the world-in-itself. Readers are therefore always involved in contemplating the views offered by the text, and referring these to everyday experience.

To include the reader in the production of meaning in this manner raises questions about the ontological status of the text. If the text is not to be seen as an entity in itself, but as something the reader must work with in order to produce meaning, then what is a text? According to Iser 'literary objects come into being through the unfolding of a variety of views that constitute the 'object' in stages and at the same time give a concrete form for the reader to contemplate' (Indeterminacy 8). These views are called 'schematised views' and, as an object, be it a literary or a real object, can never be described in its entirety, each view at the same time determines the literary object and raises the need for a new determination. In other words, every schematised view presents an image of the literary object, but as the whole object cannot be described fully, every schematised view at the same time as describing the object raises questions about it. The reader's involvement stems from the fact that the literary object can never be fully determined; as this is not possible, the reader must constantly try to grasp the object through the descriptions of the schematised views. It is, so to speak, left to the reader to connect the schematised views, or, put differently, to bridge the gaps between them. More often than not the reader is not even aware of these gaps, but is nevertheless very much a part of constructing the literary object.

Unlike Booth, Iser does not refer to 'interests' that bring the reader through the challenge of reading. For Iser, these challenges, or blanks, themselves are what provoke the reader's participation: 'By reading we uncover the unformulated part of the text, and this very indeterminacy is the force that drives us to work out a configurative meaning while at the same time giving us the necessary freedom to do so' (*The Reading Process* 62). Iser's concept of indeterminacy points to an interesting doubleness in that it, on the one hand, incorporates the unsettling feeling which arises when the reader finds himself lost in structures he struggles to make meaning out of and, on the other hand, argues that it is the very struggle that makes the reader keep reading. For Iser, as for Ricoeur, a complicated novel invites the reader to solve the complexities rather than just give up. In an attempt to describe the structurally difficult aspects of *London Fields*, as well as to account for the feeling of being 'left alone' and the feeling of being urged forward, we turn now to an exposition of the use of gaps and blanks in the *London Fields*, how they function, and how they are resolved.

3.2 Blanks in *London Fields*

London Fields has two interrelated parts; the novel Samson is writing and his diary. This explains the shift from the opening first person narrative, to the third person point of view of chapter one. On page 9 a page break turns the voice back to Samson and the first person narrative. But these changes in voice are consequences, not causes, of the diary-novel composition and are not in themselves clues to the reader that they should read *London Fields* as part diary, part novel. Noting the distinction between diary and novel is crucial to understanding *London Fields* and once established, it quickly becomes very obvious, and any difficulty in arriving at this particular understanding is embarrassingly forgotten. But it is not a given; nowhere is such a distinction laid out to us, and it is not possible to pinpoint an exact place where readers learn to interpret page breaks as shifts in mode; different levels of attention afforded and different levels of literary competence enjoyed by different readers obviously make such a task impossible. Since the shifts are nowhere introduced, it would seem more rewarding to talk about a process of learning rather than a point of discovery. What the reader is asked to do, in Iser's words, is to bridge and explain the gaps between the sudden transitions between first and third person styles of narration. The first stone to the bridge is laid by noting that Samson labels himself a novelist (1) and says that he is 'ready to write' (3). Together with his 'let's start with the murderer' which is followed by a page break and the first glimpse of Keith Talent, the assumption seems well founded that we are dealing with someone talking about telling a story and telling it in between.

What cannot be learned from the first pages alone is the sharpness of this distinction between telling and telling about telling. The self-conscious style of the diary carries a vivid image into the novel parts, which are distinguished only by the fact that there is no 'I' persona of the someone (Samson) who is writing it. The style is also here self-conscious. Take for example the first lines of Chapter 1: 'Keith Talent was a bad guy. Keith Talent was a very bad guy. You might even say he was the worst guy. But not *the* worst, not the very worst ever. There *were* worse guys.' The repetitions foreground the style of writing and consequently give the feeling of a not-to-distant narrator telling the story rather than a distant one presenting it, while struggling to keep himself out of the lamplight. In the second diary entry (10-14) we have straightforward dialogue, uncommon in diaries which normally feature reported speech, between the narrator (Samson) and the character of the first chapter (Keith), and important

background is given to the story of the novel, frustrating the inclination to make the correct kind of distinction between the two modes.

The narration itself is, in Iser's words, full of blanks. It often yields scenes defined by a significant distaste for telling the reader where and why it takes place, or even what is going on. The 'evasive' narration – surely not many 'he finished his drink and left' sentences here (see 22) – contrasts with the novel's explicitness, which we saw examples of in the last chapter, and arrogantly seems to count on circumstantial knowledge which it does not itself provide. The actual intercourse in the sex scene between Samson and Nicola, for example, is substituted in the narration of it with 'it' or 'that' (390), and 'we put our clothes back on' is about as explicit as it gets. But still pretty explicit compared with another sexual encounter, between Hope and Guy, whose vanishing passion ('Guy bent his throbbing neck and kissed her mouth, which was half-open and half-awake and tasted of dreams and fever') is suggestive, of course, of their relationship in general. As in the scene in chapter 19 where Nicola gives Keith a blow job in front of his darting opponent, we are given precisely enough information to make us want more. That is, the narration offers half-described scenes which call upon the reader to fill its blanks. In the process, we are inevitably drawn into the story.

The scene between Keith and Nicola works mainly because of its evasiveness; told in detail it would lose its force which lies in the reader's reconstruction. Nicola's unbelievable act with Keith in the Gents is told with some reluctance at first: 'she bent lower. "... On your knees, girl," said Keith calmly' (380). We must picture the scene to fill its blanks, but the incredibility of what is actually going on hinders the process. Having seen the incident, one of Keith's girlfriends pushes the reconstruction further: 'Why's he rub my nose in it? With her. In the *toilet* [...] on her knees' (382) and later to Nicola, making it clear: 'I saw you. In the Gents. She was down on her fuckin knees in the Gents! For Keith. She was down on her knees *sucking his* – ' (383). This is as far as she gets before Keith steps forward and hits her unconscious. The picture we are encouraged to make in our heads of the scene comes gradually together in the pages subsequent to the scene itself, which maintains a suspenseful and reader-involving distance.

Leaving the realisation of situations to the reader's imagination is effectively used for comic purposes as well. It seems that the more revolting the situation, the more effectful is an evasive description of it; its realisation by the reader becomes an active process rather than a

passive reception. The terror of Marmaduke, for example, while mostly established through hyperbole as we saw in the last chapter, comes across no less forcefully when we hear that one of the baby-sitters, Terry, had ‘gratefully accept[ed] some post at a prison gymnasium’ (224), or that ‘an outgoing nanny (Caroline?), [...] was openly drinking cooking-sherry and taking deep breaths as she stared in wonder at the garden’ (273). With attention turned away from Marmaduke himself to the destruction he causes, we are led to add another inch to the extremity of his character.

The above are all illustrations of blanks in the narrative to be filled by the reader. The main part of the reader’s job in *London Fields*, however, is analytical, not imaginative, and to see how, we turn to our main discussion of blanks in the novel. While inviting no less reader participation, these are not so much blanks coming from evasive narration as we saw in the examples above, but rather blanks coming from a fragmented narration. When Nicola goes to visit Keith dressed as a social worker (264) we are certainly dealing with evasive narration (not until ‘then she had to confront the pallor and distress of the mother and the surprising child on the floor’ is the scene established as a repetition from Nicola’s point of view of the scene from 256). But it also exemplifies the most frequent source of complication in *London Fields*: an unusual chronology of narration.

With the help from the separation between story (fabula) and discourse (syuzet), we can define the main kind of work *London Fields* calls upon its reader to perform. The process of making sense of the novel is a process of extricating the story from the discourse. As has been described earlier (see note 54, page 62), the story is the chronological procession of events in the novel and the discourse is the way in which these events are presented to the reader. What makes *London Fields* complicated is the discourse, not the story; the story is straightforward, the discourse, as we shall see, discontinuous and fragmented, and before we can take a stand on what the text says or what kind of relevance it has for us, we have to figure out, very basically, what is going on. A disrupted timeline; an abrupt entering into and exiting from scenes; repetitions of scenes from different points of view, and fragmented notes in Samson’s diary are pieces of the puzzle of the discourse, and for the story to be reconstructed, close attention is afforded.

3.2.1 Repetition of Scenes

Often when a paragraph in *London Fields* begins, a lot of effort is demanded to establish where this segment fits into the rest of the action, when and where it takes place. One example that illustrates this well is the confusion that arises from the delivery, by Keith, of two messages from Nicola to Guy. On page 176, Nicola says to Keith: ‘Have you got all that? Are you sure? And for God’s sake don’t overdo it. Lay it on, but don’t overdo it. And mention the globe.’ The information to be delivered to Guy is not revealed to the reader at this point, but withheld to create suspense. On page 178, the suspense is released as Keith recalls how he told Guy the message, earlier in the Black Cross: ‘Anyway she’s definitely under the weather. Know what it looked like to me? Apaphy. Apaphy. Staring out of the window. Playing with that globe thing. Sad little smile on its face. [...] Like – like she was pining. Pining. Pining its little heart out...’

Some pages later, the same pattern appears to be played through again with another message. On page 201, Nicola tells Keith: ‘All right. See Guy tomorrow. Tell him this. Call me when it’s done.’ Once again the reader is held in the dark as to what information Keith is to deliver to Guy, and the tension is further heightened when Keith calls Nicola (203) to tell her that the message has been given to Guy, still without revealing what the message is. When Keith and Guy are seen together again, on page 217, the reader expects to be let in on what the important message could be. Sure enough, the conversation turns to Nicola, as Keith says to Guy: ‘I tell you who else ain’t in the best of elph either. Neither.’ The dramatic effect this has on Guy (‘At the sound of her name... Guy felt something soft exploding in the transept of his chest. His head dropped and he reached out a hand for the bar. Nicola was suffering. This was heavenly news’) further adds to the suspense. But then: ‘Sad little smile on its face. Like – like she was pining. Pining. Pining its little heart out...’ As it turns out, this scene does not exhibit the telling of the message proclaimed on page 201, but is a repetition of the scene encountered on page 178, this time from Guy’s point of view. The message from page 201 is not revealed to the reader until page 225, where Keith tells Guy that Nicola is suicidal, and then calls Nicola to say that Guy is coming over.

The messages Keith has to Guy are, first, that she is doing badly, (‘pinning’) and then later that she is actually suicidal. Both messages are played through the perspectives of the characters as they give, pass and receive the messages. On page 176, from Keith’s perspective, we learn

that he is to tell Guy Nicola is ‘pining’ – which he does on page 178. On page 190 the scene from page 176 is narrated again, this time from Nicola’s perspective and on page 217 the cycle is closed by a repetition of the 178 scene from Guy’s perspective. What makes the discontinuity even more confusing is that a version of the first message delivery is unsuspectingly inserted into the second ‘message passing’ (201, 225), which is ‘held open’ by withholding the content of the message. This sequence is told ‘straight’, i.e. not repeated; its complexity arises from the way the content of the message is teasingly withheld until page 225 and not until after an insertion on page 217 of a scene that belong to the previous cycle, the one turning around the message that Nicola is ‘pining’.

In an effort to reconstruct the fabula, the story, to place the different segments in the correct order, we find ourselves once again led to read closely and pay attention to small details. In the previous example it is noteworthy that the inserted repetition of the earlier scene is unmarked. Only by recognising the sentences ‘Sad little smile on its face. Like – like she was pining. Pining. Pining its little heart out’ (217) from the previous scene (178) is the reader able to understand and cope with the discontinuous way of narrating. The gaps thus created must be filled by the readers, if they are to understand how the story unfolds, and in this way *London Fields* illustrates the concepts of Iser’s theory well. In order to make sense out of what is taking place in the text (or in the words of Ricoeur, to configure the text) the reader is indeed involved, as the connections between the different segments are left implicit for the reader to work out.

