

**Notes from the Urban Underground**  
***Money: A Suicide Note***

(chapter 3 of  
*Understanding Martin Amis,*  
by James Diedrick)

*(page numbers in brackets correspond to original printed edition)*

"*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." --James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis.*

*Money stands ruinously at the center of every vital interest.*  
--Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

[70] 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. This chapter will analyze the comic artistry of *Money*, including its figurative strategies, narrative voice, satirical motifs, and use of doubles and doubling.

[71]

**Plot and figurative design**

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 pedalling "smoking, drinking, junk food and nude magazines."<sup>2</sup> 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 (the most inspired of many inspired names in *Money*), 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, broke, 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 [72] 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" (7). 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" (11). 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, pterodactylese, fish-purr" (86). Tinnitus again? 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."<sup>3</sup>

A common condition. 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--  
Â£%Â¼@=&\$--sums, subtractions, compound terrors and greeds. 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 [73] get loose till I feel the juice-- . . .*" (104). 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. I don't want any of these voices but I especially don't want this one. It is the most recent. It has to do with quitting work and needing to think about things I never used to think about. It has the unwelcome lilt of paranoia, of rage and weepiness made articulate in spasms of vividness: drunk talk played back sober" (104). 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" (104). 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 [74] (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."<sup>4</sup> 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 and onanistic 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."<sup>5</sup> The spectacle of Self's "private culture"--by turns appalling, savagely hilarious, touching, and contemptible--represents a tour-de-force of satiric representation. Self's narrative, written in 1981, is like an extended hangover following the orgy of the "Me" decade. 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. One method of this magic is what Amis has called the novel's "mad exuberance."<sup>6</sup> [75] Self's quoted speech may be halting and fractured, but Amis has infused his soliloquies with a dazzling punk-poetic eloquence, a wholly original blend of what Ian Hamilton has called "low slang and high figurative artifice."<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Yardley has taken the fullest measure of this achievement: "in *Money* we listen not to Martin Amis speaking through John Self, but to John Self speaking through Martin Amis. We have to go a long way back--perhaps all the way to the Compson children in *The Sound in the Fury*--to find a novelist so utterly possessed by his narrator; the result, as

they say in the macho world John Self inhabits, is awesome."<sup>8</sup> *Money* frequently traverses the traditional boundary placed between a satiric persona and the reader. As his surname suggests, Self is meant to be broadly representative. Like his tinnitus, Self's experiences of temporal confusion, psychic fragmentation, and anxiety are common symptoms--of the postmodern condition that has shaped his voice as well as the voices of his fellow "Earthlings."

In this sense 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.

### Self's voice

Doing justice to the novel's verbal artistry alone would require a separate essay, but some avenues worth further exploration can be suggested here. Amis has set severe limits on [76] himself in *Money*, since his narrator is verbally challenged and resistant to literature, not to mention narrative structure ("in my state, you don't want things assuming any shape on you" (131)). 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 [77] *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" (61). 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" (16).<sup>2</sup>

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" (306). 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" (29)). Fortunately for the reader and the novel's art, this [78] 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. At one point, for instance, Self lists the titles of the few books he owns. It is one of many great comic lists in the novel, and it reveals how Self's money mania reduces all of culture to the same qualitative level. "*Home Tax Guide, Treasure Island, The Usurers, Timon of Athens, Consortium, Our Mutual Friend, Buy Buy Buy, Silas Marner, Success! The Pardoner's Tale, Confessions of a Bailiff, The Diamond as Big as the Ritz, The Amethyst Inheritance*" (67). Self tells us that "most of the serious books are the accumulations of Selina's predecessors" (67), and that he hasn't read them. Those who have will recognize that they are concerned with the deforming influence of money--as is the novel Self is narrating. 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 pennyless"), 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" (69).

