

A Contemporary Arrogant Study on Martin Amis's- "Money-A Suicide Note"

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ABSTRACT

With Money: A Suicide Note (1984) Amis went global, according to Will Self, perhaps Amis's most clearly identifiable stylistic follower. "Money: A Suicide Note" is also a confession - the author's confession of the gratuitous crime of totaling John Self. This self-conscious and Self-indulgent novel has an impact that is, paradoxically, selfless. Self doesn't remember writing out his story, his "suicide note," and it reads as if Mr. Amis doesn't remember composing it. It's like a tale taken down in a trance by a medium in the grip of a spirit control, one of those prankish controls waxing autobiographical from a spectral barstool. Money represents a high-water mark in Amis's career, building on the strengths of his earlier novels but far exceeding them in scope, depth of characterization, and organic unity. It also stands as one of the indispensable novels of and about its decade.

Key words-

trance,gratuitous,paradoxically,autobiographical, indispensable

1. INTRODUCTION

In *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984) the materialist excesses of the late twentieth century are viewed through, and magnified by, the salacious leer of its narrator. "I'm addicted to the twentieth century," says the eponymous John Self, and during his narrative the reader vicariously experiences the damage this addiction inflicts on Self's physical body--and the larger social body he also inhabits. *Money* represents a high water mark in Amis's career, building on the strengths of his earlier novels but far exceeding them in scope, depth of characterization, and organic unity. It also stands as one of the indispensable novels of and about its decade. In terms of

narrative technique, *Money* is a vernacular dramatic monologue in the Russian skaz tradition. Dostoevski's novella *Notes From Underground* is the master-text of this tradition, containing a narrator whose bitter alienation from his society and its most cherished beliefs makes him a perversely perceptive critic of that society. Self is a literary descendant of Dostoevski's protagonist, sharing the *Underground Man's* brutal, seamy honesty.

2. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martin Amis (ā'mĭs), 1949–, English novelist; son of Kingsley Amis. The younger Amis, who turned from literary journalism to fiction, invites comparison with his father through his choice of career and style. Often writing satire so bitterly sardonic that it goes far beyond the caustic comedy of his father's fiction, he has exposed the darker aspects of contemporary English society in his novels. Among them are *The Rachel Papers* (1973), *Dead Babies* (1975), *Money* (1984), *London Fields* (1990), *Time's Arrow* (1991), *The Information* (1995), *Yellow Dog* (2003), *The Pregnant Widow* (2010), and *Lionel Asbo: State of England* (2012). His short-story collections include *Heavy Water and Other Stories* (1999). Among his non-fiction works are *The War against Cliché* (2001), a selection of mainly literary essays and reviews, and *Koba the Dread* (2002), an examination of Stalinism's horrors and the attitudes of Western intellectuals toward the Soviet regime. The novel *House of Meetings* (2006) also treats similar themes—the Soviet Gulag and Stalinist atrocities.

2.1 THE ESSENCE AND COMPARISON

The plot of *Money* is deceptively simple. As the novel opens, in early summer, 1981, John Self arrives in New York to direct what he imagines will be his first major film. He is one of the new media hucksters who came of age in the free-wheeling sixties, and he struck it rich in the mid-seventies making a series of controversial TV commercials. More recently, he made a deal with the American producer Fielding Goodney to film a story based on his own life. During the six frenetic months his narrative recounts, Self turns 35, shuttles between London and New York, meets with Goodney, auditions actors and screenwriters, and wallows in the fleshly vices his commercials celebrate. Self is seriously involved with two women in the course of the novel: Selina Street and Martina Twain.

Selina betrays Self with at least two men, and she ultimately stages Self's betrayal of Martina, who represented his only (faint) hope for renewal and reform. The other major character in the novel is one Martin Amis; Self hires him to rewrite the film's script and they have many subsequent encounters. Self's high-speed, high-rolling life comes to an end when he discovers that Fielding has set him up: the money financing the film and his appetites is nonexistent, and all the contracts he signed with Fielding hold Self financially liable. He ends up back in London, broken, having survived a failed suicide bid. Absent from this brief summary is the highly charged language, the arresting comedy, the figurative and thematic ingenuity that breathe life into every page of the novel. Consider the metaphorical implications of Self's hearing problem, for instance. At first, it seems to be a purely physical condition. "Owing to this fresh disease I have called tinnitus, my ears have started hearing things recently, things that aren't strictly auditory. Jet take-offs, breaking glass, ice scratched from the tray." Then these sounds begin to shape themselves toward meaning--odd music, strange languages--that Self cannot decipher. One morning he wakes up in a New York hotel room hearing "computer fugues, Japanese jam sessions, didgeridoos". Later, sitting in a London pub called The Blind Pig, he hears strange sounds

coming from the mouths of his fellow "Earthlings" (his name for human beings): "the foreigners around here . . . They speak stereo, radio crackle, interference. They speak sonar, bat-chirrup. The curious reader, consulting a medical encyclopedia, discovers that tinnitus is a condition, not a disease. A "common complaint," it is "the annoying sensation of noise in the ear when no sound is present."