The scene repetitions make it possible for Amis to confuse the readers and strain their sense making efforts by starting or breaking off a segment in medias res without any clues as to when it is taking place, what is happening, etc. Thus provoked, the reader’s sense making efforts are aided when the scene returns with more information about the context. In fact, every time a scene is repeated the rule is that the second time the scene is shown, more information about the context is given.⁵⁷ This is an effective way of letting the reader’s imagination work at making the connections adequate to understanding how the scene is to be placed. As the next example shows, a scene can be exited at an especially tense moment, creating a ‘cliff-hanger’ which compels the reader to keep reading, waiting and expecting the

⁵⁷ Compare pages 173 and 187 to see how more of the context is revealed the second time the scene is shown.

tension to be released. The conversation on page 177 between Keith and Nicola is broken off after Nicola's: '...*What?*'. The use of italics suggests that Keith's: 'Jim Beam. Benedictine. *Porno.*' has in some way upset Nicola, and the reader is naturally anxious to see what happens next. Page 191, where the scene is repeated from Nicola's point of view, with more context before as well as after the conversation, marks the resolution of a suspense which has added a quality of reading-in-anticipation to the pages in between 177 and 191.

As the scenes are repeated from different points of view, they give the reader an excellent example of how the characters perceive the actions taking place. In the example given above, it is remarkable how different the two versions of the scene are. In Keith's version (pages 173-177) there is no mentioning of the discussion about Burton Else, which is very dominant in Nicola's version of the conversation (pages 187-191). The reason for the omission is obvious; Keith is losing face in the discussion about Burton Else (Nicola is playing with the framework of Keith's understanding of reality, the tabloid papers), and therefore he has chosen not to report this incident to Samson. As described in the previous chapter, the scene repetitions are an excellent means for ironic effects. It gives a precise illustration of the power balance between the characters and is the most dramatic method of displaying Nicola's superiority to Keith and Guy. The contrast between the first account in which Keith feels in control of the situation with the revelation in the second visit to the scene, where it is shown that it is Nicola who is the mastermind, sums up the power balance between the two.

Whether relying on the reader's 'interest' or simply by leaving the text's configuration open, *London Fields* urges the reader to read closely. By paying close attention to tiny details, and the hints given by Amis on how to put the pieces together, the reader can laboriously solve the discourse related complexities. And based on the successes of the method, the reader can only assume that this is the right way of reading this particular novel. The 'ideal' reader of *London Fields* will also, however, and precisely because he is the ideal (close) reader, discover elements which do not seem to fit any configuring explanation. We will mention three such elements and stress once again that while their mentioning may appear pedantic, it results directly from the novel's own forceful insistence on being read closely.

3.3 'Problems'

A large part of Nicola's scheme revolves around the fact that Guy does not know that Enola Gay is the name of the plane that dropped the atomic bomb over Hiroshima in 1945. In the novel Guy does not find this information until the closing pages of the book, when he, on his way back to England (445), reads the book *The Light of Many Suns*, which Nicola gave him before he left for America. Enola Gay is also the name Nicola uses for her fantasy friend, whose tragic destiny Nicola uses to squeeze money out of the credulous Guy. On their second meeting (123) Nicola tells Guy the made up story about her Cambodian friend who is now lost between refugee camps somewhere in South East Asia with her little boy, daringly *called* Little Boy after the bomb thrown by Enola Gay. 'Her name is En Lah Gai. I called her Enola. Enola Gay,' Nicola tells Guy and then checks the expression on his face to see if the names gave her away. They did not, of course: 'Nothing. And a little knowledge might even have saved him...' Considering that this is the first time Guy hears of Enola Gay, it is strange that the name appears in Guy's recollection of their *first* meeting and before he knows anything about Enola Gay. He imagines seeing a darkbraided girl, and thinks: 'Perhaps it was Enola, perhaps it was Enola Gay' (95). The first meeting takes place Sunday (95), Guy thinks back on Monday (95) but he does not learn about Enola Gay until the second meeting with Nicola, 'the day after the day after' (123), i.e. on Tuesday.

In the same breath it is worth mentioning that readers are introduced to Enola Gay not once but twice. First on page 16: 'Right from the start she had a friend - Enola, Enola Gay. Enola wasn't real. Enola came from inside the head of Nicola Six,' and again on page 66: 'When Nicola was just a little girl she had a little friend called Enola Gay [...] Enola didn't exist. Nicola invented her.' Both passages are taken from novel sections and are as such directed to the same audience, but apparently an audience with a very short attention span.⁵⁸ Otherwise why would they need to be told the same thing twice like this? What is going on? The second introduction is perfectly superfluous - a waste of information; we already know about Enola Gay, and with the amount of work and attention Amis expects of his readers throughout, he can hardly think it necessary for these readers to be told this information twice. Again we can

⁵⁸ Another repetition ('a vampire (another class of creature that cannot cross your threshold uninvited)' (65)) escapes the charge of 'slobbiness' because it occurs in the novel section and repeats a private comment Samson made in his diary, and so not meant for publication: 'I'm like a vampire. I can't enter unless I'm asked in over the threshold' (42).

take recourse to Samson's unique narrator position, that he is on a deadline, that he has to write things down as they happen, that he rarely has time to make corrections (59). In this light, the double introduction of Enola Gay is to be seen as Samson's responsibility, and Amis uses it to illustrate the consequences of the stress laid upon the shoulders of his narrator. Samson's involvement with his story is such that he loses the distance which is necessary for an author to be in control of his material. Due to his deadlines, Samson is unable to perform the activity of rereading and rewriting which is arguably the most basic manifestation of the author's control. Things escape Samson's control, and with the double introduction of Enola Gay, we are told, albeit very subtly, to be careful to weigh the words of the narrator and, what amounts to the same thing, to see that Samson's voice is not the only one in the narrative. There is an organising force, an implied author, showing us that Samson cannot be totally relied upon to tell the truth.

The second incongruity is more straightforward. On page 154, Nicola asks Guy to call her 'at six o'clock, at six o'clock precisely'. But when Guy does call her, it is 'on the stroke of seven' which is supported by the fact that when Guy reads to Marmaduke in the next scene it is 'nine hours later, at four in the morning' (157). When the incident is recalled by Keith, however, (who is at Nicola's apartment when Guy calls) 'it was six o'clock precisely' (190). Now there is absolutely no reason that Guy would fail to obey such an outright request from Nicola to call her 'at six o'clock'. Not least since he knows that 'unpunctuality throws [her] totally' (130). Keith's version confirms that Guy was indeed punctual – so why are we told that he calls her 'on the stroke of seven'? Mark Imlah notices the discrepancy and sees it as a sign of Samson's unreliability; with little or no time to synchronise the different stories he gets from the characters, incongruities are likely to appear.

A similar instance of a time discrepancy is found on pages 242 and 243. While Samson is stuck at Heathrow, Marmaduke falls ill and has to be taken to the hospital by Guy: 'If the best care available was private, then Hope went in with the child; if non-private, then Guy did' (243). On page 242 'Guy had checked into hospital a little after ten,' while page 243 reveals: 'By eleven o'clock, at any rate, Guy had his pyjamas and toothbrush ready in a briefcase and was soon backing the car out into the street.' As in the example above, this inaccuracy is bound to awake suspicion in the reader, the two instances being less than a page apart. Once again, the obvious explanation is Samson's deadlines, which do not allow him enough time to reread and correct his material. In any case, discrepancies as the above mentioned are

disturbing to the reader, who, asked to read closely, expects to be able to work things out. Considering the coherence of the novel as a whole, the reader must interpret discrepancies as the above mentioned as comments from the implied author about the narrator; simply dismissing them as being just slips appears too easy. Imlah's explanation is probable, not least in the light of Samson's own remarks that he is on a deadline (1, 117) and that changes are called for (10, 59, 432).

3.4 The Composition of *London Fields*: Diary and Novel

Having looked at the initial difficulty in making the proper separation between diary and novel and at the intricate complexities of the discourse in the novel parts, it is time now to turn our attention to the diary parts and the ways in which they support as well as undermine the narration of the novel parts. The diary sections of *London Fields* are no less complicated than the novel sections but they appear less so because the expectations to them are different. Countless times Samson writes about the weather, his disease, the upcoming Crisis, the problems with getting a contract for his novel, his wrecked love life and so on; things that, while important for the generally bleak background, appear to have little or no bearing on the events in his novel. It may seem strange that these discontinuous segments immediately provoke less participation from the reader than the novel sections do, but the diary has other conventions than the novel. In a diary we do not expect a story (or a lot less of it) to hold passages together. The diary author presents his reader with a view into his thoughts which digress, like thoughts do, according to unwritten and unconscious rules of association, and we may be wasting our time trying to make every little item function in the context.

This being said, we do well to remember that Samson's diary is part of a novel called *London Fields*. The novel conventions frame the diary conventions, so to speak, and while it is too much to ask that all Samson's comments in his diary should have relevance for the overall structure of *London Fields* (in order to work as a diary we expect elements that 'mean nothing') it would be a mistake to dismiss Samson's thoughts as 'just a diary' with no particularly strong relation to the novel as such. Not only the structural 'framing' of the diary by a novel suggests as much: Samson's comments in his diary play a significant role in understanding the events of the novel.

The most obvious manner in which this connection is shown is through the use of direct comments on the novel in the diary. Samson's diary is not only a container for private thoughts but also reads as a logbook for the progression of his novel. Considering the remarkable opportunity the events present to Samson, who 'after two decades of fastidious torment, two decades of non-starting' (3), finally finds an outlet for his stocked-up urge to write, it is not very surprising that the private thoughts related to his diary should revolve around this release of creative energy and how to channel it. This is especially relevant in the beginning when Samson is still amazed and grateful for his luck in encountering this real life thriller begging to be written. Enthusiastically, Samson comments on his own writing: 'For reasons not yet altogether clear, I seem to have adopted a jovial and lordly tone' (10) as well as on the reception of particularly interesting material: 'I can eke out Chapter 4 with Keith's sexual confessions (vicious, detailed and unstoppable), which, at this stage, are the purest gold' (40). Uplifting too is the 'fine material on Marmaduke' Samson receives from Auxilladora, the Clinches' cleaning-lady (78). On the same page Samson contemplates the next chapter – 'warmly looking forward to the domestic haven, the blameless hearth of Chapter 6,' and again, on page 101: 'I have a hysterical urge to burst right into Chapter 7, to write all night and beyond!' The connection between diary and novel is obvious and frustrates as such also the effort by the reader to make the right separation (see above).

As mentioned above, Samson's comments occasionally work directly on the reader's expectations by making assessments on what is to come. Apart from 'Let's start with the bad guy. Yeah. Let's start with *the murderer*', introducing chapter one, we have the introduction of chapter two: 'But none of this would ever have gotten started without the girl. It didn't have a hope in hell without the girl. Nicola Six was the miracle, the absolute doneé. She's *perfect* for me. And now she'll be taking things into her own hands' (14). And the arrival of the third character, Guy Clinch, is also anticipated in the diary: 'I am cultivating our third party, the foil, the foal, Guy Clinch, who, to my horror, seems to be a genuinely delightful human being,' (14) ... 'When I take on Chapter 3, when I take on Guy Clinch, I'll have to do, well, not happiness, but goodness, anyway. It's going to be rough' (23).

Samson's diary comments on the progression of the events in his novel serve paradoxically to make things more difficult as well as more easy to understand for the reader. The complexity

come from the dubious status of Samson, the narrator. To have him genre-determine his story, or categorise a character in it, does not only aid the understanding of it but adds an extra layer to be interpreted as well. After all, we have a narrator who proclaims to write a ‘true story’ but who does not tell his readers the whole truth. Do not forget that the intended reader of Samson’s novel is not the reader of *London Fields*, which was put together by adding Samson’s diary to his novel. What we learn from Samson’s diary, we learn behind his back, so to speak, and so confirms his unreliability rather than saving him from the charge. While setting himself up as a detached observing voice in his novel which he only enters at the end to his own surprise, Samson continually reveals in his diary that he helps the events of his novel along.

On page 181 he makes a pretence consideration about his involvement. Keith’s financial problems have reached a point where Keith considers a burglary, doomed to go wrong, with one of his fellow cheats from the Black Cross. If he does not pay his debts the coming Friday he risks having his darting finger broken. Such a turn of events would side-track Nicola’s (and Samson’s) plan and cannot be allowed to happen. Letting Keith go ahead with the risky business of ‘semi-violent’ crime is to count too much on chance:

Mindful of Heisenberg’s principle that an observed system inevitably interacts with its observer – and aware too that the decent anthropologist never meddles with his tribe – I decided not to tell Nicola about Keith and semi-violent crime. Then I told Nicola about Keith and semi-violent crime. I told her to get moving and give Keith money.

