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horrorism redux



The Guardian reported last week that a fight has broken out between Terry Eagleton and Martin Amis, who now are both teaching at Manchester University. In a new introduction to his primer Ideology, Eagleton attacks Amis's views on Islam, coming within a hair's breadth of calling Amis a racist for "The Age of Horrorism," a three-part essay Amis published last year in the Guardian. The Guardian has now published Eagleton's response to the latest article, as well as Amis's letter responding to the response.

When Amis's essay first showed up, I wrote an essay responding to it. A much-shortened version was published by a U. of Chicago email broadsheet called Sightings. Since the subject has come up again, I thought I'd post the original version in its entirety below. (Warning: it's long.)

(Photo by Stuart Price.)

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The Seduction of Reasons

"Courage, sir" is the basic prerequisite of serious moral thought, and for good reason. Moral thinking is a difficult discipline, and the byways of moral thought are littered with corpses both real and figurative. Martin Amis has always impressed me as a writer who has that courage in spades. He has never shied from the moral critique of life or literature. Where most critics bent their spines in spirals trying to show some sympathetic or redemptive aspect of *Lolita's* Humbert Humbert, Amis states plainly, "Hum is Lo's stepfather, and three times her age, and for two years he rapes her at least twice a day." Here is his imagination of a nuclear attack's autobiographical implications:

Suppose I survive. Suppose my eyes aren't pouring down my face, suppose I am untouched by the hurricane of secondary missiles that all mortar, metal, and glass has abruptly become: suppose all this. I shall be obliged (and it's the last thing I'll feel like doing) to retrace that long mile home, through the firestorm, the remains of the thousand-mile-an-hour winds, the warped atoms, the groveling dead. Then—God willing, if I still have the strength, and, of course, if they are still alive—I must find my wife and children and I must kill them. (*Einstein's Monsters*, 4)

The first time I read this passage I winced. The second time I tried to aestheticize it (what impressive hyperbole!) and thereby to dismiss it. Only on

a third read was I able to force myself to acknowledge its utter, honest realism. Moral intelligence like this does not come easily or cheaply. Unfortunately the same cannot be said for how it goes.

Last weekend [Sept. 10, 2006] the *Guardian* published Amis's "The Age of Horrorism," a three-part essay-attack on extreme Islamism that left me wondering what had happened to one of the more honest moral voices of the day.

The first charge in Amis's indictment against Islamism is irrationalism. He writes, "Contemplating intense violence, you very rationally ask yourself, what are the reasons for this? It is time to move on. We are not dealing in reasons because we are not dealing in reason." One of the appeals of Amis's novels is his ability to show with heart-sickening precision just how little of the time any of us spend dealing in reason, how the world presents itself as rational only in rare and beatific glimpses before falling back into chaos. But the basic irrationality of our lives doesn't stop any of us from having all kinds of reasons all the time. Amis's sentence is a bit of pure sophistry that stops working the moment you stop pretending not to notice the equivocation between "reasons" and "reason".

Over and over Amis takes up the appeal to reason as his central theme, and over and over it misleads him. It doesn't take long for the whole of Islam to be tarred by the same broad brush: answering the title of Bernard Lewis's "What Went Wrong?" Amis says, "The broad answer would be institutionalized irrationalism, and the particular focus would be the obscure logic that denies the Islamic world the talent and energy of half its people." I'm all for women's liberation, within Islam and without, but I can't help but wonder what went wrong with Amis's once-keen historical sense. The "obscure logic" that Amis holds responsible for throttling Arab economies is the same logic that until very recently deprived (and still deprives, in some quarters) most Western nations of "the talent and energy of half its people." How did they squeak by?

Amis continues, "The connection between manifest [economic] failure and the suppression of women is unignorable." This is pure sentimentality—we'd all like to live in a world where patent injustice is punished by a dwindling standard of living, but who's going to demonstrate that causality? And what happens when someone comes along to rationally show—as economist Robert Fogel tried to do with slavery—that the suppression of women might very well make good economic sense? Amis should know better. The strong case for women's liberation is based on the dignity of the human person, not their ability to raise the GDP.

Amis thinks that the West's moral advantage is "still vast and obvious" and that "we should strengthen and expand it." Let's forget for the moment the unsettling echoes of "the white man's burden" that suffuse this claim. We can still imagine reasons why this kind of moral imperialism might not be the best mode of rapprochement with Islam, especially when we make no real effort to understand it.

Take, for instance, his approving quotation of Bernard Lewis:

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.'

