

Money, 'Money', *Money*: Cultural Transactions between Philip Larkin and Martin Amis

PETER MARKS

Philip Larkin was far more important to Martin Amis than Martin Amis was to Philip Larkin. Larkin appears more frequently in *Experience*, the first volume of Amis' autobiography, than any writer other than the author's father, Kingsley, and the person who might be thought of as his surrogate father, Saul Bellow. A photo in *Experience* shows Larkin, slightly menacing, standing in front of a bookcase, the caption reading simply, 'Larkin'; the poet in this context needs no further introduction. (By way of comparison, a group photograph has Robert Graves' full name). Larkin features repeatedly in Amis' critical writing, for example in *The War Against Cliché*, where he earns his own titled section – only Nabokov and Updike receive the same star treatment. Amis' extended defence of Larkin, 'The Ending: Don Juan in Hull', appears there, having been first published in the *New Yorker* in 1993. Amis also wrote the Larkin obituary for *Vanity Fair*, reproducing it later in his collection of journalism, *Visiting Mrs Nabokov and Other Excursions*. And the *Martin Amis Website* has a section on Larkin under the page titled 'Affinities', which 'features links to writers with important connections to Amis'. There, Amis gets classified a 'LarkinholiC', a term neither he nor Larkin would have liked. Yet in *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin* Amis barely gets a walk-on part, and then chiefly because he is Kingsley Amis' son. Admittedly, this epistolary absence depends on Amis having lost many of the letters Larkin sent him, but the sketch Larkin produces of Amis in these letters is tellingly faint. In a 1972 effort to Norman Iles, Amis receives the briefest of character references: 'he was all right – got a first in English'.¹

¹Anthony Thwaite ed., *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940–1985* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p.460.

If Larkin here is rather offhand about the adolescent Amis, the adult Martin remains a zesty champion of the poet. In ‘The Ending’ Amis comes not to bury Larkin, nor necessarily to praise him, but to act as advocate for someone now travestied by others as an almost diabolical figure. Not because Larkin is a particularly honourable man, but because Amis detests the response to revelations of Larkin’s political, cultural and sexual views set out in *Selected Letters* and Andrew Motion’s 1993 biography. Amis declares:

In 1985, the year of his death, Philip Larkin was unquestionably England’s official laureate, our best-loved poet since the war: better loved, *qua* poet, than John Betjeman, who was loved also for his charm, his famous giggle, his patrician bohemianism, and his televisual charisma, all of which Larkin notably lacked. Now, in 1993, Larkin is something of a pariah, or an untouchable. He who was beautiful is suddenly found to be ugly.²

The overreaction, Amis writes, ‘has been unprecedentedly violent, as well as unprecedentedly hypocritical, tendentious and smug’.³ I do not wish to wade into the now-cold pool of that debate, but I do want to establish biographical and textual links between the novelist regularly described as ‘the best writer of his generation’ and the poet sometimes seen as the best Poet Laureate Britain never had. I aim to use these connections, and a sense of Larkin and Amis *films* as in certain respects representative of their times, to make some general claims about developments in British writing in the second half of the twentieth century. Obviously, I am painting with a very broad brush, so to add definition I will focus specifically on money – the commodity itself, as well as the title of Larkin’s poem from *High Windows*, and of Amis’ astringent comic novel of 1985. These works, and their respective conceptions and depictions of money, I will argue, help measure an important distance between postwar and postmodern life and literature in Britain.

The connecting thread between the two writers, of course, was Kingsley Amis. As his son reports: ‘It was love, unquestionably love, on my father’s part. He wanted to be with Larkin *all the time*’.⁴ And from the outset, money (the spendable, hoardable kind) bound the three together,

² Martin Amis, *Experience* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), p.153.

³ *Ibid.*, p.153.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.238.

even if Martin was too young to recognise the fact. ‘I was very short of money when I was a baby’, writes Amis mock-pathetically in *Experience*:

I slept in a drawer and had my baths in an outdoor sink.... Kingsley would sometimes write to Philip Larkin pleading for the loan of a fiver – or even a quid. It was really tough; but I don’t remember any of it.⁵

What he does remember, from the age of four or five, and writes of in the Larkin obituary, is the odd financial ritual indulged in when the poet visited the Amis family in Swansea. Larkin, as godfather and namesake to Amis’ brother Philip, would ‘tip the boys’:

At first it was sixpence for Philip against threepence for Martin; years later it was tenpence against sixpence; later still it was a shilling against ninepence: always index-linked and carefully graded.⁶

