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Martin Amis: The age of horrorism

It was mid-October 2001, and night was closing in on the border city of Peshawar, in Pakistan, as my friend - a reporter and political man of letters - approached a market stall and began to haggle over a batch of T-shirts bearing the likeness of Osama bin Laden. It is forbidden, in Sunni Islam, to depict the human form, lest it lead to idolatry; but here was Osama's lordly visage, on display and on sale right outside the mosque. The mosque now emptied, after evening prayers, and my friend was very suddenly and very thoroughly surrounded by a shoving, jabbing, jeering brotherhood: the young men of Peshawar.

At this time of day, their equivalents, in the great conurbations of Europe and America, could expect to ease their not very sharp frustrations by downing a lot of alcohol, by eating large meals with no dietary restrictions, by racing around to one another's apartments in powerful and expensive machines, by downing a lot more alcohol as well as additional stimulants and relaxants, by jumping up and down for several hours on strobe-lashed dancefloors, and (in a fair number of cases) by having galvanic sex with near-perfect strangers. These diversions were not available to the young men of Peshawar.

More proximately, just over the frontier, the West was in the early stages of invading Afghanistan and slaughtering Pakistan's pious clients and brainchildren, the Taliban, and flattening the Hindu Kush with its power and its rage. More proximately still, the ears of these young men were still fizzing with the battlecries of molten mullahs, and their eyes were smarting anew to the chalk-thick smoke from the hundreds of thousands of wood fires - fires kindled by the multitudes of exiles and refugees from Afghanistan, camped out all around the city. There was perhaps a consciousness, too, that the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, over the past month, had reversed years of policy and decided to sacrifice the lives of its Muslim clients and brainchildren, over the border, in exchange for American cash. So when the crowd scowled out its question, the answer needed to be a good one.

'Why you want these? You like Osama?'

I can almost hear the tone of the reply I would have given - reedy, wavering, wholly defeatist. As for the substance, it would have been the reply of the cornered trimmer, and intended, really, just to give myself time to seek the foetal position and fold my hands over my face. Something like: 'Well I quite like him, but I think he overdid it a bit in New York.' No, that would not have served. What was needed was boldness and brilliance. The exchange continued:

'You like Osama?'

'Of course. He is my brother.'

'He is your brother?'

'All men are my brothers.'

All men are my brothers. I would have liked to have said it then, and I would like to say it now: all men are my brothers. But all men are not my brothers. Why? Because all women are my sisters. And the brother who denies the rights of his sister: that brother is not my brother. At the very best, he is my half-brother - by definition. Osama is not my brother.

Religion is sensitive ground, as well it might be. Here we walk on eggshells. Because religion is itself an eggshell. Today, in the West, there are no good excuses for religious belief - unless we think that ignorance, reaction and sentimentality are good excuses. This is of course not so in the East, where, we acknowledge, almost every living citizen in many huge and populous countries is intimately defined by religious belief. The excuses, here, are very persuasive; and we duly accept that 'faith' - recently and almost endearingly defined as 'the desire for the approval of supernatural beings' - is a world-historical force and a world-historical actor. All religions, unsurprisingly, have their terrorists, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, even Buddhist. But we are not hearing from those religions. We are hearing from Islam.

Let us make the position clear. We can begin by saying, not only that we respect Muhammad, but that no serious person could fail to respect Muhammad - a unique and luminous historical being. Judged by the continuities he was able to set in motion, he remains a titanic figure, and, for Muslims, all-answering: a revolutionary, a warrior, and a sovereign, a Christ and a Caesar, 'with a Koran in one hand', as Bagehot imagined him, 'and a sword in the other'. Muhammad has strong claims to being the most extraordinary man who ever lived. And always a man, as he always maintained, and not a god. Naturally we respect Muhammad. But we do not respect Muhammad Atta.

Until recently it was being said that what we are confronted with, here, is 'a civil war' within Islam. That's what all this was supposed to be: not a clash of civilisations or anything like that, but a civil war within Islam. Well, the civil war appears to be over. And Islamism won it. The loser, moderate Islam, is always deceptively well-represented on the level of the op-ed page and the public debate; elsewhere, it is supine and inaudible. We are not hearing from moderate Islam. Whereas Islamism, as a mover and shaper of world events, is pretty well all there is.

So, to repeat, we respect Islam - the donor of countless benefits to mankind, and the possessor of a thrilling history. But Islamism? No, we can hardly be asked to respect a creedal wave that calls for our own elimination. More, we regard the Great Leap Backwards as a tragic development in Islam's story, and now in ours. Naturally we respect Islam. But we do not respect Islamism, just as we respect Muhammad and do not respect Muhammad Atta.

I will soon come to Donald Rumsfeld, the architect and guarantor of the hideous cataclysm in Iraq. But first I must turn from great things to small, for a paragraph, and talk about writing, and the strange thing that happened to me at my desk in this, the Age of Vanished Normalcy.

All writers of fiction will at some point find themselves abandoning a piece of work - or find themselves putting it aside, as we gently say. The original idea, the initiating 'throb' (Nabokov), encounters certain 'points of resistance' (Updike); and these points of resistance, on occasion, are simply too obdurate, numerous, and pervasive. You come to write the next page, and it's dead - as if your subconscious, the part of you quietly responsible for so much daily labour, has been neutralised, or switched off. Norman Mailer has said that one of the few real sorrows of 'the spooky art' is that it requires you to spend too many days among dead things. Recently, and for the first time in my life, I abandoned, not a dead thing, but a thriving novella; and I did so for reasons that were wholly extraneous. I am aware that this is hardly a tectonic event; but for me the episode was existential. In the West, writers are acclimatised to freedom - to limitless and gluttonous freedom. And I discovered something. Writing is freedom; and as soon as that freedom is in shadow, the writer can no longer proceed. The shadow, in this case, was not a fear of repercussion. It was as if, most reluctantly, I was receiving a new vibration or frequency from the planetary shimmer. The novella was a satire called *The Unknown Known*

Secretary Rumsfeld was unfairly ridiculed, some thought, for his haiku-like taxonomy of the terrorist threat:

'The message is: there are known "knowns". There are things that we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know.'

Like his habit of talking in 'the third person passive once removed', this is 'very Rumsfeldian'. And Rumsfeld can be even more Rumsfeldian than that. According to Bob Woodward's Plan of Attack, at a closed-door senatorial briefing in September 2002 (the idea was to sell regime-change in Iraq), Rumsfeld exasperated everyone present with a torrent of Rumsfeldisms, including the following strophe: 'We know what we know, we know there are things we do not know, and we know there are things we know we don't know we don't know.' Anyway, the three categories remain quite helpful as analytical tools. And they certainly appealed very powerfully to the narrator of *The Unknown Known* - Ayed, a diminutive Islamist terrorist who plies his trade in Waziristan, the rugged northern borderland where Osama bin Laden is still rumoured to lurk.

