



## The voice of the lonely crowd

After September 11, writing fiction seemed a pointlessly indulgent exercise. But, Martin Amis argues, against the deadly excesses of politics and religion, the novel is a supremely rational undertaking

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### Guardian

Were I (who to my cost already am  
 One of those strange prodigious  
 Creatures Man)  
 A Spirit free, to choose for my  
 own share,  
 What Case of Flesh, and Blood,  
 I pleas'd to weare,  
 I'd be a Dog, a Monkey, or a Bear.  
 Or any thing but that vain Animal,  
 Who is so proud of being rational.

These bitterly charged lines, from Lord Rochester's Satyr Against Mankind, were written in 1675. They now seem somewhat premature, do they not? The age of reason, individuality and empiricism was on its way, and Rochester was suspicious of the new reality. His worries were needless. On any longer view, man is only fitfully committed to the rational - to thinking, seeing, learning, knowing. Believing is what he's really proud of.

After a couple of hours at their desks, on September 12, 2001, all the writers on earth were reluctantly considering a change of occupation. I remember thinking that I was like Josephine, the opera-singing mouse in the Kafka story: Sing? "She can't even squeak."

A novel is politely known as a work of the imagination; and the imagination, that day, was of course fully commandeered, and to no purpose. Whenever that sense of heavy incredulity seems about to dissipate, I still find, an emergent detail will eagerly replenish it: the "pink mist" in the air, caused by the explosion of the falling bodies; the fact that the second plane, on impact, was travelling at nearly 600mph, a speed that would bring it to the point of disintegration. (What was it like to be a passenger on that plane? What was it like to see it coming towards you?)

An unusual number of novelists chose to write some journalism about September 11 - as many journalists more or less tolerantly noted. I can tell you what those novelists were doing: they were playing for time. The so-called work in progress had been reduced, overnight, to a blue streak of pitiable babble. But then, too, a feeling of gangrenous futility had infected the whole corpus. That page headed "By the same author" - which, in the past, was smugly consulted as a staccato biography - could now be dismissed with a sigh and a shake of the head. My own page, as an additional belittlement, ended with a book called The War Against Cliche. I thought: actually we can live with "bitter cold" and "searing heat" and the rest of them. We can live with cliché. What we have to do now, more testingly, is live with war.

Imaginative writing is understood to be slightly mysterious. In fact it is very mysterious. A great deal of the work gets done beneath the threshold of consciousness, without the intercession of reason. When the novelists went into newsprint about September 11, there was a murmur to the effect that they were now being obliged to snap out of their solipsistic daydreams: to attend, as best they could, to the facts of life. For politics - once defined as "what's going on" - suddenly filled the sky. True, novelists don't normally write about what's going on; they write about what's not going on. Yet the worlds so created aspire to pattern and shape and moral point. A novel is a rational undertaking; it is reason at play, perhaps, but it is still reason.

September 11 was a day of de-Enlightenment. Politics stood revealed as a veritable Walpurgis Night of the irrational. And such old, old stuff. The conflicts we now face or fear involve opposed geographical arenas, but also opposed centuries or even millennia. It is a landscape of ferocious anachronisms: nuclear jihad in the Indian subcontinent; the medieval agonism of Islam; the Bronze Age blunderings of the Middle East.

We recall that Ronald Reagan habitually anathematised the Soviet Union as "godless". This epithet could hardly be unleashed on Osama bin Laden. So Bush, who is religious, and Blair, who is religious, offered the patent falsehood that the war on terrorism was "not about religion". Iraq is godless too, but this fact is unlikely to be parlayed, just now, into another good reason for invading it.

The 20th century, with its scores of millions of supernumerary dead, has been called the age of ideology. And the age of ideology, clearly, was a mere hiatus in the age of religion, which shows no sign of expiry. Since it is no longer permissible to disparage any single faith or creed, let us start disparaging all of them. To be clear: an ideology is a belief system with an inadequate basis in reality; a religion is a belief system with no basis in reality whatever. Religious belief is without reason and without dignity, and its record is near-universally dreadful. It is straightforward - and never mind, for now, about plagues and famines: if God existed, and if He cared for humankind, He would never have given us religion.

I was six or seven years old, and I was filling out a school registration form, and I came to the disquieting question. I ran into the hall and shouted up the stairs, "Mum! What religion am I?" There was a long silence, then: "Uh... Church of England!" Yes, thank God for the Church of England: it didn't commit you to anything at all. In truth, though, "Church of England" was a lie. We weren't even Church of England.

Still, I felt an unwelcome distance from the families of my churchgoing friends (this was South Wales, in the 1950s). And I also developed a passion for my religious-knowledge mistress. It was an obscure passion: she was very nice, but she looked like an average witch in the picture-books I was then growing out of. I didn't go to church but I did go to chapel (a soft-drinks party with the occasional parable); and I became a determined collector of Bibles. What you got, then, was a community and a language. My apostasy, at the age of nine, was vehement. Clearly, I didn't want the shared words, the shared identity. I forswore chapel; those Bibles were scribbled on and otherwise desecrated, and two or three of them were taken into the back garden and quietly torched.

Later - we were now in Cambridge - I gave a school speech in which I rejected all belief as an affront to common sense. I was an atheist, and I was 12: it seemed open-and-shut. I had not pondered Kant's rather lenient remark about the crooked timber of humanity, out of which nothing straight is ever built. Nor was I aware that the soul had legitimate needs.