He corrects this account in *Experience*, but downwards, labelling the earlier memory ‘a gross exaggeration: it was fourpence for Philip and three pence for Martin’.⁷ Larkin’s frugality, as interpreted by the young Amis, differed alarmingly from that of Martin’s own godfather, Bruce Montgomery. In the *Vanity Fair* piece Amis suggests that Larkin’s ‘meanness was legendary’,⁸ while he describes Montgomery in *Experience* as ‘a legend of generosity’.⁹ The obituary argues that Larkin’s ‘feelings about money were complicated and pleasureless. He pronounced the word *bills* as if it were a violent obscenity’.¹⁰ And Amis adds to this personal memory the assessment that ‘[m]oney meant work, and there was a priestly stoicism in Larkin’s devotion, or submission, to his job as Librarian at Hull’.¹¹ More figuratively, in *Experience* he locates in Larkin an ‘emotional parsimony’,¹² one he feels can be detected in Larkin’s complex and slowly cooling relationship with Kingsley.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.44.

⁶ Martin Amis, ‘Philip Larkin 1922–1985’, *Visiting Mrs Nabokov and Other Excursions* (London: Penguin, 1994), p.205.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.241.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.202.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.242n.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.202.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.203.

¹² Martin Amis, *Experience*, p.245.

In both these retrospective pieces, Amis quotes the first and last stanzas of Larkin's 'Money' as a way of exploring the poet's character, his relationships, and his achievements. Particular attention is paid to money's reproach in that poem ('I am all you never had of goods and sex') itself read in contrast to Kingsley Amis' early disappearance 'past all recall, into a carwash of goods and sex'.¹³ Larkin, by implication, never entered that wet, soapy world. Martin then recounts a revealing conversation he had with the poet:

- You should spend more, Phillip.
- He didn't answer.
- You've just bought the car and that's good. Now you –
- I wish they wouldn't keep sending me these *bills*.
- For the car.
- They keep sending me these *bills*.
- You can afford them. Now you should –
- I wish they wouldn't keep on sending me all these *bills*.¹⁴

Amis works this personal interchange for comic effect, but adds a broader note, that 'it was altogether characteristic of him (of him, of his time, of his place) that having identified the difficulty he did nothing to relieve it ... he just hugged it to him'.¹⁵ Emphasising his sense that Larkin was wary of spending money, he adds: 'Someone else would have had to get the goods and the sex. But Larkin did get the poems'.¹⁶ For Amis, then, Larkin's emotional as well as financial parsimony signify a time and place now consigned to cultural history. In that world, a particularly English postwar environment, goods and sex, even if available, might be spurned for the best of reasons. Kingsley Amis' time in America in the late 1950s allowed relief from the pinched world of Britain, and an array of opportunities denied Larkin. Yet Kingsley's belief that 'dodging your share made you an idler and a niggard' meant that Martin's more relaxed attitude to money was dismissed as 'young, modern, ignorant, corrupt'.¹⁷

Still, in Larkin's case, out of this 'hugging' of difficulty came the poems. The dynamics between Larkin, money and writing generally are figured in various ways in *Experience*. In addition to Amis' character

¹³ Ibid., p.244.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.242.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.242.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.243.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.185.

analysis of Larkin's by way of his supposed attitude to money, the novelist reveals that Larkin's poem 'Money' is one of his favourites. And he recalls Larkin's reaction in a letter to *his* novel of the same name:

Unlike my father, he succeeded in finishing it. But in his reply he made it inoffensively clear that he disliked the postmodern liberties I took with the reader, and that he found the prose too dense and worked-at. Parts of the book amused him.¹⁸

Kingsley Amis, Gavin Keulks suggests, thought the novel 'literary blasphemy, unreadable and contemptuous'.¹⁹ Although he did not keep Larkin's letter, Martin Amis remembers a key sentence in it that suggests a slightly more positive if only fleeting reaction from the poet: 'My big shriek came on page 275, line 3'.²⁰

I will return to that big shriek shortly. But having given Amis most of the opening statements, some right of reply seems in order. In the *Selected Letters*, Larkin, having noted Amis' first in English in 1972, next mentions him more revealingly in a letter to Robert Conquest six years later: 'Martin Amis writes to say he has just returned from a mediterranean cruise: "singalongs and bingo in the Cockatoo bar" – and cock too, I suspect. Strange pleasures!'²¹ The association of Amis *fils* and strange pleasures (for which read something more than singalongs and bingo) recurs the following year in a letter to Amis *père*:

And your son Martin going on about porn in the shops: let him come up to Hull and find some. All been stamped out by police with nothing better to do. It's like the permissive society they talk about: never permitted me anything as far as I can recall.²²

Martin of the strange pleasures is a child of that permissive age, a beneficiary of its permission. The profligate consumption of goods and sex, rejected by those like Larkin, are from his perspective greedily and unashamedly taken up by Amis and his peers, a generation set free from the economic privations and social strictures of the decades of austerity that followed World War II. The permissive society, alas, grants its licence

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.243n.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.198.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.243.