Ayed's outfit, which is called 'the "Prism"', used to consist of three sectors named, not very imaginatively, Sector One, Sector Two and Sector Three. But Ayed and his colleagues are attentive readers of the Western press, and the sectors now have new titles. Known Knowns (sector one) concerns itself with daily logistics: bombs, mines, shells, and various improvised explosive devices. The work of Known Unknowns (sector two) is more peripatetic and long-term; it involves, for example, trolling around North Korea in the hope of procuring the fabled 25 kilograms of enriched uranium, or going from factory to factory in Uzbekistan on a quest for better toxins and asphyxiants. In Known Knowns, the brothers are plagued by fires and gas-leaks and almost daily explosions; the brothers in Known Unknowns are racked by headaches and sore throats, and their breath, tellingly, is rich with the aroma of potent coughdrops, moving about as they do among vats of acids and bathtubs of raw pesticides. Everyone wants to work where Ayed works, which is in sector three, or Unknown Unknowns. Sector three is devoted to conceptual breakthroughs - to shifts in the paradigm.

Shifts in the paradigm like the attack of 11 September 2001. Paradigm shifts open a window; and, once opened, the window will close. Ayed observes that 11 September was instantly unrepeatable; indeed, the tactic was obsolete by 10am the same morning. Its efficacy lasted for 71 minutes, from 8.46, when American 11 hit the North Tower, to 9.57, and the start of the rebellion on United 93. On United 93, the passengers were told about the new reality by their mobile phones, and they didn't linger long in the old paradigm - the four-day siege on the equatorial tarmac, the diminishing supplies of food and water, the festering toilets, the conditions and demands, the phased release of the children and the women; then the surrender, or the clambering commandos. No, they knew that they weren't on a commercial aircraft, not any longer; they were on a missile. So they rose up. And at 10.03 United 93 came down on its back at 580mph, in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, 20 minutes from the Capitol.

I found it reassuringly difficult, dreaming up paradigm shifts. And Ayed and his friends in sector three find it difficult too. Synergy, maximalisation - these are the kinds of concept that are tossed from cushion to floormat in Unknown Unknowns. Here, a comrade argues for the dynamiting of the San Andreas Fault; there, another envisages the large-scale introduction of rabies (admixed with smallpox, methamphetamine and steroids) to the fauna of Central Park. A pensive silence follows. And very often these silences last for days on end. All you can hear, in Unknown Unknowns, is the occasional swatting palm-clap, or the crackle of a beetle being ground underfoot. Ayed feels, or used to feel, superior to his colleagues, because he has already had his eureka moment. He had it in the spring of 2001, and his project - his 'baby', if you will - was launched in the summer of that year, and is still in progress. It has a codename: UU: CRs/G,C.

Ayed's conceptual breakthrough did not go down at all well in Sector Three, as it was then called; in fact, it was widely mocked. But Ayed used a family connection, and gained an audience with Mullah Omar, the one-eyed Islamist cleric who briefly ruled Afghanistan - an imposing figure, in his dishdash and flipflops. Ayed submitted his presentation, and, to his astonishment, Mullah Omar smiled on his plan. This was a necessary condition, because Ayed's paradigm shift could only be realised with the full resources of a nation state. UU: CRs/G,C went ahead. The idea was, as Ayed would say, deceptively simple. The idea was to scour all the prisons and madhouses for every compulsive rapist in the country, and then unleash them on Greeley, Colorado.

As the story opens, the CRs have been en route to G,C for almost five years, crossing central Africa, in minibuses and on foot, and suffering many a sanguinary reverse (a host of some 30,000 Janjaweed in Sudan, a 'child militia', armed with pangas, in Congo). On top of all this, as if he didn't have enough to worry about, Ayed is not getting on very well with his wives.

Those who know the field will be undismayed by the singling out of Greeley, Colorado. For it was in Greeley, Colorado, in 1949, that Islamism, as we now know it, was decisively shaped. The story is grotesque and incredible - but then so are its consequences. And let us keep on telling ourselves how grotesque and incredible it is, our current reality, so unforeseeable, so altogether unknowable, even from the vantage of the late Nineties. At that time, if you recall, America had so much leisure on its hands, politically and culturally, that it could dedicate an entire year to Monica Lewinsky. Even Monica, it now seems, even Bill, were living in innocent times.

Since then the world has undergone a moral crash - the spiritual equivalent, in its global depth and reach, of the Great Depression of the Thirties. On our side, extraordinary rendition, coercive psychological procedures, enhanced interrogation techniques, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, Haditha, Mahmudiya, two wars, and tens of thousands of dead bodies. All this should of course be soberly compared to the feats of the opposed ideology, an ideology which, in its most millennial form, conjures up the image of an abattoir within a madhouse. I will spell this out, because it has not been broadly assimilated. The most extreme Islamists want to kill everyone on earth except the most extreme Islamists; but every jihadi sees the need for eliminating all non-Muslims, either by conversion or by execution. And we now know what happens when Islamism gets its hands on an army (Algeria) or on something resembling a nation state (Sudan). In the first case, the result was fratricide, with 100,000 dead; in the second, following the Islamist coup in 1989, the result has been a kind of rolling genocide, and the figure is perhaps two million. And it all goes back to Greeley, Colorado, and to Sayyid Qutb.

Things started to go wrong for poor Sayyid during the Atlantic crossing from Alexandria, when, allegedly, 'a drunken, semi-naked woman' tried to storm his cabin. But before we come to that, some background. Sayyid Qutb, in 1949, had just turned 43. His childhood was provincial and devout. When, as a young man, he went to study in Cairo, his leanings became literary and Europhone and even mildly cosmopolitan. Despite an early - and routinely baffling - admiration for naturism, he was already finding Cairene women 'dishonourable', and confessed to unhappiness about 'their current level of freedom'. A short story recorded his first disappointment in matters of the heart; its title, plangently, was Thorns. Well, we've all had that; and most of us then adhere to the arc described in Peter Porter's poem, 'Once Bitten, Twice Bitten'. But Sayyid didn't need much discouragement. Promptly giving up all hope of coming across a woman of 'sufficient' moral cleanliness, he resolved to stick to virginity.

Established in a modest way as a writer, Sayyid took a job at the Ministry of Education. This radicalised him. He felt oppressed by the vestiges of the British protectorate in Egypt, and was alarmist about the growing weight of the Jewish presence in Palestine - another British crime, in Sayyid's view. He became an activist, and ran some risk of imprisonment (at the hands of the saturnalian King Farouk), before the ministry packed him off to America to do a couple of years of educational research. Prison, by the way, would claim him soon after his return. He was one of the dozens of Muslim Brothers jailed (and tortured) after the failed attempt on the life of the moderniser and secularist, Nasser, in October 1954. There was a short reprieve in 1964, but Sayyid was soon rearrested - and retortured. Steelily dismissing a clemency deal brokered by none other than the young Anwar Sadat, he was hanged in August 1966; and this was a strategic martyrdom that now lies deep in the Islamist soul. His most influential book, like the book with which it is often compared, was written behind bars. Milestones is known as the Mein Kampf of Islamism.

