

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

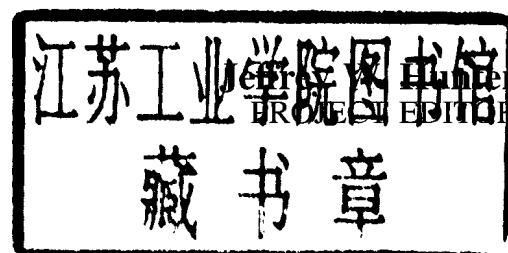
CLC

213

Volume 213

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 213

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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, and the *Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook*, which was discontinued in 1998.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Martin Amis

1949-

(Full name Martin Louis Amis) English novelist, short story writer, nonfiction writer, essayist, and memoirist.

The following entry provides an overview of Amis's career through 2005. For additional information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 4, 9, 38, 62, and 101.

INTRODUCTION

Amis is acknowledged as one of England's most widely-read contemporary authors. Amis's writing contains an irreverent wit similar to that of his father's, well-known author Kingsley Amis. Amis utilizes a mixture of profanity, slang, and wry observation to satirize the excesses of contemporary society, commenting on aspects of modern culture that exhibit an obsession with sex, violence, and material gain. Though he is compared favorably with such satirists as Jonathan Swift, critics often condemn Amis for brandishing a juvenile vulgarity in his prose, and his political and moral opinions have garnered a significant amount of controversy.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born on August 25, 1949, in Oxford, England, Martin is the son of Kingsley Amis, a prominent British novelist and poet, and Hilary Bardwell Amis. After attending over a dozen schools while growing up in England, the United States, and Spain, Amis studied at Exeter College, Oxford. In 1972 he became an editorial assistant at the *London Times Literary Supplement*, and was promoted to the position of fiction and poetry editor two years later. His first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, was published in 1973 and was later awarded the Somerset Maugham Award. In 1975 he joined the editorial staff at *The New Statesman*, eventually becoming the literary editor. He became a staff writer and reviewer for *The London Observer* and was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Biography in 2000 for *Experience* (2000), a memoir about his relationship with his father. In 2001 Amis received the National Book Critics Circle Award in the criticism category for *The War against Cliché* (2001). His novel *Yellow Dog* (2003) was considered for the Booker Prize.

MAJOR WORKS

Amis's first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, is a coming-of-age story about a sexually-charged young man on the verge of his twentieth birthday. Sexuality and intimate



relationships are identified as prominent themes throughout Amis's work, and the novel's biting wit has earned Amis comparison to one of his literary idols, Vladimir Nabokov. Sexuality is also a primary subject in Amis's second novel, the black comedy *Dead Babies* (1975), in which a group of deviant youths gather at a country home for a weekend filled with sex, drugs, and violence. *Success* (1978) chronicles the troubled relationship between two foster brothers whose origins reside in very different social and economic backgrounds. Reviewers find the theme of rivalry to be another recurring motif in Amis's work. Deemed one of his best novels, *Money* (1984) details the deterioration of John Self, a man consumed by alcohol, greed, and sex. Critics note that the novel incorporates several of Amis's characteristic themes: avarice, excess, self-destruction, sexual obsession, love, identity, and cultural deprivation. Published in 1989, *London Fields* traces the self-destruction of a young woman who claims to have foreseen her death and spends her remaining days with the intention of dying on her own terms.

