

ONLINE ONLY: Arguing About Amis

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"Writers die twice," wrote Martin Amis, "once when the body dies, and once when the talent dies." In the case of Philip Larkin, it was decided that two deaths weren't enough. The dead bores attacked the poems as dead bores do: by trashing the dead man's reputation. When he went to the grave in 1985, Larkin was known by many people to be a great poet. Eight years later — after the publication of the first *Collected Poems*, the *Selected Letters* and the *Life* — Larkin was known by many more people to be a racist, a womaniser, a porn collector and a drunk. It was soon questioned whether Larkin wrote great poetry. Then it seemed irrelevant that he wrote poetry at all.

A few serious writers stood up for Larkin with sensible words. Martin Amis was one of those writers. Clive James was another. They said what mattered, and what still matters: that Larkin had talent, and that the man's private failures were a private affair, because the man chose to keep them that way. Amis was still defending Larkin in October. On *Letters to Monica* he wrote that "Larkin's life was a failure; his work was a triumph. That is all that matters. Because the work, unlike the life, lives on." In September, Faber will publish the *Selected Poems of Philip Larkin*. The poems are chosen by Martin Amis.

Many people who write about literature think that Martin Amis's talent is dead. That talent, apparently, fell terminally ill about the same time as Larkin's funeral: in the mid 1980s, after the publication of *Money*. One reviewer, writing in *The Sunday Times* in 2003, offered a neat summary of this popular opinion in the press. *London Fields* (1989) and *The Information* (1995) "threw into embarrassing relief the meagreness of his fictional repertoire". *Einstein's Monsters* (1987) and *Heavy Water* (1998) "showed that even the short story format couldn't curb his tendency to meander and repeat". "Two experimental

novellas", *Time's Arrow* (1991) and *Night Train* (1997), "both proved ill-judged". In *Koba the Dread* (2002) Amis sounded "even more egotistical than he did in his autobiography, *Experience* [2000]". *Yellow Dog* (2003) "ends with a baby getting triumphantly up on to its feet. But the impression it leaves is of a talent on its last legs."

Clive James made an elegant point when he wrote that: "Literature says most things itself, when it is allowed to." Books, in liberal democracies, live or die over time on their own merits. The dead bores' criticisms simply don't matter to the literature. But they matter to how we talk about literature, which means —to borrow another elegant idea from Clive James — they matter to civilisation. There's something curious about a pack of dead bores trying to take down a living novelist. It's curious that they think nothing of doing it with dead boring prose. They should, because to write like a bore is to think like one.

True literary style is unique. It's a voice heard above the immense hum of printed words. For Nabokov, style was matter. For Amis, style is perception: "It's not the flashy twist, the abrupt climax, or the seamless sequence of events that characterises a writer and makes him unique. It's a tone, it's a way of looking at things." A unique voice on the page provokes a unique response. No two readers can react to a real prose style in the same way. Yet many literary journalists try to persuade us that that's exactly what happens when they read a new Martin Amis novel. The style they use to describe his work is almost always the same. There are, of course, occasional warm reviews. *The Pregnant Widow*, rereleased in March in a Vintage paperback edition, was briefly praised in the *Guardian* and *The Independent* recently. But it is true to say that there's a consensus on Amis's work that is wholly unrelated to the quality of his words. The tale of Amis's dead talent is so popular in the press nowadays that it's a cliché. The cliché is betrayed by the dead boring style adopted by many writers when they write about Amis.

Even worse is the consensus on Amis as a person. He's Keith Talent. He's a very bad guy. In Larkin's case, the vicious ad hominem attacks began after he died. In Amis's case, personal abuse already passes for legitimate literary criticism. Critics have accused Amis of racism, misogyny and egotism. He's vain (the teeth), and greedy (the £500,000 advance, the Manchester University salary). He's "ageist", a shameless self-promoter and "past HIS sell-by date" (the euthanasia drama). He sprouts "arrogant twaddle" (the children's writing melee). Professor Terry Eagleton famously shot a rocket at the House of Amis: "[Kingsley Amis was] a racist, anti-Semitic boor, a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals." Eagleton added that: "Amis files has clearly learnt more from him than how to turn a shapely phrase."

But the bores don't need to put up with him for much longer, because Martin Amis is moving to New York. Amis is leaving for his family. His wife, the writer Isabel Fonseca, wants to live closer to her parents. Nonetheless, there was speculation in the papers recently that he's fed up with hostile reviews of his books and intrusive reporting about his life. Amis's editor at Jonathan Cape, Dan Franklin, told *The Sunday Times* in September that: "Martin plans to go to live in New York mainly because of Isabel, but I would also not blame him for leaving because of the way the media treats him and looks at the minutiae of his personal life. In America he would not, and does not, get that close personal scrutiny." The bores are claiming a victory in hounding "Wounded Amis" out of London.

They're also booing Amis because he's trash-talking England. As I write, he's reportedly called the royal family "philistines" in an interview with a French magazine. Last month he said that he's embarrassed the English "don't see that England doesn't matter in the

world". England is "an old drunk with airs of grandeur". It's the "land of Shakespeare", where everybody "wants to know about Jordan". Katie Price was once described by Amis as "two bags of silicone", and he's recommended readers think of her when they meet a character called Threnody in his next novel. The novel, tentatively due for publication next February, was initially titled *State of England*. A.N. Wilson, who sang in the cowardly choir that abused Larkin after the poet's death — he called him a "kind of petty-bourgeois fascist" and "nutcase" — responded to all this good news in the *Daily Mail* on Monday:

The reality is that the former *enfant terrible* of English novelists has turned into a strange, purple-faced parody of his father — only without the back catalogue of great books that Kingsley so impressively notched up. [...] Increasingly, his public utterances are more and more bizarre. He announced he will soon be leaving Britain to live in the US, and maybe that is just as well. Most of us have had enough of him — his mean-minded denunciations of the poor old Queen and her grandson's wedding being the final straw.