Sayyid was presumably still sorely shaken by the birth of Israel (after the defeat of Egypt and five other Arab armies), but at first, on the Atlantic crossing, he felt a spiritual expansion. His encyclopedic commentary, *In the Shade of the Koran*, would fondly and ramblingly recall the renewal of his sense of purpose and destiny. Early on, he got into a minor sectarian battle with a proselytising Christian; Sayyid retaliated by doing a bit of proselytising himself, and made some progress with a contingent of Nubian sailors. Then came the traumatic incident with the drunken, semi-naked woman. Sayyid thought she was an American agent hired to seduce him, or so he later told his biographer, who wrote that 'the encounter successfully tested his resolve to resist experiences damaging to his identity as an Egyptian and a Muslim'. God knows what the episode actually amounted to. It seems probable that the liquored-up Mata Hari, the dipsomaniacal nudist, was simply a woman in a cocktail dress who, perhaps, had recently drunk a cocktail. Still, we can continue to imagine Sayyid barricading himself into

his cabin while, beyond the door, the siren sings her song.

He didn't like New York: materialistic, mechanistic, trivial, idolatrous, wanton, depraved, and so on and so forth. Washington was a little better. But here, sickly Sayyid (lungs) was hospitalised, introducing him to another dire hazard that he wouldn't have faced at home: female nurses. One of them, tricked out with 'thirsty lips, bulging breasts, smooth legs' and a coquettish manner ('the calling eye, the provocative laugh'), regaled him with her wish-list of endowments for the ideal lover. But 'the father of Islamism', as he is often called, remained calm, later developing the incident into a diatribe against Arab men who succumb to the allure of American women. In an extraordinary burst of mendacity or delusion, Sayyid claimed that the medical staff heartlessly exulted at the news of the assassination, back in Egypt, of Hasan al-Banna. We may wonder how likely it is that any American would have heard of al-Banna, or indeed of the Muslim Brotherhood, which he founded. When Sayyid was discharged from George Washington University Hospital, he probably thought the worst was behind him. But now he proceeded to the cauldron - to the pullulating hellhouse - of Greeley, Colorado.

During his six months at the Colorado State College of Education (and thereafter in California), Sayyid's hungry disapproval found a variety of targets. American lawns (a distressing example of selfishness and atomism), American conversation ('money, movie stars and models of cars'), American jazz ('a type of music invented by Blacks to please their primitive tendencies - their desire for noise and their appetite for sexual arousal'), and, of course, American women: here another one pops up, telling Sayyid that sex is merely a physical function, untrammelled by morality. American places of worship he also detests (they are like cinemas or amusement arcades), but by now he is pining for Cairo, and for company, and he does something rash. Qutb joins a club - where an epiphany awaits him. 'The dance is inflamed by the notes of the gramophone,' he wrote; 'the dance-hall becomes a whirl of heels and thighs, arms enfold hips, lips and breasts meet, and the air is full of lust.' You'd think that the father of Islamism had exposed himself to an early version of Studio 54 or even Plato's Retreat. But no: the club he joined was run by the church, and what he is describing, here, is a chapel hop in Greeley, Colorado. And Greeley, Colorado, in 1949, was dry

'And the air is full of lust.' 'Lust' is Bernard Lewis's translation, but several other writers prefer the word 'love'. And while lust has greater immediate impact, love may in the end be more resonant. Why should Qutb mind if the air is full of love? We are forced to wonder whether love can be said to exist, as we understand it, in the ferocious patriarchy of Islamism. If death and hate are the twin opposites of love, then it may not be merely whimsical and mawkish to suggest that the terrorist, the bringer of death and hate, the death-hate cultist, is in essence the enemy of love. Qutb:

'A girl looks at you, appearing as if she were an enchanting nymph or an escaped mermaid, but as she approaches, you sense only the screaming instinct inside her, and you can smell her burning body, not the scent of perfume but flesh, only flesh.'

In his excellent book, *Terror and Liberalism*, Paul Berman has many sharp things to say about the corpus of Sayyid Qutb; but he manages to goad himself into receptivity, and ends up, in my view, sounding almost absurdly respectful - 'rich, nuanced, deep, soulful, and heartfelt'. Qutb, who would go on to write a 30-volume gloss on it, spent his childhood memorising the Koran. He was 10 by the time he was done. Now, given that, it seems idle to expect much sense from him; and so it proves. On the last of the 46 pages he devotes to Qutb, Berman wraps things up with a long quotation. This is its repetitive first paragraph:

'The Surah [the sayings of the Prophet] tells the Muslims that, in the fight to uphold God's universal Truth, lives will have to be sacrificed. Those who risk their lives and go out to fight, and who are prepared to lay down their lives for the cause of God, are honourable people, pure of heart and blessed of soul. But the great surprise is that those among them who are killed in the struggle must not be considered or described as dead. They continue to live, as God Himself clearly states.'

Savouring that last phrase, we realise that any voyage taken with Sayyid Qutb is doomed to a leaden-witted circularity. The emptiness, the mere iteration, at the heart of his philosophy is steadily colonised by a vast entanglement of bitternesses; and here, too, we detect the presence of that peculiarly Islamist triumvirate (codified early on by Christopher Hitchens) of self-righteousness, self-pity, and self-hatred - the self-righteousness dating from the seventh century, the self-pity from the 13th (when the 'last' Caliph was kicked to death in Baghdad by the Mongol warlord Hulagu), and the self-hatred from the 20th. And most astounding of all, in Qutb, is the level of self-awareness, which is less than zero. It is as if the very act of self-examination were something unmanly or profane: something unrighteous, in a word.

Still, one way or the other, Qutb is the father of Islamism. Here are the chief tenets he inspired: that America, and its clients, are jahiliyya (the word classically applied to pre-Muhammadan Arabia - barbarous and benighted); that America is controlled by Jews; that Americans are infidels, that they are animals, and, worse, arrogant animals, and are unworthy of life; that America promotes pride and promiscuity in the service of human degradation; that America seeks to 'exterminate' Islam - and that it will accomplish this not by conquest, not by colonial annexation, but by example. As Bernard Lewis puts it in *The Crisis of Islam*

'This is what is meant by the term the Great Satan, applied to the United States by the late Ayatollah Khomeini. Satan as depicted in the Qur'an is neither an imperialist nor an exploiter. He is a seducer, 'the insidious tempter who whispers in the hearts of men' (Qur'an, CXIV, 4, 5).

Lewis might have added that these are the closing words of the Koran. So they echo.

