

Allegory and Allegoresis in Martin Amis's *Money*

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I shall start with the discussion of some passages from D. H. Lawrence's essay on Galsworthy, where Lawrence posits a fundamental distinction between what he calls the "true human individual" and the "social being." "While a man remains a man, a true human individual," writes Lawrence, "there is at the core of him a certain innocence of naiveté which defies all analysis" (Lawrence 219). A division--and eventually a split--between man's subjective and objective consciousness led to the fall from this original state ("conceived as a feeling of at-one-ness with the universe" 220); after the fall, man is degraded to the status of "social Being," subordinated to the reign of money. "Money," says Lawrence, "of course, with every man living goes a long way. With the alive human being it may go as far as his penultimate feeling. But in the last naked him it does not enter" (219). When, however, the alive individual loses his feeling of identity with the living continuum of the universe, he falls into a state of fear where his only conceivable reaction is the striving to protect himself against the world, "to insure himself with wealth... Money, material salvation is the only salvation. What is salvation is God. Hence money is God" (220). It seems that at this stage the state of innocence is irrevocably beyond reach: even rebelling against the money-god is inauthentic as it does not, cannot regain naiveté; the rebel remains "castrated just the same, made a neuter by having lost his innocence" (220).

Lawrence's narrative follows a fairly well known mythical and theoretical scheme, where the story of man's downfall is projected onto a topography of the self: the origin of the story (Edenic at-one-ness) is identical with the deepest core of personality. The fall from the original state of innocence (which, incidentally, is posited here as some arcane knowledge) into a state of fear is presented in terms of a shift away from the core of the self. The fallen, divided self, having lost the knowledge of his innocence, creates an inauthentic deity, identified by Lawrence's syllogism as money. In his fear of the outside world (suddenly become alien, other), man accumulates as much of the false god as possible, making out of it a protective layer around himself. While man is entrenching

himself in layers of the outside world, his self recedes back into itself, or rather, into the inauthentic, material half of itself. It would seem from this text that the authentic self is irredeemably lost (as is suggested by the word 'castrated'); later on, however, Lawrence implies the possibility of some archeological recovery (or uncovering) of the core of manhood, when he claims that humanity is humanly unconscious, unaware of its hidden naiveté (222). As elsewhere in his writings, Lawrence's language associates this original core of manhood with the body ("naked him"); accordingly, its loss is metaphorized as the loss of bodily energies, potency ("castrated," "neuter"). A recovery of the true self would, then, require the recovery of the body and a consciousness of the body as the source and site of authentic desire and happiness.

If we disregard Lawrence's missionary zeal and some implications of his mythical framework, it is obvious that his narrative--and the kind of language he uses--is relevant to Martin Amis's novel, where several key words of Lawrence's story appear (self, fall, fear, innocence), although with ironical overtones (deprived of the teleology of the Lawrentian myth.) Amis's novel seems to be a study of the inauthentic self in the fallen state of fear, seeking false safety in the false god it has created: money. Amis explores some of the problems raised by Lawrence, and other problems raised by the implications of Lawrence's language: the relationship between money and the inauthenticity (or disintegration) of the self; the contemporary social being as a fallen being; money as a transcendental entity (and the problems inherent in allegorical discourse about money); the Utopia of the self in at-one-ness with the body, the self as the source of authentic desire. One of Amis's primary concerns is exactly the inauthenticity of desire in contemporary society; in the (relentlessly) dystopian landscape of the self he presents, desire is transformed before its inception into pornography--it is always already pornographic ("pornography" is used in the novel in a broad sense, meaning something like desire turning into consumption, determined by external systems of signification instead of originating in the self; in terms of the body, for instance, it means what Baudrillard calls the "erotization" of the body, constituting it as a carrier or palimpsest of the exchanged signs of predetermined desire (Baudrillard 208).

I shall discuss some of these issues as they are related in Amis's novel to the question of allegory and allegorical interpretation, reading the book in the light of another allegorical narrative about money: Zola's novel of the same title.

On the very same day, John Self receives two presents. One is a plastic woman, a gift from the anonymous mystery caller who is pestering Self all the time on the phone and is set on destroying him completely. The gift happens to be extremely appropriate, since Self is admittedly addicted to pornography: the plastic woman may be seen as an allegory of his desire, the archetypal object of pornographic desire (which Baudrillard calls the "poupée sexuée," 235).

If the first gift may be read allegorically, the other one is itself an allegory. It is a book, given to Self by Martina Twain, the female agent of the author in the novel, the woman representing the only hope of genuine human emotions, the very tentative initiator of rewriting Self's life as a redemption story instead of the definitive version we are reading.

The book is *Animal Farm*, a well-known allegory. Self, who does not read books anyway, has a very tough time poring over Orwell's book; reading *Animal Farm* is a kind of test, something he has to accomplish in order to meet Martina again; (setting a test is one of the ways in which Martina tries to transform Self's life into a story with meaning.) Even after he has got through the book, Self does not understand it: he does not get the allegorical meaning, unable to recreate a higher level above the literal meaning of the words. To put it in another way: Orwell's allegory is not a consumer's good and Self is simply not equipped with the kind of reading/consuming strategy the text would require. He is incapable of switching over into a different (say, esthetic) mode of appropriation, called for by a text that insists on its otherness from the reader" in the sense that it sets up obstacles in the way of the interpretation, i.e., it demands work, interpretative investment to bring out what it yields: surplus meaning, deeper (or higher) meaning, an immediately inaccessible level of meaning.