By juxtaposing Samson’s claim that the story he writes is true with the comments in his diary that reveal his involvement, the organising presence behind Samson shows us that Samson is not completely reliable, despite his repeated statements to the contrary (78 and 162). Since we know that Samson edits himself out, the story he tells is at least not the whole truth.⁵⁹ His characterisation of his own role on page three already displays the doubleness that undermines his reliability: one the one hand, he says ‘I think I am less a novelist than a queasy cleric,

⁵⁹ For Samson’s involvement in his story see page 101 where he advises Guy about Nicola: ‘(it was bad advice), and with any luck he will take it’; on 119, Samson’s pity for Guy perhaps starting to manifest itself, he asks Nicola if she really needs Guy in her plan; before his attempt to go to America (235) Samson tries to persuade Nicola to ‘keep activity to the minimum while I’m gone’; and on 388, afraid of Kim’s safety with Keith around the house, Samson urges Nicola to let Keith move in with her. Nowhere in the novel sections, however, is Samson credited with helping the plot along.

taking down the minutes of real life,' but on the other hand: 'Technically speaking, I am also, I suppose, an accessory before the fact.' Characteristic for his attitude this consideration is dismissed: 'to hell with that for now.'

The fact that Samson is not totally reliable is of course a complication, but many times his diary comments serve to illuminate puzzling blanks in the novel. For example when chapter 4 exits with Keith's '*Fuck*,' the abruptness is immediately explained by Samson on the following diary page: 'Now I had no choice but to end that chapter *right there* ... Maybe I can go back later and soften the transition, if there's time. Keith's version couldn't be trusted for a second longer' (59). Samson explains to us here what would have constituted a rather abrupt exit from the scene and consequently a gap for the reader to fill. At the same time as solving the puzzle of the abrupt break, the comment, however, does present other difficulties. It illuminates the fact that the novel parts are mediated through Samson, who must struggle to get information about the meetings between the characters. And for the reader this means an extra layer to consider. The events of the novel parts where Samson is not present are mediated to him by the characters, and then to the reader by Samson. By explicitly commenting on his own role as mediator of events, Samson draws the reader's attention towards his problematic role as narrator of events he himself is one step away from (in that he is not present at most of the events he narrates) as well as toward the *syuzet* itself.

Another instance in which Samson solves a puzzling element in his novel is when he explains Keith's sports monologue on page 91. Trying to fill out the time, Guy asks Keith if he went to the football game in the weekend. Keith's answer and analysis is like taken out of one of his tabloids, and while the clichés are easily attributed to Keith, the length (one whole paragraph) and the fluency of the monologue contrast sharply with the almost monosyllabic idiolect he is otherwise equipped with. Mainly, however, the passage is striking because it so clearly exemplifies written, not spoken, language and because its monologue form is so inappropriate to the informal situation between Keith and Guy. Samson shares the reader's confusion and tries to explain:

I've heard many such summaries from him – of boxing matches, snooker matches, and of course darts matches. At first I thought he just memorized sections of the tabloid sports pages. Absolutely wrong. Remember – he is modern, modern, despite

the heels and the flares. When Keith goes to a football match, that misery of stringer's clichés *is what he actually sees* (97-98).

Through Samson's remark, which is also a key to the characterisation of Keith Talent as a brainwashed product of the tabloid culture he lives in (see 4.2.1) a clue is given to understand the passage.

The examples given above are all rather microcosmic in nature – referring to a specified piece of text or a certain character's description, but the connections between diary and novel can also be seen on a much larger scale. The first twelve chapters are structured around one character at a time, meaning that in each of the first twelve chapter the reader is presented almost exclusively with one character as the focal point. The first chapter (The Murderer) is devoted to Keith, the second chapter (The Murdere) introduces the reader to Nicola, and the third chapter (The Foil) is about Guy. This sequence (Keith, Nicola, Guy) is then repeated four times. In the table of contents the structure is shown by dividing the first 12 chapters into subsections of 3 each, with each title giving a hint to the character the chapter represents.

Between chapters twelve and thirteen there are two diary entries. Samson resolves on going to America, hoping to reenlighten the love between himself and his lost love, Missy Harter. The diary does not follow him there but is picked up when Samson comes back. As it is, Samson ends up spending six days in Heathrow airport trying in vain to get to America, and the effects of the failed trip are detectable in the following diary and novel sections.⁶⁰ If we compare the diary entry before (pages 230-236) and after (pages 238-241) Samson's attempted trip to America, we see a startling difference. In the first part, the segments are long and rather indifferent in mood and contents. At some points Samson even appears to have hopes for the future: 'Having failed in art and love, having lost, I may win through with both, even now, so late in the goddamned day' (234). After the unsuccessful attempt to go to America the segments are very short, creating a lot of gaps, and quickly jump between different topics. Samson's depression and confusion is stated: 'I lost. I failed. I lost everything' (238), and illustrated by numerous gaps and blanks to the reader, who in turn is

⁶⁰ Samson explicitly airs his frustration a little later: 'So maybe the American dream was a farewell to dreams. And to much else. What was I doing? The whole thing, the whole love-quest, the whole idea: it was from another world. Forget it. Turn back. Back to try the art and dice with death and hate, and not fight for love in some unreal war' (263).

struggling to make sense while not even knowing what upset Samson to this degree. In this way, the effect of the failed trip to America on Samson's psyche is structurally exemplified for the reader by the change in style after his return to Asprey's apartment.

Samson's gloomy mood is also (and maybe more importantly) reflected in the novel sections following this significant change. In the table of contents, the last twelve chapters are not divided or structured in any way, and this is also true of the chapters themselves. Whereas the first twelve chapters are structured around one character at a time, the last twelve are more confusing. Within chapters, the focal point changes from one person to the next without any hints to the reader,⁶¹ who has nevertheless been prepared throughout to be attentive. On page 239 Samson subtly alerts the reader about the upcoming changes: 'As is the case with the world situation, something will have to give, and give soon. It will all get a lot woollier, messier,' but while the change is dramatic, it remains a change in degree, not in kind, and the reader is greatly helped by having gone through the process of reading the first half of the novel, whose complexities are accelerated in the second half, after the non-visit to America. In this sense *London Fields* teaches us to read *London Fields*. The expectations of difficulty built up by reading the first half are not disappointed but over-confirmed, so to speak: we come to expect discontinuation and blanks, and that is precisely what we get, more of it even.

The reader of *London Fields* is very involved in the process of reading and understanding the novel, and the conclusion lies nearby that the reader is actually in charge of determining the meaning of the novel. As we shall see in the next chapter, this is far from the case. The question of authority is made complex by 'the return of the author': Seen in the fact that a coherent fabula lies behind the fragmented syuzet, the encouragement of reader involvement is juxtaposed with a strong emphasis on authorial control.

⁶¹ See, for instance, page 245, where action changes midchapter from Guy to Keith.

CHAPTER 4: NARRATIVE AUTHORITY IN *LONDON FIELDS*

Useful for the following discussions on structural as well as thematic levels, ‘narrative authority’ is a key concept in *London Fields*. The distinction between ‘structure’ and ‘theme’, or ‘form’ and ‘content’ makes it possible to identify two separate treatments of the concept of narrative authority which initially appear to contradict. In the shape of the novel’s complexities, we dealt with ‘structure’ in the last chapter. The amount of necessary reader contribution to ‘make sense’ of the text was demonstrated, and the silent assumption was that by contributing to its configuration, readers make a justified bid for authority over the text. The question ‘whose text are we reading’ cannot be straightforwardly answered with respect to *London Fields*. A play for power between author and reader is staged, whose structural expression we investigated in the previous chapter. The next three paragraphs translate that discussion into one concerning narrative authority, and we will show how Amis, while engaging his readers and letting them feel the rush of narrative authority, eventually reasserts his power over the story. The main body of this chapter deals with narrative authority as a theme *in* the novel; through an exposition of the characters aspiring to narrative authority in *London Fields*, we aim to show how Amis’s text in a paradoxical way signals a relativisation of the author’s power which ultimately can be seen as a strengthening. The movement from author to reader and back again mirrors the one identified on a structural level and is the subject of our concluding remarks of this chapter.

The relationship between a well-formed, ‘gap-less’ story and a tremendously fragmented discourse suggests the presence of a controlling force, one who has obscured the syuzet, while having the comprehensive view needed to create sufficient hints in it for the reader to get (back) to the fabula. A significant element in learning-to-read-*London Fields* is to trace the steps back to the fabula. The different pieces of the syuzet refer to a coherent fabula and we can continue reading without being frustrated about the apparent loose ends, blanks, and gaps. Apart from the afforded discipline and close attention, readers come to rely on the organising force behind the work. This might always be the case with novels, but is underscored by Amis in *London Fields* by the fact that solutions to the apparent ‘mess’ of the syuzet can be found in the novel and are not left for readers to create. If the text of *London Fields* had ‘stayed open’, i.e. if the fabula, rather than the syuzet, had been full of blanks, we would have had a situation in which each blank would be filled according to the individual

reader and no reader would essentially read the same text. Each reader contribution being unique, each reading would be unique and every reader of such a blankful text could claim an element of authority over the text in exchange for their creativity.

Due to the cut-up discourse, the readers of *London Fields* are also asked to bridge gaps, and they consequently aspire to authority over the text. We seek answers and try to imagine possible connections. Soon, however, it becomes clear that the skill called upon is predominantly analytical; imagination and individual answers are not wanted in the process of getting from *syuzet* to *fabula*, since all the answers to the fragmented discourse can be found in the text.⁶² Amis flirts with relinquishing his author control and makes a fragmented discourse, but just when readers try to be creative, they realise that they are only finding the clues planted by Amis, whose footsteps they follow and whose authority over the text they cannot question. The effect is double; there is relief at the realisation that the discourse is solvable and constructable into a coherent story; the complexities can be considered puzzles, inspiring a search for clues and not as frustrating incidents of unsolvable problems. On the other hand, readers pay for the guiding hand with a loss of authority; by providing answers to all the discourse related questions, Amis technically asserts his own authority at the expense of the reader.

When we stop to consider the issue as it is presented *in* the novel, the situation is different. Whereas Amis technically has established himself as an authority, he has gone out of his way to create confusion about authority inside the text which ‘self-consciously dramatizes a contest for authorship; all of the characters are “authors” in one sort or another who are vying with each other to shape events into the form of a story that will count as authoritative’ (Holmes 53). We will now show how complex the issue is in the novel, through an exposition of the different characters aspiring to narrative authority in the novel, and will later return to Amis’s status as author, and how the confusion about narrative authority in the novel challenges the authority eventually asserted by Amis through the technical aspects of discourse and story.

⁶² This is not to say that all possible questions about the text are answered in the text. To recall Iser’s argument, no object can be described in its entirety. We are concerned here with answers to the questions arising from blanks in the discourse.

4.1 Samson Young

Samson's peculiar position has been illuminated throughout this paper. To sum up: Samson is the most obvious author-figure as he is the one writing everything down; he is the designated narrator and is 'given all the linguistic sophistication of Amis's developed narrative style' (Finney 12). Whatever control over his material that he might aspire to is compromised from the beginning by his lack of imagination. Unable to make things up, he has had to wait until something 'real' happens that he, as 'a queasy cleric, taking down the minutes of real life' (3), can transcribe into a novel. The lack of imagination also means that he cannot assume position as an omniscient narrator.⁶³ He cannot invent scenes where he was not himself present and comes to rely heavily on what the characters subsequently tell him. When the versions he gets do not correspond, the most common result is that we get both versions and so a repetition of scenes from different perspectives. Samson is on a deadline from his publisher and has no time to go back and change what he has already written. Samson is further pressured by the fact that he suffers from a life-threatening disease, which is getting worse and worse as the novel progresses.

Demonstrably unable to control the fabula, Samson remains in control of the syuzet, at least of the novel he writes, or so it seems. We have no reason to believe that Samson intended his diary to be published with his novel (in the diary it is revealed that Samson is partly unreliable, as when he claims to tell the whole truth but remains silent with regards to his own contributions (see 77) and this points in the direction of a higher authority, the one constructing the *London Fields* we read by adding the diary sections to Samson's novel. When Samson asks Mark Asprey in the end to be his 'literary executor' (468), and leaves his diary and novel in the hands of Asprey, it opens for suspicions that Asprey not only put Samson's diary and novel together (Samson had told him to 'throw everything out' (468)) but perhaps even changed bits and pieces. On top of this, Samson is referred to in the introductory Note signed M. A. as 'my narrator,' hinting at his inevitable status as a fictional construct, and consequently at the presence of a literary constructor, a higher authority.