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. Self's use of the word "true" and [79] its variants in the following passage is a telling example. It conveys the perverse depth of his emotional investment in money: "Selina says I'm not capable of true love. It isn't true. I truly love money. Truly I do. Oh, money, I love you. You're so democratic: you've got no favourites" (221). Later in the novel, when Self's money

malignancy is in temporary remission, he uses repetition a different kind of longing. "Me, I don't like what I want. What I want has long moved free of what I like, and I watch it slip away with grief, with helplessness. I'm ashamed and proud of it. I'm ashamed of what I am. And is that anything to be ashamed of?" (299). "I" is used eight times in four sentences here, effectively capturing its speaker's self-absorption. Moreover, Amis teases the reader into thought by reversing the order of the verbal pairs ("like/want" becomes "want/like") and by using "ashamed" three times in close succession but with entirely different connotations. The last sentence here carries an arresting comic charge (via verbal doubling) that effectively conveys Self's confused struggle to change.

Like his syntax, Self's vocabulary is rough and ready. It also reflects a dialectical doubling appropriate to his transatlantic background (his mother was American, and he spent several childhood years in New Jersey). Few of his words are more than two syllables in length, and many are of the four-letter variety. His word choices give his voice a unique accent nonetheless. Some of them are simply working class Britishisms ("brill" for brilliant, "knackered" for exhausted, "sock" for apartment); some are favored Americanisms that take on an added charge coming out of a British mouth ("deal," "gimmick," "upshot"). Others are slang terms whose meaning Self expands ("rug" becomes his [80] word for any hair, not just a toupee) or uses in an altered context ("redo" is generally used as a verb, and applied to renovation, but Self turns it into an all-purpose noun, as in "rug redo"--which translates as "haircut"). "Redo" and "rethink" are two of his favorite terms, reflecting his mechanistic self-conception (he refers to himself repeatedly as a robot, a train, and a cyborg). Most of these terms are conventionally masculine, if not macho, and so are his favored phrases, especially "butch it out," "shagged out," "there was nothing more to say."

There is something more to say about Self's voice, however--its alternation between the tough guy and the teenager, for instance. As Ian Hamilton has noted, Self's voice often "comes out sounding like Holden Caulfield done over by Mickey Spillane."<sup>10</sup> Or like Martin Amis. Readers familiar with Amis's other novels and nonfiction will notice that Self's voice often partakes of Amis's distinctive accents, from Martian-style descriptions to sharp social satire. Hamilton describes its tone as "an urban-apocalyptic high fever," adding that it is "somehow kept steady, helped across the road, by those old redoubtables--wit, worldly wisdom, and an eye for social detail."<sup>11</sup> Qualities that inform Amis's writing generally, in other words. Yet for all of the vocal "doubling" whereby Amis's voice inhabits Self's, Self never seems a mere mouthpiece for his creator. He retains his uniqueness, as his description of Manhattan street life demonstrates: "I strode through meat-eating genies of subway breath. I heard the ragged hoot of sirens, the whistles of two-wheelers and skateboarders, pogoists, gocarters, windsurfers. I saw the barreling cars and cabs, shoved on by the power of their horns. I felt all the contention, the democracy, all the italics, in the air" (12). Self's language is visceral, elemental; even his abstruser musings are experienced as sensations.

### Satirical motifs

[81] As the preceding passage suggests, Self is especially expressive about machines. His fetishistic relationship to his sports car is the ultimate expression of this impulse. One of Amis's major satirical strategies in *Money* is his use of proper names; they evoke actual models or people while partaking of a wholly imaginary realm. Fielding uses a limousine called an *Autocrat*; Martin Amis drives an *Iago 666*. These vehicles share the road with *Acapulcos*, *Alibis*, *Boomerangs*, *Farragos*, *Hyenas*, *Mistrals*, *Tomahawks* and *Torpedoes*. *Fiasco*, the name of Self's purple sports car, sounds like a combination of an Italian *Fiat* and an American *Fiero*, while forming a word that describes the tenor of its owner's life.

In keeping with the novel's satire on commodity fetishism, Self invests his car with powers well beyond its mechanical function. "It's temperamental, my *Fiasco*, like all the best racehorses, poets and chefs" (64). It also inspires some of his best punk-poetry, as in this passage, which unbeknownst to Self makes explicit the theme of doubling that echoes throughout the novel. "The car and I crawled cursing to my flat. You just cannot park round here any more. . . . You *can* doublepark on people: people can doublepark on you. Cars are doubling while houses are halving. . . . Rooms divide, rooms multiply. Houses split--houses are tripleparked. People are doubling also, dividing, splitting. In double trouble we split our losses. No wonder we're bouncing off the walls" (64).

