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Review

**Martin Amis, *Lionel Asbo: State of England*
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Reviewed by

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'Boys like you [...] *They never learn*' (252, Amis's italics). These words, addressed to Lionel Asbo, the title character of Martin Amis's thirteenth novel, might still apply to Amis himself. Around the Millennium, after the publication of *Night Train* (1997) with its female narrator, and the autobiography *Experience* (2000), with its exploration of family traumas, it could have seemed that Amis was learning to be a different kind of writer, who would combine his stylistic energies with a humane, sensitive and mature vision that would earn him widespread acclaim and a long-deferred Booker Prize. Ian McEwan, ever the proficient creative writing student, showed how it could be done, and even, perhaps inadvertently, symbolised it in *Saturday* (2004), summoning the spectre of Matthew Arnold to disarm his former self, the knife-wielding, seemingly degenerate invader of the privileged hearth. But Amis did not go in that direction. His next novel, *Yellow Dog* (2003), looked like an uncompromising declaration that he was not going to mellow but would become more rebarbative and convoluted. *House of Meetings* (2006) focused unsparingly on the brutalities of the Gulag. *The Pregnant Widow* (2010) came trailing clouds of publicity that seemed to announce an attempt to deal with deeply personal and painful material in his fiction but veered again into excess and caricature. Amis has remained unassimilable, and his latest novel still stays beyond the pale. But there are attempts to negotiate a re-entry.

The main title of *Lionel Asbo* is misleading insofar as it suggests that the focus will be on Lionel. In fact he is counterpointed by another figure, his ward and nephew Desmond (Des) Pepperdine, the main viewpoint character in the first, third, and fourth and final parts of the book, and the rather fragile vehicle of Amis's re-entry strategy. When the novel opens in 2006, Lionel is 'a heavily-weathered' twenty-one (9), Desmond fifteen; they share Lionel's flat on the thirty-third floor of the Avalon Tower in Diston, a dysfunctional, dystopian area of London, the first syllable of whose name is that of the city in Dante's *Inferno* where the lower circles of hell are located. Diston has low life expectancy and a high fertility rate, the worst hospital in England and a school, Squeers Free, that 'set the standard for the most police call-outs, the least GCSE passes, and the

highest truancy rates' (19) and sounds like an excursion into Michael Gove's worst nightmares.

In appearance, Lionel is 'brutally generic – the slablike body, the full lump of the face, the tight-shaved crown with its tawny stubble' (6), with front teeth that are 'white and square, but so broadly spaced that you thought of a cut-out pumpkin on Halloween' (59). He is the youngest son of a mother who first fell pregnant at the age of twelve and who, by the age of nineteen, had seven children, the first named after Cilla Black and the subsequent ones after the Beatles (including Stuart Sutcliffe, the 'fifth Beatle' who died before the group rose to fame). Lionel himself is named after Lionel Blair, the choreographer and dancer, but his forename also ironically invokes the British lion, transformed into a monstrous embodiment of antisocial behaviour; his successive duos of psychopathic pit bull terriers – Joe and Jeff, then Joel and Jon, then Jek and Jak – are debased canine incarnations of John Bull, packed with menace.

Lionel, an early starter, was 'pronounced "uncontrollable" at the age of eighteen months' (20) and served his first Directive at the age of three for smashing car windscreens with paving stones. He spent five and a half years, on and off, in a YOI (Young Offender Institution) and changed his surname to 'Asbo' by deed poll on his eighteenth birthday. He works mainly as a debt collector at the roughest end of the market; he has most often been imprisoned for 'Extortion with Menaces and Receiving Stolen Property' (42). Rather too much is made of his distinctive pronunciations: 'Cymfia' for 'Cynthia' (8); 'miff' for 'myth' (15); 'hypoffesis' for 'hypothesis' (17); 'truc-kuh (with a glottal stop on the terminal plosive)' for 'truck' (17); '[t]hick-uh' for 'thick' (18); and 'labyrinf' (a modest improvement on 'labryimf') for 'labyrinth' (43). Although it is supposed to be Des who is registering these locutions, as a sign of his growing command of the English language, they seem more like the affronted responses of a pedantic English master at a 1950s grammar school.

Des is undoubtedly, however, a different matter from Lionel – indeed, he is close to the sensitive young protagonist of a *Bildungsroman*. He is of mixed race – his father was a Trinidadian whom his mother saw only twice, and whom she thinks was called Edwin. He is haunted by the image of the fall that preceded his mother's death, which happened when he was ten. She slipped on the supermarket floor and struck her head but at first seemed to be all right, getting up and laughing. But the next day she was in a coma and then died. Desmond especially recalls the phrase in the autopsy report: '*massive insult to the brain*' (62, Amis's italics). The motif of head injury, prominent in *Yellow Dog*, recurs here. It was after Cilla's death that Lionel became his guardian, functioning as 'a kind of anti-dad or counterfather' who offers encouragement to crime and vice rather than trying to prohibit it (22). But Desmond is not inclined to follow Lionel's directions. Desmond has a good brain, a legacy, he believes, from his grandfather, Dominic Oldham, who became an economics student at Manchester University. A desire for learning awakens in Desmond as he grows up, taking him first to the Public Library, then to success at school, and finally to a university.