Utilizing a reverse-time narrative structure, *Time's Arrow* (1991) is the story of Tod Friendly, an American doctor who becomes progressively younger during the course of the novel. He eventually finds himself running a Nazi concentration camp as an infamous "death doctor." *The Information* (1995) satirizes the politics of academia in the story of two middle-aged writers who reflect on the successes and failures of their careers. Amis's foray into the genre of detective thriller, *Night Train* (1997), follows a female police officer on the trail of a murderer. *Experience*, a nonlinear autobiography, focuses on Amis's relationship with his celebrated father. *The War against Cliché* contains a series of essays and reviews in which Amis takes aim at the prevalence of old, stale language in modern literature. He ponders the life and atrocities committed by Josef Stalin in *Koba the Dread* (2002), and devotes significant attention to the motives of Stalinist sympathizers, such as his father, Kingsley. *Yellow Dog* focuses on the character of Xan Meo, an upstanding citizen and husband who transforms into a vile and abusive sexual deviant after suffering a serious head injury. The novel includes several other characters who exhibit a similar dichotomy of primitive and civilized impulses.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Amis has garnered a mixed response from critics, but remains one of the best-known and most popular writers in England. In fact, he is viewed as a celebrity, and his journalism and essays attract a great deal of attention from readers and British press alike. Some reviewers contend that the publicity about his personal life—his relationship with his father, his public feuds with other literary figures, and his marriages—tends to obscure the value of his literary achievements. Commentators often discuss the influence of Amis's father on his life and work; Amis himself has often written about his relationship with his father, particularly in his memoir *Experience*. His narrative experimentation is another area of critical study. Reviewers have discussed him as a postmodern writer, focusing on the function and implications of his fractured narratives. His later fiction has been deemed disappointing by many critics, particularly in relationship to his earlier work; several reviewers perceive these later novels and memoirs to be sophomoric, self-aggrandizing, and obsessed with fame. Others regard him as a literate, perceptive, and clever writer who continues to provide a valuable outlook on contemporary society. His insights as a social and literary critic are widely acknowledged, but such efforts have been unfavorably compared to his early works of fiction. In recent years, his perspective on politics and contemporary culture has generated controversy among his literary peers, specifically his view of the September 11th terrorist attacks and its impact on writers. Amis has been accused of being out of touch and failing to

engage with the most important political and social issues of our time. Although critics may dispute the degree and character of Amis's abilities and insights, they concur that he has had a profound impact on contemporary British letters.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- The Rachel Papers* (novel) 1973
Dead Babies (novel) 1975
Success (novel) 1978
Other People: A Mystery Story (novel) 1981
Money: A Suicide Note (novel) 1984
The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America (essays and interviews) 1986
Einstein's Monsters (essays and short stories) 1987
London Fields (novel) 1989
Time's Arrow; or, The Nature of the Offence (novel) 1991
Visiting Mrs. Nabokov and Other Excursions (essays) 1993
The Information (novel) 1995
Night Train (novel) 1997
Heavy Water and Other Stories (short stories) 1998
Experience (memoirs) 2000
The War against Cliché: Essays and Reviews, 1971-2000 (essays) 2001
Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million (history) 2002
Yellow Dog (novel) 2003
Pornoland [with Stefano de Luigi] (nonfiction) 2004

CRITICISM

Peter Stokes (essay date summer 1997)

SOURCE: Stokes, Peter. "Martin Amis and the Postmodern Suicide: Tracing the Postnuclear Narrative at the Fin de Millennium." *Critique* 38, no. 4 (summer 1997): 300-11.

[In the following essay, Stokes considers Amis's recent work within the context of postmodern fiction and claims that the author's fractured narratives reflect his anxiety over a possible global nuclear apocalypse.]

When, in Martin Amis's novel, *Time's Arrow*, Tod Friendly's soul encounters its physiognomy for the first time in a bathroom mirror by virtue of a simple flick of the switch on a wall, it remarks: "It would have to hap-

pen at the speed of light.” “I expected to look like shit” the soul continues, “but this was ridiculous. Jesus. We really *do* look like shit” (10). Self-revelation at the speed of light, that is what the postmodern moment promises. Here we find ourselves face to face with what Arthur Kroker and David Cook in *The Postmodern Scene* refer to as, “a certain literary mood,”—or, “a way of participating directly in the ruins within and without of late twentieth-century experience” where “everything approaches the end of Einstein’s world at the speed of light” (Kroker ii, iv). How will this ending come? What, if anything, will remain?

I want to approach those questions through the vortices of Amis’s recent fiction—a body of work that owes much to its late postmodern forebears in Borges and Nabokov. Amis’s work is particularly important and deserving of attention because it is, I believe, the nearest postmodern fiction has come to offering something other than a mere critique of the mediating effects of language and the consequences of such a language for contemporary notions of subject construction. In Amis’s work, such a critique is undeniably present, but rather than signaling an exhaustion of literature’s possibilities—to recall John Barth’s famous phrase—Amis’s critique opens up a space for a productive potential in the radical indeterminacy of the postmodern subject and postmodern knowledge production. And Amis locates that productive potential, particularly, within the endlessness of apocalyptic discourse. Thus, although language may no longer be thought capable of rendering transparent truths, it is still capable of producing, in Foucault’s language, *effects*. Amis’s fiction, then, investigates the social ends of a postmodern literature cast not as a discourse of truth or realism, but as a discourse of mediated truths or truth-effects. Amis’s novels suggest that the distance between literary discourse and other social discourses may not be so great, and thus these novels exploit the self-reflexive character of literature as a means of revising and redirecting nuclear apocalyptic discourse. In so doing, Amis argues that postmodern subjects serve a critical function in the reproduction of apocalyptic discourse—a function through which critical changes in the development of that discourse are effected.