Amis glosses: "The West isn't being seductive, of course; all the West is being is attractive." Even granting the dubious distinction between seduction and attraction, there's matter for quarrel here. Seduction used to be a big deal in the West: in medieval Europe it was considered a worse crime than rape. The autonomist thrust of the Enlightenment put an end to all that, with at least one unquestionably positive result: women are no longer held responsible for leading men to their sexual downfall. But who's to say that we haven't lost a useful implement of moral reasoning when we ignore the moral

implications of seduction? The West *is* being seductive—Philip Morris wants my lungs, Coke wants my gullet, the internet wants my attention span—and that seduction is a type of violence. Not legally actionable violence—unless it involves politicians and a golfing jag to Scotland—but violence all the same. If someone, somewhere, or even a whole culture decides that it wants to opt out, who are we, shrunk in the blizzard of seductions that is modern Western life, to object?

This same, sterling chauvinism breaks through everywhere in Amis's article. He quotes with approbation famous Islamophobes like VS Naipaul and Christopher Hitchens. He frankly advocates racial profiling (at an airport, in his head: "Oh yeah: and stick to people who look like they're from the Middle East"). He allows Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis a sneaky return to the stage. His favorite historian of Islam is Bernard Lewis, a preference he shares with Dick Cheney.

What's more, Amis eyes Islamic history through a remarkably narrow keyhole, citing Islam's "tradition of intellectual autarky...so robust that Islam remained indifferent even to readily available and obviously useful innovations, including, incredibly, the wheel." Never mind the great medieval trade networks. Never mind the Ottoman trade empire. Never mind that in the 1890s Algerian Muslims had to work to establish elementary schools "against the will of the colons, who were not eager to see Algerian Muslims acquire a knowledge of French and the ideas expressed in it" (Albert Hourani in *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 302). Amis cares nothing for these subtleties; for him Islamic culture is all "extreme incuriosity," the few brief forays from which landed it squarely in the arms of Hitler and Stalin.

Amis tracks the psychological motivations of Sayyid Qutb, one of the founding theorists of the Muslim Brotherhood, with the same narrowness of mind: "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." If it weren't so silly, you'd think you were reading the ramblings of a back-alley analyst. He may be accurate in his characterization of Qutb as a "shambling invert," "sexual truant," and "marginal quack and dabbler." But what good does it do to think or imagine that Qutb's sexual and alcoholic frustrations were the root of his ideology? By the lights of Amis's logic the best way to stifle an entire generation of Islamists would seem to be parachuting ten thousand pre-paid prostitutes and a million cases of beer into Islamabad.

The most obvious instance of Amis's chauvinism comes when he's turned away from the Dome of the Rock (on account of "some calendric prohibition"). He asks the gatekeeper to "let me in anyway." What does the gatekeeper do? "His expression, previously cordial and cold, became a mask; and the mask was saying that killing me, my wife, and my children was something for which he now had warrant." Murderous intent is a serious charge, and reading this you can't help but think that had the gatekeeper been British and not anonymous, he might have a pretty good slander case on his hands. A long quotation from Philip Larkin's epigone poetry doesn't explain why Amis thought the gatekeeper should have let him profane this "serious house on serious ground."

At the start of his essay, Amis writes, "Naturally we respect Islam. But we do not respect Islamism, just as we respect Muhammad and do not respect Muhammed Atta." But of course Amis doesn't respect Islam: "Islam is totalist...That is to say, it makes a total claim on the individual....Islam means 'submission'—the surrender of independence of mind." That move from "Islam" to "Islamism" is little more than an amulet to assuage the pious pluralists among the Guardian's readership. After all, we all hate isms and we all want to be tolerant.

Like Hitchens, Amis has what I can only describe as a peculiarly British impatience for all things religious: "All religions are violent; and all ideologies are violent. Even Westernism, so impeccably bland, has violence glinting within it." Even? Allow me to wax Williamsian for a moment:

so much depends
upon

that "Even
Westernism"

glinting with
violence

beside the "impeccably
bland."

How is it that Amis—whose *Einstein's Monsters* took us straight to the fission-fueled core of "Westernism"—can now only see a glint where he once saw a raging conflagration? I am a firm defender of the right to change one's mind, but when the fall is so precipitous and the concussive injuries so obviously apparent, I can't help but suspect he's been sipping from Hitchens's gin-and-Kool Aid.

And just what, exactly, does Amis think "Westernism" is? For the sake of argument let's grant his point that "today, in the West, there are no good excuses for religious belief." What shining white stone lies at the bottom of our well? After the rejection at the Dome of the Rock, Amis says

I knew then that the phrase 'deeply religious' was a grave abuse of that adverb. Something isn't deep just because it's all that is there; it is more like a varnish on a vacuum. Millennial Islamism is an ideology superimposed upon a religion—illusion upon illusion. It is not merely violent in tendency. Violence is all that is there.

