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Introduction: Listen to *Money* Singing

Joseph Brooker

I listen to money singing. It's like looking down
From long french windows at a provincial town,
The slums, the canal, the churches ornate and mad
In the evening sun. It is intensely sad.

Philip Larkin, 'Money'

This issue of *Textual Practice* is dedicated to a set of essays on Martin Amis's novel *Money* (1984). The origin of the collection was a one-day symposium at Birkbeck, University of London in May 2009. The event's title, *Money Talks*, announced a set of talks about *Money*, and more talk in their wake, a quarter-century after the novel's publication. It also suggested that *Money* itself has something to say: that it can talk to us about its own time and ours, and the relations between them. Money, as a substance, is said to talk in the novel's pages. The book's narrator John Self reflects on the different voices echoing through his head, and those he hears around Manhattan: and one recurring voice, to his ears, is the voice of money itself, crackling, buzzing and whispering to him. Bob Dylan in 1965 had adapted the familiar phrase to insist that 'Money doesn't talk, it swears'.¹ In a season of counter-cultural scepticism, he surely meant that the idea that money talks – persuades, seduces, gets its way – was too mildly phrased to be accurate: if we want to grasp how money communicates, we have to see it as acting more violently, obscenely and uncompromisingly. The novel, not shy of obscenity or violence, perhaps supports this case.

The conceit of money's voice was played upon by Philip Larkin – godfather to his namesake, Martin Amis's brother – in the poem completed in 1973 and quoted above. Money reproaches the poem's speaker for not using it more profligately, regularly reminding him: 'I am all you never had of goods and sex. / You could get them still by writing a few cheques'.² Briefly looking back at his novel in his memoir *Experience* (2000), Amis connected it with the poem. The novel reprises the poem's sense of money as an interlocutor, reproachful or seductive, and its lesson that money is eloquent enough to open many doors. The novel also seconds the sadness on which the poem suddenly ends: though it is an immense black comedy, *Money* also has its tides of melancholy. In rereading the novel now, the essayists in this issue

listen to *Money* singing, and try to identify its timbres and tones as well as its meaning.

Amis's fifth novel, *Money* was a far bigger book than any he had previously published. An element of sheer ambition is part of its effect. In publishing his first 400-page volume, Amis also made a bigger demand on his readers, who would need to give him more attention, trust him with more of their time. *Money* acknowledges this with characteristic throwaway literary referentiality. John Self, reading *Animal Farm* in room 101 of the Ashbery Hotel, wearily observes:

It takes such a long time to get from, say, page twenty-one to page thirty. I mean, first you've got page twenty-three, then page twenty-five, then page twenty-seven, then page twenty-nine, not to mention the even numbers. Then page thirty. Then you've got page thirty-one and page thirty-three – there's no end to it.³

As we ford the halfway mark, he announces that 'the book is also turning on itself and getting nearer to being over' (211), and this time he appears to mean the book in which he appears. *Money* is a book that demands a certain effort to read, which also reflects on the protocols and rewards of reading.

The novel occupies a contested conjuncture in recent British literary history. Dominic Head has written suspiciously of the 'myth of the post-consensus Renaissance'. In this historical narrative, the English novel of Butskellite Britain becomes moribund, parochial and insular, reflecting stagnation and inflation through the 1970s, then is suddenly revived around the turn of the 1980s as Margaret Thatcher administers long, sharp shocks to industry and society, and a new generation of writers shows up to rejuvenate English fiction.⁴ This is the moment of *Granta's* top twenty 'Best of Young British Novelists', announced in 1983 and featuring several who would become a confirmed canon in contemporary British fiction: Amis, Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie, Ian McEwan, Graham Swift, Kazuo Ishiguro. For all those writers' manifest diversity, it is not hard to see how *Money* (previewed in an early draft in *Granta*, then unleashed in full the following year) would be a flagship of that informal movement.⁵ While Rushdie, Barnes and Ishiguro were revitalizing English fiction with infusions from India, France and Japan respectively, Amis was clearly keen to take on the role of American correspondent.⁶

