

## **“You didn’t set me up. Did you?” Genre, Authorship and Absence in Martin Amis’s *London Fields* and *Night Train***

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Martin Amis is not only a satirist whose use of genre self-evidently signals a desire to communicate with his readership, but also a writer who is immensely preoccupied, in his work, with genre and generic expectations as a precondition to the social and aesthetic functions of literature. Indeed, David Duff introduces his collection of *Modern Genre Theory* with an Amis quotation: “I am a comic writer. You have to submit to the huge power of the genre you are in. Genre really does determine outcomes” (Duff 1). In one of his most ambitious novels, *The Information* (1995), Amis has the narrator reflect on the paradigmatic nature of genre: “The four seasons are meant to correspond to the four principal literary genres. [...] We keep waiting for something to go wrong with the seasons. But something has already gone wrong with the genres. They have all bled into one another. Decorum is no longer observed” (52-53). Like many of Amis’s previous and later works, *The Information* can be read as a sustained meditation on the adequacy of literature as a genre or cognitive frame for making sense of life in postmodernity. In the following, we discuss two of his novels that broach the subjects of authorship or agency and the place of literature in contemporary culture through the device of absent figures whose belatedly revealed authorial function results in surprise endings.<sup>1</sup>

In *London Fields* (1989) and *Night Train* (1997), readers only realize at the very end of the respective novel that a previously unsuspected and physically absent authorial figure has been pulling the strings of the narrative throughout: In *London Fields*, the ostensibly insignificant writer Mark Asprey is suggested to have decisively manipulated the plot and potentially to have revised the very text of the novel; in *Night Train*, suicide Jennifer Rockwell turns out to have planted a series of leads that narrator Mike ultimately realizes to be false. Why, we ask, should these absent figures be attributed with authorial functions, how is their absence in the novels constructed and maintained, and how does their shadowy presence impose on the novels’ plots and themes? We argue that their absence, conspicuous only at second reading, constitutes a narrative strategy that disappoints conventional generic expectations and makes readers realize as much, prompting them to reflect on the nature of such expectations or hypotheses formed during the process of reading. Ultimately, such metaleptictrespassing against the separation of diegetic levels prompts reflections about the mimetic potential of the novel as a genre, and about the

epistemological and ontological status of fiction. In the context of the present issue on genre, our contribution aims to demonstrate how Amis's 'disappearing acts' negotiate the relationship between genre and authorship in the postmodern novel as a means of presenting the genre's abiding power to reflect on (late twentieth-century simulacral conceptions of) reality by trespassing against (traditional) realism. For these novels, Mary Louise Pratt's assessment of deviance against the rules of literary discourse holds true, since their purposeful disturbance of diegetic levels and narrative convention "amounts to a declaration of war on the unmarked narrative and literary norms the novel presupposes and on the interpretation of experience which those norms have been used to affirm in our culture" (Pratt 222).

Absence, according to Anke Grutuschus and Peter Krilles, may be conceived of in two ways: on the one hand, it signifies a transcendental void, while on the other, the presence-in-absence of that which is not there may hint at a hidden ontological plenitude, undiscovered but the more alluring for that. If absence is viewed in the first way, they suggest, all human cultural activity can be seen as an effort, never entirely successful, at overcoming this fundamental absence and filling the void (9). We might add that by the second approach, too, art, and literature as verbal art in particular, fulfills the function of surmounting absence in pursuit of *that which is absent*. The very process of linguistic signification, and more overtly of improper language, is one of overcoming absence, of 'presencing' something that is not here. In verbal art, the delight in language is the delight in summoning that which is not present otherwise, whether this be ideas, emotions, experiences, ways of looking at the world. For Jacques Derrida, modern criticism and aesthetics are predicated on the "absence and haunting of the divine sign" and meaning only comes into its own by "being said or written."<sup>2</sup> If the actualization of meaning is effected through writing, then the figure of the literary author as 'creator' becomes, willy-nilly and always already, a problematic instance caught between presence, absence, and agency, who comes to figure for the very foundations of literature and literary meaning itself. Indeed, it has been said that "the 'crisis' of literary criticism and theory, the crisis that literary studies just *is*, just has to be, revolves around the question of what an 'author' is" (Bennett 123). By reference to Foucault's 'author function', Peter Lamarque explains the intimate relationship between literature as an 'authored-text' and the concept of the author:

*An authored-text is one that is subject to interpretation, constrained in its meaning, exhibiting unity and coherence, and located in a system of values. [... These] qualities [...] are institutionally based, i.e., part of the conception of literature, and not individually based, i.e., formulated in terms of individual psychological attitudes. There is no need to see the constraints on interpretation, nor the source of unity and coherence, nor the criteria of value, as directly attributable to an individual (the author-as-person). Literary works have authors, of course; they are the product of a creative act (a real act from a real agent) but the constraints on interpretation, and the determination of coherence and value, that serve to characterize the literary work, are independent of the individual author's will. (Lamarque 111, emphasis in the original)*

