

David Papineau

Colin McGinn

The Space Trap

187pp. Duckworth. £14.99.

0 7156 2415 6

The author of this impressive first novel is a professional philosopher who left England recently to teach in the United States. The novel contains little philosophy to speak of, but a lot about the differences between England and America. Alan Swift, the central figure in The Space Trap, is a man transmuted by geographical transportation. He begins the novel as an insurance clerk in Holloway, ground down by the daily drudge of job and family. But one day something snaps and he takes himself off to Manhattan, where he finds a new job, a new girlfriend, a series of picaresque adventures, and his true self.

The comic novel of the Englishman in America has a distinguished ancestry, from Evelyn Waugh, through Kingsley Amis and Malcolm Bradbury, to William Boyd. The common theme has been that America is a fascinating place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there. This novel inverts the message. For Alan Swift England is a land of "spent smoke and creeping damp", "reined-in and rained-on", the "kidney of greyness". America, by contrast, is all invigorating colour. Once he gets to Manhattan, Swift shapes up, he works out, he shaves off his moulting beard, he sheds his pale English skin.

The real progenitor of this novel is not Amis per but file. The writings of Martin Amis are becoming increasingly influential, and it is now something of a cliché for reviewers of first novels to detect symptoms of covert imitation. In Colin McGinn's case, however, the connection can scarcely be overlooked. Apart from the obvious overall affinities with Money, with its other Englishman-at-large who actually likes America, there are more specific borrowings: Alan Swift has a glamorous and disdainful doppelganger, echoing the theme of Success; his tribulations in a Manhattan gym closely follow the pattern of the tennis match in Money. And McGinn's style is straight Amis, complete with surreal hyperbole, emphatic litanies, and unruly bodily parts ("It was days since he had been on terms with his large intestine. His colon seemed to have gone on strike . . . It wasn't listening to his pleas. If only they could get round a table together . . .")

This style can be successfully transplanted, and McGinn wields it to much comic effect in a succession of broad set pieces. Some of his other borrowings are less happy, however. He is clearly far more at home with the drab insurance clerk than the glamorous doppelganger, for example, and the perfunctory appearances of the latter at the beginning and end of the novel add little to the overall structure.

More generally, the borrowed style sits uneasily with McGinn's relatively conventional novelistic aims. Where Martin Amis is a hard-eyed observer of human foibles, whose uses his hyperbolic idiom to construct memorable grotesques, McGinn's vision is essentially benign. His concern is not to expose human shortcomings, but to articulate the experience of geographical dislocation. In these mobile times this is a worthwhile subject, and McGinn has important things to say about the freedom of new places and the demands of those left behind. But the aggression of his adopted style continually forces him away from these topics and into knockabout farce. McGinn has a genuine gift for comic writing. But he will be better able to use it for his own purposes once he has found his own voice.