Much of the book's force indeed derives from its self-conscious, aggressive bid to break with a perceived norm of polite, reflective English fiction, doing all the things that such novels were not supposed to do. But one

need not cleave entirely to the 'post-consensus Renaissance' case to see *Money* standing out. Dominic Head makes a good case for continuity, for the value of English fiction in earlier decades, and for the mythic rather than empirical status of the literary renaissance of the Thatcher years. What is not to be doubted, though, is *Money's* rare linguistic extravagance. On this score, the book is too bold to be considered a continuation of normal service, and also too *sui generis* to be a reliable representative of any broader literary movement.

In *Axel's Castle* (1931) Edmund Wilson adjudged *Ulysses* 'the most completely "written" novel since Flaubert'.⁷ All novels are written, but we sense Wilson's meaning: that it was the most carefully written, painstakingly, flamboyantly, ostentatiously written; even at times the most wilfully overwritten. In this sense, within the specific tradition of the English novel, *Money* was more 'completely "written"' than most. Amis forged a voice which mixed American slang with English working-class patter; high literary allusion with the lowest forms of mass, indeed masturbatory culture; lyricism with bathos. Simply take a feature like repetition (of words, phrases or whole sentences), alliteration, or metaphor in *Money*, and you could mine an article from a few consecutive pages. The riches are an embarrassment, the more so as they are attributed to a man who when he actually speaks often can't string five words together. A gulf yawns between the job who narrates the book and the exquisite invention of that narration, and it has never been clear just what one should do with that gulf, save laugh at it as an immensely extended built-in joke.

Amis mints a miniature vocabulary for John Self to call his own, and to resonate in readers' minds in years to come. The words are often recognizable from elsewhere, but are made into a private diction, the verbal version of his 'private culture': the suit with its boxy strides, the pad with its tang of batch, the county chicks with their county prongs, the rug rethink - all part of our time travel, our travel through time. In unlovely London you go down the drinker, be it the London Apprentice or the Jesus Christ; in American parlance the next morning the hungover, penitent prong punishes the pale can. Even the repeated assertion that someone is 'in turnaround' appears to be a Hollywood studio locution that Amis has chosen to treat as everyday English.

Neologisms and redirected words are part of a stylistic pattern that also includes recurrent direct address to the reader; the ellipsis, usually dotting gently away after a comic punchline; and the incessantly coupled adjective and noun ('smiting light and island rain' [3], 'foaming malls' [69], 'stained pavements' [153], 'swamped Ninth Avenue' [193]), rhyming,

bouncing off or polishing up one another. Such touches thicken the texture and give the reader more to slow down and ponder, on the long trek all the way down pages 23, 25, 27, 29, not to mention the even numbers. Much remains to be articulated about just how the novel's voice stretches to lyricism, a few paragraphs or even lines away from low comedy – just as, in a book of two big cities, deluxe apartments or private parks sit sore-cheek-by-jowl beside the torched slums and winded boozers.

The book's texture is so dense that a discussion of its formal properties can almost forget to mention another outstanding feature: the appearance of a writer called Martin Amis, in a novel written by Martin Amis. That metafictional gambit adds another flavour, another distraction, to a book that might already seem overladen with them. In one sense the move might be deeply traditional, reaching back as far as another London literary innovator, Geoffrey Chaucer. In another it was surely a highly contemporary tactic, typical of the time: a self-referential gesture to place beside Alasdair Gray's insertion of an author figure into *Lanark* (1981) or Rushdie's similar moment in *The Satanic Verses* (1988), and perhaps most directly inspired by Kurt Vonnegut's encounter with his own alter ego Kilgore Trout in *Breakfast of Champions* (1973). You could call it postmodernism, then, and in interview Amis has accepted this label for the book – but that does not tell us exactly what happens when his avatar walks into a scene, or how the things he says in the book make us reflect on his own persona.

