



The age of horrorism (part two)

An exclusive essay by Martin Amis, continued.

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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 paradisaic immortality for a host of relations (the number is a round 70, two fewer, curiously, than the traditional allotment of houris). 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. (Continues)

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