The West isn't being seductive, of course; all the West is being is attractive. But the Islamist's paranoia extends to a kind of thwarted narcissism. We think again of Qutb's buxom, smooth-legged nurse, supposedly smacking her thirsty lips at the news of the death of Hasan al-Banna. Far from wanting or trying to exterminate it, the West had no views whatever about Islam per se before 11 September 2001. Of course, views were then formulated, and very soon the bestseller list was a column of primers on Islam. Some things take longer to sink in than others, true; but now we know. In the West we had brought into being a society whose main purpose, whose raison d'etre, was the tantalisation of good Muslims.

The theme of the 'tempter' can be taken a little further, in the case of Qutb. When the tempter is a temptress, and really wants you to sin, she needs to be both available and willing. And it is almost inconceivable that poor Sayyid, the frail, humourless civil servant, and turgid anti-semitic (salting his talk with quotes from that long-exploded fabrication, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*), ever encountered anything that resembled an offer. It is more pitiful than that. Seduction did not come his way, but it was coming the way of others, he sensed, and a part of him wanted it too. That desire made him very afraid, and also shamed him and dishonoured him, and turned his thoughts to murder. Then the thinkers of Islam took his books and did what they did to them; and Sayyid Qutb is now a part of our daily reality. We should understand that the Islamists' hatred of America is as much abstract as historical, and irrationally abstract, too; none of the usual things can be expected to appease it. The hatred contains much historical emotion, but it is their history, and not ours, that haunts them.

Qutb has perhaps a single parallel in world history. Another shambling invert, another sexual truant (not a virgin but a career cuckold), another marginal quack and dabbler (talentless but not philistine), he too wrote a book, in prison, that fell into the worst possible hands. His name was Nikolai Chernyshevsky; and his novel (*What Is To Be Done?*) was read five times by Vladimir Lenin in the course of a single summer. It was Chernyshevsky who determined, not the content, but the emotional dynamic of the Soviet experiment. The centennial of his birth was celebrated with much pomp in the USSR. That was in 1928. But Russia was too sad, and too busy, to do much about the centennial of his death, which passed quietly in 1989.

In *The Unknown Known* my diminutive terrorist, Ayed, is not a virgin (or a Joseph, as Christians say), unlike Sayyid, on whom he is tangentially based. He is, rather, a polygamist, confining himself to the sanctioned maximum of four. On top of this, he indulges himself, whenever he has enough spare cash, with a succession of 'temporary wives'. The practice is called mutah. In her justly celebrated book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi tells us that a temporary marriage can endure for 99 years; it can also be over in half an hour. The Islamic Republic is very attentive to what it calls 'men's needs'. Before the Revolution, a girl could get married at the age of 18. After 1979 the age requirement was halved.

In *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples*, VS Naipaul looks at some of the social results of polygamy, in Pakistan, and notes that the marriages tend to be serial. The man moves on, 'religiously tomcatting away'; and the consequence is a society of 'half-orphans'. Divorce is in any case unarduous: 'a man who wanted to get rid of his wife could accuse her of adultery and have her imprisoned'. It is difficult to exaggerate the sexualisation of Islamist governance, even among the figures we think of as moderate. Type in 'sex' and 'al-Sistani', and prepare yourself for a cataract of pedantry and smut.

As the narrative opens, Ayed is very concerned about the state of his marriages. But there's a reason for that. When Ayed

was a little boy, in the early Eighties, his dad, a talented poppy-farmer, left Waziristan with his family and settled in Greeley, Colorado. This results in a domestic blow to Ayed's self-esteem. Back home in Waziristan, a boy of his age would be feeling a lovely warm glow of pride, around now, as he realises that his sisters, in one important respect, are just like his mother: they can't read or write either. In America, though, the girls are obliged to go to school. Before Ayed knows it, the women have shed their veils, and his sisters are being called on by gum-chewing kaffirs. Now puberty looms.

There is almost an entire literary genre given over to sensibilities such as Sayyid Qutb's. It is the genre of the unreliable narrator - or, more exactly, the transparent narrator, with his helpless giveaways. Typically, a patina of haughty fastidiousness strives confidently but in vain to conceal an underworld of incurable murk. In *The Unknown Known* I added to this genre, and with enthusiasm. I had Ayed stand for hours in a thicket of nettles and poison ivy, beneath an elevated walkway, so that he could rail against the airiness of the summer frocks worn by American women and the shameless brevity of their underpants. I had him go out in all weathers for evening strolls, strolls gruellingly prolonged until, with the help of a buttress or a drainpipe, he comes across a woman 'quite openly' undressing for bed. Meanwhile, his sisters are all dating. The father and the brothers discuss various courses of action, such as killing them all; but America, bereft of any sense of honour, would punish them for that. The family bifurcates; Ayed returns to the rugged borderland, joins 'the "Prism"', and courts his quartet of nine-year-old sweethearts.

As Ayed keeps telling all his temporary wives, 'My wives don't understand me.' And they don't; indeed, they all want divorces, and for the same embarrassing reason. With his paradigm-shift attack on America now in ruins, and facing professional and social disgrace, Ayed suddenly sees how, in one swoop, he can redeem himself - and secure his place in history with an unknown unknown which is sure to succeed. For this he will be needing a belt

Two years ago I came across a striking photograph in a news magazine: it looked like a crudely cross-sectioned watermelon, but you could make out one or two humanoid features half-submerged in the crimson pulp. It was in fact the bravely circularised photograph of the face of a Saudi newscaster who had been beaten by her husband. In an attempted murder, it seems: at the time of his arrest he had her in the trunk of his car, and was evidently taking her into the desert for interment. What had she done to bring this on herself? In the marital home, that night, the telephone rang and the newscaster, a prosperous celebrity in her own right, answered it. She had answered the telephone. Male Westerners will be struck, here, by a dramatic cultural contrast. I know that I, for one, would be far more likely to beat my wife to death if she hadn't answered the telephone. But customs and mores vary from country to country, and you cannot reasonably claim that one ethos is 'better' than any other.

In 1949 Greeley was dry... It has been seriously suggested, by serious commentators, that suicide-mass murderers are searching for the simplest means of getting a girlfriend. It may be, too, that some of them are searching for the simplest means of getting a drink. Although alcohol, like extramarital sex, may be strictly forbidden in life, there is, in death, no shortage of either. As well as the Koranic virgins, 'as chaste', for the time being, 'as the sheltered eggs of ostriches', there is also a 'gushing fountain' of white wine (wine 'that will neither pain their heads nor take away their reason'). The suicide-mass murderer can now raise his brimming 'goblet' to an additional reward: he has the power, post mortem, to secure paradisaal immortality for a host of relations (the number is a round 70, two fewer, curiously, than the traditional allotment of hours). Nor is this his only service to the clan, which, until recently, could expect an honorarium of \$20,000 from Iraq, plus \$5,000 from Saudi Arabia - as well as the vast prestige automatically accorded to the family of a martyr. And then there is the enticement, or incitement, of peer-group prestige.