It is certainly not by chance that Self's first venture into what he calls "the bookish, contemplative life" is by way of an allegory (although Orwell is relevant in other respects as well; *1984* also features on the reading list compiled by Martina as a 20th century "survival kit," reinforcing the dystopian atmosphere of the novel). The word "allegory" actually appears in the novel when Self is discussing his formative reading experience with Martina (Amis 212).

Self's first reading experience seems to be a kind of *mise en abyme*, providing a clue for our interpretation. Let it be noted, however, that it is not *Animal Farm* itself that functions as a *mise en abyme*, but the reading process (itself). Self is reading a book the allegorical meaning of which eludes him entirely; fortunately, there is someone to provide the explanation (she happens to be the agent of the author). If this episode is really a miniature duplicate of the novel, and if the novel is really an allegory, it is an "allegory of reading the world." Self fails entirely as the reader of his life, and since this reading assumes an existential significance, the failure to read properly incurs real punishment. Seen in this light, *Money* is the allegory of misreading a world that although full of signs, cannot be read allegorically, since the authority to explain (that of the implied, or in this case "implicated" rather than implied author) is questioned, or taken over by eternal systems of signification. Besides the allusion to Orwell, Amis's novel abounds in other signals of allegory, invitations to allegorical reading. The novel offers itself as an allegory in several ways, disrupting at the same time the possibilities of allegorizing. I shall now look at four aspects of this self-subverting allegorical invitation, comparing it occasionally with Zola's much more straightforward allegory.

First of all, Amis's text offers itself as an extended trope, the general allegory of money. This (the allegorical mode of the text) is confirmed by two conspicuously planted instances of personification allegory very early on in the novel. "Inflation, they say, is cleaning up this city. Dough is rolling up its sleeves and mucking the place out" (Amis 3). The second one, on the very next page, is even more conspicuous:

Fear walks tall on this planet. Fear walks big and fine... One of these days I'm going to walk right up to fear ... I'm going to walk right up and say, 'Okay, hard-

on, No more of this. You've pushed us around for long enough. Here is someone who *would not take it*. It's over. Outside? ... Fear is a bully, but something tells me that fear is no funkier. Fear, I suspect, is really incredibly brave. Fear will lead me straight through the door, will prop me up in the alley among the crates and empties, and show me who's the boss ... Now I come to think about it, maybe I'd better let fear be. He's too good at fighting, ... fear really scares me. He's too good at fighting, and I'm too frightened anyway. (Amis 212)

In this extremely effective hypertrophied allegory, the little narrative creates a reality of its own, so that even the tautological phrase "fear really scares me" seems to make sense in the context, while it also reattaches the allegory to the primary reality of the novel. Money reappears later as the object of personification allegory, as in the sentence "We are all stomped and roughed up and peed on and slammed against the wall by money" (270).

Reading the novel as the allegory of money depends upon the status of money in allegorical language. As an analysis of fictional and philosophical discourse on money shows (cf. Simmel, Marx, Spengler), it is at least doubtful whether money can be placed on either of the poles of allegory; on the one hand, it is both an object and a concept; on the other hand--as Simmel demonstrates--its essence is its emptiness, lack of content, infinite interchangeability; it is somewhere between material reality and the world of ideas; it is very much like language, a semiotic system in the field of value which is its transcendental signified. Allegorizing money therefore implies allegorizing language itself as a strategy of meaning-making; it has to be a self-scrutinizing, deconstructive allegory (as allegory is defined by Walter Benjamin, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller and Murray Krieger), turning back upon itself as language and aware of the inevitable failure of (allegorical) signification. (Amis's novel is very much aware of this, as it is concerned with systems of significations which have nothing to do with the reality they cover instead of revealing it.)

Amis's novel offers itself as an allegorical narrative also in the sense that it is the retelling of an arch-story (cf. Honig). This arch-story seems to be the *Divine Comedy* (there are numerous references to Dante's work: the dog, 666, all the talk about a fallen world, hell, the underworld inhabited by ghosts, pain and punishment). The narrative logic of the novel, however, is not allegorical in the traditional sense; deprived of the teleology inherent in Dante's narrative, and of the possibility of an external position or point of view, the story borrows the logic of the *Inferno* only. It is purely repetitive; instead of the progress of the allegorical protagonist, there is only a kind of "fraying," "attrition," "erosion," a sense of a slow spiraling down to ever lower levels of energy.