3. THE UNIQUE PLATFORM

Like so many of the details in *Money*, John Self's tinnitus constitutes part of larger pattern of implication that awaits the reader's discovery. Early in his narration Self describes "four distinct voices" competing for his attention. They represent a figurative extension of his tinnitus, filling his head with distracting noises. The first two render him *morally* hard of hearing: "First, of course, is the jabber of money, which might be represented as the blur on the top rung of a typewriter-- $\hat{A}\text{\%}\hat{A}^{1/4}\text{@}=\&\text{\$}$ --sums, subtractions, compound terrors and greed. Second is the voice of pornography. This often sounds like the rap of a demented DJ: *the way she moves has to be good news, can't get loose till I feel the juice-- . . .*". These two refrains nearly drown out all the other voices Self hears, leading to everything from hilarious comic confusions to searing betrayals to life-threatening catastrophes. They speak of an invaded Self, a programmed Self, a diminished Self--a "gimmicked" Self, to use one of his favorite terms. The other two voices--one speaking in conscience-stung tones, the other in unquiet desperation--imply regret and possible reform. "Third, the voice of ageing and weather, of time travel through days and days, the ever-weakening voice of stung shame, sad boredom and futile protest. . . . Number four is the real intruder. Though Self is not aware of this, these two voices are in conflict with the first two. Taken together, all four voices constitute a fragmented, decentered Self.

Self thinks of these voices as an unwanted affliction, like his tinnitus, though he owns up to a small measure of responsibility for their presence. "All the voices come from somewhere

else. I wish I could flush them out of my head. As with vampires, you have to ask them in. But once they're there, once you've given them headroom, they seem pretty determined to stick around". This is because they come to *constitute* Self--who he is, how he sees and hears the world, how he relates to others. They represent his subjective experience of the world, what he calls his "private culture." And while the specifics of these voices (especially their ranking) precisely measure Self's character, they have a wider application. Their resonance suggests something about the dialogic design of *Money* itself. *Money* can be read exclusively as a satirical novel, attacking the dehumanizing influence of capitalism and the specific forms this has taken in the post-war west. "I think money is the central deformity in life," Amis has said. "It's one of the evils that has cheerfully survived identification as an evil. . . . it's a fiction, an addiction, and a tacit conspiracy that we have all agreed to go along with." In this reading John Self is both target and victim, a one-man carnival of junk taste and junk morality who has relinquished most of his free will by embracing commodity culture in all its pornographic excess. The fact that most of Self's pleasures are solitary, reinforces the sense that he is a prisoner of his own addictions. Amis's public statements about Self sanction this reading: "he has no resistance, because he has no sustenance, no structure."

The spectacle of Self's "private culture"--by turns appalling, savagely hilarious, touching, and contemptible--represents a tour-de-force of satiric representation. At the same time his unabashed entrepreneurial greed embodies the emergent values of Thatcher's England and Reagan's America. Few, however, will experience Self merely as a monster of wretched excess. He is so fully, triumphantly realized that most readers will warm to him in spite of themselves. Once Self enters the reader's consciousness, he takes up permanent residence there, like the best characters in Dickens.

The novel's 1984 publication date is significant: Orwell's great dystopic novel *1984* is a recurrent motif in *Money*. *1984* is a seminal postmodern novel, and *Money* extends Orwell's analysis of totalitarian ideology into the realm of

post-industrial capitalist democracies. Unlike Orwell's protagonist Winston Smith, Self lives in a "free" society (two of them, in fact). Like Winston, his responses have been conditioned--not by a state apparatus, but by an equally powerful economic system that shapes individual subjectivities, fetishizes objects and commodifies relationships. His role in this system--as a maker of TV commercials--puts him at the center of its mediating machinery. When we laugh at Self, we are laughing at an exaggerated version of other selves as well.