²¹ Anthony Thwaite ed., *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940–1985*, p.588.

²² *Ibid.*, p.596.

chiefly to the young. It is worth recalling that when sexual intercourse supposedly began in 1963, as Larkin recounts in 'Annus Mirabilis', he was already a ripe old 41; Amis was then a ripe young 14.

Whatever envy Larkin felt about Amis' easy access to pornography and bingo, his own status as a writer allows him a form of artistic reprisal. In 1981 he comments in a letter to Anthony Thwaite that Amis' new novel, *Other People*, 'sounds piss'.²³ That's all, apart from a positive review of Thwaite's review (it 'read very well') and a swipe at Bernard Levin: 'who says he can review novels by the way?'²⁴ Notice that Larkin's pithy dismissal of *Other People* involves not having read the book – his virtual review is based on Thwaite's actual effort in the *Observer*. Brief as the references to Amis are, they link him to two of Larkin's abiding interests, writing and sex. And, in Amis' fifth and final appearance in the *Selected Letters*, a third concern is added, the largest. 'What are you doing about a literary executor?' Larkin asks Kingsley Amis in 1982:

I don't know anybody under fifty except Douglas Dunn and Andrew Motion. I suppose you'll nominate Martin. NOT THAT I BLOODY WELL CARE what happens when I am amber dust, but one has to say something. The whole business depresses me.²⁵

Larkin was so preoccupied with writing, sex and death, and writing about sex (obliquely) and death (more directly), that even a figure who appears in his letters as infrequently as Martin Amis will pick up the scent of them in Larkin's work. These connections to Amis, sex, writing and death especially, are intriguing in terms of Larkin's response while reading *Money*.

What caused Larkin's big shriek? *Money*'s protagonist, John Self, is a creature of life-threatening excess and squalor: an Olympic-level boozier and junk food guzzler, unabashed pornography devotee, sexual thug, moral and cultural moron. By his own admission he is 'just junk'²⁶ and 'addicted to the twentieth century'.²⁷ Apparently the London-based son of an English father and an American mother, in the passage Self is in New York talking

²³ Anthony Thwaite ed., *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940–1985*, p.642.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.624–23.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.664.

²⁶ Martin Amis, *Money* (London: Penguin, 1985), p.265.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.91.

to his American ‘money man and pal’ Fielding Goodney. They are hoping to produce Self’s semi-autobiographical film, sometimes titled *Good Money*, sometimes *Bad Money*. Goodney suggests they visit an expensive place on Fifth Avenue, and sketches an enticingly lurid picture:

You go in, right? Ambrosia on the rocks with a twist. The Queen of Sheba takes you to her boudoir and with a combination of head and hand gives you the biggest hard on you ever had. You ever saw. You look down and you think, *Whose dick is this?* You look up and the panels of the ceiling fold back. And guess what?

[John Self] A ton of shit comes down on you.²⁸

That made Larkin shriek. Amis comments:

And I found *that* funny. Because Larkin seized on a moment where extravagant (and expensive) sexual temptation is greeted by the prediction of extravagant (and deflationary) disappointment.²⁹

Money, sex and the prospect of a ton of shit – strange pleasures, indeed. But it is the fall from extravagant temptation to extravagant disappointment that Amis recognises as likely to amuse, even thrill, Larkin. The poet’s ‘Money’ does not put it like that, but a disappointed relationship between money and sex emerges. Perhaps that is why Amis calls it a favourite of his and suggests that it uncovers something substantial about Larkin. The longest section on Larkin in *Experience*, the one that contains the first and last stanzas from ‘Money’, is headed ‘He Hugged It To Him’. *He* is Larkin; *it* is money, but it is also *difficulty*.

Is Larkin’s poem similarly money-hugging? Larkin commentators have seen more than simple miserliness at work in ‘Money’, Stephen Regan reading it as the ‘quintessential statement of alienation’.³⁰ He notes the rhythmic banality, the verbal flatness of the first stanza, through the ‘drollery of its middle stanzas into the sublimation of its own worldly anxieties’.³¹ Regan quotes the same stanzas as Amis does:

²⁸ Ibid., p.292.

²⁹ Martin Amis, *Experience*, p.243n.

³⁰ Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p.136.

³¹ Ibid., p.137.

Quarterly, is it, money reproaches me:
 'Why do you let me lie here wastefully?
 I am all you never had of goods and sex.
 You could get them still by writing a few cheques'.