According to this view, literature relies on institutionalization for its hyper-protection of the cooperative principle, i.e., the implicit contract between author and reader that a given text is 'worthwhile' reading in a certain way (cf. Pratt 215). 'Authored-ness' can be said

to be a necessary and constitutive feature for this contract to be concluded – the figure of the author vouches for a given text’s literary value. Based on this assumption, readers are entitled to a number of hypotheses related to the qualities of interpretability, meaning-constraint, unity and coherence, and located-ness within a system of values. These qualities form the basis of a frame of expectations a contemporary reader would hold towards a ‘literary’ text, and the frame constitutes a set of rules that is independent of the author-as-person. Moreover, few would now debate that a text’s meanings, unity and coherence, and its relation to a given system of values, are as much ‘produced’ by readers as they are ‘found’ in a text. Hence, while the ‘presence’ of the author in their text is an undeniable (not least, commercial) fact, their simultaneous ‘absence’ in terms of authority over their text is no less recognized. It would be wrong to treat this marginalization or even exorcism of the author as a recent development, because “since at least the late eighteenth century, writers and critics have almost obsessively dwelled on the complex interaction of authorial presence and absence, on the way that the *centrality* of the author is bound up with, is caused by and a cause of, his or her *marginality*, that authorship indeed is in thrall to the apparitional” (Bennett 66). The figure of the author is, in this tradition, luminal by definition, always suspended between absence and presence, and literary author figures thus epitomize the crucial question after the border between fiction and reality that is constituted by genre.

*Amis’s London Fields and Night Train*, we argue, explicate and problematize their own status as fictions in surprise endings, in which the texts propose that contrary to reader expectations, hitherto ‘absent’ characters have exerted authorial influence over them (the texts and hence, also the readers). In describing this effect of genre, we make use of the ‘text continuum’ concept as defined by Benjamin Harshav (179).<sup>3</sup> This concept from the field of cognitive linguistics is useful to us since it draws together the notions of sequentiality and of reader expectations, both of which are crucial to the phenomenon we examine. As Harshav and others have shown, literary texts present readers with a linear continuum from which patterns (e.g., plots) are constructed as the reading progresses. Menakhem Perry points out:

The effects of the entire reading process all contribute to the meaning of the work: its surprises; the changes along the way; the process of a gradual, zig-zag-like build-up of meanings, their reinforcement, development, revision and replacement; the relations between expectations aroused at one stage of the text and discoveries actually made in subsequent stages; the process of retrospective re-patterning and even the peculiar survival of meanings which were first constructed and then rejected. (41)

This integration of previously held but discarded frames into the current frame, and the persistence of certain other frames, may be attributed to “two quasi-organic instincts” of each given frame:

It tries to protect itself, and it tries to maximize its scope. Both of these instincts save it from being discarded at the earliest appearance of exceptional or irregular data. In addition, admitting excuses, modifications, and perhaps also some judicious bending of low-level conditions ensures that a frame correctly adapts to new, idiosyncratic, and unusual situations. However, if the data persistently fail to match a frame’s essential conditions, if the frame appears to be “basically wrong” and its interpretation of the data exotic or suspect, then a “replacement frame” must be

tried. Since a replacement frame, like an initial frame, will also strive to protect itself and maximize its scope, it will attempt a retrospective re-analysis. (Jahn 457)

Narratives establish frames of readerly expectations about the text (about the rules that govern it, both in form and content, and about its ontological status), then proceed to differ from these expectations. As long as the difference is tolerable, the currently held hypothesis will integrate new material; when the difference becomes too great, a new hypothesis needs to be formed. It is a feature of narrative fictions that previously held and then discarded frames still form part of the aesthetic experience of reading. The ‘final’ hypothesis readers arrive at in the end is not the “whole truth” – or only if it is viewed as part of a process. Anyone who has ever had a novel or film spoiled for them by having been told the surprise ending beforehand will appreciate that knowledge of the ‘final’ frame is far different from the experience of arriving at this frame by the cognitive and aesthetic process of integrating, rejecting and negotiating previous frames. It is obvious that here, too, the notion of “presence-in-absence” comes to the fore: discarded frames linger on as part of the aesthetic experience; they may have been replaced, but they do not disappear and are rather put under erasure by the replacement frame. Genre is an obvious and pertinent instance of frames and their utility in the reading process, and for their curious existence between presence and absence.<sup>4</sup>

The curious status of the generic frame or “re-mark” negotiating between a particular text and its genre is described by Derrida as “absolutely necessary for and constitutive of what we call art, poetry, or literature” (“Law” 64). In this respect, it is similar to authoredness, and by this analogy, authorial absence and agency can come to figure for genre and vice versa. Novels like *London Fields* and *Night Train*, both of which go out of their way to activate the generic frame of the detective novel only to disappoint the expectations raised by that frame through the belated revelation of an unsuspected author figure, rely for their aesthetic effectiveness on that very disappointment – readers need to realize that something they deemed present was absent all along, and that some other unexpected and ostensibly absent frame and ‘author’ has been effective and present at the same time.

