

## Escape or Warning?

Environmental Concerns in Contemporary British Fiction.

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Although in previous years much ecocritical attention has been paid to Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), most critics have limited themselves to a discussion of the landscape in the novel. Martin Amis' *London Fields* (1989) on the other hand, has received very little ecocritical attention. Although the novels may seem very different at first glance, they have one theme in common: apocalypse. In the following paper I aim to prove that apocalypse not only plays an important part in both novels but that it influences both the historical setting as well as the treatment of nature in the works. I will start my discussion by examining *Waterland* before continuing with *London Fields*.

*Waterland*, published in 1983, combines several stories told by Tom Crick, a history teacher faced with losing his job. In his classes he deviates from the curriculum and instead tells his students about the history of the Fens and of his family – reaching back to the eighteenth century – as well as his own childhood in the 1940s. Apocalypse – or rather, the end of the world – is referred to in *Waterland* mainly by Crick's students. They have nightmares about nuclear war and are no longer interested in history because they are too concerned about their future. Crick's headmaster, Lewis, tells him that it is the study of history itself that causes these fears. As he says, "we don't learn from the past. What's more, what we pick up from dwelling on it is a defeatist, jaundiced outlook" (154).

Consequently, Crick turns towards history to prove that fear of the end of the world is not new. This is illustrated by the second chapter of the book, which is titled

“About the End of History”. In this chapter Crick’s most critical student – Price – tells him that “The only important thing about history ... is that it’s got to the point where it’s probably about to end” (7). However, as a historian, Crick knows that Price and his classmates aren’t the first generation to have these fears. As he says,

the end of the world is on the cards again – maybe this time it’s for real. But the feeling’s not new. Saxon hermits felt it. They felt it when they built the pyramids to prove it wasn’t true. My father felt it in the mud at Ypres. My grandfather felt it and drowned it with suicidal beer. Mary felt it... It’s the old, old feeling, that everything might amount to nothing (269).

Crick’s response to apocalypse is to look to the past and – reassuringly – conclude that the end of the world is not new. In fact, history – as Crick suggests – is cyclical: “How it repeats itself, how it goes back on itself, no matter how we try to straighten it out. How it twists and turns. How it goes in circles and brings us back to the same place” (142). In this respect, history is like nature – or more specifically, like the river Ouse, which “flows, in reality, like all rivers, only back to itself, to its own source” (145).

History, then, appears to be Crick’s antidote to fears of apocalypse. He turns, however, not merely to history in general but specifically to the history of nature. In order to understand the significance of this it is important to briefly discuss the three purposes of history that can be identified in *Waterland*. First of all, history – according to Crick – may be able to teach us something for the present and the future.

Secondly, history can cause nostalgia. Thirdly, and most importantly, by turning to history Crick offers a decentred view of the world. According to Hanne Tange, Swift “opts for a decentred viewpoint because he cannot accept the national mythology presented by the Thatcherites. English regionalism can be read as an antipole to the

core culture, incorporating principles that are either ignored or dismissed by the centre” (Tange 87-8). This decentred viewpoint is demonstrated in *Waterland* in a number of ways, for example by the geographical setting. The Fens are a remote place in England, far away from the centre, London. As Crick says, he lived “Far away from the wide world” (1). Similarly, instead of relating the history of the British Empire, Crick tells his students about the Empire his ancestors – the Atkinsons – were building.

However, as I said, Crick’s most powerful antidote to apocalypse is the history of nature. This clearly underlines Tange’s claim that Swift gives a decentred viewpoint of history, as the focus in the novel is not on wars and revolutions but on “small” history. An apt example of this is the juxtaposition of history and land reclamation – a recurring motif in the novel. In Crick’s story about the Atkinsons, for example, the Battle of Trafalgar (21 October 1805) is but a minor incident compared to the draining of the Fens. As he says: “By the year of Trafalgar, Thomas [Atkinson] has drained 12,000 acres along the margins of the Leem” (70). The effect of this is that humankind appears insignificant in the face of nature. This is also illustrated in chapter 15, “About the Ouse” in which Crick relates the history of the river Ouse to his students. He tells them about the first people who lived near the Ouse: “What these first men ... called the Ouse we have no idea ... But how the Ouse regarded ... these two-legged intruders ... we can say readily: with indifference” (143).