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

For Regan, the last stanza

employs a self-conscious and seemingly incongruous poetic simile, 'It's like looking down ...', – as a way of reasserting the role of the imagination in a modern civilisation that appears hollow and deprived of value. The poem's intensity of feeling is a measure of that absence and emptiness.³²

This ascent above the deprivations of modern civilisation, with the attendant effort to reassert the role of the imagination, could hardly be further from the grotesquely aroused figure trapped beneath a ton of shit imagined by John Self. In 'Money' distancing is necessary for self-preservation; in *Money*, distancing is impossible. Without money, there is neither self nor Self. And money, as Self tells us, is to blame: 'You cannot beat the money scandal. You can only join it'.³³

Stan Smith, while not dealing specifically with 'Money', examines the notion of distance in Larkin's work, which in certain poems 'places the observer in a secure frame'.³⁴ 'Only the abstracted, distanced observer really preserves his individuality', Smith writes, and judges that this

condescension, turning to resentment ... pervades the poetry of the post-war period. It expresses the renewed anxiety of a traditional liberal-individualism that has survived into an era of welfare state social democracy, where mass tastes and values prevail, and the charming yokels of an earlier pastoral have turned into menacingly actual fellow companions, claiming

³² Ibid., p.137–38.

³³ Martin Amis, *Money*, p.288.

³⁴ Stan Smith, *Inviolable Voice: History and Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982), p.172.

equal rights with the egregious and refined spectator of their shoddy ordinariness.³⁵

Certainly, a distancing bordering on condescension (if not quite resentment) can be detected in the figure looking down at a provincial town. And while Smith naturally does not consider Amis' *Money* in his study of Larkin's poetry, his sense of a significant change in the power relationship between classes holds true for the novel, John Self being anything but the charming yokel. At one point, for instance, he verbally confronts the novel's likely readers:

I hate people with degrees, O levels, eleven pluses. Iowa Tests, shorthand diplomas ... And you hate me, don't you. Yes you do. Because I'm one of the new kind, the kind who has money but never use it for anything but ugliness. To which I say: You never let us in, not really. You might have thought you let us in, but you never did. You just gave us some money.³⁶

Larkin's speaker never spends money; John Self never spends it on anything but ugliness.

The class differences, the cultural differences, are bleak, obvious and unsettling. One voice is straitjacketed, intensely sad, while the other emerges strident, angry and seemingly powerful. If Larkin's is the anxious voice of liberal-individualism in an era of welfare state social democracy, that projected by Amis is the aggressive voice of the Britain of 1981, hurtling towards a post-nannystate of rampant and unabashed materialism. Hurtling, perhaps, towards something approaching America, to which the Anglo-American John Self is by heritage and inclination addictively drawn, where he spends so much of his time and energy, talent and money. With Larkin money sings, while with Amis (to quote Bob Dylan) it swears. In the poem money is hoarded, reproachful, the gratification it might provide remaining (to the speaker) denied. Money in the novel is a potent force, the instant and repeated source of gratification, the generator and currency of junk, and the means to its consumption. John Self's economic theory is a crude form of chaos theory:

Money, I think, is uncontrollable. Even those of us who have it, we can't control it. Life gets poor mouthed all the time, yet you

³⁵ Ibid., p.176.

³⁶ Martin Amis, *Money*, p.41.

seldom hear an unkind word about money. Money, now this has to be some *good shit*'.³⁷

Money remains omnipresent and omnipotent, whether as good shit or as a ton of it. And here one might distinguish Self's economic theory from Amis'. As Jon Begley argues in an astute reading of the economic forces at work in *Money*, the novel registers the political and economic instability in play through a barely aware Self who notices but does not fully comprehend the relationship between an Arab oil-hike and the fact that 'ten years later [an insane] big whiteman windmills his arms on Broadway for all to see'.³⁸ Begley states:

It is the economic and political instability that underpins Amis's vision of money as an arbitrary and inexplicable global 'god', an impervious and self-sustaining agency responsible for fracturing the consensual bonds of urban communities and capable of 'pussy whipping' both individuals and nation-states.³⁹

Crucially, that vision is Amis', not Self's, the latter being both tool and focus of the former's satire. Against this dark take on the 1980s celebration of money's liberating potency, Stephen Regan suggests that Larkin's poem catches the dissenting spirit of the young Karl Marx, to the effect that money robs the world of its value and values.⁴⁰ Liberating potency here is replaced by a sense of corrosive devaluing.

Other Larkin commentators have addressed more obviously literary matters. Andrew Motion, for example, detects symbolist attributes in 'Money', though he recognises that

Larkin's exploitation of symbolist techniques does not always guarantee him absolute freedom from time and its ravages. At the end of 'Money', for instance, a gloomily rationalising tone of voice is abandoned only to confirm despair....The visual freedom here and the sense of being raised above immediate

³⁷ Ibid., p.153.

³⁸ Ibid., p.7.