3.1 ONE'S OWN EXPRESSION

Amis has set severe limits on himself in *Money*, since his narrator is verbally challenged and resistant to literature, not to mention narrative structure. He is also drunk a great deal of the time, which poses a serious threat to sustained narrative coherence. *Money's* 363 pages contain no chapter titles or numbers; there are nine unnumbered sections, but the logic of these divisions is not immediately apparent. As a result, the novel's narrative seems messy, sprawling, unfocused--though never less than compelling. Self's exposition is roughly chronological, but it is punctuated by flashbacks, digressions, and frequent omissions. The latter occur when Self defers disclosing shaming events that have just happened to him. Repression decisively shapes his story, disrupting chronology, increasing narrative suspense, and leading to dramatic revelations throughout the novel. There is method in this narrative sprawl, however, since among other things it convincingly captures Self's "private culture" in all its human density. Early in the novel, discussing his film outline with scriptwriter Doris Arthur, he breaks away from his transcription of their conversation, telling us that he's given this speech so many times that he can speak while letting his mind "wander unpleasantly, as it always wanders now when unengaged by stress or pleasure."

What follows perfectly conveys the associational twitchiness of Self's thought: "My thoughts dance. What is it? A dance of anxiety and supplication, of futile vigil. I think I must have some new cow disease that makes you wonder

whether you're real all the time, that makes your life feel like a trick, an act, a joke. I feel, I feel dead. There's a guy who lives round my way who really gives me the fucking creeps. He's a *writer*, too . . . I can't go on sleeping alone--that's certain. I need a human touch. Soon I'll just have to go out and buy one. I wake up at dawn and there's nothing". Like his auto-eroticism, Self's self-examination is a constant in the novel. His self-awareness constitutes a kind of psychological doubling, captured in a sentence near the beginning of the novel: "Jesus, I never meant me any harm". In terms of its verbal surface, *Money* mirrors Self's limitations while finding ways around them. Self favors simple words, short sentences and clipped syntax (the only semicolon in his entire narrative occurs in its last sentence). Yet Amis achieves maximal effects from these minimal means. He employs allusion, parody, sudden shifts of tone, and comic irony so that Self's statements echo with additional, authorial implications. Amis satirizes Self by "doubling" Self's voice with his own throughout the novel, composing an artful counterpoint that resonates with implications beyond the range of his narrator's hearing. Self's explanation of the change he is experiencing under Martina's influence is representative of his staccato style--and Amis's "double-voicing": "I'm getting chicked. It would explain a great deal. I have tried in the past to feminize myself. I womanized for years. It didn't work, though on the other hand I did fuck lots of girls. Who knows? It if happens, it happens". Unlike Self, Amis (and the ideal reader) recognize that "womanizing" will not bring Self (or any male self) any closer to feminine, or feminist, understanding.

Repetition is Self's favorite rhetorical strategy, not surprising given his self-description ("that's my life: repetition, repetition"). Fortunately for the reader and the novel's art, this repetition is never redundant. The word "money" and its variants, for instance, appears on virtually every page of the novel, since the cash nexus determines and shapes all of Self's experiences and relationships, but its uses are almost infinitely variable. To Self, however, money is *formative*--especially of his language. After receiving his first letter from Selina in

their two-year relationship, containing the postscript he finds so seductive ("P.S.--I'm penniless"), Self realizes this is the first time he has seen her handwriting. He then wonders if she has seen his. "Had I ever shown her *my* hand? Yes, she'd seen it, on bills, on credit slips, on cheques". Self's phrase "my hand" here is an example of the pervasive verbal doubling in the novel, a form of repetition manifested in punning, double-entendres, double-takes, double-talk, and inversion. "My hand" is a double entendre referring to Self's secrets as well as his penmanship. Amis constantly makes an artistic virtue out of Self's repetition compulsion, wresting poetic effects from his narrator's verbal habits.

3.2 DUALITY AND DOUBLING

Throughout the novel, Self's personal life and moral squalor are refracted through the filter of his film project. The project itself is one of Self's many attempts to double himself in the novel. Thus it is not surprising that his life and the film project get constantly inter tangled. Caduta Massi, approached to play the role of the mother, takes an immediate maternal interest in the motherless Self, and literally succors him at her breast. Butch Beausoleil, sought for the part of the mistress, embarrasses Self sexually in anticipation of Selina's later betrayal. And the revised plot of the film, alternately titled *Good Money* and *Bad Money*, concludes with a scene of Oedipal violence that anticipates Self's violent encounter with his father near the end of the novel. Just as Self seeks to recreate himself on screen, he also doubles himself with some of those associated with the film. In near-perpetual envy of the sleek and suave Fielding (himself a double of Selina), Self imagines going to the west coast for a complete physical makeover. The most extensive of these doublings involves Self's relationship with the character Martin Amis, hired to rewrite the film script. He does so with a blunt honesty worthy of Self's narrative voice. He creates a protagonist named Self whose life parallels his own to a surprising degree; he embodies himself in the novel as a recurring character; and he doubles this character through the American Martina Twain

("twain" literally means two). He even has Self voice the theme: "people are doubling also, dividing, splitting". The reader is virtually invited to consider Self, Amis, and Martina as aspects of a single consciousness.