Thus, the questions of authorship and genre in fiction can be said to revolve around issues of absence and presence, and we will demonstrate how these complexes are fruitfully combined in Amis’s surprise revelations about (ostensibly) absent author figures. On the level of plot, both novels acknowledge absences early on – *Night Train* hinges on the suicide of Jennifer Rockwell, the plot of *London Fields* is enabled by the narrator’s transatlantic exchange of residences with Mark Asprey. In *Night Train*, it is ultimately revealed that throughout the novel, Jennifer fulfilled an authorial function by contriving various fictions about her life and death which are (fatally) found out by the narrator. In *London Fields*, on the other hand, one author figure is revealed to be crucially present in the plot for all their efforts to remain a mere ‘absent’ observer, while an ostensibly absent author figure turns out to be responsible for “the book”, *London Fields*, although the extent of their influence on that text remains elusive. In both novels, then, readers need to negotiate the initially supposed absence of author figures with a presence that is ultimately disclosed. While the previous assumption about their absence remains effective, it also prompts readers to undertake a second reading and find out how the revealed presence is marked or manifested in the text. Such a search for clues is reminiscent, of course, of a frame that is also activated by both novels on the level of generic form, viz., that of the detective novel or

police procedural. However, both novels ultimately frustrate the expectations raised by this frame – and in doing so, challenge the reader to reflect on their expectations and the role of author figures (including, obviously, the empirical author, Amis) in exploiting them for their own reasons. The novels offer not only an absence of authorial finality of meaning, but they acknowledge and parade the lack of *any* authority that would enable such meaning.

## II

Sam, the dying narrator of *London Fields*, sympathizes with Don Quixote at one point in the novel (350). In *Don Quixote*, even at the very beginning of the modern novelistic tradition and in a text that is, like *London Fields*, a parody of genre conventions, Cervantes interpolates a fictive editor, Cide Hamete Benengeli, whose Moorish original he allegedly translates. Like Cervantes, Amis complicates the ontological status of his novel by introducing author and editor figures into the text. What is more, Amis introduces these figures innocuously as characters whose authorial function and (perhaps) influence over the text of *London Fields* is only revealed successively. Ultimately, the novel's ending makes it impossible to say whose 'authority' is reflected in the text.<sup>5</sup> Retrospectively, though importantly not on a first reading, this renders the reader's situation similar to that of the principal narrator, Sam, who feels that he is in "a chamber of mirrors [...], a hell of mirrors" from the very beginning (14).

Switching his flat with a fellow writer, whom he does not know, Samson Young comes to Britain at a time of global crisis and anxiety. In West London, he encounters three people from whom he expects to get the material for a "murder story" – Nicola Six is looking to be murdered, Keith Talent is made out to be her killer, and Guy Clinch the 'fall guy' and money-man. Thanks to an uncanny gift, Nicola is adept at manipulating the men in her 'murder plot': she can see into the immediate future. Sam hopes that by merely recording events as they unfold, he can overcome his inability to create fiction and finish a novel before he himself dies of a mysterious, radiation-related disease. Narrating from the point of view of one of his three characters in each chapter, Sam reports on his own progress, difficulties, and feelings in interchapters narrated from his first-person perspective and addressed directly to the reader. As the novel progresses, Sam becomes increasingly obsessed with his absent host, Mark Asprey, whose writing he despises, although (and also because) it seems to be immensely successful. They communicate in writing only, except for one occasion near the end of the novel, when Asprey phones Sam – and although Asprey never appears in person, he is ultimately suggested to have "set up" Sam, who ends up killing Nicola and then himself, leaving his notes to be destroyed by Asprey. The fact that *London Fields* exists suggests that Asprey does not follow this request but uses the notes to produce the text the reader holds in their hand.

Even from this short survey, it is clear that the text features a number of candidates for 'authorship'. *London Fields* plays with this notion even in the initial paratext, i.e. the textual 'margins': The table of contents is arranged, for the first half of the novel, in groups of three chapters, suggesting authorial or editorial intervention and order, although it also signals that the ordering instance may have lost its ability to impose order in the second half of the novel, which is listed as a solid block of twelve chapters. It is followed by a "Note" signed "M.A., London", in which the signatory states that in their choice of the title, they kept "ironic faith with my narrator, who would have been pleased, no doubt, to remind me that there are two kinds of title – two grades, two orders" (n.p.). Thus, the text makes it

clear that “M.A.” perceives a fundamental difference between themselves and the narrator of *London Fields*. “M.A.” closes on the sentence, “This book is called *London Fields*. *London Fields* ...” – again, the term “book” leaves the question of genre open, but only for another page, where regular pagination begins, suggesting that this passage belongs with the novel proper. It begins with the following statements: “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 [...]” (1).

This narrator seems to be keen on order, on labels, and on truth – and they certainly see themselves as a writer, or author: “What a gift. This page is briefly stained by my tears of gratitude. Novelists don’t usually have it so good, do they, when something real happens (something unified, dramatic and pretty saleable), and they just write it down?” (1). The repeated assertion that they “can’t believe” the facts they state, the parenthetical “I think” and the seemingly open question to the reader suggest uncertainty and unreliability. The reader might, at this point, be forgiven slight confusion. Is the note’s “M.A.” identical with the title page’s “Martin Amis”? Who is the “I” speaking here – “M.A.” or “[their] narrator” mentioned in the note? Chapter 1, listed in the table of contents, does not start until page 4, by which time the reader has learnt that “I” is Sam and exchanging flats with Mark Asprey (2). An alert reader (whom the genre of the murder story calls for) might also notice that Asprey shares the initials M.A. with the author Martin Amis.