³⁹ Ibid., p.82.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.137.

circumstances, cannot deny the force of the poem's final sentence.⁴¹

And Andrew Swarbrick, arguing that 'Money' persuades because 'it remains exact to feelings of anger, self-reproach and finally an impersonal dismay', contends that in *juxtaposing* rather than *integrating* contrary modes of expression, this and other 'self-reflexive poems' in *High Windows* signal 'the adventurously post-modernist Larkin'.⁴² But though juxtaposing contrary modes of expression might be a necessary condition of postmodernity, it hardly seems sufficient. And the final 'impersonal dismay' Swarbrick detects, something approximated in Regan's note about the 'sublimation of anxieties' and Motion's on 'confirmed despair', suggests some form of *completion* at odds with the emphasis on *process* foregrounded in postmodernist texts. There's also the question of the transfer 'from the worldly to the imaginative, from a kind of truth to a kind of beauty' that Swarbrick notes in the 'mysterious simile'⁴³ of the final stanza, and which is picked up in different ways in the readings by Regan and Motion. Transcendence is not usually taken as a postmodern marker.

The argument for Larkin as intermittently postmodern looks decidedly weaker when the poem is placed alongside Amis' novel. If 'Money' is a statement of alienation, as Regan thinks, it is the alienation of the anxious liberal individual Smith mentions. Certainly there is intensity in *Money*, but not the intensity of the static individual, detached, looking down, sad, with the sadness perhaps a product of the intensity of perception. In *Money* intensity of perception and consumption supercharges the whole culture: fastpaced, superficial, pornographic; junk culture perhaps, but addictive despite or because of that. And *Money* is not merely a novel about the postmodern world; it is a piece of postmodernism itself. The novel playfully disintegrates cultural distinctions, satirises and celebrates junk culture, exposes and mocks its own motiveless action, its fake characters, its narratorial structures and rhythms. And it does so in a quintessentially postmodern move: John Self meets, befriends and briefly assumes the name of a writer called Martin Amis. 'Amis' it is who occasionally explains the twists of the plot to the bewildered Self, assuring him that it will all turn out right in the end. 'Amis' notifies him that the

⁴¹ Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp.49–50.

⁴² Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin* (Hampshire: MacMillan, 1995), pp.134–35.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.134.

other characters are just actors, discusses the relationship between author and narrator, and theorises about the 'blackness of modern writing':

Like everyone else these days, writers have to get by without servants. They have to take in washing and do all their own. No wonder they're morbid.⁴⁴

Consequently it comes as no surprise when 'Martin Amis' succumbs to the lure of money and agrees to rewrite the filmscript for John Self (at double the original offer) on one condition: 'The cheque doesn't bounce'.⁴⁵

Money's postmodernism in fact is there before the beginning of the novel proper, in the preface:

This is a suicide note. By the time you lay it aside (and you should always read these things slowly, on the lookout for clues and giveaways) John Self will no longer exist. Or at any rate that's the idea. You can never tell, though, with suicide notes, can you? In the planetary aggregate of all life, there are many more suicide notes than there are suicides.

To whom is the note addressed? To Martina, to Fielding, to Vera, to Alec, to Selina, to Barry – to John Self? No. It is meant for you out there, the dear, the gentle.

MA

London, September 1981.

Here one can see the postmodern liberties Amis takes with the reader that displeased his father and Larkin. The extract also exemplifies the prose Larkin found too dense and worked-at. Compared to the supposed rhythmic banality and verbal flatness of parts of Larkin's poem, Amis' style is day-glo, urban and knowing. And intense, right across a broad canvas. But intense sadness is not possible, nor is it worked towards in *Money*. Joke characters with their joke suicide notes can be comically sad and sadly comic, but not intensely sad, or sadly intense. Not that that matters. For John Self only *money* matters, even when he finds out that, despite what he has believed all along, he has none:

⁴⁴ Martin Amis, *Money*, p.272.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.239.

Without money you're one day old and one inch tall. And you're nude too. But the beauty of it is, there's no way of doing anything to you if you haven't got any money. They could do things to you. But if you don't have any money, they can't be fucked.⁴⁶

No abstracted, distanced observer here; John Self is embedded in the world of money, the slave to its caprices, the dwarf before its gigantic power, in this case its peculiarly American power. Self grew up in the U.S. of the 1960s, where he

collected many subliminal tips on wealth and gratification. I did the groundwork for my addictions to junk food, sweet drinks, strong cigarettes, advertising, all day television – and perhaps to pornography and fighting.⁴⁷

John Self, postwar child of Britain, child of permissiveness, is culturally a child of America. Compare this to the repressive streets of 1970s Hull Larkin complained about to Kingsley Amis, streets he challenged Martin Amis to find pornography in. Self does more than merely consume pornography in industrial quantities; he also makes it.

