

12 The Sense of Place

In LA, you can't do anything unless you drive. Now I can't do anything unless I drink. And the drink-drive combination, it really isn't possible out there. If you so much as loosen your seatbelt or drop your ash or pick your nose, then it's an Alcatraz autopsy with the questions asked later. Any indiscipline, you feel, any variation, and there's a bullhorn, a set of scope sights, and a coptered pig drawing a bead on your rug.

So what can a poor boy do? You come out of the hotel, the Vrainmont. Over boiling Watts the downtown skyline carries a smear of God's green snot. You walk left, you walk right, you are a bank rat on a busy river. This restaurant serves no drink, this one serves no meat, this one serves no heterosexuals. You can get your chimp shampooed, you can get your dick tattooed, twenty-four hour, but can you get lunch? And should you see a sign on the far side of the street flashing BEEF - BOOZE - NO STRINGS, then you can forget it. The only way to get across the road is to be born there. All the ped-xing signs say DON'T WALK, all of them, all the time. That is the message, the content of Los Angeles: don't walk. Stay inside. Don't walk. Drive. Don't walk. Run! I tried the cabs. No use. The cabbies are all Saturnians who aren't even sure whether this is a right planet or a left planet. The first thing you have to do, every trip, is teach them how to drive.

MARTIN AMIS *Money* (1984)

AS WILL BE EVIDENT to the reader by now, my division of the art of fiction into various "aspects" is somewhat artificial. Effects in fiction are plural and interconnected, each drawing on and contributing to all the others. The passage I have selected from Martin

THE SENSE OF PLACE

Amis's *Money* as an example of the description of place could have served equally well to illustrate *Skaz* or Defamiliarization, as well as several topics not yet broached. Which is another way of saying that description in a good novel is never *just* description.

The sense of place was a fairly late development in the history of prose fiction. As Mikhail Bakhtin observed, the cities of classical romance are interchangeable backcloths for the plot: Ephesus might as well be Corinth or Syracuse, for all we are told about them. The early English novelists were scarcely more specific about place. London in Defoe's or Fielding's novels, for instance, lacks the vivid visual detail of Dickens's London. When Tom Jones arrives at the capital in search of his beloved Sophia, the narrator tells us that he

was an entire stranger in London; and as he happened to arrive first in a quarter of the town, the inhabitants of which have very little intercourse with the householders of Hanover or Grosvenor Square (for he entered through Gray's Inn Lane) so he rambled about for some time, before he could even find his way to those happy mansions, where Fortune segregates from the vulgar those . . . whose ancestors being born in better days, by sundry kinds of merit, have entailed riches and honour on their posterity.

London is described entirely in terms of the variations of class and status in its inhabitants, as interpreted by the author's ironical vision. There is no attempt to make the reader "see" the city, or to describe its sensory impact on a young man up from the country for the first time. Compare Dickens's description of Jacob's Island in *Oliver Twist*:

To reach this place, the visitor has to penetrate through a maze of close, narrow, and muddy streets, thronged by the roughest and poorest of the waterside people . . . The cheapest and least delicate provisions are heaped in the shops; the coarsest and commonest articles of wearing apparel dangle at the salesman's door, and stream from the house-parapet and windows . . . he walks beneath tottering housefronts projecting over the pavement, dismantled walls that seem to totter as he passes, chimneys half-crushed, half-hesitating to fall, windows guarded by rusty

iron bars that time and dirt have almost eaten away, every imaginable sign of desolation and neglect.

Tom Jones was published in 1749; *Oliver Twist* in 1838. What intervened was the Romantic movement, which pondered the effect of *milieu* on man, opened people's eyes to the sublime beauty of landscape and, in due course, to the grim symbolism of cityscapes in the Industrial Age.

Martin Amis is a late exponent of the Dickensian tradition of urban Gothic. His fascinated and appalled gaze at the post-industrial city mediates an apocalyptic vision of culture and society in a terminal state of decay. As with Dickens, his settings often seem more animated than his characters, as if the life has been drained out of people to re-emerge in a demonic, destructive form in things: streets, machines, gadgets.

The narrator of *Money*, John Self (Amis also cultivates a Dickensian playfulness with names) is not exactly a complex or sympathetic character. A scrofulous yuppie, addicted to fast food and fast cars, junk food and pornography, he commutes between England and America in his efforts to tie up a film deal that will make him rich. London and New York are the chief locations of the action, with the latter having the edge in physical and moral squalor, but the nature of his business inevitably takes Self to Los Angeles, the capital of the movie industry.