Much more recently I reclassified myself as an agnostic. Atheism, it turns out, is not quite rational either. The sketchiest acquaintance with cosmology will tell you that the universe is not, or is not yet, decipherable by human beings. It will also tell you that the universe is far more bizarre, prodigious and chillingly grand than any doctrine, and that spiritual needs can be met by its contemplation. Belief is otiose; reality is sufficiently awesome as it stands. Indeed, our isolation in its cold immensity seems to demand a humanistic counterweight - an assertion of mortal pride. A contemporary manifestation of this need can be seen in our intensified reverence for the planet (James Lovelock's Gaia and other benign animisms). A strategy with a rather longer history centres on an intensified reverence for art - or, in Matthew Arnold's formula, for "the best which has been thought and said".

Literature - the word - has always been the most persistent candidate for cultification, partly because it nonchalantly includes the Bible and all other holy texts. It also has an advantage over conventional faiths in that there is, after all, something tangible to venerate - something boundless, beautiful and divinely bright. But of course there is an excellent reason why the unacknowledged legislators of mankind are doomed to remain just that: unacknowledged, unfollowed, unbelieved. Literature forms a single body of knowledge, yet its voices are intransigently and unenlargeably individual. And the voice of religion, to reposition a phrase from the Reverend Northrop Frye, is "the voice of the lonely crowd". It is a monologue that seeks the validation of a chorus.

In my lifetime there have been two attempts to ideologise and communalise literature. The first was the one undertaken by that grizzled relict, FR Leavis. Arnold wanted literature to occupy the spaces opened up by the weakening of faith and the unmoorings of the industrial revolution. At the outset (in the 1930s), Leavis called for the formation of an academic elite to oppose the vulgarisms of mass communication. His ideas were later

systematised as follows: literature lives on only if there is someone around to evaluate it; the judgments the literary critic is concerned with (and this is the big leap) are judgments of life; so every judgment is an act of "moral responsibility" in the essential continuum. To put it another way, no good person likes the literature disliked by Dr Leavis. It may be objected that value judgments are the products of emotion, and can never be arrived at by rational means. But we do see that such an approach wonderfully magnifies the national role of the English don.

The Leavisite canon, never extensive, was fiercely defended and regularly purged. At university you could always identify the Leavisites by the sorry dilapidation of their bookshelves. Conrad, James, George Eliot, some Austen, one Dickens ( *Hard Times* ), Yeats, TS Eliot, Hopkins, and a couple of vanished nonentities like LH Myers and Ronald Bottrall. Left to itself, Leavisism might have ended up with a single text; and that sacred book would have been the collected works of a lone sociopath - DH Lawrence. It had all gone wrong: they were supposed to be judging literature, but literature was judging them, and raucously exposing their provinciality and humourlessness. When Leavis died, in 1978, his clerisy collapsed in a Jonestown of odium theologicum. It left nothing behind it.

Leavisism was top-down, owing all its sway to the scrawny charisma of its prophet. The current ideology, known to us by the wearying clunk of its initials, is bottom-up, working through the mass and not away from it. There is a vague feeling that PC, having made its gains in the restriction of the sayable, is now in modest retreat. And it is true that the expansionist phase, with its denunciations, its invigilations, its organised execrations, seems to have run its course. On the other hand, PC now occupies the preferred territory of all ideologies: it is among schoolchildren. The language and literature papers in our national exams are becoming implicit invitations to ideological conformity; and everyone knows that there are few marks to be had for bucking the earnest line on, say, Maya Angelou. The weaker pupils will take the false comfort of belonging to a consensus; the stronger will simply receive early training in the practice of hypocritical piety.

We recognise this mental atmosphere, and its name is anti-intellectualism. Noticeable, too, is the re-emergence of sentiment as the prince of the critical utensils. Commentators respond, not to the novel, but to its personnel, whom they want to "care about", in whom they want to "believe". Such remarks as "I didn't like the characters" are now thought capable of settling the hash of a work of fiction. A critical approach of this kind will eventually elicit what it fully deserves - a literature of ingratiating. And we will then have reached the destiny that Alexis de Tocqueville predicted for American democracy: a flabby stupor of mutual reassurance. The simultaneous consolidation of "dumbing down" is not an accident. PC is low, low church - it is the lowest common denomination.

And so we return to the writer's study, and mid-September of 2001. The television, when you dared to turn it on, showed Americans queueing for anthrax hosedowns, or the writhing moustaches of Pakistan, prophesying civil war and other unknowable sequelae. I remember the bad-dream feeling, and the dismaying inability to look with pleasure at my children. Outside, the tinny city seemed to admit that its strategy of rationality had been exploded. Even the plodding logic of the traffic lights looked obsolete. Why drive on the left? Why drive on the right?

The champions of militant Islam are, of course, misogynists, woman-haters; they are also misologists - haters of reason. Their armed doctrine is little more than a chaotic penal code underscored by impotent dreams of genocide. And, like all religions, it is a massive agglutination of stock response, of clichés, of inherited and unexamined formulations. This is the thrust of the greatest novel ever written, *Ulysses*, in which Joyce identifies Roman Catholicism, and anti-semitism, as fossilisations of dead prose and dead thought.

After September 11, then, writers faced quantitative change, but not qualitative change. In the following days and weeks, the voices coming from their rooms were very quiet; still, they were individual voices, and playfully rational, all espousing the ideology of no ideology. They stood in eternal opposition to the voice of the lonely crowd, which, with its yearning for both power and effacement, is the most desolate sound you will ever hear. "Desolate": "giving an impression of bleak and dismal emptiness... from L. desolat-, desolare 'abandon', from de-'thoroughly' + solus 'alone'."