A nice phrase, that "varnish on a vacuum," but "illusion upon illusion" cuts a little too close to the quick: after all, neo-Darwinism is pretty much the view that "violence is all that is there." Does Amis still have energy after *Koba the Dread* to invoke Marx? But for Marx religion *was* the ideology. Why Amis thinks the *entia sunt multiplicanda* is beyond me. And even Marx allowed that "religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering."

You've already read the most important sentence in the three-installment article, just six words long: "It is time to move on." Move on from what we're never told, but never mind. This is it, the famous Hard Line. Morality for the digital age, all ones and zeros. Nothing shocking to anyone who's lived under the Bush administration for more than three hours, but still a bit jarring to hear from the author of *London Fields*, one of the most morally rich and subtle novels of the last century. How it is that Amis decided to crawl into bed with the likes of Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Posner is too mysterious for me to fathom.

There's a further irony. Hard Liners want us to believe that this time things are different. They ask us, in a word, to be *religious* about time. Secular history is a confusing welter of continuity and change. But only a religious attitude towards time, some version of sacred history, allows for the clean break that the Hard Liners so badly want us to believe in. For Amis the bright dot on the time chart that divides the world into Before and After is not of course 33 AD or 1 AH or even 11 September 2001. For Amis it's 2003. "Until 2003," he writes, "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." But by 2005, "suicide-mass murder had evolved...[It] had passed through a phase of decadence and was now on the point of debauchery."

Coupled with this religious attitude towards time is another, more insidious thought: not only is this time different, but so are these people. Amis sees in Islamism nothing but a near-nihilism: "Martyr" means witness. The suicide-

mass murderer witnesses nothing—and sacrifices nothing. He dies for vulgar and delusive gain.” Amis pulls back at the last moment from accusing them of nihilism pure and simple, since “for the Islamists, death is a consummation and a sacrament.” But while he’s right that extreme Islamism is not nihilist, he’s wrong about why. Islamism is not nihilist not because it promises a hereafter for its adherents but because, at least until very recently, it had a very clear idea of what it wanted here on earth. As Lawrence Wright says in a recent [9/11/06] *New Yorker* article, “Traditional radical Islam was homogenous and organized; it had a detailed ideology with a specific vision of a non-Western alternative society.”

At the heart of the Hard Line mentality is a refusal or inability to think of Islamism in political terms. Like many others, Amis wants badly to believe that the extreme Islamists’ apocalyptic ideology qualifies them as *sui generis*, somehow beyond the reach of our lowly understanding: “Suicide-mass murder is astonishingly alien, so alien, in fact, that Western opinion has been unable to formulate a rational response to it.” “Terrorism” is no longer scary enough to describe them, and so he wants a new term, “horrorism.”

But as political scientist Robert Pape has demonstrated [*American Conservative* interview, 7/18/2005], suicide bombers aren’t alien at all. In fact the largest supplier of suicide bombers are not Islamists but the Tamil Tigers, a secular Marxist group. “The central fact,” Pape says,

is that overwhelmingly suicide-terrorist attacks are not driven by religion as much as they are by a clear strategic objective: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from the territory that the terrorists view as their homeland. From Lebanon to Sri Lanka to Chechnya to Kashmir to the West Bank, every major suicide-terrorist campaign—over 95 percent of all the incidents—has had as its central objective to compel a democratic state to withdraw.

Pape has, in fact, formulated exactly the kind of “rational response” to suicide bombing that Amis thinks impossible. His conclusion? “Suicide terrorism is mainly a response to foreign occupation and not Islamic fundamentalism.”

More broadly we can also say that jihad is fundamentally a political, not religious or nihilist strategy. Here is Lawrence Wright again:

There was, in theory, a peaceful path to this idealized vision, but the traditional radical thinkers believed that this path had been cut off by the West, making jihad—which they saw as a *political* struggle carried out on the battlefield—the only alternative. [59; my emphasis]

Amis’s refusal or inability to think politically about Islamism, a refusal or inability shared by many, is substantially related to his confusion of reasons and Reason. Politically (but, again, not morally) speaking, he is wrong to put Osama bin Laden in the same category as Hitler and Pol Pot, among those who “only ask to be the last to die.” However improbable and abhorrent it may seem to us, bin Laden’s dream of reestablishing the caliphate is a political dream.

The twentieth century was one long refutation of one of our most dearly held philosophical fictions, what I like to call the Platonic fallacy: the thought that reason and goodness are intrinsically related. As Hannah Arendt famously demonstrated, however, the machinations of Stalinism, Hitlerism, and all the rest proved the durability of instrumental reason under the most noxious moral environments. The Islamic caliphate and an obsessive desire to hurt the West are bin Laden’s two fixed ideas, but they do not make him a madman. The simple, appalling truth is that you don’t have to be crazy to be a murderer. You don’t even have to be crazy to be a mass murderer.