Self's ignorance of the implications of many words, his own as well as those of other people, generates some of the novel's best satirical comedy. When Fielding tells him that they cannot sign the actress Day Lightbrowne to their film because she was recently date raped by her therapist, Self is stymied. [82] "Date-raped, huh. What kind of deal is that? What, sort of with bananas and stuff?" (26) Later, after his first encounter with Martin Amis, Self visits a New York brothel called the Happy Isles. One of the prostitutes asks him his name, and he answers "I'm Martin" (97), confiding to us that he hates his own name ("I'm called John Self. But who isn't?" (97)). One lie leads to another, and to an hilarious misunderstanding. It turns out that the prostitute ("they call me Moby," she tells Self, parodically alluding to "call me Ishmael," the opening sentence of *Moby Dick*) is a graduate student in English literature at a New York University.

When Self tells her he's a fiction writer, she asks him what kind of fiction he writes. He hears her question as "John roar mainstream." He's never heard the word "genre," so he can't hear her actual question as "genre or mainstream?" She has to spell out her meaning: "are they mainstream novels and stories or thrillers or sci-fi or something like that?" (98). It is the first of many instances where Self's ignorance of literature will get him in trouble. In fact, his subsequent rejection of this intimidating woman in favor of a less educated, more voluptuous prostitute named "She-She" anticipates his later, more fateful turn from the literary Martina to the pornographic Selina.

Throughout *Money*, Amis uses comic means to deepen the novel's themes. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his treatment of Self's relationship to high culture. Although Self has always turned a deaf ear to literature itself, he appreciates its commercial currency. One of his best-known TV commercials was an ad "for a new kind of flash-friable pork-and-egg bap or roll or hero called a Hamlette. We used some theatre and shot

the whole thing on stage. There was the actor, dressed in black, with [83] his skull and globe, being henpecked by that mad chick he's got in trouble. When suddenly a big bimbo wearing cool pants and bra strolls on, carrying a tray with two steaming Hamlettes on it. She gives him the wink--and Bob's your uncle. All my commercials featured a big bim in cool pants and bra. It was sort of my trademark" (70).

This is the first of many Shakespearean allusions in *Money*, all of which echo with serio-comic relevance to Self's situation. Like Hamlet's relationship to his stepfather, Self has a troubled, violent relationship with his father. In fact, Barry Self has recently taken out a contract on him--Laertes' employment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern echoed in a pulp fiction mode. In addition, the revised script for the autobiographical film Self is attempting to make echoes the Oedipal dynamics of *Hamlet*: the son kills his father hoping to protect his mother. Beyond these plot parallels, Self's existential soliloquies--which often seem slightly crazed--crackle with a skewed insight that recalls Hamlet's own high-pitched dramatic monologues.

*Othello* is an even more pervasive motif in the novel. Self tells us that just before he left for New York, he was told that Selina was cuckolding him. Later, when he reluctantly attends the opera *Otello* with Martina Twain, he assumes that Desdemona is cuckolding Othello, missing the point entirely. Self's subsequent summary of *Otello's* plot is one of the parodic gems in a novel full of brilliant parodies. It is also a signal example of how Amis "doubles" Self's voice, speaking through it of Self's character and limitations:

*Luckily I must have seen the film or the TV spin-off of Othello, for despite its dropped aitch the musical version [84] stuck pretty faithfully to a plot I knew well. The language problem remained a problem but the action I could follow without that much effort. The flash spade general arrives to take up a position on some island, in the olden days there, bringing with him the Lady-Di figure as his bride. Then she starts diddling one of his lieutenants, a funloving kind of guy whom I took to immediately. Same old story. Now she tries one of these double-subtle numbers on her husband--you know, always rooting for the boyfriend and singing his praises. But Otello's sidekick is on to them, and, hoping to do himself some good, tells all to the guvnor. This big spade, though, he can't or won't believe it. A classic situation. Well, love is blind, I thought . . . (277).*