What I will be examining in Amis’s work, then, is the power of narrativity as a means of recursive agency and the narrativization of that power vis-à-vis the disappearance of the subject and the threat of nuclear apocalypse. En route, I want to make two claims for Amis’s fiction: first, that it problematizes, relativizes, and disseminates the univocal authority over text and meaning that is commonly assigned to the author. Amis’s work figures authorial voices as necessarily composite. His novels value that fragmented narrative authority positively by playfully engaging with the consequences of plagiarism and appropriation—where narrative becomes not an end

point, an ultimate signification through the irrevocable punctuation of the novel’s final period, but a place to begin writing new versions of literature’s histories and futures, an empowering literary ellipsis writing itself out of a network of composite voices. Second, I want to argue that Amis’s fiction positions literature as anything but an exhausted activity by mining a critical recursive agency in the loss of truth and the production of truth-effects: an agency that Amis characterizes as being marked by a rearticulation of the function of the author and authority generally.

In the post-Enlightenment era, at least, no other figure has been as important to the value and reception of a work as its author. In Amis’s recent novels, though—novels that frequently figure authors as their narrators—that narrative authority is under serious question. In fact, Amis does much in his fiction to problematize the distance between himself and the narrators of his novels, sometimes even appearing in those novels himself as a character—a character who is also a writer. His recent fiction, then, takes as its starting point the problematization of authority and identity, thus enabling him to comment at length on the apparent disappearance of the subject in the postmodern moment. As Amis explains in a recent interview with the novelist Will Self in *The Mississippi Review*, “What people are up to now is Post-Modernist, in the sense that they are loose beings in search of a form. And the art that they bring to this now, to shape their lives, is TV” (151). In his novel *London Fields*, Amis pays particular attention to the extent to which social responsibility has been abdicated in the postmodern era in part because of the mediating effects of television. In *London Fields* he in fact characterizes the contemporary era as an “age of mediated atrocity” (214). Television, in that novel, is simultaneously positioned as a window reflecting back consumer desires and a protection against all manner of catastrophic occurrences around the world. In order to explore the problem of giving form to a life, then, Amis examines the effects of language and other representational mediums in constructing and reconstructing subjects, authors, and authority alike.

Of course, effecting a change in the historical development of the author’s function is no easy thing to achieve. For centuries the author has represented a means for the transference of authority itself: operating as what Foucault—in “What Is an Author?”—calls “a certain functional principal by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction” (118-19). The postmodern author, in Amis’s fiction, attempts to function in a different way, by problematizing and disseminating the authority of the text rather than immobilizing it. Amis clearly wants to free literature from its connections to the author. He achieves

that, to a certain extent, not by killing the author but by relativizing the power of the author's authority over the text and by questioning the kinds of truths that authority gives form to.

What concerns Amis in his novels and stories of the 1980s, however, is not merely the problem of the death of the author, but, increasingly, the possibility of the death of literature. Although the narrative of *Money* (1984) constitutes a purported suicide note, the short stories that make up *Einstein's Monsters* (1987) turn narratives of individual suicide into metaphors of global nuclear suicide, and *London Fields* (1989) concerns itself with the complex relations between individual suicide and global nuclear apocalypse, between the death of an author and the death of literature. Amis's novels argue that the fragmented character of that post-modern authority figure is a result of the precarious character of literature at the close of the twentieth century—a literature made precarious, in large part, by the tonnage of nuclear weapons pointed toward the sky. Certainly, as Jacques Derrida argues, in "No Apocalypse, Not Now," the literature of the nuclear age is characterized by a "radical precariousness" (27). Nuclear war could, in the blink of an eye, wreak a literary devastation greater in proportion than "even that of Alexandria" (27). In such an event, the literary archive itself would be erased and the author would consequently cease to have any authority at all. Rather than attempt to prohibit the loosening of that authority, and rather than disciplining the apocalyptic threat that nuclear weapons pose to literature, Amis tries to value positively this new lack of fixity. Amis suggests, then, that the author function is being reconfigured in new ways to insure the free circulation of discourse—because the self-reflexive power of literature is capable of revising this endless discourse of apocalypse in ways that explicitly enable its endless unfolding. Amis effects that by destabilizing the author's position, by rendering the author as circulatable, as manipulable, as composable, decomposable, and recomposable as fiction—by turning the author into a text.