Suicide-mass murder is astonishingly alien, so alien, in fact, that Western opinion has been unable to formulate a rational response to it. A rational response would be something like an unvarying factory siren of unanimous disgust. But we haven't managed that. What we have managed, on the whole, is a murmur of dissonant evasion. Paul Berman's best chapter, in *Terror and Liberalism*, is mildly entitled 'Wishful Thinking' - and Berman is in general a mild-mannered man. But this is a very tough and persistent analysis of our extraordinary uncertainty. It is impossible to read it without cold fascination and a consciousness of disgrace. I felt disgrace, during its early pages, because I had done it too, and in print, early on. Contemplating intense violence, you very rationally ask yourself, what are the reasons for this? And compassionately frowning newscasters are still asking that same question. It is time to move on. We are not dealing in reasons because we are not dealing in reason.

After the failure of Oslo, and the attendant consolidation of Hamas, the second intifada ('earthquake') got under way in 2001, not with stonings and stabbings, like the first, but with a steady campaign of suicide-mass murder. 'All over the world,' writes Berman, 'the popularity of the Palestinian cause did not collapse. It increased.' The parallel process was the intensive demonisation of Israel (academic ostracism, and so on); every act of suicide-mass murder 'testified' to the extremity of the oppression, so that 'Palestinian terror, in this view, was the measure of Israeli guilt'. And when Sharon replaced Barak, and the expected crackdown began, and the Israeli army, with 23 casualties of its own, killed 52 Palestinians in the West Bank city of Jenin, the attack 'was seen as a veritable Holocaust, an Auschwitz, or, in an alternative image, as the Middle Eastern equivalent of the Wehrmacht's assault on the Warsaw Ghetto. These tropes were massively accepted, around the world. Typing in the combined names of "Jenin" and "Auschwitz"... I came up with 2,890 references; and, typing in "Jenin" and "Nazi", I came up with 8,100 references. There were 63,100 references to the combined names of "Sharon" and "Hitler".' Once the redoubled suppression had taken hold, the human bombings decreased; and world opinion quietened down. The Palestinians were now worse off than ever, their societal gains of the Nineties 'flattened by Israeli tanks'. But the protests 'rose and fell in tandem with the suicide bomb attacks, and not in tandem with the suffering of the Palestinian people'.

This was because suicide-mass murder presented the West with a philosophical crisis. The quickest way out of it was to pretend that the tactic was reasonable, indeed logical and even admirable: an extreme case of 'rationalist naivete', in Berman's phrase. Rationalist naivete was easier than the assimilation of the alternative: that is to say, the existence of a pathological cult. Berman assembles many voices. And if we are going to hear the rhetoric of delusion and self-hypnosis, then we might as well hear it from a Stockholm Laureate - the Portuguese novelist Jose Saramago. Again erring on the side of indulgence, Berman is unnecessarily daunted by the pedigree of Saramago's prose, which is in fact the purest and snootiest bombast (you might call it Nobelese). Here he focuses his lofty gaze on the phenomenon of suicide-mass murder:

'Ah, yes, the horrendous massacres of civilians caused by the so-called suicide terrorists... Horrendous, yes, doubtless; condemnable, yes, doubtless, but Israel still has a lot to learn if it is not capable of understanding the reasons that can bring a human being to turn himself into a bomb.'

Palestinian society has channelled a good deal of thought and energy into the solemnisation of suicide-mass murder, a process which begins in kindergarten. Naturally, one would be reluctant to question the cloudless piety of the Palestinian mother who, having raised one suicide-mass murderer, expressed the wish that his younger brother would become a suicide-mass murderer too. But the time has come to cease to respect the quality of her 'rage' - to cease to marvel at the unhingeing rigour of Israeli oppression, and to start to marvel at the power of an entrenched and emulous ideology, and a cult of death. And if oppression is what we're interested in, then we should think of the oppression, not to mention the life-expectancy (and, God, what a life), of the younger brother. There will be much stopping and starting to do. It is painful to stop believing in the purity, and the sanity, of the underdog. It is painful to start believing in a cult of death, and in an enemy that wants its war to last for ever.

Suicide-mass murder is more than terrorism: it is horrorism. It is a maximum malevolence. The suicide-mass murderer asks his prospective victims to contemplate their fellow human being with a completely new order of execration. It is not like looking down the barrel of a gun. We can tell this is so, because we see what happens, sometimes, when the suicide-mass murderer isn't even there - as in the amazingly summary injustice meted out to the Brazilian Jean Charles de Menezes in London. An even more startling example was the rumour-ignited bridge stampede in Baghdad (31 August 2005). This is the superterror inspired by suicide-mass murder: just whisper the words, and you fatally trample a thousand people. And it remains an accurate measure of the Islamists' contortion: they hold that an act of lethal self-bespatterment, in the interests of an unachievable 'cause', brings with it the keys to paradise. Sam Harris, in *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, stresses just how thoroughly and expeditiously the suicide-mass murderer is 'saved'. Which would you prefer, given belief?

'... martyrdom is the only way that a Muslim can bypass the painful litigation that awaits us all on the Day of Judgment and proceed directly to heaven. Rather than spend centuries mouldering in the earth in anticipation of being resurrected and subsequently interrogated by wrathful angels, the martyr is immediately transported to Allah's garden...'

Osama bin Laden's table talk, at Tarnak Farms in Afghanistan, where he trained his operatives before September 2001, must have included many rolling paragraphs on Western vitiation, corruption, perversion, prostitution, and all the rest. And in

1998, as season after season unfolded around the president's weakness for fellatio, he seemed to have good grounds for his most serious miscalculation: the belief that America was a softer antagonist than the USSR (in whose defeat, incidentally, the 'Arab Afghans' played a negligible part). Still, a sympathiser like the famously obtuse 'American Taliban' John Walker Lindh, if he'd been there, and if he'd been a little brighter, might have framed the following argument.

Now would be a good time to strike, John would tell Osama, because the West is enfeebled, not just by sex and alcohol, but also by 30 years of multicultural relativism. They'll think suicide bombing is just an exotic foible, like shame-and-honour killings or female circumcision. Besides, it's religious, and they're always slow to question anything that calls itself that. Within days of our opening outrage, the British royals will go on the road for Islam, and stay on it. And you'll be amazed by how long the word Islamophobia, as an unanswerable indictment, will cover Islamism too. It'll take them years to come up with the word they want - and Islamismophobia clearly isn't any good. Even if the Planes Operation succeeds, and thousands die, the Left will yawn and wonder why we waited so long. Strike now. Their ideology will make them reluctant to see what it is they confront. And it will make them slow learners.