"He can't or won't believe it." Although Self finally resembles Othello less than he does Roderigo, the lecherous spendthrift and victim in Shakespeare's play, he is like Othello in his double gullibility. He is (often wilfully) ignorant of the complex web of deception and double-dealing he is enmeshed in. First he discovers that Martina's husband has been sleeping with Selina (later he will find that his best friend did too); then he learns that "Frank the phone," the caller who has goaded and bedevilled him during his time in New York, is none other than Fielding Goodney, who ruins him financially. Goodney has no clear motive for any of this, but then neither did Iago: he acted from what Coleridge termed "motiveless malignity."<sup>12</sup>



The language of *Othello* actually extends to Self's final, violent confrontation with Goodney, though Self is deaf to the allusion. Self has brutally beaten the disguised Goodney, [85] mistaking him first for Frank the phone, then the red-headed woman who has been following him. After the beating, he asks the crumpled figure to identify itself. "'Oh damn dear go,' it seemed to say. 'Oh and you man dog'" (322). It isn't until late in the novel, when Self recounts this scene for the Martin Amis character during their chess game, that he is given a translation of these lines from the play, spoken by Roderigo as Iago stabs him: "Oh damned Iago. Oh inhuman dog." Amis remarks "fascinating," and adds "pure transference" (347). Fluent in the language of Freudian psychology, the Amis character recognizes that Goodney thought of himself as the wronged Roderigo and Self as Iago. Even though Martina has given Self a book on Freud to read, part of his "how-to kit for the twentieth century" (308), he is doesn't yet understand Freudian terminology or Amis's comment. He even mistakes the *Othello* quotation for a reference to the Amis character's car (an *Iago 666*). "The cunning bastard, I thought. Oh, I caught that reference to his own little rattletrap. He's definitely after my *Fiasco*" (347). Not so: Amis, like every character in the novel save Martina, is just manipulating Self.

This reference to Self as an "inhuman dog" is no accident. It takes up and further extends a web of animal imagery that clings to Self throughout his narrative. A double-edged motif, this imagery functions to extend the satirical portrait of Self (so debased that he often seems sub-human) while simultaneously engaging the reader's imaginative sympathy for him. Self reads George Orwell's allegorical novel *Animal Farm* during his relationship with the bookish Martina Twain, and while its allegory is lost on him, the novel still strikes responsive chords. Well before he reads the book, he describes himself in animal [86] terms. He stares at a barmaid with "the face of a fat snake, bearing all the signs of its sins" (14). Waking with a tremendous hangover (one of many), he enters the bathroom, emerging "on all fours, a pale and very penitent crocodile" (16). The pigs in *Animal Farm* clearly disturb him, however--doubtless because they remind him of his earlier self-characterization: "200 pounds of yob genes, booze, snout, and fast food" (35). He thinks of them with high distaste: "You should see these hairy-jawed throwbacks, these turd lookalikes, honking and chomping at the trough" (191).

Self *can* imagine aspiring to the status of a dog, on the other hand:

*Where would I be in Animal Farm? One of the rats, I thought at first. But--oh, go easy on yourself, try and go a little bit easy. Now, after mature consideration, I think I might have what it takes to be a dog. I am a dog. I am a dog at the seaside tethered to a fence while my master and mistress romp on the sands. I am bouncing, twisting, weeping, consuming myself. A dog can take the odd slap or kick. A slap you can live with, as a dog. What's a kick? Look at the dogs in the street, how everything implicates them, how everything is their concern, how they race towards great discoveries. And imagine the grief, tethered to a fence when there is activity--and play, and thought and fascination--just beyond the holding rope. (193)*

This entire passage precisely (and touchingly) describes Self, who earlier confided to the reader that he "longed to burst [87] out of the world of the world of money and into--

into what? Into the world of thought and fascination. How do I get there? Tell me, please. I'll never make it by myself. I don't know the way" (118). The spectacle of Self relating to *Animal Farm* strictly as an animal story, and relating to it profoundly on that level, is one of the great comic conceits in the novel. Comic, yet not simply condescending: the Self-referential image of the dog staked to its animal nature but yearning for the world beyond the restraining rope is a humanly compelling one and nudges the reader toward genuine sympathy.