By exploiting preconceptions of the ‘common’ functions of paratext, these initial passages create a sense of uncertainty in the reader about ‘who is speaking’. This sense only increases as the novel proceeds, as will become clear in the following. But *London Fields* also undergoes, in the struggle for authority between the characters, a number of contortions that force the reader to adjust their attitude towards the text itself. This is reflected on the level of genre, which Sam initially lays down explicitly, only to immediately qualify this frame: “I have the makings of a snappy little thriller. Original, too, in its way. Not a whodunit. More a whydoit” (3). “Why do it” turns out to be a question the reader will ask at the end, when Sam kills Nicola – and that they probably will not be able to answer. It also remains a question throughout the novel, as both narrator and reader wonder how Keith, whom Sam sets up as Nicola’s murderer, should eventually come to kill her. Narrator and reader need to trust in the authority of Nicola, as the omniscient ‘plotting’ instance, because for all his enthusiasm about the genre fiction that may spring from the events he undertakes to record, Sam is also worried about his own inability to create and to invent. When he reflects on written documents he has received from his “characters”, he calls them “[d]ocumentary evidence” and wonders: “Is that what I’m writing? A documentary? As for artistic talent, as for the imaginative patterning of life, Nicola wins. She outwrites us all” (42-43). Sam here offers the reader a guide (or frame) for reading his book, his own criteria and standards for successful artistic creation: life molded imaginatively into a pattern with “pleasing symmetries”, i.e., events unfolding in a way to suggest coherence and genre compatibility. However, they ostensibly do so without Sam’s intervention in *his* novel: The task of this ‘author’ is merely to be a “queasy cleric” (3). Nicola’s murder story, her plot against herself, already offers unity, drama and appeal, and in admitting to this, Sam here seems to propose her as the ‘true’ author. Against his manifest presence (as a narrator), Nicola is ‘absent’ insofar as she does not put pen to paper any more – her diaries initially provide Sam with background, but now, he is her writing instrument. Sam, however, is also ostensibly absent from the plot that he ‘only’ narrates, while Nicola is ‘present’ as a character throughout.

For all his proximity to Nicola, Sam never seems to gain control over her: she decides on the plot, and her authorial intentions and motivation ultimately remain in the dark for Sam. The generic frame he desires, however, requires that all elements of a story be integrated in it, or at least broadly compatible with it. Imposing it on events as they unfold implies the possibility of a gross misjudgment. As Nicola does not let Sam in fully on her plans, she embodies the absence-in-presence of the literary author; as Sam attempts to interfere with events, his purported 'abs(tin)ence' from the narrated events is hampered (not to mention his large share of the narrative 'outside' the murder plot). Their presence-in-absence and absence-in-presence is also mirrored by the generic frame: both the conventional whodunit and the "original" whydoit genre frames are effective, i.e., present, for most of the text continuum. But significantly, Sam frequently expresses his anxiety about meeting generic requirements, keeping the reader suspicious about the applicability of the generic frame that has been established. Thus, he laments: "The form itself is my enemy. All this damned romance. In fiction (rightly so called), people become coherent and intelligible – and they aren't like that. We all know they aren't" (240). With the final revelation that Asprey may have tampered with the text, the question of genre appears in a new light: if he has revised Sam's manuscript, he would have had the benefit of hindsight, with the opportunity to impose a generic form onto the text that was not evident to its erstwhile 'authors', Sam and Nicola. The text may explicitly suggest it adheres to certain frames (detective story, 'whydoit', documentary), but the ending suggests that these may not be the only alternatives. An unspoken, implicit frame may be effective, or none at all.

We would like to consider one final aspect of presence-in-absence/absence-in-presence in *London Fields*: Nicola's motivation for her death wish, and perhaps for allowing a written document of its realization to be created, remains unspoken and uncertain, although Sam's version of it is clear (and full of dramatic irony on a second reading of the novel):

She welcomed and applauded the death of just about anything. It was company. It meant you weren't quite alone. A dead flower, the disobligng turpidity of dead water, slow to leave the jug. A dead car half-stripped at the side of the street, shot, busted, annulled, abashed. A dead cloud. The Death of the Novel. The Death of Animism, the Death of Naive Reality, the Death of the Argument from Design, and (especially) the Death of the Principle of Least [A]stonishment. The Death of the Planet. The Death of God. The death of love. It was company. (296)

Sam has 'bought' Nicola's explanation to him of her death wish, and he lends it hyperbolic expression here.<sup>6</sup> We should note among the "deaths" Nicola is said to revel in "The Death of the Novel" (introducing a series of capitalized Deaths signifying the death of precious ideas and/or ideals), and the "Death of the Principle of Least Astonishment". The latter death would mean the end of abiding by reasonable expectations – consistency with previous data, experience, or common sense would be done away with in all contexts. Nicola, who allegorically represents the planet throughout the novel, is said not to believe in, or play by, this principle – this marks her exceptional nature as a character but also hints at her unpredictability as an author figure. While she may be in control of the plot and thus, supremely present, there may be no "design" or consistency behind her schemes – she may violate the cooperative principle between author and reader and thus undermine the very foundation of the institution of literature. At a later point, she explains to Sam that she destroyed Asprey's one novel that "was from the heart" and not "the usual trex[sic] he

writes" (453). Sinisterly, at this point, Nicola also points out to Sam that Asprey's case "has certain affinities with your own" (453). Her destruction of Asprey's novel is ultimately revealed to be mirrored in her 'destruction' of Sam's: "She outwrote me. Her story worked. And mine didn't. There's really nothing more to say. [...] Imagination failed me. And all else" (466), Sam reflects after he has murdered Nicola. He deems his attempt at asserting authority over his ostensible character, Nicola, a failure, and puts a final request to Mark Asprey, in writing:

On your desk in the study you will find a full confession. That's all it is now. Perhaps it is also an elegy to the memory of an unfortunate lady, whom you knew. But I can't justify any of it and am indifferent to its destiny. [...] Be my literary executor: throw everything out.[...] PPS: You didn't set me up. Did you? (468)

At this point, the reader is made to realize how the text they are reading is supposed to have been published: Asprey, far from destroying Sam's papers, worked the interchapters into the narrative, thereby rendering Sam's supposed narratorial absence into a character's presence, and also inscribing his own presence onto the narrative through this act of authorial intervention. It is now retrospectively impossible for the reader to tell which passages might have been genuinely Sam's, and which Asprey may have tampered with. In terms of authorship, Asprey is thus introduced, in the novel's final lines, as a 'revisionary' author, with the *extent* of his interventions impossible to identify. Certainly, however, his revisionary work manifests this particular author in the text, affirming his presence: the elusiveness of Asprey's revisions suspends him, and the state of *London Fields* as his work, indefinitely. Amis uses this open ending to establish what may be termed a meta-frame: the reader is left, at the end, with a chain of ultimately irreconcilable hypotheses or frames about *what* the text is in terms of origin/authorship, genre, and ontological status between fiction and reality. The succession of frames held and forcibly revised about each of these constitutes a trial-and-error process that arrives at the *conclusion that no conclusion is possible*, no definite answer can be given. This paradoxical conclusion-of-no-conclusion constitutes the meta-frame: prompted by the incompatibility of frames, the reader is made to reflect on the very notion of generic frames as such.

As readers' expectations about the text's authorship are first raised by Sam's frequent self-reflexive commentary and then thwarted, readers recognize the very notion of authorship and the authored-text as problematic. The concept of the authored-text guarantees, supposedly, unity and coherence of meaning and a fixed system of values the work can be located in. As *London Fields* playfully proposes more than one author figure for its own genesis, it breaks the boundaries circumscribed by the author function – the reader is tasked with providing their own coherence and values, if they decide they need them. Thus, they are made to realize that what order and values they find in the text are, like all candidates for authorship, both present and absent – instead of the exegetical reading desired by traditional hermeneutics, they are eisegetically 'read into' the text from scant hints at their nature, and other readers may instill the text with another authorship, teleology, and meaning. The liminal status of authors as present-in-absence and absent-in-presence is foregrounded and shown to be crucial to the way we read literature.

Finally, one point emerges from all three aspects discussed in this section: the author figures oscillating between various forms of absence and presence, the novel's failure to abide by a consistent generic frame and its related dubious ontological status all contribute

to a 'making strange' between reader and fictional world – an estrangement effect that, according to Peter Widdowson, would fulfill the most crucial function of literature: “[... T]he ‘special’ function of ‘the literary’ – that which distinguishes it from other kinds of cultural production – does indeed seem to lie in its formal ‘making’ of newly perceptible ‘poetic realities’, in its textualised defamiliarising ‘moments of vision’, and in the ‘patterns’ or ‘sense of subject’ ‘knowably’ inscribed in its linguistic texture” (119). The meta-frame arrived at through a reading of *London Fields* and the frequent disappointment of readerly expectations and frame revisions is marked by general distrust against expectations – perhaps, it is similar to the “Death of the Principle of Least Astonishment” Nicola welcomes: freed from the limiting concept of authorship, literature may hold in store surprising things. The poetic reality is made by readers as much as by authors, with all the moral implications this has for the reader.

### III

While Amis’s significantly shorter novel *Night Train* (1997) avails itself of similar strategies in terms of forcing the reader to revise their interpretive frames throughout their reading, it does so within a more narrowly defined scope and with a somewhat different outcome. *Night Train* purports to consist of the case notes of Detective Mike Hoolihan, a female police officer in an undisclosed (or rather, generic) American city. Mike is called upon by her mentor and superior officer, Colonel Tom Rockwell, to investigate the death of his daughter Jennifer. Given this constellation, *Night Train* is immediately informed by a strong absence (that of Jennifer), endowed with an author figure (that of Mike, a highly self-conscious first-person narrator), and set up as a text of a certain genre (that of the police procedural). It is these three factors that are instrumental in determining the interpretive frame the reader follows right from the start and continues to follow even when the first complications arise. Before we turn to the sequentiality of the novel in order to follow the various permutations of interpretive frames at work, though, Mike’s authorial function within *Night Train* warrants closer inspection.

As has already been pointed out, Mike’s case notes – meticulously dated throughout the investigation – form the basis of the novel’s text, and they convey a sense of solidity: here are the undeniable facts and their interpretation at the hands of an experienced professional. Mike herself seems particularly convinced of her qualities as a writer: “My paperwork was outstanding. When I came to CID from the Southern everybody expected my reports to be district quality. But they were downtown quality, right from the start . . . . ‘Compared to what you guys give me to read,’ pronounced Detective Sergeant Henrik Overmars, brandishing my report at the whole squad, ‘this is fucking oratory. It’s goddamn Cicero versus Robespierre’” (3-4). Gradually, and very subtly, though, Mike’s authority is undermined by her own writing. When she creates smaller fictions in the process of interrogating witnesses, for instance, she is not always successful (55-56). More tellingly, though, her supposedly objective case notes are interspersed with personal reminiscences, considerations of her current relationship status and even direct addresses to the woman whose death she is supposed to investigate (59, 143). Finally, a close reading of the text will reveal the occasional self-contradiction, as is the case when, on two separate occasions, she refers to an event in the past, citing widely discrepant dates (21, 60).