Money is flamboyantly written and ostentatiously crafted, but this is no empty indulgence of form. For the book also insistently addresses substantial themes from the real world that it gibbously mirrors. An extremity of artifice coexists with the pursuit of contemporary actuality. A major instance is the novel's provocative discourse on gender and sexuality. Standing in a Manhattan gay bar, John Self feels surrounded by 'Adam in full stubble and muscle and sweat. All you needed in here among the shadows and sawdust was your maleness, your sour testosterone' (200). He blames men for turning from heterosexuality in the face of feminism: 'The first sign of bother, after a carefree fifty million years, and we throw up our hands and go gay? [...] Come on you guys, don't run out on me like this. Where's the old cave spirit?' (202). The meditation is emblematic, combining a heavy consciousness of masculinity with a resentful sense that feminism has changed the order of gender relations. If Self looks merely sexist, he is also voiced with comic lightness, and makes an unexpected move in finding gay culture the height of masculinity. *Money* is full of these cross-currents. It is unmistakably a book about gender: the pains of being a man and the struggle with feminism's

wake; the nature of desire and its illicit relations with commerce; the idea that sex plus money makes for pornography; and the pathos of prostitution.

Certainly some of the most evident politics here are sexual politics. But *Money* touches on other versions of politics too: the way that money itself shapes power relations, and the changing bonds between social class and culture. Ask most people who have a vague idea about *Money* what it's about: they will probably mention none of the features discussed above, but say that this is a novel of the 1980s. They might even say it was *the* novel of the 1980s. They wouldn't just mean that it happened to be set in 1981 and published in 1984 – the latter date chiming with the novel's own repertoire of Orwellian reference. They would mean that this book more than most aligns with our retrospective sense of what the 1980s were about, acting as an expression and assessment of the early years of Thatcherism in Britain and Reaganism in the USA.

An important part of that point, indeed, is that to talk about Britain in the 1980s *was* to talk about the USA, about Americanization of various kinds: so the condition-of-England novel is sometimes narrated from an aeroplane between Heathrow and JFK, by a man who has been told that the mid-Atlantic drift of his accent makes him sound like a disc jockey (206). Expenditure, consumption, excess are all over the book. So, slightly more subtly, is individualism, from the narrator's name through his confession of private pleasures – watching TV, eating junk food alone, handjobs. Just what relation to the emerging world of the 1980s does *Money* have? Is it critical, excited, amused, prescient? In any case, we are in a position to confirm Ian Hamilton's prediction upon the novel's publication: 'I am already persuaded that *Money* will be thought of for years to come as one of the key books of the decade'.⁸

The hour of *Money*'s publication is well behind us. But in some less literal respects that decade has been insistently present in the early twenty-first century. Two kinds of presence can be distinguished here. The *revival* of aspects of the 1980s has been visible across fashion, film, television, popular music, design and even literature. Films set in the period are one measure: the coal-strike drama *Billy Elliot* (2000) or the Falklands-era *This is England* (2006) in Britain, and numerous American instances. In English fiction, one can observe the minor sub-genre of the retro-1980s novel: Tim Lott's *Rumours of a Hurricane* (2001), David Peace's *GB84* and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* in 2004, David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* (2006). *The Line of Beauty* was promptly adapted into a period drama series on BBC television, thus partaking of the broader retro-culture in which period pop songs (The Passions, Spandau Ballet, New Order) can act as ready triggers for historical

association.⁹ The same fate awaited *Money* itself in May 2010. The novel was dramatized in two hour-long episodes as a central feature of BBC2's 1980s season, alongside a Royal Wedding comedy-drama and a biopic of Boy George: further confirmation of the increasingly entrenched sense of *Money* as literary emblem of its era. The adaptation itself carried some lurid visual stylization, but blandly altered the ending and unsurprisingly dispensed with most of Amis's language. It received mixed reviews, but Amis himself gallantly acclaimed it in the press.¹⁰

