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The Second Plane

Richard King, reviewer
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In *The Voice Of The Lonely Crowd* (June 2002), Martin Amis describes his

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reaction to what has been, by many magnitudes, the century's most significant event so far: the attacks on New York and Washington by Islamic fundamentalists in 2001.

Naturally enough, his thoughts turned to literature, and, specifically, to his own achievement, as summarised on the page headed "By the same author":

"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."

This was only an initial response. It soon became clear that "the war against cliché" was going to play a crucial role in what has been dubbed "the war on terror" (itself a cliché of evasive intent). The attacks left a vacuum of incredulity into which, before long, all manner of credulousness and cliché began ineluctably to flow. The planes that felled the World Trade Centre were "chickens coming home to roost". Islamists were "the fish that swim in the sea of Islamic discontent". Such clichés were evidence of a collective inability to think beyond the usual categories. Even Amis, by his own admission, showed signs of what Paul Berman, in *Terror And Liberalism*, terms "rationalist naivete". His first piece on the September attacks was "a reflexive search for the morally intelligible" and as such sailed close to moral equivalence.

He soon pulled himself together, however, and has since made the best contribution to the war effort that a man of his talents is able to make: he has mounted guard over the English language. First thoughts have yielded to second thoughts and these second thoughts have been pressed into service against the second-hand thoughts, the clichés, of the "herd". *The Second Plane* is the story of that deployment, bringing together reviews and essays and two outstanding pieces of short fiction - all of them centring on September 11 and the "moral crash" that followed it.

It's a subject Amis is well qualified to talk about, bearing as it does on two of the themes about which he has written most brilliantly: America and masculinity. Amis has said that America is too vast to inspire unconditional love or hatred: to say that you love, or hate, America is like saying that you love, or hate, life itself. This observation turns out to have been weirdly prescient. What, after all, is the favoured boast (and accusation) of the Islamist, if not "We love death more than you love life"? As Amis

says, this is a "completely new kind of enemy, one for whom death is not death - and for whom life is not life, either, but illusion".

If cliché is language that has ceased to live, then Amis's style is something like its antithesis. From his magnificent depiction of September 11 - of the "defining moment" when the second plane, "sharking in low over the Statue of Liberty", changed the world beyond all recognition - to his dazzling descriptions of the major players in this new theatre of the grotesque and the wicked ("Bin Laden's contribution is his image, and nothing more: omniscient nullity under a halo of ascetic beatitude"), Amis's writing seizes the lapels. One of his favourite adjectives is "frictionless" but his own style is almost palpably abrasive. The page fairly fizzes and pops with static.

That Amis is such a careful writer makes the rare occasions in which he falters both more conspicuous and harder to forgive. "[An] episode like Abu Ghraib" implies that that hell-hole popped into being when the photographs of Lynndie England and her fellow humiliation merchants came to light in 2004 (in fact, it had been a torture chamber and a human abattoir for many years previously). More seriously, Amis dignifies the alliance of Ba'athist thugs and Islamofascists tearing Iraq apart with the title of "an insurgency", which is like calling Adolf Hitler a bad apple.

There is also a bit of literary pilfering. A politician is described as "cake-in-the-rain handsome" (W.H. Auden's auto-description), while Tony Blair's "weak protesting treble" is lifted from Philip Larkin's *To The Sea*.

There are also at least a couple of examples of Amis trying to cover his tracks. Recently, he was accused of "Islamophobia" over his essay *The Age Of Horrorism*, reprinted here as *Terror And Boredom: The Dependent Mind*. Amis's description of an airport official searching his youngest daughter's rucksack ("palpitating the length of all four limbs of her fluffy duck") was singled out by many commentators as evidence of his bigotry. This is what Amis wrote originally:

"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 [searching my children's toys] until they do. Oh yeah: and stick to people who look like they're from the Middle East.' "

If this is bigotry, then I'm in trouble. But of course, it isn't bigotry; what Amis is doing is confessing to an urge and there is a world of difference between confessing to an urge (however unbecoming) and propounding a view. It is thus a little depressing to find that the final sentence of the offending passage has been slightly modified in a way that insures the feelings expressed against the (highly likely) eventuality that someone not from the Middle East will one day blow himself up on an aeroplane. It now reads, "Oh yeah: and stick, for now, to young men who look like they're from the Middle East." (Italics added.)

What is Amis saying with this change? That his original recollection was wrong? Or that it would have been more politically convenient to have thought something vaguely different at the time?

Nevertheless, this book is a victory for the ironic over the dependent mind and for language that loves life over language that loves death. It is a victory, in other words, in the war against cliché.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/03/21/1205602632115.html>