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Amis Amiss

by Alan Jacobs

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Long, long ago, in the years just preceding the Second World War—as Germany was overrunning Czechoslovakia and annexing Austria, and as Neville Chamberlain was preparing to travel to Munich to sort these things out—the novelist E.M. Forster wrote an essay called “What I Believe.”

He had the misfortune, he said, of living in an “age of Faith” (by which he primarily meant faith in things like communism and National Socialism) and found it “extremely unpleasant really . . . bloody in every sense of the word.” He himself did not believe in Belief; but, pressed to say what he did believe in, he had an answer: “personal relationships.” It was in the articulation of this commitment that Forster uttered what would become a famous sentence—or, when quoted by the spy and traitor Anthony Blunt forty years later, an infamous one—“I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.”

Martin Amis is an English novelist with a history of strong interest in personal relationships. For much of his career, he wrote bitterly satirical novels about well-off Londoners; even when the prospect of nuclear catastrophe arises, as it does in *London Fields* (1989), Amis seems to treat “The Crisis,” the coming “horror day,” primarily as a vehicle for revealing the largely unpleasant traits of his handful of main characters.

Over the past decade, however, Amis seems to have become increasingly uncomfortable with his habitual themes. He has begun to try to write against type and found little success when he plowed familiar ground: The dreadful *Yellow Dog*, which appeared in 2003, reads like a parody of a 1980s Amis novel. Whether this evident inability to walk in his own footsteps is a distressing development depends on one’s assessment of Amis’ recent overt seriousness. Has he succeeded in going beyond the limning of personal relationships?

It’s hard to answer that question confidently. Amis has long been a devotee of metafictional gaming, and his experiments with technique can seem ill at ease with matters of world-historical import. His first attempt to grapple with such matters, *Time’s Arrow* (1991), tells the story of a Jew-torturing Nazi doctor, but he tells it backward, time’s arrow pointing the wrong way, monstrous deeds first done and then undone. Is this a powerful meditation on tragedy or a misplaced playfulness?

Perhaps feeling the lack of propriety, Amis has in recent years written about his political and historical concerns largely in nonfictional modes, but even so he has rarely been straightforward. *Koba the Dread* (2002) is a meditation on the massive cruelties of Stalin, with a particular emphasis on the question of whether we can wrap our minds around the enormity of millions and millions of deaths. Amis approaches this question by mixing into his narrative a meditation on the death, at age forty-six, of his sister Sally; and he concludes with a letter to his “Father’s Ghost,” which (among other things) condemns the elder Amis’ long affair with Marxism. Is this self-indulgence? Or rather a truly serious attempt to confront the mysterious idiosyncrasies of human sympathy and the limits of our imaginations?

The questions might be easier to answer had not Amis also framed the book as a kind of challenge to his old friend Christopher Hitchens, whom he sees as exemplary of a class of intellectuals who forever pointed us to the horrors of the Nazis while demurely turning

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aside from the still greater horrors of Stalinism. This challenge led to a finger-wagging review by Hitchens in *The Atlantic* and a series of punch-counterpunch exchanges in various transatlantic venues, all of which obscured both the thoughtfulness of Amis' meditations on grief and his discovery of the depths of human depravity: "Hitler-Stalin tells us this, among other things: given total power over another, the human being will find his thoughts turn to torture."

I have my reservations about *Koba the Dread*, about Amis' efforts to make the world-historical real by placing it within the context of personal relationships. But *Koba* is still a pretty brave book, one that could, perhaps, reveal to a certain segment of the Western intelligentsia its own moral frivolousness and willed blindness.

Still, once we separate the book from its framework of chattering-class debates, how much does it matter? Was it worth Amis' time to write? Is it worth our time to read? Amis studied, with considerable care it seems, a dozen or so books about the Soviet Union and (to judge by his quotations) came to the conclusion that the most reliable guides to the nightmare are Robert Conquest and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. A wise conclusion—but why then should we read Amis in preference to Conquest and Solzhenitsyn? Because his book is shorter? Because of his linkage of public and private grief? Because of his skills as a writer of narrative prose?

Such inquiries are equally relevant to *The Second Plane*, Amis' new collection of essays and stories that revolve, in one way or another, around the events of September 11, 2001. The first piece in the collection, the title essay, was written in the days immediately following the attack, and Amis himself expresses reservations about it in his author's note: It "indulges in . . . a reflexive search for the morally intelligible, which always leads to the chimera of 'moral equivalence.'"

Interestingly, he sees a similar tendency in one of the most recent pieces in the book, and the longest, "Terror and Boredom," from late 2006: There, he says, he goes "rather heavy on 'respect' for Islam." He flatly calls these traits "misemphases" but allows them to remain, presumably as marking his own mind's developmental changes. Yet those with anything less than a passionate interest in the history of Martin Amis' mind could be forgiven for wondering what this collection is really worth. His current willingness to confront Islamic extremism is, I think, highly admirable—but do I need to see the steps along the way to this strong stand?

Moreover, these essays share with *Koba the Dread* the Digested Read problem. (The Digested Read, for the uninitiated, is a regular feature in *The Guardian* of London in which John Crace effectively retells a book in just a few paragraphs and then, in "The Digested Read Digested," in one sentence.) If the substantive historical material of *Koba* is just Conquest and Solzhenitsyn digested, then "Terror and Boredom"—the center of this collection—likewise masticates, swallows, and regurgitates Lawrence Wright's *The Looming Tower* and Paul Berman's *Terror and Liberalism*. (*The Second Plane* also includes a review of *The Looming Tower*, published almost simultaneously with "Terror and Boredom.")

Now, as it happens, I have myself digested those excellent books by Wright and Berman, which leads me to ask—those *Koba* questions returning—what am I gaining by having them re-presented to me by Amis?

As far as I can tell, not much. It is possible, I suppose, that some people who would find Wright or Berman relatively heavy sledding will be touched by Amis' way with "personal relationships." His relating of his sister-in-law's experience in lower Manhattan on the morning of September 11 is eerily effective, I think; his account of a flight from Montevideo to New York with his daughters—this is the boredom part of "Terror and Boredom"—far less so. None of these events takes on significantly more meaning because Martin Amis or someone he knows experienced them; nor does he have the expertise or insight to add much that is distinctive. His attempt to imagine in fiction "The Last Days of Mohammed Atta" is almost as flat and lumbering as John Updike's *Terrorist*. (One of the few unexpected insights in *The Second Plane*, however, comes in a review of the movie *United 93* in which he points out that, harsh and blunt as the movie is, the filmmakers do "spare us something": They put no children onboard that flight.)

Perhaps all my questions amount to this: When it is time to talk about terror, tragedy, and world-historical occasions, what do writers—precisely as writers—bring to the table? Do they bring anything we especially need?

It is hard for me to see what that might be. In the description and narration of such



events, great literary skills can actually impede the proper response, as many of us learned when Updike reported his view of the towers' fall—from a house in Brooklyn—in the most delicately pointillist of styles. The result proved to be grotesque: As Leon Wieseltier memorably commented of Updike's prose, "the loveliness is invincible." Amis is not as elegant a writer as Updike, but he too seems often to be trying too hard to accomplish something that is not worth accomplishing. When Amis writes, "It was the plane itself that was in frenzy, one felt, as it gunned and steadied and then smeared itself into the South Tower," I only think: No, no, please don't. That is not wanted here.

Alan Jacobs is professor of English at Wheaton College and author most recently of Original Sin: A Cultural History.