Self's case is a hard one, however. He seems allergic to the sustained effort that thought requires. Like reading, for instance. "I can't read because it hurts my eyes. I can't wear glasses because it hurts my nose. I can't wear contacts because it hurts my nerves. So you see, it all came down to a choice between pain and not reading. I chose not reading. Not reading--that's where I put my money" (44). As a result, the world of complex thought remains out of Self's reach. Martina talks one evening about aesthetics, about the "reluctant narrator" in a novel, "the sad, the unwitting narrator"--Self, in other words. But he can't understand what she is saying. "I could follow her drift for seconds at a time, until the half-gratified sense of effort--or my awareness of watching myself--intervened, and scattered my thoughts" (126).

When he does begin to make the effort, under Martina's tutelage, he begins to glimpse the truth: literature and other forms of disciplined thinking and imagining sharpen one's hearing, restore one's responses. "The thing about reading and all that," Self realizes, "is--you have to be in a fit state for it. Calm. Not [88] picked on. You have to be able to hear your own thoughts, without interference. On the way back from lunch (I walked it) already the streets felt a little lighter. I could make a little more sense of the watchers and the watched" (130). Besides Freud, Martina has given Self books on Marx, Darwin, Einstein, Hitler, and a book titled *Money* (not the novel but an economic history). By reading the latter, Self almost articulates a recognition that capitalism, and his own greed, go hand in hand with economic and social inequality: "by wanting a lot, you are taking steps to spread it thin elsewhere" (263). But he never pursues the moral implications of this fact. Martina has offered him the lifeline of ideas, and he even recognizes it as such. He simply can't hold on to it long enough.

Martina is the first woman Self has related to on fully human terms since his mother died during his childhood. Since then, all his relations with women have been mediated by money and pornography. His passion for Selina is spoken in these two voices exclusively, which unite in fetishistic rapture whenever he speaks of the "omniscient underwear" he eagerly purchases for her. When he dreams of her, he dreams of "the arched creature doing what that creature does best--and the thrilling proof, so rich in pornography, that she does all this not for passion, not for comfort, far less for love, the proof that she does all this for *money*. I woke babbling in the night--yes, I heard myself say it, solve it, through the dream-mumble--and I said, *I love it. I love her...I love her corruption*" (39-40). Note the significance of the ellipsis points here: Self loves Selina's commodified sexuality, not Selina herself.

Initially, Self has no way at all of relating to Martina; outside the language of pornography, women have no identity for him. "I [89] can't find a voice to summon her with" (114) he says of her at first, before imagining her as a kind of alien (her name is after all an anagram for Martian): "she is a woman of somewhere else" (128). The story of Martina and Self's evolving relationship--ill-fated, interrupted throughout by the shouts of money and pornography--is genuinely moving. When he finally, temporarily wakes from his pornographic stupor, he glimpses the difference between fetishistic desire and human connection:

*I know I'm a slow one and a dull dog but at last I saw what her nakedness was saying. I saw its plain content, which was--Here, I lay it all before you. Yes, gently does it, I thought, with these violent hands . . . And in the morning, as I awoke, Christ (and don't laugh--no, no, don't laugh), I felt like a flower: a little parched, of course, a little gone in the neck, and with no real life to come, perhaps, only sham life, bowl life, easing its petals and lifting its head to start feeding on the day. (310)*

By the time Self relates this experience, Martina has taken in a dog she names Shadow, who keeps tugging at his rope when she or Self walk with him near Twenty-Third Street, "where everything was unleashed, unmuzzled. . . . He looked baffled and hungry, momentarily wolverine, answering to a sharper nature" (267). Martina says that each night Shadow's desire to return to this region, where he once lived, "gets weaker," but says "sometimes . . . he wants to go." Self reassures her that Shadow "knows what the good life is," that it is with her.