By the summer of 2005, suicide-mass murder had evolved. In Iraq, foreign jihadis, pilgrims of war, were filing across the borders to be strapped up with explosives and nails and nuts and bolts, often by godless Baathists with entirely secular aims - to be primed like pieces of ordnance and then sent out the same day to slaughter their fellow Muslims. Suicide-mass murder, in other words, had passed through a phase of decadence and was now on the point of debauchery. In a single month (May), there were more human bombings in Iraq than during the entire intifada. And this, on 25 July, was the considered response of the Mayor of London to the events of 7 July:

'Given that they don't have jet planes, don't have tanks, they only have their bodies to use as weapons. In an unfair balance, that's what people use.'

I remember a miserable little drip of a poem, c2002, that made exactly the same case. No, they don't have F-16s. Question: would the Mayor like them to have F-16s? And, no, their bodies are not what 'people' use. They are what Islamists use. And we should weigh, too, the spiritual paltriness of such martyrdoms. 'Martyr' means witness. The suicide-mass murderer witnesses nothing - and sacrifices nothing. He dies for vulgar and delusive gain. And on another level, too, the rationale for 'martyrdom operations' is a theological sophistry of the blackest cynicism. Its aim is simply the procurement of delivery systems.

Our ideology, which is sometimes called Westernism, weakens us in two ways. It weakens our powers of perception, and it weakens our moral unity and will. As Harris puts it:

'Sayyid Qutb, Osama bin Laden's favourite philosopher, felt that pragmatism would spell the death of American civilisation... Pragmatism, when civilisations come clashing, does not appear likely to be very pragmatic. To lose the conviction that you can actually be right - about anything - seems a recipe for the End of Days chaos envisioned by Yeats: when "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity".'

The opening argument we reach for now, in explaining any conflict, is the argument of moral equivalence. No value can be allowed to stand in stone; so we begin to question our ability to identify even what is malum per se. Prison beatings, too, are evil in themselves, and so is the delegation of torture, and murder, to less high-minded and (it has to be said) less hypocritical regimes. In the kind of war that we are now engaged in, an episode like Abu Ghraib is more than a shameful deviation - it is the equivalent of a lost battle. Our moral advantage, still vast and obvious, is not a liability, and we should strengthen and expand it. Like our dependence on reason, it is a strategic strength, and it shores up our legitimacy.

There is another symbiotic overlap between Islamist praxis and our own, and it is a strange and pitiable one. I mean the drastic elevation of the nonentity. In our popularity-contest culture, with its VIP ciphers and meteoric mediocrities, we understand the attractions of baseless fame - indeed, of instant and unearned immortality. To feel that you are a geohistorical player is a tremendous lure to those condemned, as they see it, to exclusion and anonymity. In its quieter way, this was perhaps the key component of the attraction of Western intellectuals to Soviet Communism: 'join', and you are suddenly a contributor to planetary events. As Muhammad Atta steered the 767 towards its destination, he was confident, at least, that his fellow town-planners, in Aleppo, would remember his name, along with everybody else on earth. Similarly, the ghost of

Shehzad Tanweer, as it watched the salvage teams scraping up human remains in the rat-infested crucible beneath the streets of London, could be sure that he had decisively outsoared the fish-and-shop back in Leeds. And that other great nothingness, Osama bin Laden - he is ever-living.

In July 2005 I flew from Montevideo to New York - and from winter to summer - with my six-year-old daughter and her eight-year-old sister. I drank a beer as I stood in the check-in queue, a practice not frowned on at Carrasco (though it would certainly raise eyebrows at, say, the dedicated Hajj terminal in Tehran's Mehrabad); then we proceeded to Security. Now I know some six-year-old girls can look pretty suspicious; but my youngest daughter isn't like that. She is a slight little blonde with big brown eyes and a quavery voice. Nevertheless, I stood for half an hour at the counter while the official methodically and solemnly searched her carry-on rucksack - staring shrewdly at each story-tape and crayon, palpating the length of all four limbs of her fluffy duck.

There ought to be a better word than boredom for the trance of inanition that weaved its way through me. I wanted to say something like, 'Even Islamists have not yet started to blow up their own families on aeroplanes. So please desist until they do. Oh yeah: and stick to people who look like they're from the Middle East.' The revelations of 10 August 2006 were 13 months away. And despite the exposure and prevention of their remarkably ambitious bloodbath of the innocent (the majority of them women and children), the (alleged) Walthamstow jihadis did not quite strive in vain. They failed to promote terror, but they won a great symbolic victory for boredom: the banning of books on the seven-hour flight from England to America.

My daughters and I arrived safely in New York. In New York, at certain subway stations, the police were searching all the passengers, to thwart terrorism - thus obliging any terrorist to walk the couple of blocks to a subway station where the police weren't searching all the passengers. And I couldn't defend myself from a vision of the future; in this future, riding a city bus will be like flying El Al. In the guilty safety of Long Island I watched the TV coverage from my home town, where my other three children live, where I will soon again be living with all five. There were the Londoners, on 8 July, going to work on foot, looking stiff and watchful, and taking no pleasure in anything they saw. Eric Hobsbawm got it right in the mid-Nineties, when he said that terrorism was part of the atmospheric 'pollution' of Western cities. It is a cost-efficient programme. Bomb New York and you pollute Madrid; bomb Madrid and you pollute London; bomb London and you pollute Paris and Rome, and repollute New York. But there was the solace given us by the Mayor. No, we should not be surprised by the use of this sempiternal ruse de guerre. Using their bodies is what people do.

The age of terror, I suspect, will also be remembered as the age of boredom. Not the kind of boredom that afflicts the blasé and the effete, but a superboredom, rounding out and complementing the superterror of suicide-mass murder. And although we will eventually prevail in the war against terror, or will reduce it, as Mailer says, to 'a tolerable level' (this phrase will stick, and will be used by politicians, with quiet pride), we haven't got a chance in the war against boredom. Because boredom is something that the enemy doesn't feel. To be clear: the opposite of religious belief is not atheism or secularism or humanism. It is not an 'ism'. It is independence of mind - that's all. When I refer to the age of boredom, I am not thinking of airport queues and subway searches. I mean the global confrontation with the dependent mind.

One way of ending the war on terror would be to capitulate and convert. The transitional period would be an unsmiling one, no doubt, with much stern work to be completed in the city squares, the town centres, and the village greens. Nevertheless, as the Caliphate is restored in Baghdad, to much joy, the surviving neophytes would soon get used to the voluminous penal code enforced by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Suppression of Vice. It would be a world of perfect terror and perfect boredom, and of nothing else - a world with no games, no arts, and no women, a world where the only entertainment is the public execution. My middle daughter, now aged nine, still believes in imaginary beings (Father Christmas, the Tooth Fairy); so she would have that in common, at least, with her new husband.