The novel *Money*, in fact, is marked by an attempt to produce just this effect. The novel concerns the son of an English pub owner, John Self, a former producer of television commercials and the current writer of the suicide note that constitutes the narrative of the novel, who is trying to make his first full-length movie—to be called *Good Money*, or later *Bad Money*. The problem with Self's film, however, is that it has no script. To solve this problem, Self approaches a writer who lives in his neighborhood. As Self describes it, "A guy in a pub pointed him out to me . . . This writer's name, they tell me, is *Martin Amis*. Never heard of him. Do you know his stuff at all?" (71). After brushing up on Amis's background a bit, Self meets the author and asks, "Your dad, he's a writer too, isn't he? Bet that

made it easier" (88). "Oh, sure," the Amis character assures him, it's "just like taking over the family pub" (88).

Two points need to be underscored here: first, this novel contains a narrator who addresses his readers (the readers of a novel written by Martin Amis) to ask if they have ever heard of Martin Amis. The effect of that post-modern conceit is to confuse the boundaries separating the author and his characters. To add a further dimension to this confusion, the novel also includes a female character named Martina Twain, suggesting still more bifurcations in the Amis persona within the text. Second, Self indicates that the fictional Martin Amis has a father who is a writer—not unlike the real Martin Amis whose father is, of course, Kingsley Amis. As the narrative of *Money* continues, these two Martin Amises become less and less distinguishable. For example, Self later learns that his script writer, Martin Amis, is a known plagiarist—"there'd recently been some cases of plagiarism, of text-theft, which had filtered down to the newspapers and magazines" (235). The same is also true for the real Martin Amis who has commented in public on instances of plagiarism in his own work on several occasions. "So," Self concludes, "Little Martin got caught with his fingers in the till, then, did he. A word criminal. I would bear that in mind" (235).

And so, it goes without saying, must Amis's readers. And so must Amis, whose narrative self is also John Self. Amis himself draws particular attention to this confluence in order to suggest that the narrative voice is always fragmented and driven by conflicting narrative desires. As the fictional Martin Amis describes his theory of narrative to Self during a script session, those conflicting narrative desires necessarily affect the relation between an author and his characters:

The distance between author and narrator corresponds to the degree to which the author finds the narrator wicked, deluded, pitiful or ridiculous . . . The further down the scale he is, the more liberties you can take with him. You can do what the hell you like to him, really. This creates an appetite for punishment. The author is not free of sadistic impulses.

(246-47)

However true that may be for the fictional Martin Amis, that is certainly an apt description of the author and narrator relation in *Money*—the novel authored by the real Martin Amis. Self is certainly wicked, deluded, pitiful, and ridiculous, rather low down on the human scale, and Amis pulls no punches in meting out his punishment. But meting out that punishment is by no means a simple assignment when it involves a fictional Martin Amis who is trying to write a script for a movie called *Good Money* or *Bad Money*, all of which occurs in a novel written by Martin Amis called *Money* that

concerns a narrator called John Self, who, while narrating what comes to be taken for the novel *Money*, is trying to make a film called *Good Money*, and who must be punished. As the fictional Martin Amis sums it up, "we're pretty much agreed that the twentieth century is an ironic age—down-ward looking. Even realism, rock-bottom realism, is considered a bit grand for the twentieth century" (248). What that passage indicates is that in the postmodern moment even realism is a matter of representation. And there is no such thing as a value-free representation.

Thus, the fictional Martin Amis asks himself: "Is there a moral philosophy of fiction? When I create a character and put him or her through certain ordeals, what am I up to—morally? Am I accountable?" (260). The interviewable Martin Amis also struggles to answer that question. When, in a 1990 interview with Susan Morrison of *Rolling Stone* magazine, Amis attempted to account for that kind of narrative, he remarked, "Actually, I think in my case, and perhaps this is part of the reason why all this happened, I feel a sort of guilt about creating characters, guilt about making them suffer" (Morrison 98). That is, however, rather reductive reasoning—fixing the narrative's unmistakable origin once again at the author. Pressed by his interviewer to explain the presence of a character called Martin Amis in *Money* and another called M. A. in *London Fields*, though, Amis responds in an ultimately more self-effacing fashion: "Well, it all comes under the main heading of 'Fucking Around With the Reader'" (98).