⁶³ In chapter one we saw how Samson's lack of imagination has another, more fatal, consequence in that it prevents him from staying open to a revision of his own life (see 32).

4.2 Nicola Six

That Nicola is in control of the story is clear from the beginning. It is her diary that gives Samson the idea to follow her story and it is her plan he writes down.⁶⁴ Her power to manipulate Samson as well as Keith and Guy and have him, unwittingly, play a role in her personal drama which he thought he was only writing down, puts her position in further perspective. The subversion of Samson's role as a distanced, or at least separated, witness to the events in his novel, is of course a surprise to him when it occurs on page 464, but like all good (literary) surprises it is foreshadowed via hints to the close reader. Interpreting these hints correctly means sharing with the implied author knowledge of which Samson is ignorant, making him the victim of dramatic irony. Nicola, who is the next in the line of characters who aspire to narrative authority, is nowhere in the novel victim of such irony, and she is consequently allowed to stand more independently as an author figure. Although she is obviously not the last in the chain of narrative authority (the composition of *London Fields* does not end until after her death), she is treated altogether differently than Samson. There is distancing irony against Samson but none against Nicola, which suggests a closer resemblance between her and the (implied) author (see 94).

4.2.1 Nicola's Control

Nicola possesses the right prerequisite for a successful author figure in that her actions are purely aesthetically motivated. In section 1.7 we saw how Samson's failure to finish his novel can be attributed to an untouched 'regenerate' part of his character and an untimely interference of moral concerns where only artistic ones are called for. By saving Kim, he becomes a character in Nicola's story and loses the ability to finish his novel. He ultimately does the morally right thing and fails in art as a direct consequence. Nicola, on the other hand, is willing to do whatever it takes to make her story work. She spares no one; not the enlisted characters and not herself. She is the black hole, bound to destroy anyone she comes into contact with.

⁶⁴ On page 117, Samson needs an outline to send to his publisher. Instead of trying to imagine what will happen, or just make something up, he decides: 'I'll ask Nicola. She already has an outline.'

The key to Nicola's power as the 'story controller' is her self-reflectivity. More than any of the other characters, she has come to an understanding of the nature of Self, Text and Culture in the postmodern world.⁶⁵ Part of this understanding is that the Self is a product of how we see it, of the narratives we tell to create it. There is nothing to the Self outside these narratives, no independent core of untouched 'Self'-material from which we can organise the rest. Knowledge of this is what Nicola uses to manipulate Keith and Guy who exemplify that 'the only available narratives for constructing the self and interacting socially are either debased and shallow or hopelessly anachronistic' (Holmes 55).

Keith's identity is a poor mixture of tabloid headlines and sport commentaries and his preferences are formed by pornography and/or taken from the misogynist's handbook: 'What he was after were images of sex, violence and sometimes money. [...] Best were the scenes that combined all three motifs. An oil baron roughing up a callgirl in a prestige hotel, for instance, or the repeated coshing of a pretty bank teller' (165). The extent to which Keith's identity and sense of reality are created by the mass media is hyperbolically illustrated throughout *London Fields*. In the discussion about Burton Else, one of Keith's big movie heroes, Nicola presses Keith through a gruelling examination of how much he really believes in the media-created world. After being presented with Burton Else's homosexuality, Keith's whole concept of reality is almost in shambles: '...for a few seconds he blinked steadily on a heartbeat rhythm. "but if... but then... but he..." *Film, Keith*, she could have said. *Film. All that not real. Not real*' (190). The difficulties Keith has with separating TV and reality reach their pinnacle when Keith watches the ninety-second TV biodoc on himself. The experience leaves him 'in a state of near-psychotic confusion' (424), and the problems regarding how his wife will interpret the glamorous biodoc, which Nicola has been in charge of constructing, leaves him 'clinging to the notion that the biodoc would be screened only at those locations where it had been filmed' (425).

Whereas much of the comic effect derived from the Keith character comes from his ignorant lack of self-reflection regarding the fabricated nature of his personality, Nicola understands him fully and has thereby the power to manipulate. Keith, for instance, prefers sex on video

⁶⁵ The use of the term 'postmodern' in this discussion connects to the idea about the dissolution of the I, an idea which finds its philosophical foundation in thinkers such as Horkheimer, Adorno, and Foucault (see Diedrick 10). Basically, the idea of the dissolution of the I is a countermovement to a strong focus going back to the Enlightenment on reason as an absolute and unchanging foundation for human identity.

where he can fast-forward through the boring bits and go back to the good bits. Nicola learns this and seduces Keith by taping pornographic videos of herself. One of these instances shows how much Nicola understands Keith's problems with coping with the problems of separating TV and reality. On page 427 Keith is about to enjoy another one of the videos when Nicola enters the bedroom in the exact same costume she is wearing in the video taped for Keith. The segment is continued on page 428, where it is revealed that Keith was unable to perform satisfactorily in bed with Nicola. Keith blames his failure on 'pressures of darts' (429), whereas Nicola hits the nail on the head: 'Yes. And a little difficulty switching from one medium to another. That's what this whole thing is about' (429).⁶⁶ Unlike Keith, who thinks that 'TV is real' (55), Nicola does not make one ontological state prior to the other; 'reality' and 'fiction' are both 'mediums' in which signs and constructs are open to manipulation.

Guy's identity is formed by 'hopelessly anachronistic' narratives. They are stories of innocence; of a belief in the reforming influence of high art, and of the romantic and idealistic soul looking for life and love in a materialistic world to which he feels increasingly alien. Guy's suppression of his sexuality is almost Victorian in its excessive inhibition: the occasional extra-marital crushes he finds himself suffering under are vehemently confronted: It 'was like an illness that passed after a couple of weeks; the love virus, efficiently repelled by a determined immune system' (147). Similarly, he constantly fights his lust for Nicola. Mentionings of Guy's chronic erections literally crowd the narrative,⁶⁷ but he hangs on to a chaste and Platonic description of his relationship of Nicola and is unable to acknowledge this other side in him:

He had this toy of Nicola in his head, oval, blue-backed, like a Victorian miniature. Symbol of the real thing. The real thing. Three brutal jolts would certainly finish it. But all kinds of considerations – including squeamishness, another kind of *amour*

⁶⁶ We see that the simulacrum, the artefact of life, holds much more attraction to Keith than life itself, which often fails to meet the standards of the idealised simulacrum. While Keith would prefer to have the news of his sexual conquests broadcast worldwide (134, 167), i.e. transformed into TV reality, the thing itself, actual sexual intercourse, 'had a habit of slipping his mind' (289) – perhaps related to the lurking impotence (see 357: 'the spirit was willing – was ravenous, was desperate – the flesh was inexplicably weak') evident in the scene with Nicola. 'Telling' far outranks 'kissing' in other words: 'he kept hurrying and bothing and underdoing his conquests, such was his eagerness to get back to the pub and give all the details to his mates' (167).

⁶⁷ See 221, 254, 286, 310, 316, 330, 365, 398, 414, 423, 440.

propre, and the thought of all the mess it would leave – combined, as always, to stay his hand (221).

Guy's reluctance to masturbate and his outdated disgust at the prospect ('brutal jolts') contrasts of course with the outspoken glee, or at least eagerness with which the activity is performed by the likes of John Self⁶⁸ and Keith Talent.⁶⁹

While Guy is unaware of the fact that he is shaped by anachronisms, Nicola understands this and uses it to manipulate him much in the same way as she does with Keith. She pretends to share Guy's passion for high art and the implicit distinction to mass culture in order to win him over (145, 162). As the incident with the Keats lecture (352) for Keith shows, the reverence toward high art which she puts on for Guy is just a pretence; in true postmodern spirit, she mixes the codes of high art and mass culture to serve her own ends. Nicola films the lecture for Guy to convince him that she is indeed teaching Keith, and what he thinks he sees is the honest and not unsuccessful attempt to add some civilisation to Keith's brutish nature. While Keith is the main victim of the belief that 'TV is real', Guy here also takes the image he sees for a truthful representation. The episode is the most straightforward illustration of the manipulative force of the simulacrum and another example of Guy's misreadings (see 56). What the camera does not see is that the perceptive analysis Keith manages to stammer out is written on small cards which he keeps receiving from Nicola who, more importantly, keeps Keith's attention fixed by having her dress fall open and so mixes the lecture with striptease.⁷⁰

Naturally, the lecture completely misses Keith's 'intellect'; his mind is elsewhere: '“Why don't we begin”, she said, “with Keats's ‘Bright Star’?” “Yeah cheers.” “Page eighty-six. It is

⁶⁸ See *Money* 97, 125, 272, 314.

⁶⁹ This is not to suggest that Keith is to be considered more sexually liberated; the Victorianism guiding the sexuality of Guy has merely been replaced by pornography in Keith's case. A remnant of less permissive views on sexuality is still detectable in Keith's thoughts: 'sinning singly. You locked the door behind you' (296), and in the shame that accompanies the masturbatory climax: 'now he was wishing that he hadn't done it. In ten minutes he would be wanting to do it again' (299).

⁷⁰ In Amis's first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, in which the main character, Charles Highway, fights off premature ejaculation by citing poetry (158), we see a similar mixture between the codes of high art and sexual behaviour. The self-serving use of literature pervades Charles's writing and he is finally reprimanded by an author figure who gives the novel a moral edge lacking in *London Fields*: 'Literature has a kind of life of its own, you know. You can't just use it . . . ruthlessly, for your own ends' (*The Rachel Papers* 211). It is worth noting that in contrast to *The Rachel Papers*, *London Fields* does not administer such a punishment; unlike Charles, Nicola is not rebuked for her abuse of literature.

five lumps, isn't it, Keith." 86, thought Keith. Treble 18, double 16. Or you could go bull, double 18. Darts' (353). The fact that Keith is unable to appreciate the high art of Keats is underscored as he leaves Nicola's. His thoughts revolve around a picture of himself, living the life he has seen on TV, again showing us how all he can relate the session to is the media-world of TV and tabloids: 'John Keith, thought Keith, as he drove away. Top wordsmith, and big in pharmaceuticals. Books: one way to make a fast quid. Breakfast by the pool. Wife in good nick' (356).⁷¹ The example is also an illustration of Keith's indiscriminating taste. Keith does not only watch pornography; anything that will help fuel Keith fantasies of success, money, TV and pornography is admitted to his mind: '[Keith] also watched major adaptations of works by Lawrence, Dreiser, Dostoevsky, Conrad – and anything else that sparked controversy in the pull-out TV section of his tabloid. For skirt, you often did better with something like *The Plumed Serpent* than you did with something like *Vegas Hooker*' (165).

To suggest the composite nature of the forces that shape the identity of Keith, Amis lets other parlances (cp. the sports commentary on page 91) influence Keith's language. Like 'John Keats' turns into 'John Keiths', 'Heathcliff' from *Wuthering Heights* becomes 'Keathcliff' in Keith's reading (164). In the next example, typical of conversations between Keith and Guy, from the opening of chapter 17, at least three very different styles can be detected to Keith's utterances:

"LOVE JUICE. UNGOVERNABLE PASSION. The earth moved innit."

"Hello, Keith. How are you?"

"Give herself utterly. The consumation of their bliss. One up the Khyber."

⁷¹ While Keith on page 47 expresses amazement that 'books fetched money,' the idea seems here to have settled with him. The notion that the market value defines the total value of books is voiced in *Money* by John Self whose first comment to the writer Martin Amis is 'sold a million yet?' (87). Unsurprisingly, it is difficult to draw a definite comment from *London Fields* on such philistinism: The 'novel does not really seem to allow for a base outside mass culture from which it could be repudiated. All of the narrative patterns which comprise this culture are parodically exaggerated, it is true, but so are those which might otherwise be held to transcend it. To treat Keats as pornography or Lawrence as a joke or as bait in a sordid trap is to forfeit the potential to see them as real alternatives to the ephemeral and demeaning narratives of commercial media' (Holmes 59). Still, as Holmes points out, readers have a sense that the 'novel's intention [is] to lament the cultural sickness in which it participates' and to understand the doubleness, Holmes refers to Linda Hutcheon's definition of postmodern art which 'at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world' (Hutcheon *The Politics of Postmodernism* 11). With her reflective awareness of her complicity with the culture she criticises, Nicola is a model example of Hutcheon's postmodern (wo)man.