There are four main intertwining plots in *Lionel Asbo*. One is an incest-revenge plot, an updated version of a key element of Jacobean drama, a mode to which some of Amis's most striking fiction comes close. The epigraphs of the first, second and third parts of the novel, and the title and some of the dialogue of the fourth, draw on the refrain of the song made famous by the Baha Men: 'Who let the dogs out?'. But Amis changes 'out' to 'in', and this links up with the implication that it is the inward-looking, darkly intimate act of incest that let the dogs in, which released the forces of savagery that have to be worked through before order can be restored. At the age of fifteen, Des is seduced by his 39-year-old grandmother, Grace, who, after telling him their sexual relationship must end, apparently takes up with a younger schoolboy, Rory Nightingale. When Lionel finds out about Rory, he disposes of him – the precise means are unspecified, but he hands

over to Des a 'metal loop smeared with dried blood and an additional gout of pink tissue. Rory's lip ring' (55). Des feels guilty about Rory and his own incestuous transgression; Lionel hints on a couple of occasions that he suspects it. Grace is stricken with early onset dementia and Lionel puts her in a distant home, but in a lucid phase near her death she confirms Lionel's suspicions about Des, spurring Lionel to revenge.

The second plot strand in *Lionel Asbo* is that in which riches and fame come suddenly to a man who is ill-equipped to cope with them. In 2009, while he is in Wormwood Scrubs as a result of sparking an affray at the wedding of Marlon Welkway, his supposed best friend and rival in love, Lionel learns he has won almost 140 million pounds in the National Lottery (though it was Des who filled in the numbers). The *Sun* dubs Lionel a 'Lotto Lout' (81). Released from prison, his wild activities quickly put him back behind bars. When he is let out again, he starts a well-publicised relationship with a glamour celebrity, Sue Ryan, a 29-year-old 'poetess' who styles herself 'Threnody' – she is particular about the inverted commas – and who is famous for her expensively reconstructed breasts, first revealed the previous year, which are 'more like pottery than flesh, and pointing *upward*' (147, Amis's italics). When 'Threnody' complains that her rival, Danube, is getting more publicity than she is, Des suggests this is because Danube has children – she has been 'Celebrity Mum of the Year' – and 'Threnody' tells Lionel that she must have a baby right away (162).

The third plot in *Lionel Asbo* is the plot of upward mobility, as Des rises from his origins in a criminal and sexually licentious subculture to professional success, even if of a dubious kind, as a *Daily Mirror* reporter and to the start of a settled life as a husband and father. His paternal role feeds into the fourth main plot of the novel, the procreative plot and the idea of the redemptive child, which has a long literary currency and has been prominent in Amis's own work since *London Fields* (1989). Once they have graduated, Des and his fellow-student Dawn have a baby daughter whom they call Cilla, after Des's mother. Though born prematurely, and provoking in Des an initial sense of 'horror at the thing-alive beneath its dome of deep glass' (216), Cilla survives, awakens her father's love, and flourishes. Characteristically in Amis's handling of procreative matters, however, more attention is paid to the man than the woman; the focus is mainly on Des's proxy experiences of the pangs and pleasures of pregnancy and on his initial failure to bond that finally melts – or explodes – into a loving response. It is as if Amis were saying: 'Parturition? No problem' – at least for women. In contrast to Dawn, 'Threnody' has a miscarriage, but this is handled lightly and indeed it is suggested that she may have had an abortion to exploit the publicity potential of losing a baby and as an exit strategy to enable her to escape from Lionel.

The procreation and incest-revenge plots mesh most strongly near the end of the novel when Lionel, having confirmed Des's incest with Grace, tries to take revenge, by proxy, by arranging for his latest pit bulls, currently residing on the Avalon Towers balcony to be let in so that they will savage Des and Dawn's baby. In a contrived but carefully prepared twist, the dogs leap at the trestle cradle where the baby sleeps and pitch her into a large open kitchen waste bin, the lid of which snaps shut before their teeth and claws can get to her. Des is able to rescue her, unscathed and still breathing. The novel ends with Des and Dawn determined to enlarge their family by having another child. This interplay of plots helps to make a symbolic interpretation of the novel possible in which the forces of life win out, narrowly, over the forces of destruction.