The challenge of the novel's chosen form is to make the style both eloquently descriptive of the urban wasteland *and* expressive of the narrator's stobbish, tunnel-visioned, philistine character. Amis manages this difficult trick by disguising his literary skills behind a barrage of streetwise slang, profanity, obscenities and jokes. The narrator speaks in a mid-Atlantic lingo that is partly derived from popular culture and the mass media and partly Amis's plausible invention. To decipher the first paragraph of this passage, for instance, you have to know that Alcatraz is a famous Californian prison, that "pig" is a term of abuse for policeman, that "drawing a bead" means taking aim, that "rug" is American slang for toupee (though Self uses it to refer to real hair), and guess that "coptered" is a participle derived from "helicopter". The metaphor for the

city's polluted sky, "a smear of God's green snot", suggesting the deity of the Old Testament glowering over this latterday Sodom, is as startling as T. S. Eliot's evening "spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherized upon a table" in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", and owes something to Stephen Dedalus's description of the sea as "snot-green", in the first episode of *Ulysses*. But whereas Prufrock has high-cultural pretensions and Stephen is consciously travestyng Homer's favourite epithet for the sea, "wine-dark", John Self seems to be merely indulging in schoolboy nastiness, and this distracts us from the literary sophistication of the image.

The key trope of this description of Los Angeles is hyperbole, or overstatement. In that respect it resembles another *skaz* narrative we looked at earlier, *The Catcher in the Rye*. But Amis's passage is much more of a rhetorical set-piece than anything to be found in Salinger's novel. It performs a series of comically exaggerated variations on the commonplace theme that Los Angeles is a city dedicated to and dominated by the motor car ("The only way to get across the road is to be born there"); and on the slightly less commonplace observations that America favours highly specialized retail outlets, and that American taxi-drivers are often recent immigrants who don't know the way to anywhere.

On arriving in Boston recently, I took a cab whose driver had to make three attempts, assisted by radio-telephone consultation in Russian with his control, before he could find his way out of the airport. It's difficult to exaggerate that kind of incompetence, but Amis found a way: "The cabbies are all Saturnians who aren't even sure whether this is a right planet or a left planet. The first thing you have to do, every trip, is teach them how to drive." An echo of the homely seat-belt safety slogan, "Clunk Click, every trip", follows fast on the flip allusion to science fiction – Amis's prose delights in such juxtapositions, culled from the *dreck* of contemporary urban consciousness. The echo also contributes to the jaunty, finger-snapping rhythm of the whole passage, which threatens at one particularly cherishable moment to break into rhyming couplets ("You can get your chimp shampooed, you can get your dick tattooed").

The danger of most set-piece descriptions of place (the novels of Sir Walter Scott provide plenty of examples) is that a succession of well-formed declarative sentences, combined with the suspension of narrative interest, will send the reader to sleep. No risk of that here. The present tense describes both the place and the narrator's movement through it. The shifts in verbal mood – from indicative ("You come out of the hotel") to interrogative ("but can you get lunch?") to imperative ("Don't walk. Drive. Don't walk. Run!") and the generalizing second-person pronoun ("You walk left, you walk right") – involve the reader in the process. After many pages of this sort of thing you might fall asleep from exhaustion, but not from boredom.

13 Lists

With Nicole's help Rosemary bought two dresses and two hats and four pairs of shoes with her money. Nicole bought from a great list that ran two pages, and bought the things in the windows besides. Everything she liked that she couldn't possibly use herself, she bought as a present for a friend. She bought coloured beads, folding beach cushions, artificial flowers, honey, a guest bed, bags, scarfs, love birds, miniatures for a doll's house, and three yards of some new cloth the colour of prawns. She bought a dozen bathing suits, a rubber alligator, a travelling chess set of gold and ivory, big linen handkerchiefs for Abe, two chamois leather jackets of kingfisher blue and burning bush from Hermes – bought all these things not a bit like a high-class courtesan buying underwear and jewels, which were after all professional equipment and insurance, but with an entirely different point of view. Nicole was the product of much ingenuity and toil. For her sake trains began their run at Chicago and traversed the round belly of the continent to California; chicle factories fumed and link belts grew link by link in factories; men mixed toothpaste in vats and drew mouthwash out of copper hogsheads; girls canned tomatoes quickly in August or worked rudely at the Five-and-Tens on Christmas Eve; half-breed Indians toiled on Brazilian coffee plantations and dreamers were muscled out of patent rights in new tractors – these were some of the people who gave a tithe to Nicole and, as the whole system swayed and thundered onward, it lent a feverish bloom to such processes of hers as wholesale buying, like the flush of a fireman's face holding his post before a spreading blaze. She illustrated very simple principles, containing in herself her own doom, but illustrated them so accurately that there was grace in the procedure, and presently Rosemary would try to imitate it.

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD *Tender is the Night* (1934)