“How are things?”

“Mutual body pleasure. The importance of sufficient foreplay. A full but firm figure. Consenting adults.”

Apart from the pornographic pub talk (‘one up the Khyber’), Keith recycles a phrase he read from *Wuthering Heights* (see 164): ‘ungovernable passion.’ The last turn with ‘mutual body pleasure’, but especially the phrase ‘consenting adults’, hints to the language Keith has been exposed to on various ‘rehab courses and buddy programmes’ designed to rid him of the habit of rape. That Keith has ‘mastered some jargon and tinkertoy psychology’ (168) from these courses is evident in the example above and when words like ‘Regard and Respect’ suddenly enter his vocabulary (see 51, 168, 169). Again, it is the constructed and externally shaped nature of Keith’s identity that is revealed to us through these hints.

To both Keith and Guy, Nicola embodies their wildest dreams (see Diedrick 151): she is a darts interested, permissive whore for Keith and a innocent, literate Madonna for Guy. She is in possession of the knowledge about their senses of reality needed to manipulate them as she wishes. Nicola plays the roles required by the situation, and we do not get access to ‘the real’ Nicola – because there is none. Her character is highly ‘unrealistic’,⁷² a fact that does not worry Amis with his mentioned preference for style over content, for the literary construction as a whole over the psychological correctness of the characters.⁷³ It does worry his narrator, however: ‘“Nicola, I’m worried about you, as usual . . . I’m worried they’re going to say you’re a male fantasy figure.”’ Nicola’s answer is the key to her power as it shows her ability to self-reflect: ‘“I *am* a male fantasy figure. I’ve been one for fifteen years. It really takes it out of a girl.” “But they don’t know that.” “I’m sorry, I just *am*”’ (260). She does not adopt the contradictory position of claiming that she alone has forged out an independent identity while exploiting the manufactured nature of the characters around her. In other words, she does not stand outside the manipulation; she exploits the clichés but they are also part of her. Holmes says of Nicola that

⁷² The character of Nicola Six has been the object of criticism because it is ‘unrealistic’ (see Koning; Pesetsky: ‘[Nicola] is not truly satisfying as character or caricature. She seems to be another of Mr. Amis’s plastic women.’ However, as Fuller claims, ‘that [Nicola] is a masturbatory figment of male imagination, not really a woman at all, is essential to Amis’s sardonic analysis of the anaesthetizing effects of pornography’ (Murder He Wrote 16).

⁷³ ‘I would certainly sacrifice any psychological or realistic truth for a phrase that has a spin on it. Mere psychological truth in a novel doesn’t seem to me all that valuable a commodity’ (Amis in Haffenden 16).

her detached awareness that these roles [Madonna and whore] do not express her essential identity and her cold-blooded ability to use these parts for an ulterior purpose do not, when all is said and done, liberate her from them. She exaggerates the two personas to such an extreme extent that she manages to heap parodic scorn on them, but she embodies them nevertheless (61).

Nicola's identity is a mixture of roles fashioned by the entertainment industry, just like Keith and Guy's; what sets her apart, is that she knows that this is the case. Nicola is aware that the roles she plays do not express her essential identity, but this is not because this identity has been steadily formed somewhere else. The very idea of an essential identity is a myth.⁷⁴

When Nicola says about her life that 'it always felt like a story' (118) she is acknowledging that her identity is an artefact, as opposed to something nature-given and context-free. She is a character in a story and while her self-reflectivity truly does not liberate her from the roles she plays, it does make her 'able to muster sufficient detachment to deploy them successfully to manipulate others' (Holmes 53). The difference between Nicola, on the one hand, and Keith and Guy on the other, is that she is aware that her Self is created, and this enables her to choose the narratives that define her. Her rather successful career as an actress has ended by 'drifting into life' (*London Fields* 19).

Samson, as the narrator, is ostensibly responsible for the discourse of Nicola's story. He shares the insight with Nicola that identity is a question of context and its influence. When he realises that the sport commentaries lingo Keith occasionally reverts to are not memorised from the tabloid but assimilated into his personality ('that misery of stringer's clichés *is what he actually sees*' (98)), he shows sophisticated awareness of the postmodern idea of the dissolution of the I that defines the characters in *London Fields*. His problem is that he does not escape this postmodern condition himself, but thinks he does. Unlike Nicola, Samson believes that his own life is isolated from the events orchestrated by Nicola and it is the failure to realise this that is his downfall. Not the fact as such that Samson is a character in

⁷⁴ Here is Amis on Philip Larkin: 'Larkin the man is separated from us, historically, by changes in the self. For his generation, you were what you were, and that was that. It made you unswervable and adamant. My father has this quality. I don't. None of us do. There are too many forces at work on us' (Don Juan in Hull, 82, qtd in Diedrick 12). Diedrick continues: The 'increasingly fluid, unstable nature of selfhood is one of Amis's central subjects.'

Nicola's story, but the fact that he has not realised it from the beginning and made the proper foreshadowing in the novel he has been writing. The separation that breaks down in the end when Samson enters Nicola's story is the separation between his diary and his novel, and the lesson he learns is that the narratives with which we make sense of ourselves, create our Selves, are inevitably bound up with other narratives: 'Amis uses Samson's literary naiveté to demonstrate the inescapability of the poststructuralist assumption that all forms of narrative belong to the democratic state of textuality' (Finney 12). Being text, all discourses, in other words, have more in common than what might set them apart and Samson is naive when he thinks his story (being 'true') is different in nature from fiction. While a diary may be a daily written report, its factuality is not such that it needs to be placed on an ontologically different level than the novel. Both are narratives and are as such interrelated.

4.2.2 Nicola's Death

That Nicola exploits her superior position to plan her own death is a paradox. Her recognition of the postmodern condition of the unstable self grants her sufficient freedom to set her off from the other characters, but she uses her freedom for destructive purposes. It is open for interpretation whether Nicola's vision of her death should be taken as a prophecy which is reliable due to the ability Amis has equipped her with to see into the future (15), or one which is self-fulfilling: 'She knows [the date of her death] because she has planned it' (Diedrick 148; see also Kakutani). The novel allows both interpretations. Nicola 'the determinist' (*London Fields* 119) clearly believes in her psychic ability, whereas Samson the pragmatist calls it a 'delusion' (15) and at one point urges her to 'call it off [...] So far, there's absolutely nothing inevitable about what you've entrained. Forget it. Do something else. Live' (118).

Holmes has called Nicola's 'aimed-for and ultimately achieved death [...] a postmodernist parody of the deconstructionist position on language and meaning.' 'The murder,' he says, 'is a way of supplying closure and generating a teleological structure which confers the extra-textual meaning denied by the post-structuralist [i.e. deconstructionist] theory' (53). The element of post-structuralist theory referred to is the idea that all signs refer endlessly to each other, that the Saussurean idea of having a stable signified to each signifier must be modified. Nicola opts precisely for such a signified, a meaning to her death, which does not in turn refer on to other signs. In an illustration of deconstructionist theory, Nicola's death should have no stable meaning, but she is using her awareness that reality is forever mediated by signs that

refer to each other to break that chain and achieve something final: her death. She sees through and halts the post-structural condition; her death does not refer endlessly, the chain stops. The irony is that the power enabling her to achieve her goal is an awareness of the idea which she then puts in postmodern brackets. It is by being a deconstructionist that she can create and give meaning to her life, through death.

So, Nicola's death *means*. If death as such was all she wanted, she could go jump off a bridge or ask Keith to take care of it, but as she says to Samson, 'of course it could be managed. Easy. A bungled rape, strangulation . . . But what do you think I'm after? A "senseless killing"?' (119). It must be given significance, her death; it must make sense. But what sense? What is the significance she seeks to attach? Holmes offers that 'the perverse signification which she seeks consists of the destruction of love' (54). It is beyond doubt that Nicola's destructive personality has unfortunate consequences for love.⁷⁵ Still, it seems premature to spell out the destruction of love as her aim, the motivating guide line behind her obsessive plotting. After all, what she actually achieves in the end is a powerful demonstration that love after all is not dead. Her plan depends for its success on Samson's intervention, and Samson would not have intervened had it not been for his love for Kim whom he saves by taking Guy's place as Nicola's murderer (see 1.7).

Confronted on his promotion tour for the short story collection *Heavy Water and Other Stories* with 'the usual challenge about Nicola Six, the glamorous and entirely unbelievable "murderess" of *London Fields*: what's she about?' Amis shows his lack of interest in what motivates his characters deepest down: 'I don't know. Writing is a leak from the unconscious mind to the conscious. It comes from all the things you're not thinking about' (Jordan 2).⁷⁶ Thus discouraged to seek the deeper meaning of Nicola's death, we might just repeat that the Nicola character symbolises the connection between creation and destruction. The fact that

⁷⁵ Nicola's death is connected to 'this idea about the death of love' (19) throughout *London Fields*. Cp. her tendency to invoke love and send it back, 'not just cancelled but murdered' (21); 'her project had been to get to get through men - to get to the end of men' (188); and her connection to nuclear destruction with its dire consequences for love: 'hard to love when you're bracing yourself for impact' (197).

⁷⁶ Gowrie suggests that the major impetus to Nicola's plotting is fear of reaching middle age with its corresponding loss of attraction and power. There are places in the novel that could sustain such an interpretation, but they remain largely suggestive and inconsequential: 'Her *life* had a Plan B, or it had had: to live on. But intimations of early middle age had settled that' (69), and 'even at sixteen, when you're excitedly realizing what you've got (and imagining that it will last forever), you're still noticing what you haven't got, and will never get. Beauty's hand is ever at its lips, bidding adieu. Yes, but bidding adieu *in the mirror*' (127).

she knows (or thinks she knows) the date of her death gives her the creative impetus to make the last part of her life(-story) significant.

In the story she tells of her life in *London Fields*, Nicola's death takes on significance as the narrative climax, the culmination of her creation. It illustrates, in other words, the idea that the fact that we are going to die is vital if our lives are to have meaning; if we lived forever we could do everything at anytime (and in the long run we would necessarily get around to doing everything). Since everything is eventually going to happen anyway,⁷⁷ there would be no reason to act, no reason to do anything. Motivation would disappear and nothing would matter. Thus understood, Nicola's 'motivation' may be compared with Fielding Goodney's in *Money*. For no obvious reason Goodney puts a lot of effort into setting up the naive narrator, John Self. 'Martin Amis' (the Martin Amis character in the novel) explains to Self: 'Why didn't he let you walk out of the door at the Carraway? Because he was hooked. On the fiction, the art. He wanted to get to the end. We all do. A failed actor, he wanted an actor's revenge. He took it out on real life' (376).

In this respect, Nicola exemplifies Peter Brooks's thoughts on narrative endings found in the chapter 'Freud's Masterplot' in *Reading for the Plot*. Brooks argues, through an exposition of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, that 'what operates in the text [...] is the death instinct, the drive toward the end' (102). But for Brooks, as for Nicola, not any end will do: 'The narrative must tend towards its end, seek illumination in its own death. Yet this must be the right death, the correct end' (103). As seen above, not just any death is good enough for Nicola; the way to the ending envisioned in her 'foretelling' (be it literal or self-fulfilling), is one long, creative detour. When Brooks says: 'The complication of the detour is related to the danger of short-circuit: the danger of reaching the end too quickly, of achieving the im-proper death' (103-104), it pinpoints Nicola's worries about a 'senseless killing' (*London Fields* 119). A reading along these lines highlights the artistic element behind Nicola's death wish; being a literary creation, whose life always 'felt like a story' (118), she must pursue her death with the rigour called for by a proper (literary) ending.

⁷⁷ The 'immortal baboon, locked up with typewriter and amphetamines for a few Poincaré time-cycles, a number of aeons with more zeros than there are suns in the universe, might eventually type out the word *darts*' (*London Fields* 102).

Nicola's highly charged sexuality (during the course of the novel she has sexual intercourse with all the major characters: Keith, Guy, Samson, and Asprey) may also be seen in this light. According to Brooks, sexual instincts are what prohibit the immediate collapse of life into death, and thus create the impetus for 'the middle' (104). The dynamic opposition between the death instincts and the sexual instincts creates the possibility of narrative by combining a desire for the end with a desire for not reaching the end. While the death instincts strive towards the end, they are opposed by the sexual instincts and this dialectic is the space for narrative. Finally, Brooks's coupling between the death instinct and repetitions in the text might help explain the consistent repetition of the actual murder scene: 'What operates in the text through repetitions is the death instinct, the drive toward the end'. By revisiting the murder scene again and again, the reader is held in suspense, reading to reach the (very literal) end of the novel.