It should go without saying—but probably wouldn’t—that to say that Islamism is political, to say that there might be real, even rational reasons that

undergird its murderous impulses, is not to absolve, justify, or excuse it. Explanation is not exculpation. Nor is it to confine oneself to a nervous little circle in which we fret ourselves over what we did to cause 9/11. It is, rather, to suggest that Al Qaeda might well be one of Rumsfeld's "known knowns." Amis and the Hard Line confraternity want us to believe that Islamism really is different, and the conclusion of this claim is always the same: the argument that an unprecedented threat requires an unprecedented response.

In Amis's account of the war, the "vast pluralities all over the West that are thirsting for American failure in Iraq...do not realize that they are co-synchronously thirsting for an Islamist victory." Here is Robert Pape's account:

Before our invasion, Iraq never had a suicide-terrorist attack in its history. Never. Since our invasion, suicide terrorism has been escalating rapidly with 20 attacks in 2003, 48 in 2004, and over 50 in just the first five months of 2005. Every year that the United States has stationed 150,000 combat troops in Iraq, suicide terrorism has doubled.... There is no evidence there were any suicide-terrorist organizations lying in wait in Iraq before our invasion. What is happening is that the suicide terrorists have been produced by the invasion.

The portrait of Al Qaeda that emerges in the suite of articles published in the *New Yorker's* Sept. 11 [2006] issue is one of a fairly "normal" terrorist organization, different from organizations like the Red Brigades and the I.R.A. only in its size, tactical weaponry, and ambition. Jane Meyer quotes terrorism scholar Jessica Stern on the testimony of informant Jamal Ahmed al-Fadl: "[Fadl] showed us that bin Laden was like any other C.E.O., and that Al Qaeda was a real bureaucracy" [35]. This observation is seconded by Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who appears in Wright's article: "[Osama] was not the one who originated the radical thinking that came to characterize Al Qaeda. He joined these men, rather than the other way around. His organization became the vehicle for their thinking." In hindsight this should have been less surprising than it was; though there are many, and many spectacular, ways to kill large quantities of humans, there are relatively few ways to get them to work together towards a common goal, no matter how evil or obscene.

Moreover, as Wright reports, Al Qaeda was beset by the same power struggles that test the cohesion of any corporate body, from HP to the Republican majority. "Zarqawi refused to swear fidelity to bin Laden.... He was bluntly critical of Al Qaeda's decision to wage war against America and the West rather than against corrupt Arab democracies." Only after Zarqawi had relocated to Iraq and only after bin Laden agreed to support his attacks on Shiite Muslims would he swear fealty to Osama. (If anyone deserved to be called insane it was Zarqawi, who attacked Muslims at prayer and personally beheaded hostages, but it seems clear that Al Qaeda's apocalyptic ideology was an outlet for, not a cause of, his psychopathology.)

Amis's inability to see Islam as anything more than the pathological pursuit of a fairy tale keeps him blind to the range of reasons that lead young men to join radical jihadi groups. Real suffering and a protest against real suffering are part of it, as is, or was, the \$25,000 promised to families by Saudi Arabia and the Saddam regime. (The history of jihadi suicide bombing surely contains more than a few perverse enactments of Willie Loman.) We are shocked to see "martyrdom pictures" of young teenage boys wielding AK-47s, but who hasn't seen that same counterfeit toughness in the face of a freshman football player? In a 2005 interview Pape notes that of the 462 people who have blown themselves up in suicide attacks since 1980, "Most are walk-in volunteers. Very few are criminals. Few are actually longtime members of a terrorist group. For most suicide terrorists, their first experience with violence is their very own suicide-terrorist attack."

Those who did have previous criminal experience bear a striking resemblance to another familiar type: criminals. The Fadl that emerges from Jane Meyer's *New Yorker* profile is a middle-time crook whose motivations

are a shifting mix of lust, greed, and ambition. Of course there's a huge, nearly unbridgeable moral gap between bringing down the World Trade Center and robbing a supermarket bank branch. But the startling fact—wasn't this what we learned with the Eichmann case?—is that there's no commensurate psychological gap. Both acts depend on the same psychological equipment. It's only from the outside that the patina of ideology appears deep and unalloyed.

Moral thinking is not the same as moral action, and it is one of the small graces of this life is that the latter does not require the former. But moral thinking can prepare the way for moral action in the way that classical training can prepare a jazz musician. What we get in Amis's article is not moral thinking. What we get is unthinking rage—a rage barely hidden under the surface of his always-shimmering prose—that apes precisely the thing Amis professes to despise. But we don't need Martin Amis for his rage—these days we can get it on any street corner, from almost anyone. Intelligence, wit, and moral clarity are rarer quantities, as elusive, it sometimes seems, as Nigerian yellowcake. There was a time when we could count on Amis for these qualities. I sincerely hope that time will come again.

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