Self's attempted reassurance here is double-voiced: he is speaking of himself as well as Shadow. He wants to stay with [90] Martina, to live in her world of order and contemplation. But part of his nature, or more precisely his mediated desires, pull him in other directions. In response to Self's comforting words about Shadow, Martina frets that "it's his *nature*" to seek that other region. While in America, the land of second chances, Self entertains the possibility of change and reform. But just when Martina seems to have made this possible, Selina arrives from England, where second chances don't come quite so easily. And she stokes the fires of his pornographic desires. His subsequent loss of Martina is accompanied by a symbolic devolution. Selina calls Self while he is exercising, "wiggling my legs in the air like an upended beetle" (312). After Selina has seduced him into bed, Martina appears. Self is on his back, and he describes what Martina sees: "the decked joke, flummoxed, scuppered, and waving his arms" (319). Like Kafka's Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, Self has become an insect.

He does not remain one, however. Despite his debasement, Self's radical honesty and capacity for shame raise him above the level of many other characters in the novel. Reformative change remains a (faint) possibility for him, even at the end of his narrative. If anything, the American film actors Self deals with are more debased than he is, and certainly more deluded. In Lorne Guyland, the actor signed to play Gary, Self's father, Amis has written the last word on the aging male narcissist. Self wants his film to accurately echo his own lower-class roots; Lorne wants to rewrite the father's character, so that he becomes a "lover, father, husband, athlete, millionaire--but also a man of wide

reading, of wide . . . culture, John . . . I see Garfield at a lectern reading aloud from a Shakespeare first edition, bound in [91] unborn calf" (172).

The role of Garfield's son in the film has been assigned to Spunk Davis, fresh from his first successful film role and thus in high demand. He was poor before discovering fool's gold in Hollywood, and at one time "never wanted to forget what it was like to be poor" (315). But he has fallen for the actress Butch Beausoleil, who has taught him to deny his past. "I'm through with all that now and I feel good about my money," Spunk says defiantly, which inspires Self, wiser at least than this, to indulge in an observation about American-style self-deception worthy of his creator: "So this philosopher had frowned his way to a conclusion. The pity was that the whole of tabloid and letterhead America had reached it before him" (315-16).

### Doubles 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 intertwined. 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- [92] 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. "When I wing out to Cal for my refit, when I stroll nude into the lab with my cheque, I think I know what I'll say. I'll say, 'Lose the blueprints. Scrap those mock-ups. I'll take a Fielding'" (207). Even Spunk Davis inspires a passing infatuation, causing a brief sexual identity crisis until Self takes his own counsel: "relax, he's just giving you a pang of your younger self" (301).

The most extensive of these doublings involves Self's relationship with the character Martin Amis, hired to rewrite the film script (which is also of course Self's story). All four of Amis's previous novels have contained self-reflexive elements; in *Money* he makes this explicit. 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" (64). 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."<sup>13</sup> 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 [93] Amis, the character, is a suave, intelligent, highly educated, comfortably middle-class writer who quite obviously finds Self, and what he represents, unsavory."<sup>14</sup>

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 offhandedness 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 yob's breakfast" (165). 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 [94] creator viewed through the distorting lens of an unlikely double.<sup>15</sup> 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" (85). 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.<sup>16</sup>

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. "Remember the stir in the flaming summer of '76?" Self asks. "My nihilistic commercials attracted prizes and writs. The one on nude mags was never shown, except in court" (76). Amis experienced prominence and success in the 1970s for a body of work that generated considerable controversy, including charges [95] 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

Self's tribulations with his film project slyly mirror the critical controversies attending Amis's postmodern narratives. When the Amis character agrees to become Self's script doctor, Self spells out his ailments. "We have a hero problem. We have a motivation problem. We have a fight problem. We have a realism problem" (221). Amis's own novels exhibit these "problems" as well. His protagonists are anti-heroes,<sup>19</sup> their motivation seldom fully explained; they are often involved in grotesque violence; and they inhabit fictional worlds that obey a literary but not always a conventionally realistic logic. Self's "aesthetic standards" are driven purely by the conventions of the popular market, so he wants Amis to provide larger than life heroes, clear-cut motivation, and "realism" as defined by current mainstream conventions. The Amis character obliges, since the price is right, all the while schooling Self in his own literary [96] assumptions (and explaining to the attentive reader why *Money* is the kind of novel it is).