Brooks's link between destruction and creativity is fitting for our description of Nicola. It helps explain the impetus to her plotting and why she uses her power over the other characters in such a destructive and self-destructive manner. We may expand upon this and say that the curious (artistic) life Nicola asserts from the knowledge of her imminent death is analogous to the death of the Self and its possible resurrection through narration, through art. Nicola has, like everybody else, a fragmented personality. She plays roles and assumes identities to fit other people's fantasies. Her *knowledge* of this, as we have seen in section 4.2.1, is a necessary prerequisite to break free from it. In turn, her freedom is asserted through her art. 'I'm a Murdereer,' she says (260) and fashions for herself a new kind of (fictional) Self. While the fragmentation of real life identities is unavoidable, the knowledge of this opens for the possibility of creating a coherent *fictional* Self.

As such Nicola's project is similar to Amis's and she is back in the forefront of candidates for narrative authority. Amis and Nicola are both driven purely aesthetic motives, and the characters in their fictions are subordinated the overall plan of the fiction as a whole. Like Nicola, Amis too can be seen to fight against the postmodern dissolution of the I, which is recognised in *London Fields*, and also in interviews Amis talks about the demise of 'coherent motivation' as a defining trait of the present human condition, which he does not himself escape (see footnote 74, page 90). *London Fields*, however, is not the work of a 'fragmented existence'; as we have demonstrated throughout, a strong and coherent power with superior overview and well-executed control is implied by the text, whose fragmentation is only

apparent. Like Nicola, Amis asserts not only his control but perhaps even his Self through the creation of fiction, and as in the case with Nicola it is the awareness of real-life fragmentation that makes the fictional assertion possible.

From this detour, let us return to the concept of narrative authority by looking at the next character aspiring to narrative authority: Mark Asprey.

4.3 Mark Asprey

Whose narrative are we finally reading? For a moment in the beginning it seems that we are reading Samson's story, but it quickly becomes clear that Nicola is in charge of events. We only have access, however, to her story through the way it is told, that is, via Samson. The detective-like job of extricating the fabula necessarily goes via the way it is presented to us, the *syuzet*. We work, in other words, from Samson to Nicola, to whom we never have direct access. Even though Nicola 'outwrites' Samson, as well as Keith and Guy (43), her story remains 'his story of her story' (Finney 13). Employed as he is to kill her, the narrator of Nicola's story, while outwritten by her (466: 'She outwrote me. Her story worked. And mine didn't'), necessarily outlives Nicola in return.

We are reading Samson's diary and novel against his will, however. In the letter to Mark Asprey (468), Samson asks Asprey to be his 'literary executor: throw everything out'. Samson has realised that his novel does not work with himself as the murderer. Obviously, Asprey did not follow Samson's request; not only are we reading Samson's (ruined) novel, we are presented with his private diary as well. In the context of *London Fields*, Samson's diary establishes him as a character and provides the foreshadowing needed to make his final entry in his novel coherent according to literary conventions. In effect, Asprey actually saves Samson's novel. He does so by paying absolutely no respect to Samson's wishes (explicitly stated in the final letter, and implicitly obvious in that the diary was never meant for publication in the first place) and so confirms the connection between amorality and artistic success which Samson and Nicola in opposite ways illustrate (see 1.7, 94).

Asprey's appointed position as Samson's literary executor is one of the clues that constitute Asprey as the third character to aspire to narrative authority. If we for example attribute the introductory Note (signed M. A.) to Mark Asprey, who appears as M. A. in Nicola's diary,

we are led to think of Asprey as the ultimate author figure. The disrespectful way in which he ignores Samson's plea to 'throw everything out', together with the arrogant and condescending tone of the Note suggest as much, and while the mentioned suspicion that he changed parts (or all!) of Samson's writing is pure speculation, the fact is that by explicitly handing his writing over to Asprey, Samson loses the last bit of narrative authority he has; that of the discourse-constructor, the one in charge of shaping fabula into syuzet. Asprey is given a disturbing opportunity to overtake Samson's writing and we are forced to consider the resulting uncertainty regarding the narrative voice. In the end, Samson himself seems in doubt whether he is 'set up' (468) by Asprey, in which case he has lost narrative authority but at least maintains that he does exist, or whether he was in fact 'made up' by Asprey (or Amis): 'I feel seamless and insubstantial, like a creation. As if someone made me up, for money. And I don't care' (470).⁷⁸

The precise role of Asprey is never revealed. We encounter his 'footprints' several places in *London Fields* (always in the diary) but only through artefacts like notes and letters to Samson, or as the object of conversation between Samson and Nicola, or between Samson and Asprey's house keeper. All we have is traces to his existence and he remains consequently a ghostly character. His relationship to Nicola is revealed gradually through the dawning suspicion raised by Nicola's diary (160, 205) and is finally confirmed on page 304. 'Some things are never over,' Nicola says when asked directly about her and M. A. (305), and who else but Nicola could have told Asprey about Samson spending a week at Heathrow airport? (302). The clues remain vague, however, and the 'blank-'ful relationship between Nicola and Asprey invites readers to make their own constructions. Peter Stokes, for example, argues that Nicola creates her story for Asprey as a payback for the novel of his she destroyed (453). With both Nicola and Samson dead, Asprey is left with material for a new novel - 'a replacement novel [...] produced by Samson' (Stokes 7).

Finney sees it differently; in the fight for narrative authority 'Sam might be the designated narrator, but Nicola is meant to control the plot, and M. A. lurks off the stage reminding us that both Sam and Nicola are narrative mouthpieces with limited autonomy' (11). That

⁷⁸ See also page 409: 'Sometimes (I don't know) I take a knight's jump out of my head and I think I'm in a book written by somebody else.' Samson's eventual appearance in his own novel parodies the involution by making it literal. Samson finds himself very literally *on* the page: 'how *strange* it is in here, fish-grey, monkey-brown, all the surfaces moist and sticky, and the air no good to breathe' (464).

Samson's limited autonomy is of course well established, and Samson's two realisations in the end (to Asprey: 'You didn't set me up. Did you?' (468) and to Kim: 'I feel seamless and insubstantial, like a creation. As if someone made me up, for money. And I don't care' (470)) naturally direct attention to Asprey. Still, the quotes can also support Stokes's contention that Nicola and Asprey were in on it together; the nature of their relationship defies definite explanation. *London Fields* is open to both Stokes's and Finney's interpretations, and it is hard to present definitive arguments against either one; there is no doubt that Nicola and Asprey have had a strong and stormy relationship,⁷⁹ but whether the relationship is terminated is cleverly left open: '“Did you see him? When he was here.” She made no reply' (305).

In terms of narrative authority, the function of the Mark Asprey character does not of course take on full significance until we consider the initials shared with Martin Amis. Unlike some of the intricacies of the discourse line which require close reading and careful attention, the identification of Asprey with Amis is forcefully and all but explicitly stated. We are taught about the significance of pseudonyms and initials in the sub-story concerning *Crossbone Waters*, whose author, 'Marius Appleby', we learn is a pseudonym for Mark Asprey (434), whose slippery and ghostly character, in turn, is to be identified with the M. A. from Nicola's diary (304). The excessive play with the initials and the open thematising of the pseudonyms makes the invitation to think of Martin Amis so strong as to become a summons, and, while also mirroring the entrance of Samson into *his* story, the dramatisation of involution is almost as obvious as when Amis brings in the 'Martin Amis' character in *Money*.

4.4 Martin Amis

If we try to draw a 'message' from *London Fields* in terms of narrative authority, at first it seems that we have to deal with conflicting signals. On the formal, stylistic level readers are presented with a multitude of gaps and discontinuous writing which they are led to reconstruct (or configure) some sense into. The feeling of freedom this engenders is countered by a just as strong feeling, caused by the persistent appearance in the novel of

⁷⁹ Samson writes about Nicola's revelations in her diary: 'The only one she kept going back to, the only one who was half a match for her, "the only one I've ever been *stupid* for", the handsomest, the cruellest, the best in bed (by far): he's called MA' (160). Later Samson finds photographs in Asprey's desk drawer of Nicola and Asprey having sexual intercourse (304-305).

solutions to its gaps, that we are tracing the footsteps of someone else rather than forging a new way. The open text closes up again, and we sense the presence of an omnipotent, controlling force, the author. If we take the other side of the neat distinction between form and content and look at what the novel ‘says’, its ‘content’, a different picture emerges. Narrative authority is disseminated and fought over by at least three contestants, none of whom seem to decisively win the battle, and we could conclude saying about *London Fields* what Stokes has said about Amis’s fiction, which ‘problematizes, relativizes, and disseminates the univocal authority over text and meaning that is commonly assigned to the author’ (1).

It is just as true, however, that all the energy invested into problematising the idea of a stable narrative authority also, and paradoxically, serves to reinforce the very same idea. The more Amis plays with narrative authority in his novel, the more we are reminded of his controlling presence behind the novel. All the confusion about authorship and authority points in the direction of the one who constructed the confusion: ‘In Nicola’s plan the death of the author [Samson] becomes a paradoxical assertion of the power of the author’ (Holmes 54). With Samson dying, the focus on the other narrator (Nicola) becomes all the more strong. But then of course, behind Nicola is Mark Asprey and behind Asprey (who is no less a creation than Samson or Nicola) is Martin Amis. While ostensibly writing a novel about the instability of literary authorship, Amis ends up constituting a very stable, controlling author. Holmes says: ‘I would argue that he [Amis] performs the paradoxical feat of nihilistically denying the possibility of meaningful creation while simultaneously creating a memorably corrosive, if somewhat compromised, satire of contemporary culture’ (54).

The distinction used to talk separately of the ‘form’ of *London Fields* and its ‘content’ is a variation of the distinction between fiction and reality. When we talk about ‘form’, we address the communication that takes place on the ontological level including the implied reader and the implied author. ‘Content’ is what we can draw from the issues raised by the novel as analysts. But it is precisely this distinction that is played with. When Amis, via M. A. enters his own work; when he lets Samson enter his novel; when he lets him learn that ‘all forms of narrative belong to the democratic state of textuality’ (Finney 12); and when he lets him (and Nicola) die, Amis is eroding the idea of a stable narrative centre. It remains, however, a play. Though narrative authority is thematised and problematised in *London Fields*, we must interpret the confusion as ultimately an expression of the one who

constructed the confusion. While compromised throughout, the idea of a stable narrative authority returns inevitably when we follow the threads of confusion to their origin. The fiction/reality borderline is restored as the author returns to assert his authority by reinserting an ontological difference between himself and what he writes.⁸⁰

Once again, it must be observed that the above interpretation with its implied distinction between fiction and reality, between content and form, as such takes its cue from a supposition, the undermining of which is exactly what is played with by *London Fields*. Who says there is to be such a ‘stable origin’ at all? We say that the author ‘returns to assert his authority’ but what reason do we have to believe this is so apart from our feeling that it *must be so*? When Amis associates with the M. A. of his fiction, he makes it problematic to attribute the confusion to an ultimately detached author. Asprey is obviously a creation: Amis’s creation, but since Amis, via the shared initials, also invites identification of himself with Asprey, we are led to ask if Amis is a creation as well and, if so, who his creator is. The questions Amis urges us to ask increasingly run counter to common sense and head toward complete nonsense, and they do so because of the dualistic assumption upon which they are based; no matter how many narrators are killed or how much parody is heaped on the idea of a stable author figure, we cannot help taking an ontological step outwards and ask for precisely such an author. However, while we cannot free ourselves from dualism and so from the charge that we are begging the question when we say that Amis must stand outside his fiction, we can acknowledge the attempt to confuse and play with this particular and normally silent assumption: there is fiction and there is reality, and whatever an author chooses to do in

⁸⁰ That Amis intends his questioning of narrative authority to be a play more than a serious undermining is supported by his predominantly negative view on the American ‘New Journalism’ whose defining trait is the mixture of factual and fictional genres (for an exposition of New Journalism, see Wolfe and Johnson). Amis has written pieces, both included in the essay collection *The Moronic Inferno*, on central figures associated with New Journalism: Truman Capote and Norman Mailer. His criticism, which is repeated in the interview with Victoria Alexander, may be a version of the criticism that goes ‘everyone should be more like me’ (Amis on Tom Wolfe, Morrison 64), but the basic assumptions informing Amis’s own work it reveals are worth noticing. When Capote and Mailer go so close to life, they lose the author’s control of his material: ‘The difference between *In Cold Blood* and *The Executioner’s Song*, say, and *Crime and Punishment* is that Capote and Mailer are just given the facts and cannot arrange them to point up a moral – or just arrange them to point up various ironies. What they’re left with is *life*, which I say is kind of random’ (Alexander 2). Not so with Amis. Faced with the mess of *life*, Amis is bent on bestowing some kind of order: ‘[Life] is all too random. [I have] the desire to give shape to things and make sense of things [...] I have a god-like relationship [with] the world I’ve created. It is exactly analogous. There is creation and resolution, and it’s all up to [me]’ (McEwan interview, qtd in Alexander 2). Accordingly, so Alexander formulates Amis’s criticism of New Journalism, ‘the American authors are not “artists” according to Amis’s definition because neither has Amis’s “god-like” control over material’ (2).

his fiction, he can always be identified on a meta-level, 'locked in [a] solipsistic state of non-narrative being' (Finney 14), as the responsible force behind the fiction.