Lionel Asbo can also be read as a loose national allegory, in the light of its subtitle, 'State of England' and a brief reference to an earlier national allegory, Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (6). To put the matter schematically, Lionel himself, the reporters that both mock him and make him a celebrity, the parody poetess 'Threnody', and the racist Howard Sheringham, represent the forces of stupidity, vulgarity and prejudice that are prominent in present-day England; Des and Dawn stand for an image of a multiracial

England informed by intelligence and love and looking towards the future. But this sounds much too nice for an Amis novel and any over-simple symbolic or allegorical interpretation is complicated by the distribution of energy in *Lionel Asbo*. Amis may not invest so much stylistic intensity in Lionel as he did in John Self in *Money* (1984) or Keith Talent in *London Fields* (1989), but, as with those earlier characters, it is Lionel who has the crude vigour that Des, the good guy, lacks. Lionel can turn a 'Whitsun wedding' into an internecine Battle of the Centaurs (few Lapiths are present), transforming the 'uncle shouting smut' in Larkin's poem into an anti-avuncular volcano of obscenity (61); by contrast, Amis's description of Dawn, when she and Des are both waiting to be interviewed for their university places, is in a poised Pre-Raphaelite mode that, in the context of the whole novel, cannot escape the suspicion of irony: 'now he saw her face, under its weight of golden hair – the gold of sunlight and lions. And her exorbitant eyes, fairy-tale blue, and ideally round' (63).

Whereas Lionel's embarrassments as he clumsily invades the enclaves of the rich are sharply rendered, the issue of Des's mixed-race identity is lightly handled, in comparison, say, to the comparatively trivial anguish of the vertically challenged characters in some of Amis's earlier novels (Keith Whitehead in *Dead Babies* (1975), Keith Nearing in *The Pregnant Widow*). Des, six foot one when he is eighteen, has no height problems, only the little matters of racism, incest and a criminal family to cope with, and he seems to suffer few pangs on the first subject, even when Dawn's father asserts the intellectual superiority of white people and disowns his daughter for her continuing association with Des. As with parturition and women, it is as if Amis were saying 'Race? No problem' – at least for people of colour. The academic achievement of Des and Dawn is summed up in a sentence whose concluding exclamation mark seems to knock a satirical nail into it: 'On August 2, 2011, Des and Dawn were informed that they'd both got Two Ones!' (133). Such exclamation marks will recur at various other points in the Des-and-Dawn saga. Most damningly of all, Daphne, *Sun* journalist and agony aunt, compares Des favourably with Lionel Asbo, hailing Des as a success, a 'tall, slender, well spoken and delightfully assured young man', 'who's faced a challenge and surmounted it', 'who's achieved something in this life', 'who's "come good"' (150, 152). Daphne's cliché-ridden endorsement of Des, in a novel so apparently scathing about the tabloid press from a writer who has presented his own career as a war against cliché, casts doubt upon Des's function as a symbolically positive figure.

This ambiguity about the balance of positive and negative forces in the novel might be seen as a strength, an eschewal of a consoling symbolic or allegorical resolution in the interests of complexity and open-endedness. There is some truth in this but in the case of *Lionel Asbo* the ambiguity seems more like that of a writer who has not fully come to grips with his material. There is a remoteness from the worlds described in the novel which suggests that, for the most part, they have not been experienced, researched or deeply imagined. The irony of this novel that has the tabloid press as a key target is that some of its representations are remarkably 'tabloidal' (35), to use an adjective Amis himself employs in the text, and are in some ways even more distant from their supposed topics than a tabloid news item might be. In *Money* and *London Fields*, Amis presented a heightened, postmodern-Gothic London that was clearly not intended as a realistic or documentary representation but that was sufficiently close to London actualities to gain substance from them. The London of *Lionel Asbo* is a more attenuated region, as if constructed from afar by a writer whose main source was lurid fragments of the *Evening Standard*. Amis's Gothic heightenings and gargantuan grotesques have sometimes been compared to those of Dickens and there are indeed points of comparison; but Dickens, in a manner symbolised by those manic night-time walks that he took through the London streets, kept his feet on the ground even in his most elaborate imaginative peregrinations. In *Lionel Asbo*, Amis has rather lost touch with the earth, as if the embarrassing experience described in the appendix to *Experience* – of being physically moved out of the way on a London pavement by an impatient pedestrian – were an adumbration of an increasing estrangement from the streets, a

growing withdrawal from the particularities of the real world. In one sense, it is good that Amis has still not learned the McEwan lesson of anodyne accommodation; in another sense, it is regrettable that he has never yet – and the time is shorter now – learned quite how to bring his stylistic gifts, his literary bravura, fully into contact with a reality that would go beyond cliché. As it is, there is a strong sense that if an author-surrogate appeared in this latest novel, as it did in *Money*, it would be called, not Martin Amis, but Mart Tabloid.

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