In all of his appearances, the Amis character is treated with the same comic irony that is leveled at Self. In the following encounter, Self and Amis talk about how their similar "problems" effect their chosen genres--films and novels. Amis explains why heroes are scarce in modern fiction:

*"The distance between author and narrator corresponds to the degree to which the author finds the narrator wicked, deluded, pitiful or ridiculous. I'm sorry, am I boring you?"*

*"--Uh?"*

*"This distance is partly determined by convention. In the epic or heroic frame, the author gives the protagonist everything he has, and more. The hero is god, or has god-like powers or virtues. In the tragic . . . Are you all right?"*

*"Uh?" I repeated. I had just stabbed a pretzel into my dodgy upper tooth. Rescreening this little mishap in my head, I suppose I must have winced pretty graphically and then given a sluggish, tramplike twitch . . . .*

*"The further down the scale he is, the more liberties you can take with him. You can do what the hell you like to him, really. The author is not free of sadistic impulses." (229)*

Self's complaint about his tooth here comically emphasizes his status as an anti-hero subject to his author's impulses. But in true dialogic fashion, it has an additional, countervailing effect. By interrupting the Amis character's would-be monologue, Self [97] asserts his autonomy, his refusal to be a mere authorial "gimmick." A few paragraphs later, this impression is strengthened. The Amis character claims that "the twentieth century is an ironic age--downward-looking. Even realism, rockbottom realism, is considered a bit grand for the twentieth century." Self's irrepressible, skeptical response: "'Really,' I said, and felt that tooth with my tongue" (231). Self and realism alike emerge triumphant from this encounter.

Self may be the victim of his author's postmodern assumptions about fiction, in other words, but he never surrenders his fundamental autonomy within these constraints, nor the freedom of his elemental responses. He retains what the Amis character calls a fictional character's "double innocence" (241)--ignorance of his role in a fiction, ignorance of the reasons why things are happening to him in a particular way. In the final pages of the novel, an italicized section symbolizing Self's escape from his author's surveillance and control, he has one brief, final encounter with the Amis character, curses him, and watches him leave the room, looking "stung, scared" (359). Having survived suicide, Self even survives his author's withdrawal of authorship. As Amis said in an interview after *Money* was published, "I learned very early on that no matter how much you do to forestall it, the reader will believe in the character and feel concern for them."<sup>20</sup>

Self's relative autonomy, like the many ways in which he is an authorial double, is crucial to the dialogic design of *Money*. While Self is unmistakably represented as less intelligent, educated, and self-aware than the Amis character, he still speaks for him on the lower frequencies. Both, for instance, must make their way in the cultural marketplace. One of the novel's unspoken ironies [98] is that Self's TV advertisements and mainstream film project are far more viable commercially than Amis's self-consciously postmodern narratives. The relative print space given to Self and the Amis character in *Money* accurately reflects the currency of their chosen genres. One of the novel's running jokes about the Amis character is Self's concern about how much money he makes. When Self notices that he washes his clothes at a laundromat, he says to the reader, "I don't think they can pay writers that much, do you?" (71). When they converse for the first time, in The Blind Pig pub, Self asks him, "Sold a million yet?" In response, Amis "looked up at me with a flash of paranoia" (85). 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" (243). 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 [99] 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" (218). 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*.<sup>21</sup> 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 moonspots and boneshadow you're bound to get if you hang out in the twentieth century" (243-4). 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.

## Conclusion

When Self reads *1984*, he is attracted to the world it depicts: "A no-frills setup, run without sentiment, snobbery, or cultural [100] favouritism, Airstrip One seemed like my kind of town. (I saw myself as an idealistic young corporal in the Thought Police)" (207). 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" (305). 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.<sup>22</sup>

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."<sup>23</sup>

John Self, who made himself through advertising, who has a "screening-room inside my head" (304), is the embodiment **[101]** 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" (288). 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.