CONCLUSION

That we end this thesis with an emphasis on the author's control is hardly surprising; from the beginning our outline has been that of a rhetorical study – 'with what aims does the author achieve these effects?' The author behind is implied. Like poems written by waves on the beach, we assume that the meaning of a text is the meaning of someone and that the effects the text has on us are on some level willed, consciously or not, by an author.

The indispensability of the author in a discussion of narrative is clearly stated in *London Fields*. The novel also illustrates another common sense notion about texts, namely that they need a reader as well as an author. And not only in the philosophical sense that if texts were not read, they would not 'exist'. Since every text is finite, it cannot tell its reader everything; that there are blanks in narratives is a logical necessity, and who else but the reader, who ultimately makes the texts alive, can fill the blanks? Texts need readers help them make sense and become in effect results of co-operative efforts. These two truths about texts (that they are both written and read, and that both activities play a part in the generation of meaning) are competing for attention in *London Fields*. The presence of an author and the necessity of a reader. Saying that *London Fields* 'illustrates' these propositions is to propose to read it 'theoretically'. In our interpretation, the novel comes alive as a contribution to the debate on meaning, author, and reader, as well as a fictional object existing in its own right.

The presence of the author in *London Fields* is parodied by the extensive play with the initials 'M. A.'. Generally the author makes his presence known by continually pointing to the fictionality of the text. The opening displays this most prominently with the Note where 'M. A.' speculates about what to call his novel and refers to Samson Young as 'my narrator'. The stylised design, including the suggestive force of the names, is not compromised but put into further perspective by Samson's helpless insistence that he is telling a 'true' story. Overall, the author's presence is foregrounded by drawing attention away from the events, the story, to the way the story is told, the artefact, the discourse.

In the chapter on the humour of the novel we also saw several examples where play with language is preferred to getting on with the telling. The comic effect alternately forces the reader to pay attention and depends on the attention being present. The first strategy is detected mainly in the shock effect coming from the unexpected inclusion of themes which

are normally not treated with a comic voice. The attention being thus encouraged, and the readers drawn to close reading, they are rewarded with comic reversals whose effects depend upon the readers being faithful to the temporality of the reading process and to continually evaluate the singular words as they are read. For a reader who takes a broad sweep, a general assessment of each paragraph, these comic reversals are lost, occurring as they do on word, not sentence, level. While the funny passages unquestionably also work as relief from the complications, the encouragement of reader attention is built into the comic structure as well.

The gaps in the syuzet can be bridged to refer to a coherent (and rather straightforward) fabula. We have mentioned the further emphasis this puts on the presence of an organising force, an emphasis which grows stronger because the well constructed, orderly, perhaps even simple fabula is hidden behind a highly chaotic syuzet. The chaos demands reader participation, but the puzzles only fit together meaningfully in one way; the author's control is only put into perspective by its apparent disappearance. It is in the process of making sense of the novel's structure that we see the opportunity to read it as theory; we have in the play between reader and writer, coming from the contrast between a chaotic syuzet and a simple fabula, a situation which, by analogy, translates into a play of authority in narratives.

Who determines the meaning of texts, author or reader? An obvious further study following this one, which has investigated mainly the theoretical contributions that *London Fields* might make to the discussion on meaning, would deal with the meaning of *London Fields*. Such a study would correspond to the third step in Ricoeur's theory of reading when the reader, having made the text make sense by going into the textual universe, tries to go back and take the text with him in an act of appropriation, 'what does the text, then, mean?' Not left out of our paper, this question has remained secondary to our efforts of making sense, of configuring the text.

In recent years it has become fashionable to talk about the death of the author and a corresponding power of the reader. 'The Author' whom Barthes symbolically killed in 1968 was the Author who 'is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same antecedence to his work as father to his child. In complete contrast,' Barthes continues, 'the modern sriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing' (Death of the Author 145-6). Until this point Barthes's attack is most efficient when directed against the

biographical criticism which seeks to explain elements in an author's work by referring to his life, to the existence which precisely precedes and exceeds the activity of writing. This kind of criticism, however, had already been discredited by 1968. Renounced by the New Critics in favour of an idea of the text as autonomous, it received its own name in 1954 with Wimsatt and Beardsley's 'The Intentional Fallacy.' From the bit quoted above Barthes could actually be talking about the implied author who, like 'the modern scriptor', is distinguished by having his existence limited by the text.

But Barthes does not stop here. The radicality of his essay lies in its attack of the unity of the text itself. Dancing on the grave of the real author, Barthes attempts to get at the implied author as well, the term symbolising by personification the inherent unity of the text. The quote above continues: 'We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.' Whereas the use of the implied author betrays a belief in some kind of narrative order, Barthes opens for a plurality of meaning. These meanings come from the readers: 'The death of the author,' Barthes says, is synonymous with 'the birth of the reader' (118).

At the wake of the Author, we find someone like Fish, whose work exemplifies the possible consequences of the Author's absence as the originator of the text's meaning. For Fish, all authority is granted to the reader. In his introduction to *Is There a Text in This Class* Fish sketches his intellectual development from initial focus on the reader and the preoccupation with circumventing another fallacy identified by Wimsatt and Beardsley: the affective fallacy, the fallacy of mistaking the text's effect on its reader for its meaning. Later, as he says, he 'Stopped Worrying' and realised that the only way to avoid contradicting himself was to stop hanging on to the text as 'a little bit independent' and take the full jump into the relativism of the readers' meaning.⁸¹

⁸¹ See 'Why No One is Afraid of Wolfgang Iser' where Fish locates the attractiveness of Iser in the latter's insistence on having it both ways: reader freedom and textual autonomy. While appealing to common sense, this aspiration must be abandoned, says Fish, on logical grounds. Fish does not ascribe to the term 'relativism' but talks about 'collectivism'; interpretative freedom is not granted to each individual reader but to the reader communities.

But according to David Lodge the dichotomy implied in Barthes's statement and made explicit in the writings of Fish is a false one. Lodge formulates it like this: 'either (A) the text contains a single meaning which the author intended and which it is the duty of the critic to establish, or (B) the text is a system capable of generating an infinite number of meanings when activated by the reader' (Lodge, Milan Kundera 158). With comments that deserve to be mentioned here because they delineate the theoretical standpoint we have detected in *London Fields*, Lodge continues:

No one who is seriously engaged in the practice of writing fiction *and* familiar with modern critical theory [...] could accept either of these positions as starkly stated here. Works of literature – in our civilisation at least – do not come into being by accident. They are intentional acts, produced by individual writers [...] Without such control and design there would be no reason to write one sentence rather than another, or to arrange one's sentences in any particular order.

On the other hand, once texts leave the hand of the writer and become public, they also free themselves of the author's control:

It is the nature of texts, especially fictional ones, that they have gaps and indeterminacies which may be filled in by different readers in different ways, and it is of the nature of codes that, once brought into play, they may generate patterns of significance which were not consciously intended by the author who activated them, and which do not require his 'authorization' to be accepted as valid interpretations of the text.

In argument with Barthes and Fish *London Fields* would side with Lodge. Although it asks the question about narrative authority, it states at the same time the meaninglessness of a definitive answer in favour of either figure. Samson's death alludes to Barthes's 'Death of the Author' and more subtly, so does Nicola's. She too, as we have seen, is an author figure. But the allusion comes in form of parody more than illustration. With the death of each candidate for authorship, the question of narrative authority is not rejected as false ('there is no narrative authority') so much as suspended and displaced to the next figure in line. The narrative continues happily and without problems also after the death of Samson and Nicola. He outlives her, and someone else obviously outlives him to present us with the novel called

London Fields, composed by Samson's novel and his diary. The reader, then, according to *London Fields*, is not free, like Fish's reading communities to make their own opinions and create their own readings which are sanctioned by the number of people holding them. But the novel also does not advocate a return to early hermeneutics where the reader was supposed to 'lose themselves' into the mind of the author whose intention they sought to reproduce.

The play with narrative authority in *London Fields* can be characterised as a distinctly postmodern discourse. According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodernism takes the form of a self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement: 'it is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to highlight, or "highlight", and to subvert, or "subvert", and the mode is therefore "knowing" and an ironic – or even "ironic" – one' (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 1). In *London Fields* we have inverted commas around virtually every important aspect. The cultural critique is written from within that culture; it does not assume a position outside from which to offer assessment and can consequently be hard to identify as criticism at all (see Hutcheon, *Power of Postmodern Irony*).

If we concentrate on the theme of narrative authority, the ambiguity is obvious. We have the death of the author(s) – and a narration that just continues; we see the reader invited to make sense and promised some kind of authority – and a strong emphasis on the author's ultimate control. The contention that the present human condition, eroded by mass media, is defined by a lack of coherent motivation, i.e. a lack of a stable Self, is contrasted with the text of *London Fields* whose well-structuredness presupposes a clear and coherent motivation, a Self. Like Nicola Six who paradoxically lifts herself out of the condition just described by acknowledging that she is defined by it; who achieves freedom by recognising her captivity, Martin Amis posits with *London Fields* the possibility of artistic control as a means to the assertion of Self.

WORKS CITED

Books by Martin Amis

(The editions referred to are the ones we have used in our paper. Year of first publication in parentheses.)

The Rachel Papers. (1973). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984.

Dead Babies. (1975). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984.

Success. (1978). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.

Other People: A Mystery Story. (1981). London: Vintage/Random, 1999.

The Invasion of the Space Invaders. (1982). London: Hutchinson, 1982.

Money: A Suicide Note. (1984). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.

The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America. (1986). London: Jonathan Cape, 1986.

Einstein's Monsters. (1987). London: Jonathan Cape, 1987.

London Fields. (1989). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990.

Time's Arrow or The Nature of the Offence. (1991). New York: Harmony Books, 1991.

Visiting Mrs. Nabokov and Other Excursions. (1993). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994.

The Information. (1995). London: Harper.

Night Train. (1997). London: Vintage/Random, 1998.

Heavy Water and Other Stories. (1998). London: Vintage/Random, 1999.

Through a long career as literary critic, Amis has published numerous reviews and literary essays. For a selection see Diedrick.

On Martin Amis

Interviews

Alexander, Victoria. 'Between the Influences of Bellow and Nabokov.' *Antioch Review* (Fall 1994). Available at: <http://www.dactyl.org/amis.html>

Biggsby, Christopher. *New Writing*. Eds. Malcolm Bradbury and Judy Cooke. London: Minerva, 1992.