Money was thus explicitly appropriated into a culture of 1980s revivalism. To such revivals we can add the second form of the presence of the past: the *persistence* of major features of the 1980s through subsequent decades. This is a matter of politics and economics rather than the arts. In Britain and the United States, the 1980s are associated with deregulation, privatization, regressive tax regimes, the promotion of the free market as a social model, and accompanying assaults on public spending, welfare programmes and the labour movement. It would be difficult to argue that these principles have been fundamentally reversed or challenged in the North Atlantic in subsequent years. On the contrary, what we would now call the neo-liberal model has spread. Across Europe, so much is evident in the Germany of Schröder and Merkel, Berlusconi's Italy, Sarkozy's France, or the relative retrenchment of the celebrated social democracies of Scandinavia. To this record one can add what Naomi Klein presents as the 'shock doctrine' of neo-liberal medicine administered to reluctant but desperate nations in the developing world.¹¹ As John Self put it in summer 1981, 'You just cannot hide out from money anymore' (153). In this sense, if *Money* did accompany a new political dispensation, it has remained relentlessly pertinent rather than swinging in and out of fashion. Notwithstanding New Labour, the once vaunted 'third way', or the financial crisis of 2008, the world still awaits the radical change of course that Self briefly ponders in the novel's italicized coda (384).

Money, we have seen, is a peculiarly rich book, which does several distinctive things at once or in quick succession. Accordingly the essayists here approach the novel from diverse directions, which relate to the themes traced above. All of them address questions of literary form, aware that the extravagant texture of *Money* inflects everything it touches. Amis's own statement that 'style is morality' is taken up by both David James and Isabelle Zahar, who explore the relation between these terms. James is interested in Amis's reprisals of aspects of modernism. He highlights particularly a lineage that has been overlooked by criticism, the likeness of Amis's 'behaviourist' fiction to that of

Wyndham Lewis. Zahar picks up on Amis's declaration that artist-critics are 'secret proselytizers for their own work', reading closely his critical statements on American fiction and finding terms with which to discuss *Money*. John Updike in particular emerges as a somewhat overlooked model for the way *Money* 'lets the ordinary man sing and soar'. Both James and Zahar find a diversity of registers within John Self's monologue. Formal questions are linked to the issue of literary influence by Finn Fordham. Lighting on Amis's long-standing admiration for Vladimir Nabokov, Fordham asks how exactly Amis absorbed Nabokov's work in the years leading up to *Money*'s publication, and how this influence might be visible in the novel itself. Fordham concludes that while *Money* 'may be a masterpiece' and Amis's best work, Amis's openness to complexity still compares unfavourably with that of his Russian master.

Cathryn Setz and Kaye Mitchell both address matters of gender and sexuality. Setz views *Money* as a comedy of masculinity. Alongside the pathos of John Self's 'crying jags' and the sit-com humour of his domestic dialogue, she finds something more troubling in the representation of Fielding Goodney. In Amis's rendition of a sinister transvestite Setz finds 'a writer for once *not* in control of his craft'. Yet in *Money*'s multiple ironies she sees an enduring ambiguity which makes simple condemnation an inadequate response. Mitchell, meanwhile, assesses the importance of pornography in *Money*. In doing so she brings a valuable new emphasis to the study of Amis's work, by carefully situating *Money* in its particular moment in the history of feminism and gender relations. Mitchell points to the varieties of feminist argument prevalent through the 1970s, and recounts the debates about pornography and censorship engaged in by Catharine Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin around the time of the novel's publication. She also suggests that the novel has proved prescient: its picture of a generalized world of pornography has effectively been corroborated by the 'pornification of culture' in the twenty-first century.