Like John Self, Martin Amis spent formative years in America, the result firstly of his father's appointment as Visiting Fellow in Creative Writing at Princeton in 1958. Returning to Swansea the following year Kingsley wrote apologetically to Larkin about his lack of correspondence while away, before noting that in the second half of the trip 'I was boozing and fucking ... practically full-time'.⁴⁸ Consequently, he admits to having a 'very fine time indeed', judging that the Americans

have more energy than we have, and are better at enjoying themselves. They are not complacent or woman-dominated or death-wishing or insecure or naïve – especially not that. Mind you, you have to go there to see this: I can't make anybody here believe it quite.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.383.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.206.

⁴⁸ Zachary Leader, *Letters of Kingsley Amis*, p.599.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.560.

Larkin wrote to Robert Conquest, after receiving this report, that Amis' 'view of Yankland is more sympathetic than mine'.⁵⁰ Larkin would never go to Yankland, though he joked later to Conquest that 'I am really tempted to go and see it if, for me, US would be full of fishy winds, trolley buses, girls like plethoric sausages etc'.⁵¹ To Barbara Pym he wrote that Amis' 1963 novel, *One Fat Englishman*, 'takes its place among all the other books that don't make me want to visit America'.⁵² This already hardened dislike is given satirical vent in a 1977 song Larkin wanted Robert Conquest to sing to Donald Davie (who, like Conquest, was then at Stanford University):

California here I come
 Watching out for drink and bum;
 My thesis
 On faeces in *Ulysses*
 Has knocked em'
 From Stockton
 Grammar School to Los Angeles –
 California, you're my perk,
 Help me to indulge my quirk,
 Otherwise I'll have to work –
 California, here I come!⁵³

John Self has no such fear or loathing. And Martin Amis (the *real* Martin Amis) writes fondly of America throughout *Experience*. Like Self, he picked up American addictions, and addictions to America, including the mannerisms of American literary style. Compare the clipped hesitancy of the opening line of Larkin's 'Money' ('Quarterly, is it, money reproaches me') with the pacy opening of Amis' *Money*:

As my cab pulled off FDR Drive, somewhere in the early
 Hundreds, a low-slung Tomahawk full of black guys came
 sharking out of lane and sloped in fast right across our bows.⁵⁴

This affectionate parody of gritty American realism laced with street-wise mannerisms is one of the voices of John Self. At other moments he will

⁵⁰ Anthony Thwaite ed., *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940–1985*, p.306.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.307.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.362.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.561.

⁵⁴ Martin Amis, *Money*, p.1.

sound like a Cockney wide boy, and the novel moves regularly, effortlessly back and forth across the physical and cultural boundaries of the Atlantic. For Jon Begley and Dominic Head⁵⁵ this suggests that *Money* is a transatlantic work, although Joseph Brooker⁵⁶ and Philip Tew⁵⁷ argue in different ways that although the narrative bounces between London and New York, homebase is always England.

More generally, *Money* is symptomatic of how writers of Martin Amis' generation drew inspiration, techniques, and subject matter from beyond Britain. For Amis, Julian Barnes and Salman Rushdie, to name three of the literary stars of the 1980s and 1990s, America, along with places such as France and India, are spiritual and sometimes actual homelands. Their respective literary outputs incorporate the histories, sensibilities and literatures of these 'foreign' places back into Britain and British literature and culture generally. Rushdie, for example, argues in the 1982 essay 'Imaginary Homelands' that Indian writers in England were 'inescapably international writers at a time when the novel has never been a more international form'.⁵⁸ He adds that one of the freedoms of the literary migrant was to choose his parents, in Rushdie's case Gogol, Cervantes, Kafka, Melville, Machado de Assis.⁵⁹ The eclectic list contains writers from three continents and five countries, but none from England itself. Martin Amis' literary idols – Saul Bellow and Vladimir Nabokov – make regular appearances in his essays, time spent with the latter's wife even providing the eponymous sketch for *Visiting Mrs Nabokov*. And the acknowledged Francophile Barnes paid homage to another American monolith, John Updike, in the *New York Times Review of Books* soon after that writer's death in 2009:

Hearing of John Updike's death in January of this year, I had two immediate, ordinary reactions. The first was a protest –

⁵⁵ Jon Begley, 'Satirizing the Carnival of Postmodern Capitalism: The Transatlantic and Dialogic Structure of Martin Amis' *Money*', *Contemporary Literature* XLV, 1 (2004): 79–105; Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), p.31.

⁵⁶ Joseph Brooker, 'The Middle Years of Martin Amis', *British Fiction Today*. Eds. Philip Tew & Rod Mengham (London: Continuum Press, 2006), p.3.

⁵⁷ Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel* (London: Continuum Press, 2004), pp.94–95.

⁵⁸ Salman Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands', *Imaginary Homelands; Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta, 1991), p.20.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.21.