The presence of Amis's persona in *Money* has generated a surprising amount of criticism and critical misunderstanding. John Bayley has called the strategy "tiresome," and an "artistic trick." Laura L. Doan, following the lead of earlier critics, claims its sole function is to maintain a satirical distance between Self and his creator: "Amis takes exceptional care to ensure that the narrator-protagonist, so disgusting in his values and lifestyle, cannot be mistaken for the writer by literally putting himself into the text. Martin Amis, the character, is a suave, intelligent, highly educated, comfortably middle-class writer who quite obviously finds Self, and what he represents, unsavory." Bayley's impatience is hard to credit given the fact that each appearance by the Amis character is unique to the dramatic situation, and reveals additional facets of his real and symbolic relationship to Self. Furthermore, Amis's existence in the novel is handled with such off handedness and comic panache that his presence never feels like the self consciously obtrusive trick it has seemed in other works where it occurs (from John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* to John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*).

Since *Money* is about the way reality is mediated, and features conversations between a filmmaker and the actors who will play his characters, it seems almost natural that the filmmaker's author would converse with *his* main character. Doan's charge, on the other hand, is seriously misleading--though consistent with her mistaken assumption that Self is punished in the novel for attempting to rise above his "station." Doan's claim that the character Martin Amis finds Self and what he represents "unsavory" is contradicted throughout the novel, but especially by the second meeting between the two. The Amis character, thoroughly familiar with Self's television work, tells Self "I thought those commercials were bloody funny"--just before ordering what Self calls "a standard job's breakfast". It isn't Self's

upward mobility or his downward aesthetic that Amis and his persona object to, but his moral fatigue syndrome. Nowhere does Amis imply that exposure to high culture per se is a sufficient inoculation against this condition. Self and the Amis character are secret sharers more than antagonists. Many of Self's experiences are in fact those of his creator viewed through the distorting lens of an unlikely double. During their first conversation, Self tells Amis he heard that his father is also a writer, adding: "Bet that made it easier."

Amis's sarcastic reply: "Oh, sure. It's just like taking over the family pub". This alludes to the difficulties inherent in the actual Amis's struggle to establish his own identity and voice in the shadow of his famous literary father. He has experienced both envious accusations of nepotism and favoritism and public criticism from Kingsley Amis, who has called his son's novels unreadable. This withholding of paternal support is mirrored in Self's relationship to his father (who owns a pub named after the ultimate literary father: The Shakespeare). Barry Self's interactions with his son in the novel range from cavalier to callous to cruel. Their most emotional encounter is a grotesque parody of familial intimacy, in which Self is invited to share the joy of his stepmother's appearance in a pornographic magazine (this occurs after Self's father has sent him a bill for his upbringing). Under ordinary circumstances, Self might have assumed that he would eventually inherit his father's pub.

By the end of the novel, however, his father has denied paternity and disowned him. Self's career also constitutes a fun-house mirror image of Amis's. Both were shaped by the youth culture of the 60's, which is reflected in their work; both made professional names for themselves in the seventies; both sought artistic recognition on the other side of the Atlantic in the eighties; both have worked in film. Amis experienced prominence and success in the 1970s for a body of work that generated considerable controversy, including charges of tastelessness and obscenity. Publication of the American edition of his third novel, *Success*, was delayed for nine years--which Amis has attributed to its sexual explicitness. Self's film project has a similar

resonance. Two years before Amis began writing *Money*, he wrote the screenplay for the science-fiction movie *Saturn 3*, released in 1980 (like his persona in *Money*, he was hired to adapt someone else's story). An American-British co-production, *Saturn 3* is a big-budget space opera featuring one Hollywood legend (Kirk Douglas), one emerging star (Harvey Keitel), and one actress attempting to move from television to film (Farah Fawcett). The movie itself--as ludicrous as those Amis parodies in *Money*--is a triumph of celebrity and special effects over plot and characterization. During his involvement with the film Amis, like Self, learned first-hand about the unbridled egos of American actors.