Similarly, Crick explains the different courses that the river took throughout history not as a victory for human ingenuity, but “as the continued contempt of the river for the efforts of men” (144). Nature’s indifference to history is also illustrated by the chapter titled “About the Eel”. It gives a similar decentred viewpoint of history as well as focusing not on the wars and revolutions that took place throughout history,

but on the research that was done into the life cycle of the eel. And, like the river Ouse, the eel wasn't influenced much by history either, as during World War I: "it must be said that this catastrophic interval, to which dread words as apocalypse, cataclysm, Armageddon have not unjustly been applied, does not interrupt the life cycle of the eel" (201). By describing nature as that which continues, even in the midst of cultural and political chaos, Crick provides an antidote to his students' fears of apocalypse. However, his choice of antidote is striking, especially since nature may not be never ending – as Crick believes. Indeed, throughout the novel Swift ignores the possibility of an end to nature even though – at the end of the twentieth century as well as in the beginning of the twenty-first – this is a very real possibility.

Amis, on the other hand, does incorporate the destruction of nature in his apocalypse. Published in 1989, *London Fields* takes place in 1999 and is narrated by an American writer staying in London, Samson Young. He tells his own story and that of a number of other characters – Keith Talent, Nicola Six and Guy Clinch – during the last months of the millennium. The novel is overshadowed by the fear of environmental apocalypse, combined with a possible nuclear war, political instability and the coming eclipse.

As I mentioned earlier, apocalypse determines the historical setting as well as the treatment of nature in the novels. In the case of *London Fields*, this is illustrated by the imminent environmental apocalypse which is set to take place in 1999. The treatment of nature in this work then, invites a reading of the novel as an example of environmental apocalypticism.

In his chapter on environmental apocalypticism in *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell identifies three bases of late twentieth-century dystopianism, which can be discerned in *London Fields* as well. These three

elements are “the vision of exploitation leading to ‘overshoot’ ... or interference producing irreversible degradation”, “the vision of tampered-with nature recoiling against humankind in a kind of return of the repressed” and “the loss of all escape routes” (Buell 308). Firstly, “interference producing irreversible degradation” (Buell 308) is clearly illustrated by the state of the ozone layer in *London Fields*. As one of the characters, Guy Clinch, says:

we suspected sacrifices might have to be made, later, for all the wonderful times we had with our spray cans and junk-food packaging. We knew there'd be a price. Admittedly, to you, the destruction of the ozone layer looks a bit steep. But don't forget how good it was for us: our tangy armpits, our piping hamburgers” (156)

Secondly, the freak weather patterns in *London Fields* demonstrate the second element: nature striking back. Young describes the winds that have been tearing through the city, “as if softening it up for an exponentially greater violence. In the last week the winds have killed nineteen people and thirty-three million trees” (43). Also, the rain is nothing like London rain in the past: “It wouldn't look so bad in a jungle or somewhere, coming down like this, but in a northern city, suspended from soiled clouds” (205). Finally, Guy's wife Hope illustrates the third element of late twentieth-century dystopianism, the loss of all escape routes, by telling him that there is no use in moving out of London as “Everywhere's a toilet” (244).

As I have demonstrated in this paper, the historical setting and the representation of nature in the novels are determined by the treatment of apocalypse presented in the works. In *Waterland*, Tom Crick returns to the past to demonstrate that the fear of the end of the world is not new and is part of the cyclical nature of history. Similarly, Crick also believes that nature is cyclical and therefore never

ending. This positive outlook echoes Greg Garrard's suggestion that "the real moral and political challenges of ecology may lie in accepting that the world is *not* about to end, that human beings are likely to survive even if Western-style civilisation does not. Only if we imagine that the planet *has* a future, after all, are we likely to take responsibility for it" (Garrard 107). Amis, however, confronts his readers with a future in which environmental apocalypse is imminent and seemingly unavoidable. The function of this bleak perspective is illustrated by Buell who, unlike Garrard, suggests that we need apocalyptical scenarios in literature in order to keep them from happening. As he says: "Can our imaginations of apocalypse actually forestall it, as our fears of nuclear holocaust so far have? Even the slimmest of possibilities is enough to justify the nightmare" (Buell 308).

## Works Cited

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