‘But I thought we had him for another ten years’; the second, a feeling of disappointment that Stockholm had never given him the nod. The latter was a wish for him, and for American literature, the former a wish for me, for us, for Updikeans around the world.⁶⁰

In different but interlocking ways, Amis, Rushdie and Barnes all recognise themselves as literary global citizens, and welcome that internationalism.

Rushdie’s consciously wide-eyed gaze signals and implicitly celebrates the postcolonial world of the 1980s. By contrast, Blake Morrison notes that the Movement writers of the fifties, including Larkin and Kingsley Amis, were ambivalent about the decline of British power after 1945:

There was a public insistence on the inevitability of the dissolution of empire, and on the ‘moral leadership’ which Britain would enjoy instead. But there was also nostalgia for the power that the country once enjoyed, and misgivings at a certain ‘narrowing of horizons’.⁶¹

Morrison nominates Larkin’s ‘Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album’ from *The Less Deceived* (1955) as emblematic of this sensitivity ‘to loss, regret, wistfulness, the immediate past’.⁶² Twenty years on, the poems in *High Windows* more regularly indicate nostalgia for a personal rather than a national or imperial past, though in ‘Going, Going’ the feared death of England before that of the speaker sharpens the personal despair:

Despite all the land left free
For the first time I feel somehow
That it isn’t going to last

That before I snuff it, the whole
Boiling will be bricked in
Except for the tourist parts –

⁶⁰ Julian Barnes, *Flights*, at www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/jun/11/flights/ (accessed 15 November, 2011)

⁶¹ Blake Morrison, *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980), pp.81–82.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.82.

First slum of Europe ...

And that will be England gone,
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,
The guildhall, the carved choirs.⁶³

But the doomed 'England' pictured here, one of shadows, meadows and carved choirs, has a startling insubstantiality, not so much nation as notion. 'Homage to A Government', by contrast, adopts a satirical tone, a polemical stance. Instead of defending the lost cause of postwar England, the poem aggressively records the loss of imperial power. The change of focus is significant, for the 'country/That brought its soldiers home for lack of money' is not England (which does not have a separate government as such) but Britain. And while the gloomy prediction of 'Going, Going' is swathed in the uncertainties of the future (the speaker might be lucky enough to 'snuff it' in time) 'Homage to a Government' concentrates on a specific historical moment, the withdrawal of British troops from Aden. And money, so the first and third stanzas argue, is both the cause and the legacy of this lamentable decision:

Next year we are to bring the soldiers home
For lack of money, and it is all right.
Places they guarded, or kept orderly,
Must guard themselves, and keep themselves orderly.
We want the money for ourselves at home
Instead of working. And this is all right.

Next year we shall be living in a country
That brought its soldiers home for lack of money.
The statues will be standing in the same
Tree-muffled squares, and look nearly the same.
Our children will not know it's a different country.
All we can hope to leave them now is money.⁶⁴

Money here enjoys several functions, depending on how and why it is used or not used. Honourably employed in the service of benign British imperial power, it ensures security and order in places prone to insecurity and disorder. And yet, should the same nation that provides order renege on its

⁶³ Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), pp.189–90.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.171.

imperial duty and choose to indulge itself, money becomes the index of waste and sloth, of work dodged. It is worth remembering here Martin Amis' view that for Larkin money meant work, and that he submitted to his job with a priestly stoicism. Work, whether in Aden or in Hull, is honourable employment. The internal and international failures provide the impetus for a different, tarnished country, in which money assumes a third function, that of a tainted legacy, a debased substitute for ideals and responsibilities.

'Homage to a Government' has been criticised for its unsubtle political analysis, although Larkin considered it more an historical than a political poem.⁶⁵ Stan Smith, for example, charges that it displays a colonialist naivety,

as if presumably, the troops had not been stationed out there for what, in the long term, were financial reasons: to preserve the investments, raw materials, and cheap labour of an imperial economy.⁶⁶

And Andrew Swarbrick describes the poem as 'a mess of inchoate feelings', that while tentatively opposing the 'values of "money" ... fails to construct a genuine dialectic or engage with real feelings'.⁶⁷ Smith and Swarbrick, from different starting points, suggest shortcomings or problems with the ways in which money is treated and not treated in 'Homage to a Government'. Clearly, though they both appeared in *High Windows*, we are some distance here from 'Money', a poem whose limited setting and individualised sensibility define and refine the chastening power of money over the solitary speaker. Larkin's attempt to register the social, or sociopolitical impact of money in 'Homage to a Government' remains sketchy and undigested. The self-aware speaker of 'Money' grasps grim personal truths from his perch above the provincial town, while the speaker in 'Homage to a Government' rises only to the height of a soapbox.