- Fuller, Graham. 'Fuller Interview.' *Interview*. Vol. 25, no.5, May 1995. Available at:
<http://academic.albion.edu/jdiedrick/fuller.htm>
- Haffenden, John. 'Martin Amis.' *Novelists in Interview*. London: Methuen, 1985. 1-25.
- Laurence, Alexander and Kathleen McGee. 'No More Illusions. Martin Amis is Getting Old and Wants to Talk About It.' Available at
<http://www.altx.com/interviews/martin.amis.html>
- McEwan, Ian. 'Writer Talk: Ideas of Our Time.' *Writers in Conversation: With Martin Amis*. ICA, Northbrook, Ill, 198-.
- Miller, Laura. 'The Salon Interview.' Available at:
http://www.salonmagazine.com/books/int/1998/02/cov_si_10int.html
- Morrison, Susan. 'The Wit and Fury of Martin Amis.' *Rolling Stone*. No. 578, 17 May, 1990, 95-99, 101-102. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 101. Ed. Deborah A. Stanley. Detroit: Gale, 1997. 63-69.
- Self, Will. *Mississippi Review Web*. Available at
<http://sushi.st.usm.edu/mrw/mr/1995/07amis.html>
- Stout, Mira. 'Martin Amis: Down London's Mean Streets.' *The New York Times*. 4 Feb., 1990.
- Wachtel, Eleanor. *The Malahat Review*. March 1996. 43-59.
- Wilson, Jonathan. 'A Very English Story.' *New Yorker*. 6 Feb., 1995. 96-106.

Reviews of *London Fields*

- Bragg, Melvin. 'Nuclear Reaction.' *The Listener*. Vol. 122, no. 3132, 21 Sept., 1989, 30.*
- Fuller, Graham. 'Murder He Wrote: Martin Amis's Killing Fields.' *The Village Voice*. Vol. 35, no. 17, Apr. 24, 1990. 75.*
- Gowrie, Grey. 'Castigated by Fierce Laughter.' *The Weekend Telegraph*. 23 Sept. 1989.
- Harris, Martyn. 'Pursuit of the Millennium.' *New Statesman & Society*. Vol. 2, no. 68, 22 Sept., 1989. 34.*
- Imlah, Mark. 'A Dart in the Heart.' *Times Literary Supplement*. 29 Sept. – 5 Oct., 1989.
- Kakutani, Michiko. 'Books of The Times; A Post-Mod Scheherazade In a Funky, Fearful London.' *The New York Times*. 13 Feb., 1990.
- Kemp, Peter. 'Streets of Fire.' *The Sunday Times*. 24 Sept. 1989.

King, Francis. 'A Thin Plot in a Fat Sandwich.' *The Spectator*. Vol.263, no. 8411, 23 Sept., 1989. 36-37.*

Koning, Christina. 'Death by Request.' *The Guardian*. 23 Sept. 1989.

Pesetsky, Bette. 'Lust Among the Ruins.' *The New York Times*. 4 Mar., 1990.*

Rainer, Michelle. Available at: <http://www.peak.sfu.ca/the-peak/97-3/issue/london.html>

Rifkind, Donna. 'Apocalypse Now.' *The New Criterion*. Vol. 8, no. 9, May 1990, 73-77.*

Sante, Luc. 'Cheat's Tale.' *The New Republic*. Vol. 202, no. 18, 30 Apr., 1990. 45-46.*

Symons, Julian. 'Dart for Art's Sake.' *London Review of Books*. Vol. 11, no. 18. 28 Sept. 1989. 7-8.

Yardley, Jonathan. 'Martin Amis: Waiting for the Millennium.' *Book World - The Washington Post*. 18 Feb., 1990. 3.*

* Excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 62. Ed. Roger Matuz. Detroit: Gale, 1991. 12-20.

Articles and Books

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 6th ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt, 1993.

Amis, Martin. 'Don Juan in Hull.' *New Yorker*. 12 July 1993, 74-82.

Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. London, 1970.

---. 'The Death of the Author.' *Image-Music-Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath, 1977.

Bennet, Andrew and Nicholas Royle. *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. London: Prentice Hall, 1999.

Bergson, Henri. 'Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic.' *Comedy*. Ed. Sypher. New York: Doubleday, 1956. 61-193.

Bernard, Catherine. 'Dismembering/Remembering Mimesis: Martin Amis, Graham Swift.' *British Postmodern Fiction*. Eds. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993. 121-144.

---. 'A Certain Hermeneutical Slant: Sublime Allegories in Contemporary English Fiction.' *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 38, no. 1. (Spring 1997). The University of Wisconsin Press. 164-184.

Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961.

---. *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.

- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot. Design and Intention in Narrative*. New York: Vintage, 1985.
- Brown, Richard. 'Postmodern Americas in the fiction of Angela Carter, Martin Amis and Ian McEwan.' *Forked Tongues? Comparing Twentieth-Century British and American Literature*. Eds. Ann Massa and Alastair Stead. London: Longman, 1994. 92-110.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- Crosman, Robert. 'Do Readers Make Meaning.' *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*. Eds. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- Cuddon, J. A. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1997.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975.
- Diedrick, James. *Understanding Martin Amis*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of Carolina Press, 1995.
- Elias, Amy J. 'Meta-mimesis? The Problem of British Postmodern Realism.' *British Postmodern Fiction*. Eds. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993. 9-31.
- Finney, Brian. 'Narrative and Narrated Homicide in Martin Amis's *Other People* and *London Fields*.' *Critique. Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. 37. No. 1, 1995. 3-15.
- Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980.
- . 'Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser.' *Doing What Comes Naturally. Change, Rhetoric and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1989.
- Frye, Northrop, Sheridan Baker, George Perkins. *The Harper Handbook to Literature*. New York: Harper, 1985.
- Glasgow, R.D. V. *Madness, Masks, and Laughter. An Essay on Comedy*. London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1995.
- Hawkes, David. 'Martin Amis.' *British Writers*. Eds. George Stade and Carol Howard. New York: Scribner's. Supplement IV (1997): 25-44.
- Hirsch, E. D. *Validity in Interpretation*. London, 1967.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*. Ed. Sir William Molesworth. London: John Bohn, 1840. Vol. IV.

- Holmes, Frederick. 'The Death of the Author as Cultural Critique in *London Fields*.' *Powerless Fictions? Ethics, Cultural Critique, and American Fiction in the Age of Postmodernism*. Postmodern Studies 17 (1996): 53-62. Ed. Ricardo Miguel Alfonso. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- . 'The Power of Postmodern Irony.' *Genre, Trope, Gender*. Ed. Barry Rutland. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1992. 33-51.
- Iser, Wolfgang. 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach.' *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-structuralism*. Ed. Jane Tompkins. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1980.
- . 'Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction.' *Aspects of Narration*. Ed. J. Hillis Miller. New York: Columbia University Press, 1971.
- Jordan, Justine. *Withholding the Information*. Available at http://www.theword.org.uk/news/file_amis01.html
- Joyce, James. 'The Dead.' *Dubliners*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1993.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgment*. Trans. James Meredith
- Kerr, Stuart. *Like Father ... Like Son?* Diss. Holloway. Available at: <Http://academic.edu/jdiedrick/kerr/.htm>
- Lodge, David. 'Indeterminacy in Modern Narrative. Reading off "Mrs Bathurst".' *After Bakhtin. Essays on Fiction and Criticism*. London: Routledge, 1990. 143-54.
- . 'Milan Kundera, and the Idea of the Author in Modern Criticism.' *After Bakhtin. Essays on Fiction and Criticism*. London: Routledge, 1990. 154-68.
- . 'The Novel Today: Still at the Crossroads?' *New Writing*. Eds. Malcolm Bradbury and Judy Cooke. London: Minerva, 1992. 203-216.
- Maclean, Ian. 'Reading and Interpretation.' *Modern Literary Theory. A Comparative Introduction*. 2nd ed. Eds. Ann Jefferson and David Robey. London: Batsford, 1993. 122-45.
- Mailloux, Steven. *Rhetorical Power*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989.
- Mills, Sara. *Feminist Stylistics*. London: Routledge, 1995. 187-197.
- Moyle, David. 'Beyond the Black Hole: The Emergence of Science Fiction Themes in the Recent Work of Martin Amis.' *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Vol. 36, 1995. 305-15.
- Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Hornby, A. S. Fourth Edition. Ed. A. P. Cowie. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

- Ricoeur, Paul. 'Mimesis and Representation.' *A Ricoeur Reader. Reflection and Imagination*. Ed. Mario J. Valdes. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991. 137-157.
- Robey, David. 'Anglo-American New Criticism.' *Modern Literary Theory. A Comparative Introduction*. 2nd ed. Eds. Ann Jefferson and David Robey. London: Batsford, 1993. 73-92.
- Skhlovsky, Victor. 'Art as Technique.' *Russian Formalist Criticism. Four Essays*. Eds. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965.
- Smith, Penny. 'Hell Innit: The Millennium in Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, Martin Amis's *London Fields*, and Shena Mackay's *Dunedin*.' *Essays and Studies 1995*. Ed. Laurel Brake. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995. 115-129.
- Snyder, Cara Lynn. *Morality in Six Novels of Martin Amis*. Diss. University of North Texas, 1996.
- Stein, Thomas Michael. 'From Purgatory to Full Inferno': Martin Amis's Novels of the Eighties.' *Anglistik & Englischunterricht*. 48 (1992): 115-131. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter.
- Stokes, Peter. 'Martin Amis and the Postmodern Suicide: Tracing the Postnuclear Narrative at the Fin de Millennium.' *Critique*. Summer 1997.
- Sturrock, John, ed. *The Oxford Guide to Contemporary Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 113-142: 'England.'
- Suleiman, Susan R. Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism. *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*. Eds. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- The Norton Introduction to Literature. Combined Shorter Edition*. Bain, Carl E., Jerome Beaty, J. Paul Hunter. New York: Norton. 1973.
- Todd, Richard. 'Confrontation Within Convention: On the Character of British Postmodern Fiction.' *Postmodern Fiction in Europe and the Americas*. Eds. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B. V., 1988.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Ed. Peter Ackroyd. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.

APPENDIX A: ABSTRACT IN DANISH

Specialets omdrejningspunkt er litteraturanalyse. Det overordnede mål har været at præsentere en dybdegående læsning af romanen *London Fields*, skrevet i 1989 af den britiske forfatter Martin Amis, og specialets struktur skal ses i lyset af denne målsætning. De to midterste kapitler (2 og 3) er centrale ikke kun i kraft af deres placering, men også fordi resten af specialet i en vis forstand udspringer fra dem. Kapitel 2 og 3 undersøger virkemidlerne bag romanens to hovedkarakteristika, dens humor og dens indviklede opbygning, og afdækker samtidigt den optagethed med begrebet 'læser', som er karakteristisk for specialet som helhed.

Læserens rolle er i centrum i alle kapitlerne og binder dem tematisk sammen, men udspringer af det møde med og den opfattelse af teksten som vi redegør for i kapitel 2 og 3. I to henseender er læseren her i centrum. For det første fordi analyserne gør det klart at teksten selv 'kalder' på læseren, inviterer læseren til at deltage i tekstens konstruktion. For det andet fordi identificeringen af romanens to definerende elementer kan ses som en oversættelse af de to reaktioner den fremkalder hos læseren, som bliver bragt til at le, men også til at rynke brynene og sendt på jagt efter løsninger til tekstens strukturelle vanskeligheder. Specialets første kapitel gør rede for hvordan tekstens spil med læseren etableres i romanens indledning gennem en konstant undergravning og genskabelse af forventninger - konventionelle litterære forventninger, såvel som forventninger skabt af teksten selv.

Fokuseringen på læseren er hele vejen igennem specialet sammenkoblet med en nykritisk tilgang til 'teksten selv', som er centrum for analyserne og derved styrende for specialet. Den læser der tales om er den læser der skabes af teksten, og vores mål er at bringe denne proces frem i lyset; at gøre rede for de literære teknikker, med hvilke teksten indskriver sin læser. Forfatteren, forstået som tekstens organiserende kraft er, ligesom læseren, impliceret af teksten men befinder samtidig sig på et andet ontologisk niveau. Overvejelserne omkring denne problematik er ikke kun metodiske, og er kun til dels aprioriske; i lige så høj grad som de udspringer af refleksioner over vores egen fremgangsmåde som analytikere er de resultat af vores møde med teksten. Det spil som *London Fields* iscenesætter med læseren er et spil om narrativ autoritet: Er det læseren, teksten selv, eller dens forfatter der bestemmer tekstens betydning? Denne problemstilling kan lokaliseres på et strukturelt niveau, som det sker i specialets kapitel 2 og 3, og som et tema i romanen, hvilket behandles i kapitel 4.

Afslutningsvis holdes de metodiske overvejelser angående tekst, læser og forfatter op mod tematiseringen i *London Fields* af de samme begreber, og vi forsøger at redegøre for romanens teoretiske standpunkt i lyset af en mere generel diskussion om narrativ autoritet.