In Amis's *Money*, then, the author amounts to a strange, not quite lateral, not quite right, triangle composed of the Martin Amis whom the name on the book jacket presumably signifies, the Martin Amis who, in a novel called *Money* written by Martin Amis, is called in to work on a film script called *Good Money*, and the John Self who constitutes the narrative voice of the novel *Money*. Here, the discrete differences that have traditionally been represented as distinguishing the author from the narrator are, at the very least, problematized. Nothing is fixed, everything is moving like the particles of the atom whose explosion threatens everything so far accumulated within the literary archive. Amis's author—if he is dead—is at least, as this final electrical storm approaches, ready to be galvanized into a new kind of monstrous existence—a kind of Frankenstein's author. But this Einsteinian end, much as John Self's suicide, has not yet come. At the end of *Money*, Self has—by virtue of Amis's punishment—been brought down to the depths of a ridiculous poverty, though he has not successfully committed suicide. The novel culminates with Self humiliated, but alive. He learns that he has been the dupe of a financial scam, the plot of which is explained to him by his script writer, Martin Amis. As the narrative comes to a close, Self has, the real Amis explains in a recent interview with Victoria

Alexander in *The Antioch Review*, "escaped the novel. He has escaped control of the author figure, me" (586).

At the start of the novel, Self reports the following: "something is waiting to happen to me. I can tell. Recently my life feels like a bloodcurdling joke. Recently my life has taken on form" (*Money* 3). Amis pictures Self, like all people in the postmodern era, as a character in search of form. Yet his entrance into literary form has reduced him to a bloodcurdling joke. By contrast, Self's escape from the novel leaves him altogether "without form" and "more random" (Alexander 587). Although that transformation renders his identity somewhat problematic, "at least," Amis explains to Alexander, "he is not being manipulated" (587). And so Self is left to rewrite his own future. At the novel's close, Self is not just alive, he even realizes that there is still time to make another buck. Just as for Amis there is still time to write another book—and another. Because the postnuclear scene is, in Amis's words, characterized by suspense—a suspense in which no one has any idea how things will turn out—Amis's characters tend to find themselves waiting for an end that does not come. And thus a failed suicide sets the stage for a more elaborate means of self-annihilation—a strategy that mimics the general course of apocalyptic rhetoric itself. And a completed novel on that condition of suspense simply sets the stage for another. Suspense, as Amis's fiction positions it, is simply an on-going fact of life at the close of the twentieth century.

In "Thinkability," for example, Amis remarks, "I was born on August 25, 1949: four days later, the Russians successfully tested their first atom bomb and *deterrence* was in place. So I had those four carefree days, which is more than my juniors ever had" (1). Amis's essay addresses that ever suspenseful state of deterrence in order to estimate its cost—and the cost, according to Amis, in psychological and social terms, is high. Amis's essay, as I indicated earlier, argues that although nuclear weapons continue to pose difficult problems for the international community as a whole, there *are* some writers who "are slowly learning how to write about" those weapons in important ways (4). In Amis's view, such writing necessarily requires commenting on this feeling of suspense. When asked by Philip Hoare in the November 1991 *Details* magazine if recent attempts at disarmament had in any way mitigated the influence of nuclear weapons and the feelings of suspense they provoke or changed the course of nuclear discourse for the better, Amis replied:

No, I think it's a disaster. Instead of four tons of TNT for every man, woman, and child on the planet, it's now 3.95. We can't change what it's done to the psyche. I think that it has inserted something in us morally. When I read about things that make you scratch your head—how could people be so vile—I think, My God, it might never have happened without

this implant. It gives a bit more power to the elbow of the man who is smashing in the head of a ninety-year-old woman.

(132)

In *London Fields* Amis tries to imagine the end result of such an *implant* on the global community as a whole. What is at stake in that novel is a problem of larger proportion than the death of the author or the formlessness of the subject. Here those threats are compounded by others—the possible destruction of the literary archive, and possibly the destruction of the world.