In different ways, the final three essays address *Money*'s relation to the trajectory of Thatcherism and neo-liberalism. Philip Tew diagnoses John Self as a sufferer from alexithymia. Drawing on contemporary psychiatry to explain the concept, Tew proposes that Self's problem is not simply an individual one, but exemplary of contemporary society: the character 'displays the propensities inculcated by an era of commodified consumption, excess profit and aggressive egoism'. In this sense, Tew argues, this work is not the 'period piece' it seems but a prophecy of the conditions of the post-millennial present. On a different tack, Nicky Marsh reads *Money* in an economic context. Like Kaye Mitchell, Marsh carefully situates *Money* in

history, this time through a reading of economic debates in the late 1970s and early 1980s. She also draws on the 'new economic criticism' to place the novel in a distinctive theoretical frame. Marsh sees the doublings in the novel as a figure for 'the divergence between what have come to be thought of as financial and industrial forms of capital'. Finally, my own essay reads *Money* alongside Alasdair Gray's contemporaneous novel *1982 Janine*. Drawing on Stuart Hall's analyses of Thatcherism as a contradictory ideological formation 'speaking in the ear' of the subject, I present both novels as uneasy monologues from within the imaginative space of a new Conservatism.

In this special issue, then, critics approach *Money* by numerous routes: voice, style, ethics, literary tradition, comedy, masculinity, pornography, psychology, ideology, economics. Building on existing criticism of the novel – by such readers as James Diedrick, Jon Begley, Gavin Keulks and Emma Parker – they set new terms for future discussion of a work that will surely continue to appear central in its field. Hamilton's intuition of *Money's* enduring status has so far proved sound. The essays that follow demonstrate how the novel has retained its force and fascination.

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¹ Bob Dylan, 'It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)', *Bringing It All Back Home* (Columbia Records LP, 1965).

² Philip Larkin, 'Money', in *High Windows* (London: Faber, 1974), p.40.

³ Martin Amis, *Money: A Suicide Note* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), p.204. Subsequent references to this novel will appear in parentheses in the text.

⁴ See Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), Chapter One.

⁵ The draft section published in *Granta* in 1983 makes an interesting comparison with the finished novel. Neil Powell has briefly examined the differences and noted that the final text is more textually dense, showing 'how thoroughly Martin crafted and polished the book': *Amis & Son: Two Literary Generations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008), p.328. It is striking to realize that John Self, his name seemingly so indispensably emblematic, was originally called John Sleep. Few critics have made much of this, understandably more interested in Self's symbolization of an individualistic era. The sheer strangeness of 'John Sleep' may have appealed to Amis, but the earlier name also suggests a character sleepwalking to disaster. It may have resonated more broadly with Amis's sense of the character as a dupe of mass culture, 'stupefied by having watched too much television': interview with John Haffenden, reproduced in Nicolas Tredell (ed), *The Fiction of Martin Amis* (Cambridge: Icon, 2000), pp.60-66 (p.63).

⁶ See my discussion of the novel and Amis's generation in *Literature of the 1980s: After the Watershed* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp.50-61.

⁷ Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (Glasgow: Collins, 1961), pp.163-4.

⁸ Ian Hamilton, 'Martin and Martina', *London Review of Books* 6:17 (20 September 1984), 3-4 (p.4).

⁹ For a fuller discussion of 1980s revivalism see Brooker, *Literature of the 1980s*, pp.209-18. On the history of retro culture in general see Elizabeth E. Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (London: Reaktion, 2006), focusing especially on design and visual art; and with a more musical and contemporary emphasis Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (London: Faber, 2011).

¹⁰ Tom Sutcliffe in the *Independent* (24 May 2010) and Ed Cumming in the *Daily Telegraph* (28 May 2010) both plausibly complained that the story could not survive the loss of Amis's prose, and that Nick Frost's John Self was too amiable a buffoon for the lead role. Rachel Cooke, at Amis's old stable the *New Statesman* (27 May 2010), cited similar drawbacks and reckoned it the worst programme of 2010 so far. Amis himself praised Frost and accepted the adaptation as 'someone else's idea of the book, the basic difference being that a novel is about interior life and a film about exterior life': 'Martin Amis: for my Money, the BBC got it right', *Guardian*, 26 May 2010, G2, p.3.

¹¹ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2007).