. The Amis character's presence in the novel highlights the predicament of the serious writer in a commodity culture indifferent to traditional artistic values. In terms of the novel's critique of late capitalism, the Amis character is guilty of false consciousness. He is a naive literary modernist clinging to the fiction that he can protect his art from the influence of the marketplace. When Self learns that Amis makes "enough" yet doesn't own a video player, he becomes indignant. "You haven't got shit, have you, and how much do you earn? It's immoral. Push out some cash. Buy stuff. Consume, for Christ's sake." Amis's response: "I suppose I'll have to start one day," he said. "But I really don't want to join it, the whole money conspiracy".

He does so when revising the film script, however, and as the extra-literary Amis knows, it is impossible for any working writer to avoid. His vocation depends on a market for his books--and legal "ownership" of something as personal as his verbal style. After Self asks the Amis character to rewrite his film script, he tells Fielding about it. "Fielding, of course, had heard of Martin Amis--he hadn't read his stuff, but there'd recently been some cases of plagiarism, of text-theft, which had filtered down to the newspapers and magazines. So, I thought. Little Martin got caught with his fingers in the till, then, did he. A word criminal. I would bear that in mind". As in Self's interpretation of *Othello*, just the opposite is true. Jacob Epstein committed "text-theft" on Amis's first novel *The Rachel Papers* in composing his first (and only) novel, *Wild Oats*. Such is the nature of

authorship in a capitalist economy that Amis needed to draw attention to this plagiarism in order to protect his economic viability as a unique artistic voice. Both Amises in other words--the author of *Money* and his persona within the narrative--have been shaped by the forces that have shaped Self. So have all the novel's readers. This is made explicit when Self and the Amis character sit down together to watch the wedding of Charles and Diana, and Self describes the face of his secret sharer. "As I twisted in my seat and muttered to myself I found I kept looking Martin's way. The lips were parted, suspended, the eyes heavy and unblinking. If I stare into his face I can make out the areas of waste and fatigue, the moon spots and bone shadow you're bound to get if you hang out in the twentieth century". Although Self claims that Martina's moneyed background has protected her from these physical symptoms, her own experience of loss and isolation--represented both in her situation and in her dialogues with Self--mark her as another sharer of the postmodern condition as diagnosed by the novel.

4. CONCLUSION

When Self reads *1984*, he is attracted to the world it depicts: "A no-frills setup, run without sentiment, snobbery, or cultural favoritism, Airstrip One seemed like my kind of town. (I saw myself as an idealistic young corporal in the Thought Police)". The reader familiar with Orwell's savage satire will note that Self already lives in a version of Airstrip One. The totalitarian state of Oceania is dedicated to reducing human freedom and choice by steadily narrowing the range of thought. In the mass-mediated commodity culture Self has temporarily thrived in, advertising and film have engendered a similar effect. Like Winston Smith, the doomed hero of *1984*, Self spends most of his narrative discovering that he is trapped--not by a totalitarian state, but in the prison of a debased private culture. "I sometimes think I am controlled by someone," Self says late in his narrative. "But he's not from out there. He's from

in here". Near the end of 1984, Winston Smith is led away to "Room 101," where he is threatened with torture and loses his last shreds of freedom and dignity. It is no accident that Self's expensive New York hotel room, arranged for him by Fielding, has the same number. Among other things, *Money* represents a narrative 'representation of the "shock experience" that the Marxist writer Walter Benjamin saw typifying modern urban life. Writing in the 1920s, Benjamin foresaw the destruction of what he called the space of contemplation by the forces of modernity, in particular the aggressive, inescapable influence of advertising and its technological ally, film. "The most real, the mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement. It abolishes the space where contemplation moved and all but hits us between the eyes with things as a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careens at us out of a film screen." John Self, who made himself through advertising, who has a "screening-room inside my head", is the embodiment of modernity as Benjamin conceives it. He careens at us from the pages of his narrative, recording the spectacle of his life careening out of control. "At sickening speed I have roared and clattered, I have rocketed through my time, breaking all the limits, time limits, speed limits, city limits,

jumping lights and cutting corners, guzzling gas and burning rubber, staring through the foul screen with my fist on the horn". The word "screen" here has a double significance, referring not just to a windshield but to the debased cinema of pornography and money that takes up so much room in Self's imagination. Like modernity, it threatens to crowd out contemplation itself.

5. REFERENCES

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