As these brief observations of her status as an author figure show, Mike’s authority and reliability are undermined in the course of the novel. However, this is never done to a

degree that would force the reader to relinquish their current interpretive frame in favor of an entirely new set of propositions. These hints at general questions of reliability and authority rather serve as a subtext to remind the reader in the course of a second reading that all was not as it seemed right from the start. The real discontinuity in terms of interpretive frames is created not by any relatively superficial flaws in Mike's notes but in a threefold movement exemplified by the three chapters constituting *Night Train*.

In the first part, entitled "Blowback", the mystery is that of the question of whether or not Jennifer died by her own hand. Though the police officers involved in the brief investigation seem to be convinced that this is the case, there are two main aspects calling their conclusion into question. First of all, Jennifer has died from three shots to the head – an unusual though not entirely unheard-of circumstance for a suicide in the novel's stark world. Secondly, and perhaps most significantly, there are no discernible motives for such an action on her part. An inordinately healthy, beautiful, intelligent and successful woman in a loving relationship and from a stable, happy family background, Jennifer simply does not seem to tick any of the boxes usually associated with suicide. "Blowback" thus takes up the idea of the "whydoit" already portrayed in *London Fields* and as such is primarily concerned with the hunt for a missing motive, the absence of which would appear to be the main obstacle in the successful integration of the entire chapter into the reader's interpretive frame. The opportunity for integration is tentatively provided at the end of the chapter, when the coroner returns a verdict of "Undetermined" (60), which is given as a concession to the wishes of Jennifer's father. All those involved in the case do, however, accept that it was suicide and the toxicology report – suppressed by Jennifer's father but revealed to Mike by her mother – bears this out by attesting to Jennifer's consumption of lithium carbonate, a mood stabilizer used in the treatment of manic depression.

Having discovered their daughter's use of the drug, Jennifer's parents can finally come to terms with her suicide, but are now faced with a different problem: "See, Mike, we were looking for a why. And I guess we found one. But suddenly we don't have a who. Who was she, Mike?" (64). So Mike starts to investigate Jennifer's life more closely in the novel's second chapter, "*Felo de se*." Having been provided with a sense of closure for the questions asked in the first chapter, the reader can now confidently address a new set of questions, the answers to which they will expect to be able to square with their extant interpretive frame, never suspecting that the new set of propositions brought forth in the second and third chapters will eventually force them to abandon their presuppositions altogether.

While the problem portrayed in most of "Blowback" is that of a lack of motive, "*Felo de se*" soon confronts both Mike and the reader with an overabundance of possible motives, as Mike discovers surprising evidence of all manner of problems in Jennifer's life: first of all, while it has already become known that there was a mood stabilizer in Jennifer's bloodstream at the time of her death, a visit to her physician reveals that she must have been self-medicating (74). Next, Mike finds an appointment with a mysterious "AD" in Jennifer's diary (82), who turns out to be Arn Debs, a man that – despite her apparently happy relationship with her partner – Jennifer was to have a rendezvous with. After this, Mike discovers that in the week before her death, Jennifer made a colossal mistake at work for the very first time (97). And finally, Trader Faulkner, Jennifer's significant other, reveals that shortly before her death, Jennifer started buying "paintings. Real crap, too" (115).

With this picture of an unstable and far from happy mind firmly established, what emerges in the reader's mind is the idea of an easy causality: Jennifer was on drugs, therefore she was suicidal. Jennifer was having an affair, therefore her relationship cannot have been a happy one. Against her normal instincts, Jennifer was buying tacky art, therefore her mind must have been unbalanced, and so on. As the reader laps up these clues throughout the novel's second chapter, Mike, too, can be seen at her least perceptive, a fact succinctly adumbrated in the waiting room of Jennifer's doctor, where she finds herself sitting "in the narrow corridor, like a patient, with an ear-sufferer on one side of me and a throat-sufferer on the other" (72). As it turns out, all the leads Mike follows in "*Felo de se*" are entirely false. And there would have been clues to discover this much sooner, had either Mike or the reader been inclined to notice them. Thus, for instance, all Jennifer's tasteless pictures were paid for with checks post-dated to April Fools' Day (116) while her date with Arn Debs was set up in the Mallard, an upmarket hotel whose bar is called the Decoy Room.

Having thus failed to bring her own authorial activities to any satisfactory conclusion, Mike finally manages to make sense of the entire case by means of *Making Sense of Suicide*, a (fictive) self-help book Jennifer owned. This is mentioned intermittently throughout *Night Train* but only closely inspected by Mike at the beginning of the novel's concluding chapter, "The Seeing". *Making Sense of Suicide* is at first judged by Mike to be a trivial book full of commonplaces and singularly unhelpful advice such as "In bereavement, make yourself better, not bitter" (134). But when she begins to inspect Jennifer's notes in the margins of the book, it dawns on her that, while *Making Sense of Suicide* "doesn't make sense of anything much, including suicide" (133), it could be read – and was read – as a script by Jennifer. "[T]he suicidal person will give warnings and clues as to his, or her, suicidal intentions" (134), the self-help book points out, and Mike comes to realize that this is exactly what Jennifer did – albeit consciously and deliberately: "As she headed toward death she imprinted a pattern that she thought would solace the living. A pattern: Something often seen before. Jennifer left clues. But the clues were all blinds" (145). Jennifer, it now appears, staged a comprehensible fiction regarding her motive in order to spare her nearest and dearest the pain of having to live without a rational explanation for her suicide. In order to come to terms with her death and in order to continue their lives, they need to believe that there is a 'good,' i.e. a rationally comprehensible reason for her deed, and this is what she tried to provide in the weeks leading up to her suicide.