Amis has been trashing England for years. In much of his fiction, England is a land of cheats, pimps, liars, murderers, gangsters, slackers, drunks and dopes. It's Big Mal's world, in an Amis short story published in *The New Yorker* in 1996 and reprinted in *Heavy Water*. The short story was titled "State of England":

He was leaving early, and there on the steps was the usual shower of chauffeurs and minicabbies, hookers, hustlers, ponces, tricks, twanks, mugs and marks, and, as Mal jovially shouldered his way through, a small shape came close, saying breathily, dry-mouthed, *Hold that, mate* Suddenly Mal was backing off fast in an attempt to get a good look at himself: at the blade in his gut and the blood following the pleats of his soiled white shirt. He thought, What's all this you hear about getting stabbed not hurting? Comes later, doesn't it — the pain? No, mate: it comes now. Like a great paper cut to the heart. Mal's belly, his proud, placid belly, was abruptly the scene of hysterical rearrangements. And he felt the need to speak, before he fell.

What's literature about? What's it for? What are writers up to at their desks, or in the kitchen watching the kettle? These are difficult questions. George Orwell wondered if the "demon" that drove writers was "simply the same instinct that makes a baby squall for attention". What literature is not about is pandering to the poor tastes of dead bores; bores who try to take down a talented writer because they don't have any talent of their own. Nor is it about writers pitching platitudes at the public, or twisting their talents to suit the times. Good writers, I suspect, sit at desks chasing what Zadie Smith beautifully calls "the truth of your own conception". They do not temper their writing to please people who couldn't spot talented prose if pyrotechnics burst from the page to point it out to them.

The voice of conscience in *The Pregnant Widow* says that sex has two unique characteristics: "It is indescribable. And it peoples the world. We shouldn't find it surprising, then, that it is much on everyone's mind." You can't describe real literary talent either. You simply sense it in the shape and sound of the prose, or you don't. And while literary talent doesn't do anything as grand as peopling the world, it is the only thing that time gives a damn about when it ranks the world's writers. We shouldn't find it surprising, then, that the writers who've got talent right now are much on the minds of the writers who don't.

You can't prove why next century's readers are more likely to seek out Martin Amis's

words than they are to seek out the dead bores' words. If they do seek out the bores' words, they may marvel that so much sour ink was spat at a writer who refused to temper his speech and his writing for anyone. They may ask why the bores wasted their time, and their readers' time, bashing a writer who had interesting things to say about how we lived back then, and who wrote it down with true style. They may also ask why we listened to so many words from a person named Katie Price; a person who left nothing of any value to anyone, and who had nothing interesting to say even in her own time. I think Paul Berman, the author of *Terror and Liberalism* and *The Flight of the Intellectuals*, is asking the right questions in our time: "Who will speak of the sacred and the secular, of the physical world and the spiritual world? Who will defend liberal ideas against the enemies of liberal ideas? Who will defend liberal principles in spite of liberal society's every failure?"

In *The Second Plane* Amis wrote that the age of terror will also be remembered as the "age of boredom". Amis is the author of some of the sharpest words yet written about Islamism's challenge to the West. But his fiction speaks to what is sacred in the secular world: the imaginative play of a talented mind. It's unsettling that when faced with real talent, so many people who write about literature choose to be boring about it when they're fortunate enough to be under no obligation to be so. But as Amis wrote of the reaction against Larkin: "In a sense, none of this matters, because only the poems matter." Only the literature matters, and this is great literature:

I felt the baby's fear when I entered. A sudden pall of mid-afternoon, and silence, and no Keith and no Kath: just Kim, the squirming bagel at my feet on the kitchen floor. She seemed unhurt, only soaked and crying — and afraid. And that was enough, too much, should never happen. Oh I know when the babies come how we patter and creep like mice through the dark tunnels, to tend them, anticipate them, to pick them up and give them comfort. But it must be like that. It must always be like that. Because when we're not there, their worlds begin to fall away. On every side the horizon climbs until it pushes out the sky. The walls come in. Pain they can take, maybe. Pain is close and they know where it comes from. Not fear, though. Keep them from fear. Jesus, if they only knew what was *out* there. And that's why they must never be left alone like this.

— *London Fields*

Cities at night, I feel, contain men who cry in their sleep and then say Nothing. It's nothing. Just sad dreams. Or something like that ... Swing low in your weep ship, with your tear scans and your sob probes, and you would mark them. Women — and they can be wives, lovers, gaunt muses, fat nurses, obsessions, devourers, exes, nemeses — will wake and turn to these men and ask, with female need-to-know, "What is it?" And the men say, "Nothing. No it isn't anything really. Just sad dreams."

— *The Information*

She had been unconscious for over a hundred hours, and he told his mother and brother that there was no point in coming, she would not be waking up and there was no point in coming, coming from Andalusia, from Sierra Leone ... It was nearly midnight. Her body was flat, sunken, on the raised bed, all buoyancy gone; but the lifeline on the monitor continued to undulate, like a childish representation of the ocean, and she continued to breathe — to breathe with preternatural force.

Yes Violet looked forceful. For the first time in her life, she seemed to be someone it would be foolish to treat lightly or underestimate, ridge-faced, totemic, like a squaw queen with orange hair.

"She's gone," said the doctor and pointed with her hand.

The wavering line had levelled out. "She's still breathing," said Keith. But of course it was the machine that was still breathing. He stood over a breathless corpse, the chest filling, heaving, and he thought of her running and running, flying over the fields.

— *The Pregnant Widow*

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