If the postwar movement of Larkin and Amis' *père* harboured a sense of nostalgia for British decline, and feared the demise of the liberal individual, what might be judged the postmodern or postcolonial Movement of writers such as Amis *fils*, Barnes and Rushdie barely

⁶⁵ Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955–1982* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p.52.

⁶⁶ Stan Smith, *Inviolable Voice: History and Twentieth-Century Poetry*, p.179.

⁶⁷ Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach: the poetry of Philip Larkin*, p.140.

mourned the Empire's passing. Instead, they welcomed the edgy possibilities of a future offering cultural and personal pluralism. 'Money' and *Money* register some of these changes and distinctions. But the fact that Larkin managed to read the novel and offer the reserved judgement that parts of *Money* amused him, as well as Martin Amis' respect for Larkin as a writer, caution against making too much of the dislocations and differences. Kingsley Amis' letter to Larkin about *Money* does not invalidate the response:

I laughed heartily at your excellent jest about Martin's book. You almost had me believing that you sort of, well, *enjoyed* it or something, ha ha ha. If I didn't know you better I'd, [etc].⁶⁸

One can detect a fear on the father's part that his respected friend might rate the son's work highly. Indeed, though Larkin disliked the postmodern manoeuvres Amis made in *Money*, he was an enthusiastic reader of that very postmodern novel, *Flaubert's Parrot*, by Amis' then great friend and rival, Julian Barnes. As Larkin wrote to Barnes himself:

Dear Mr Barnes,

I much enjoyed *F's P*, in fact read 2/3rds one night, and the rest in bed between 5&6a.m. the next day. Couldn't put it down, as they say. That is the strongest compliment I can pay it's you who have written a most extraordinary and haunting book I dread trying to reread, for fear it won't work a second time.

I rather dread rereading this letter, but you gather, I hope, that I enjoyed it immensely. Thank you!⁶⁹

Money came out at the same time, so Larkin could scarcely be thought of as having changed his literary standards. But the differences in his reviews suggest that the faults he found in *Money* were not simply the result of an aversion to postmodernist liberties. *Flaubert's Parrot*, he suggests to Barnes, evokes 'the "resonance of despair" ... the subtle echoes and repetitions, the stark misery that gets at you through this most unexpected and unlikely framework'.⁷⁰ Against the strident celebration of junk captured in *Money*, the stark misery Larkin hears in *Flaubert's Parrot* is better attuned to his ear. There is a subtle criticism in Larkin's fear of re-

⁶⁸ Zachary Leader, *Letters of Kingsley Amis*, p.989.

⁶⁹ Anthony Thwaite ed., *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940–1985*, p.721.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.721.

reading Barnes' novel (surely an extraordinary book should survive rereading) but even so it is tempting to see in his response Larkin's sense of Barnes as a postmodern version of himself.

If comparisons between the postwar Movement and a postmodern Movement have some validity, we might speculatively see Barnes as an updated Larkin, while Amis *films* certainly fits the bill as a latter day version of his father. We need not take this musing too far, especially as the friendly if cagey rivalry between the two older writers has not been played out by the younger duo. Martin Amis and Julian Barnes were close friends in the manner of Kingsley Amis and Larkin, but fell out when Amis changed literary agents after 23 years; the agent in question happened to be Barnes' wife, Pat Kavanagh. Not only did he change agents but he did so from the British Kavanagh to the fiercely bargaining American, Andrew Wylie. Amis' reward was a massive advance on his then unfinished novel, *The Information*, which charts the cagey and not so friendly rivalry between two literary friends. When it became publicly known that Amis, like John Self, needed massive and expensive dental work that was being paid for by the advance, Amis was subjected to a weaker rerun of the attacks made on the posthumous Larkin. A representative headline quoted in *Experience* reads: 'Martin Amis in Greed Storm'.⁷¹ The words Amis used to defend Larkin have a wonderfully ironic resonance in the later context: 'He who was beautiful is suddenly found to be ugly'. Happily, painful, extended and costly surgery paid for by *The Information* restored Amis' dental beauty. Money can perform such surface (one might say postmodern) miracles, even if, Larkin's poem reminds us, it remains incapable of relieving existential unhappiness. As the era of neoliberal economic orthodoxy windmills its arms on Broadway for all to see, both the poem and novel offer thought-provoking assessments on the past, present and future of real and imagined money, on how we use it, and how it uses us.

Peter Marks is Senior Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Sydney. He is the author of chapters and articles on utopian and dystopian literature and cinema, literary periodicals, Margaret Atwood, socialist realism and Samuel Beckett. His book *British Filmmakers: Terry*

⁷¹ Martin Amis, *Experience*, p.247.

Gilliam was published in 2009, and *George Orwell the Essayist: Literature, Politics and the Periodical Culture* in 2011.