Like fundamentalist Judaism and medieval Christianity, Islam is totalist. That is to say, it makes a total claim on the individual. Indeed, there is no individual; there is only the umma - the community of believers. Ayatollah Khomeini, in his copious writings, often returns to this theme. He unindulgently notes that believers in most religions appear to think that, so long as they observe all the formal pieties, then for the rest of the time they can do more or less as they please. 'Islam', as he frequently reminds us, 'isn't like that.' Islam follows you everywhere, into the kitchen, into the bedroom, into the bathroom, and beyond death into eternity. Islam means 'submission' - the surrender of independence of mind. That surrender now bears

the weight of well over 60 generations, and 14 centuries.

The stout self-sufficiency or, if you prefer, the extreme incuriosity of Islamic culture has been much remarked. Present-day Spain translates as many books into Spanish, annually, as the Arab world has translated into Arabic in the past 1,100 years. And the late-medieval Islamic powers barely noticed the existence of the West until it started losing battles to it. The tradition of intellectual autarky was so robust that Islam remained indifferent even to readily available and obviously useful innovations, including, incredibly, the wheel. The wheel, as we know, makes things easier to roll; Bernard Lewis, in *What Went Wrong?*, sagely notes that it also makes things easier to steal.

By the beginning of the 20th century the entire Muslim world, with partial exceptions, had been subjugated by the European empires. And at that point the doors of perception were opened to foreign influence: that of Germany. This allegiance cost Islam its last imperium, the Ottoman, for decades a 'helpless hulk' (Hobsbawm), which was duly dismantled and shared out after the First World War - a war that was made in Berlin. Undeterred, Islam continued to look to Germany for sponsorship and inspiration. When the Nazi experiment ended, in 1945, sympathy for its ideals lingered on for years, but Islam was now forced to look elsewhere. It had no choice; geopolitically, there was nowhere else to turn. And the flame passed from Germany to the USSR.

So Islam, in the end, proved responsive to European influence: the influence of Hitler and Stalin. And one hardly needs to labour the similarities between Islamism and the totalitarian cults of the last century. Anti-semitic, anti-

liberal, anti-individualist, anti-democratic, and, most crucially, anti-rational, they too were cults of death, death-driven and death-fuelled. The main distinction is that the paradise which the Nazis (pagan) and the Bolsheviks (atheist) sought to bring about was an earthly one, raised from the mulch of millions of corpses. For them, death was creative, right enough, but death was still death. For the Islamists, death is a consummation and a sacrament; death is a beginning. Sam Harris is right:

'Islamism is not merely the latest flavour of totalitarian nihilism. There is a difference between nihilism and a desire for supernatural reward. Islamists could smash the world to atoms and still not be guilty of nihilism, because everything in their world has been transfigured by the light of paradise...' Pathological mass movements are sustained by 'dreams of omnipotence and sadism', in Robert Jay Lifton's phrase. That is usually enough. Islamism adds a third inducement to its warriors: a heavenly immortality that begins even before the moment of death.

For close to a millennium, Islam could afford to be autarkic. Its rise is one of the wonders of world history - a chain reaction of conquest and conversion, an amassment not just of territory but of millions of hearts and minds. The vigour of its ideal of justice allowed for levels of tolerance significantly higher than those of the West. Culturally, too, Islam was the more evolved. Its assimilations and its learning potentiated the Renaissance - of which, alas, it did not partake. Throughout its ascendancy, Islam was buoyed by what Malise Ruthven, in *A Fury for God*, calls 'the argument from manifest success'. The fact of expansion underwrote the mandate of heaven. And now, for the past 300 or 400 years, observable reality has propounded a rebuttal: the argument from manifest failure. As one understands it, in the Islamic cosmos there is nothing more painful than the suspicion that something has denatured the covenant with God. This unbearable conclusion must naturally be denied, but it is subliminally present, and accounts, perhaps, for the apocalyptic hurt of the Islamist.

Over the past five years, what we have been witnessing, apart from a moral slump or bust, is a death agony: the death agony of imperial Islam. Islamism is the last wave - the last convulsion. Until 2003, one could take some comfort from the very virulence of the Islamist deformation. Nothing so insanely dionysian, so impossibly poisonous, could expect to hold itself together over time. In the 20th century, outside Africa, the only comparable eruptions of death-hunger, of death-oestrus, were confined to Nazi Germany and Stalinite Kampuchea, the one lasting 12 years, the other three and a half. Hitler, Pol Pot, Osama: such men only ask to be the last to die. But there are some sound reasons for thinking that the confrontation with Islamism will be testingly prolonged.

It is by now not too difficult to trace what went wrong, psychologically, with the Iraq War. The fatal turn, the fatal forfeiture of legitimacy, came not with the mistaken but also cynical emphasis on Saddam's weapons of mass destruction: the intelligence agencies of every country on earth, Iraq included, believed that he had them. The fatal turn was the American President's all too palpable submission to the intoxicant of power. His walk, his voice, his idiom, right up to his mortifying

appearance in the flight suit on the aircraft-carrier, USS Abraham Lincoln ('Mission Accomplished') - every dash and comma in his body language betrayed the unscrupulous confidence of the power surge.

We should parenthetically add that Tony Blair succumbed to it too - with a difference. In 'old' Europe, as Rumsfeld insolently called it, the idea of a political class was predicated on the inculcation of checks and balances, of psychic surge-breakers, to limit the corruption that personal paramountcy always entrains. It was not a matter of mental hygiene; everyone understood that a rotting mind will make rotten decisions. Blair knew this. He also knew that his trump was not a high one: the need of the American people to hear approval for the war in an English accent. Yet there he was, helplessly caught up in the slipstream turbulence of George Bush. Rumsfeld, too, visibly succumbed to it. On television, at this time, he looked as though he had just worked his way through a snowball of cocaine. 'Stuff happens,' he said, when asked about the looting of the Mesopotamian heritage in Baghdad - the remark of a man not just corrupted but floridly vulgarised by power. As well as the body language, at this time, there was also the language, the power language, all the way from Bush's 'I want to kick ass' to his 'Bring it on' - a rather blithe incitement, some may now feel, to the armed insurgency.

Contemplating this, one's aversion was very far from being confined to the aesthetic. Much followed from it. And we now know that an atmosphere of boosterist unanimity, of prewar triumphalism, had gathered around the President, an atmosphere in which any counter-argument, any hint of circumspection, was seen as a whimper of weakness or disloyalty. If she were alive, Barbara Tuchman would be chafing to write a long addendum to *The March of Folly*; but not even she could have foreseen a president who, 'going into this period', 'was praying for strength to do the Lord's will'. A power rush blessed by God - no, not a good ambience for precautions and doubts. At that time, the invasion of Iraq was presented as a 'self-financing' preventive war to enforce disarmament and regime change. Three and a half years later, it is an adventurist and proselytising war, and its remaining goal is the promotion of democracy.