The narrator of *London Fields* is a failed American writer named Samson Young. Sam has arrived in London at the end of the millennium after securing an apartment swap with a successful English novelist, Mark Asprey, who signs his welcome note to Sam, M. A. Sam, who can't—as he explains again and again—make anything up and thus flounders as a writer, soon grows jealous of the many trophies and awards decorating the Asprey home. Reading an Asprey text found around the apartment, Sam becomes demoralized by the incredible success a hack novelist like Asprey enjoys. Sam's own writerly luck changes, however, when he chances upon a true story unfolding before his eyes. He uncovers some diaries that predict the end of the world. He then searches out the diarist and watches as the predictions unfold—and that story, which he records, becomes the narrative of *London Fields*. The story is, Sam assures his readers, a “true story,” but “unified, dramatic and pretty saleable” (*London Fields* 1). At the novel's end, after taking a fatal dose of pills, Sam reports feeling—much like Self at the end of *Money*—“seamless and insubstantial, like a creation. As if someone made me up, for money” (470). Believing that he has once again failed as a writer, Sam appoints his rival, Asprey, as his “literary executor,” believing that Asprey will honor his deathbed request to destroy the manuscript, to “throw everything out” (468, 470). And yet Sam goes to his death with a nagging uncertainty, and thus his suicide note to Asprey concludes with the question: “You didn't set me up. Did you?” (468). Asprey is, Amis explains to Will Self, “an anti-writer,” successful but terrible—“really,” Amis continues, “a deflected parody of the hatred I feel aimed at me” (Self 150).

The answer to Sam's question then, of course, is yes. The ruse of *London Fields* is that it appears to be an appropriation—not merely plagiarism, but out-right theft—of another author's work. As Amis's remarks to Will Self indicate, Asprey is another version of himself, another M. A., and Amis has indeed set Sam up—and Sam is indeed a creation, made up, for money. At a variety of levels, then, *London Fields* works as a kind of joke about plagiarism, or *text-theft*. Amis, disguised as Asprey, appears to have stolen the novel from Sam-

son Young. In *London Fields*, then, as in *Money*, Amis attempts to problematize the credibility of narrative authority en route to suggesting that such authority is essentially formless, insubstantial. As with *Money*, though, in *London Fields* that formlessness is once again valued positively. The text is free to travel, surviving even its author's suicide. Because the author function is transfigured here as a composite author, the text is offered other means of finding its way into circulation, into print. Amis's novel thus plays with the notion of text-theft in such a way as to suggest that disconnecting a text from its author is the best way to keep it moving, to get it read. Indeed, those disconnections take place at several levels in the novel.

As I indicated earlier, for example, Sam has in fact stolen the narrative from someone else's text—the diarist's. In that way, the novel underscores the significance of this multi-authoring from the very start. The novel begins, then, in 1999 when Sam arrives in London where he fortuitously happens upon his true story—fortuitous because Sam, who has not written anything in years, assures his readers that he cannot write fiction. Staring out the window of his London apartment, Sam happens to see a woman—whom he had just seen earlier that day, for the first time in his life, in a pub called the Black Cross—throw out a bundle of diaries. Intrigued, Sam recovers the diaries, which turn out to be the property of Nicola Six, a mysterious woman living in London. As her diaries indicate, since childhood Nicola has had visions. In those visions she knows what's going to happen before it happens. Or so it seems. Ever since she was a little girl, Nicola has seen visions of London with rings circling outward from the center—ground zero. As the novel begins, however, *that event* at least has not come to pass. Nicola's life takes a new course when she has a vision of her own death. She ceases to record any more visions in her diaries and even throws the diaries away. Through the last of her recorded visions Nicola comes to know the minute, hour, and date of her death, as well as how it will be carried out—murder, involving a car, a car-tool and a dead-end street. Yet Nicola does not know who the murderer will be. She knows the certain end of her life's story, but she does not know how her life will arrive at this end—just as she envisions the destruction of London by bombs without knowing how that end will be achieved. Her vision, ultimately, is one of her own mortality coupled together with the end of the world. Entering the Black Cross one afternoon, Nicola encounters Keith Talent, a kind of over-grown Dickensian street urchin, a professional cheat and darts champion. Later that afternoon Nicola writes in her diaries, for the last time before throwing them away, that she has found her murderer: “I've found him. On the Portobello Road, in a place called the Black Cross, I found him” (*London Fields* 22).