In Zola, the story clearly has an allegorical shape: the rebellion of man against God's supremacy, the reenacting of man's desire to become god; Saccard's career is modeled on the archetypal structure of rise and fall; his whole struggle has strong theological overtones: his financial enterprise is seen in terms of reconquering the Middle East, the Holy Land, recreating a Garden of Eden. His fight is Christianity's crusade against Jewish plutocracy, represented in the novel by the godlike Gundermann, an invisible yet

ubiquitous and omnipotent man, divinely exhausted like Borges's gods. The struggle between Saccard and Gundermann is seen as a Theomachia, a struggle between "two fabulous monsters" (cf. Zola, *Money*), it is also the struggle of abstract qualities (imagination versus rationality, desire versus asceticism). Finally, the fall of Saccard and his World Bank is described in apocalyptic language, accompanied by the apocalyptic turbulence of the last days of Napoleon III's crumbling empire. In Amis, apocalyptic language is pervasive, but real fall is inconceivable, since it is already Hell. Self is already "down here." The story is "terminal" rather than apocalyptic, pervaded by what Kermode calls an immanent sense of an ending. Amis's novel is too much about the here and now to assume a coherent allegorical shape (even Paul de Man concedes that allegory is a coherent narrative structure, provided that it is set in an ideal time--217).

Amis's novel seems to be an allegory also in the sense that some of the major characters have blatantly allegorical names like Martina Twain and Selina Street; the obvious example is the narrator-protagonist John Self, apparently a kind of contemporary Everyman, inhabiting the empirical level of the allegory. The empirical level, however, which is supposed to be self-effacing in allegory, is very problematic in the novel: reality is unreal, things already "mean" something according to preestablished systems of signification, where everything (and everybody) becomes a sign, or rather, a palimpsest for changing signs. The self is no exception; it is never identical with itself, it is made up of "timelag, culture shock, zone shift" (264), a de-realized object ("cretinized" like "girls who subliminally model themselves on kid-show presenters," "Men whose manners show newscaster interference, soap stains, film smears"--27).

Even the body becomes an entity on which the signs of always already present codes are being endlessly inscribed. There is simply no longer any empirical self to be allegorized. The interpretative procedure which Leo Bersani calls "the allegorization of the self" seems to reveal nothing that is not already inscribed on the surface. In Zola, the allegorization of the self is undisturbed; allegorical figures (like La Mechain) function according to clearly definable roles in the text. The protagonist Saccard is also an allegorical figure, both in terms of "standing for" something (say, illimitable desire) and in terms of having a personality that can be allegorically interpreted: Zola's language of character-reading abounds in expressions like "the true face of someone," "delving down into the depths of someone's soul").

If Amis's novel is an allegory, it has to possess a "metaphor of purpose" (Honig 12), i.e. the reason for the allegorical constitution of the text, related to the authority of the writer: the authority that "supports the parabolic way of telling the story" and "validates the allegorical image" (Miller 358). In Amis's novel, however, the figure of the author fails to guarantee the allegorical meaning, to provide a satisfactory authority over the text. Martin Amis is metaleptically present in the story as a character, possessing only a very limited measure of transcendence, which allows him to beat Self in chess (but only just) and to reconstruct the story of how Self has been set up. He is part of Self's world, his language commingles with that of Self and eventually his creation defies him by staying alive when he ought to be out of the picture.

The Utopia of art as an autonomous sphere, safely separated from the ordinary world by its aesthetic and ultimately moral superiority, no longer seems to be possible. Amis can be (and *is*) bought by Self to rewrite the script of the film Self is supposed to be directing; it seems that art cannot avoid becoming "pornography" as soon as it appears as something to be bought ("The books are for buying, gentlemen. You don't read the books here," remarks the assistant in a porno emporium, 323). In Zola, art (and the artist as a character) represents an autonomous sphere which, however, does not insist on its isolation from money culture to assert its autonomy.

In his essay, "Money in Literature," Zola claims that money, earned by hard work, in fact enables the writer to create his autonomy: "Money has emancipated the writer, money created modern literature ("L'argent ..." 200-201). He insists that writers ought to respect money because "money is the courage and the dignity of us writers who need to be free to be able to tell all; money has made us the intellectual leaders of the century, the only possible aristocracy" (209-10). In Zola's novel, *Jordan*, the incipient writer, eking out his existence as a hack journalist, is surely on the way towards such autonomy; he is almost the only character who is not involved in financial speculation; faith in his vocation and perfect domestic bliss support him even in times of economic difficulties. It is a precarious harmony (they are saved from repossession by Saccard who is moved by the affectionate couple), but it is still possible without isolating itself from the outside world.

The sinister and slightly ridiculous figure of Martin Amis is very far from this idyll. Most of his energy is used up in his constant striving to demonstrate his separateness from the money world, to occupy a position outside the world of the book. The difficulty of this undertaking is shown by the fact that Amis (the "real," implied one) dramatizes his "own" inability to remain in full control of the story, to provide a source of "referential authority" (Man, *Allegories* 204), a guarantee of allegorical meaning.

Money encourages and invites allegorical reading by almost announcing itself to be in the allegorical mode; if it is indeed an allegory, it is a very problematic one: by choosing money as its "transcendental signified," it explores and questions the very possibility of allegorical signification; the possibility of a coherent allegorical narrative pattern and the coherent empirical self that can be allegorized are both made problematic, together with the possibility of an authentic referential authority.

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