The Iraq project was foredoomed by three intrinsic historical realities. First, the Middle East is clearly unable, for now, to sustain democratic rule - for the simple reason that its peoples will vote against it. Did no one whisper the words, in the Situation Room - did no one say what the scholars have been saying for years? The 'electoral policy' of the fundamentalists, writes Lewis, 'has been classically summarised as "One man (men only), one vote, once."' Or, in Harris's trope, democracy will be 'little more than a gangplank to theocracy'; and that theocracy will be Islamist. Now the polls have closed, and the results are coming in, region-wide. In Lebanon, gains for Hizbollah; in Egypt, gains for Sayyid Qutb's fraternity, the Muslim Brothers; in Palestine, victory for Hamas; in Iran, victory for the soapbox rabble-rouser and primitive anti-semitic, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In the Iraqi election, Bush and Blair, pathetically, both 'hoped' for Allawi, whose return was 14 per cent.

Second, Iraq is not a real country. It was cobbled together, by Winston Churchill, in the early Twenties; it consists of three separate (Ottoman) provinces, Sunni, Shia, Kurd - a disposition which looks set to resume. Among the words not listened to by the US Administration, we can include those of Saddam Hussein. Even with an apparatus of terror as savage as any in history, even with chemical weapons, helicopter gunships, and mass killings, even with a proven readiness to cleanse, to displace, and to destroy whole ecosystems, Hussein modestly conceded that he found Iraq a difficult country to keep in one piece. As a Sunni military man put it, Iraqis hate Iraq - or 'Iraq', a concept that has brought them nothing but suffering. There is no nationalist instinct; the instinct is for atomisation.

Third, only the sack of Mecca or Medina would have caused more pain to the Islamic heart than the taking, and befouling, of the Iraqi capital, the seat of the Caliphate. We have not heard any discussion, at home, about the creedal significance of Baghdad. But we have had some intimations from the jihadis' front line. In pronouncements that vibrate with historic afflatus, they speak of their joyful embrace of the chance to meet the infidel in the Land Between the Rivers. And, of course, beyond - in Madrid, in Bali (again), in London. It may be that the Coalition adventure has given the enemy a *casus belli* that will burn for a generation.

There are vast pluralities all over the West that are thirsting for American failure in Iraq - because they hate George Bush. Perhaps they do not realise that they are co-synchronously thirsting for an Islamist victory that will dramatically worsen the lives of their children. And this may come to pass. Let us look at the war, not through bin Laden's eyes, but through the eyes of the cunning of history. From that perspective, 11 September was a provocation. The 'slam dunk', the 'cakewalk' into Iraq amounted to a feint, and a trap. We now know, from various 500-page bestsellers like *Cobra II* and *Fiasco*, that the invasion of Iraq was truly incredibly blithe (there was no plan, no plan at all, for the occupation); still, we should not delude

ourselves that the motives behind it were dishonourable. This is a familiar kind of tragedy. The Iraq War represents a gigantic contract, not just for Halliburton, but also for the paving company called Good Intentions. We must hope that something can be salvaged from it, and that our ethical standing can be reconsolidated. Iraq was a divagation in what is being ominously called the Long War. To our futile losses in blood, treasure and moral prestige, we can add the loss in time; and time, too, is blood.

An idea presents itself about a better direction to take. And funnily enough its current champion is the daughter of the dark genius behind the disaster in Iraq: she is called Liz Cheney. Before we come to that, though, we must briefly return to Ayed, and his belt, and to some quiet thoughts about the art of fiction.

The 'belt' ending of *The Unknown Known* came to me fairly late. But the belt was already there, and prominently. All writers will know exactly what this means. It means that the subconscious had made a polite suggestion, a suggestion that the conscious mind had taken a while to see. Ayed's belt, purchased by mail-order in Greeley, Colorado, is called a 'RodeoMaMa', and consists of a 'weight strap' and the pommel of a saddle. Ayed is of that breed of men which holds that a husband should have sex with his wives every night. And his invariable use of the 'RodeoMaMa' is one of the reasons for the rumble of mutiny in his marriages.

Looking in at the longhouse called *Known Knowns*, Ayed retools his 'RodeoMaMa'. He goes back to the house and summons his wives - for the last time. Thus Ayed gets his conceptual breakthrough, his unknown unknown: he is the first to bring martyrdom operations into the setting of his own home.

I could write a piece almost as long as this one about why I abandoned *The Unknown Known*. The confirmatory moment came a few weeks ago: the freshly fortified suspicion that there exists on our planet a kind of human being who will become a Muslim in order to pursue suicide-mass murder. For quite a time I have felt that Islamism was trying to poison the world. Here was a sign that the poison might take - might mutate, like bird flu. Islam, as I said, is a total system, and like all such it is eerily amenable to satire. But with Islamism, with total malignancy, with total terror and total boredom, irony, even militant irony (which is what satire is), merely shrivels and dies.

In Twentieth Century the late historian JM Roberts took an unsentimental line on the Chinese Revolution:

'More than 2,000 years of remarkable historical continuities lie behind [it], which, for all its cost and cruelty, was a heroic endeavour, matched in scale only by such gigantic upheavals as the spread of Islam, or Europe's assault on the world in early modern times.'

The cost and cruelty, according to Jung Chang and Jon Halliday's recent biography, amounted, perhaps, to 70 million lives in the Mao period alone. Yet this has to be balanced against 'the weight of the past' - nowhere heavier than in China:

'Deliberate attacks on family authority... were not merely attempts by a suspicious regime to encourage informers and delation, but attacks on the most conservative of all Chinese institutions. Similarly, the advancement of women and propaganda to discourage early marriage had dimensions going beyond 'progressive' feminist ideas or population control; they were an assault on the past such as no other revolution had ever made, for in China the past meant a role for women far inferior to those of pre-revolutionary America, France or even Russia.'

There is no momentum, in Islam, for a reformation. And there is no time, now, for a leisurely, slow-lob enlightenment. The necessary upheaval is a revolution - the liberation of women. This will not be the work of a decade or even a generation. Islam is a millennium younger than China. But we should remind ourselves that the Chinese Revolution took half a century to roll through its villages.

In 2002 the aggregate GDP of all the Arab countries was less than the GDP of Spain; and the Islamic states lag behind the West, and the Far East, in every index of industrial and manufacturing output, job creation, technology, literacy, life-expectancy, human development, and intellectual vitality. (A recondite example: in terms of the ownership of telephone lines, the leading Islamic nation is the UAE, listed in 33rd place, between Reunion and Macau.) Then, too, there is the matter of tyranny, corruption, and the absence of civil rights and civil society. We may wonder how the Islamists feel when

they compare India to Pakistan, one a burgeoning democratic superpower, the other barely distinguishable from a failed state. What Went Wrong? asked Bernard Lewis, at book length. The broad answer would be institutionalised irrationalism; and the particular focus would be the obscure logic that denies the Islamic world the talent and energy of half its people. No doubt the impulse towards rational inquiry is by now very weak in the rank and file of the Muslim male. But we can dwell on the memory of those images from Afghanistan: the great waves of women hurrying

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