After the question of the way in which Jennifer died negotiated in "Blowback" and the conspicuously successful hunt for a motive in "*Felo de se*," "The Seeing" comes to the conclusion that Jennifer Rockwell's suicide simply cannot be explained or made comprehensible to those around her. As a conclusion to a highly complex work of fiction and as a single-sentence paraphrase of *Night Train's* overall meaning, this may appear a somewhat trite statement, and it certainly fails to bear out any of the interpretive frames the reader may have developed in the course of the novel. As a means of presenting the inexplicability and incomprehensibility of suicide, however, the novel's strategy of disappointing readerly expectations and of undermining our faith in any apparently solid truths and rational explanation in the face of complex questions is second to none. Moreover, while the relative unreliability of Mike as a purported author figure and the expectations engendered by the given genre (cf. Oertel 132-135) both have their part to play in this project, it is first and foremost the retrospectively realized absence of Jennifer as an author figure that establishes the epistemological argument of *Night Train*.

As long as Jennifer's absence is seen as a simple case of death and mourning, and as long as her motives are to be thought of as transparent and comprehensible, Mike holds sole responsibility as an author figure within the novel, and Mike's interpretation of events is the reader's only guide to the world of *Night Train*. Even though Mike frequently reflects on the unreliability of mediated facts (and in this context, her caustic comments on events depicted on television and "real" police work are particularly illuminating: 6, 17-19, 107-108, 128, 139-140), she is incapable of entertaining the notion that her own status as an author figure raises those exact same questions. Once the reader discovers the hand Jennifer had in all of this, the elaborate trail of false leads she has left behind, Mike's account immediately loses all authority as an investigation into Jennifer's suicide and becomes instead a simple record of Mike's inability to see beyond the superficial. As Jennifer's boss tells Mike, she is simply another "resident of the naked-eye universe" (90), incapable of discerning complex truths.

The authority Mike loses as an author figure in the course of *Night Train* is then bestowed upon Jennifer. After all, the only thing Mike does in the novel is go along with a fiction carefully crafted by Jennifer before her death. While Jennifer may not be conspicuous as an author in the sense of a writer, she is very much the first cause of everything that happens in *Night Train*, and a second reading will reveal a number of instances in which the presence of her absence as a determining force is hinted at. This extends from a general observation on her generosity ("Jennifer would always leave you with something," 39) to the eerie sensation Mike has at the beginning of "*Felo de se*": "Now I feel that someone is inside of me, like an intruder, her flashlight playing. Jennifer Rockwell is inside of me, trying to reveal what I don't want to see" (67). In substituting the one author figure for another, *Night Train* does of course go out of its way to make explicit a feature implicitly negotiated by all novels: the simultaneous absence and presence of the author. In contrast to *London Fields*, however, it exploits this phenomenon to focus on the relatively concrete and specific question of in how far a suicide's real motives can ever be comprehended by those they leave behind. It negotiates this question by creating two distinct levels of meaning. The one is that of the easily comprehensible fiction created by Jennifer. In this, Jennifer creates a story that seems to adhere to Lamarque's idea of the authored-text to a debilitating degree: It is "constrained in its meaning, exhibiting unity and coherence, and located in a system of values." Significantly, though, it is entirely univocal: contrary to the first and foremost of Lamarque's criteria, it fails to be "subject to interpretation," and as such loses all credibility as a reflection of the complexities of life (111). This is the story that both Mike and the reader follow for the majority of the novel. As difficult as it may seem having to discard this particular version of events, the reader's task becomes even harder when this interpretive frame comes to be replaced by one that emphatically defies generic conventions and readerly expectations. After all, the second level of meaning intimates that there is no definitive truth, no certain way of knowing and – most of all – comprehending why Jennifer chose to end her own life.

It is in the interplay between these two levels of meaning, in the replacement of one by the other, while the memory of the first still lingers on, that *Night Train* comes into its own. Most significantly in the context of our argument, however, neither of these levels of meaning could have existed without the conspicuous absence of Jennifer from the text, or rather, her hidden and unsuspected presence as an author figure within the text.

#### IV

Both *London Fields* and *Night Train* make conspicuous use of absent author figures that turn out to have exerted their considerable influence on the plot of these novels from 'outside' or 'beyond'. Both novels thus negotiate questions of authorship and authorial finality of meaning, either giving the reader a choice of the meaning they wish to accept (in *London Fields*) or even confronting them with the notion that the only meaning worth accepting is one that is so contrary to their inclinations that they might feel tempted to reject it on those grounds alone (in *Night Train*). The basic strategy underlying the formulation of these epistemological questions is the same in both novels, as readers are forced to successively apply and discard various interpretive frames. While questions of authorship and authorial presence are formulated more or less blatantly in both novels, it is in their concluding frames that a previously absent author figure is revealed to have had a decisive influence on the development of the plot, and on its final meaning, all along. As both Mark Asprey's exploits and Jennifer's plot are shown to have commenced before the beginning of the respective novel, their revelation at the end serves to establish a temporal frame around *London Fields* in the one case and *Night Train* in the other, so that there simply is no conceivable way of reading these books without paying careful attention to the purported absence of these two author figures. In their different ways, both novels thus self-consciously reflect on the importance of authorial agency in the production of meaning, but they also bring home the importance of the reader's involvement – an involvement with the text, of course, but also an involvement with the immense number of other texts that have an impact on the interpretive frames we call genres. These other texts and other frames are summoned by the novels' various author figures, and the act of frame revision that is foregrounded highlights the importance of genre for understanding.

By rendering their readers aware of the role of genre and generic expectations for the production of meaning, the two novels valorize genre and its epistemological function at the same time as they parade the abuses it is made to perform at the hands of their 'absent' author figures. In this way, Amis foregrounds the precarious manner in which genre, as a social convention, is predicated on assumptions about the cooperative principle. If this convention is trespassed against in fiction, as it is in both novels discussed here, such violations entail a sense of disorientation and helplessness on the part of the reader which extends far beyond the 'merely' generic. They suggest, rather, the troubled state of epistemology and ontology frequently identified as characteristic of postmodern fiction (e.g., McHale 11). However, by highlighting the paradigmatic nature of fiction and fiction's generic frames for the way we get our hermeneutic bearing in the world, they also valorize the particular role of literature in this project and the role of the author figure. As the literary text can be relied on to signify on the basis of the 'hyperprotected cooperative principle' guaranteed by its authoredness, it functions as a 'sandbox' which allows for explorations in the mode of the 'as-if' that would not be possible outside of literature:

Our knowledge that the CP [cooperative principle] is hyperprotected in works of literature acts as a guarantee that, should the fictional speaker of the work break the rules and thereby jeopardize the CP, the jeopardy is almost certainly only mimetic. Ultimately, the CP can be restored by implicature. Given such a guarantee, the Audience [sic] is free to confront, explore, and interpret the communicative breakdown and to enjoy the display of the forbidden. (Pratt 215)

Outside of literature, these novels suggest, the absence of an author-figure that would guarantee the protection of the cooperative principle, such freedom is unavailable. That is a lament, of course, but also a celebration of the liberating power of fiction and of the power of genre to facilitate literary communication from which such liberation can result.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On the topic of authorship and writing as a permanent concern in Amis's writing, see Maczynska.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida writes: "To write is [...] to know that the Book does not exist and that forever there are books, against which the meaning of the world not conceived by an absolute subject is shattered, before it has even become a unique meaning [...]. This lost certainty, this absence of divine writing does not solely and vaguely define something like 'modernity'. As the absence and haunting of the divine sign, it regulates all modern criticism and aesthetics. [...] To write] is also to be incapable of making meaning absolutely precede writing: it is thus to lower meaning while simultaneously elevating inscription. [...] Meaning must await being said or written in order to inhabit itself, and in order to become, by differing from itself, what it is: meaning" (*Writing* 10–11).

<sup>3</sup> As Stephen Greenblatt observes, the sequential nature of the reading experience and its psychological effect is registered already by Reformation theologians such as William Tyndale (103-104). Cf. also Perry and Jahn. Oertel also applies the notion of frames to his instructive reading of two Amis novels, one of which is *Night Train*. Since Oertel's essay investigates this novel solely in terms of interpretive frames as a response to a given genre and stops short of discussing aspects of literary absence, it seems well worth reconsidering *Night Train* under this aspect in the present essay.

<sup>4</sup> Thus, John Frow defines "frame" in the context of genre as "[a] metaphor drawn from the material frame surrounding a picture to designate the boundary surrounding and organising any limited piece of information. The frame in this sense gives structure to the delimited text and at the same time situates it in meaningful relation to a context which is other than the text. *The frame is thus both a part of the text and other than it*, ambiguously mediating and defining an inside and an outside" (147, emphasis added).

<sup>5</sup> Apart, of course, from Martin Amis as what we will here call the 'empirical author'. The following discussion of authority over the text of *London Fields* always refers to the author figures *within* the text, unless otherwise noted. Also note that while the novel refuses to commit to one version of its origin, the empirical author did not. In an interview with BBC Radio 4, Amis summed up the process that is hinted at in the novel: "What's happened is that Mark Asprey has come back to the flat, found the novel, and found the intervening material, which is the narrator's little chapters between the chapters, stitched it all together, and brought it out under the name of Martin Amis" (quoted, Diedrick 263). The logical and terminological shortcomings of this 'explanation' alone invite a closer examination such as the one we intend to pursue in the following.

<sup>6</sup> On the level of the novel's 'author-reader' imagery, this of course constitutes an act of misreading on Sam's part – he reads Nicola's signs incorrectly, but he may have been intentionally misled by his author figure, whose 'true' intentions are never revealed, and perhaps unspeakable. They might thus gesture towards a 'transcendental void', and Sam's, albeit nihilistic, literary rendition of it would remain a touching effort at expressing the inexpressible.

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