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## Nutmegged

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*The War against Cliché: Essays and Reviews 1971-2000* by Martin Amis · Cape, 506 pp, £20.00

The main title of this collection may at first seem wantonly non-descriptive, but it turns out to be exact. The first thing to see to if you want to write well is to avoid doing bad writing, used thinking. The more positive requirements can be left till later, if only a little later. Clichés are infallible symptoms of used thinking. Martin Amis has always wanted to be a good writer and he has got what he wanted. He early acquired a habit of vigilance, of stopping clichés at the frontier, and that habit couldn't easily be broken. He is one of the few critics who trouble, even in a shortish newspaper review, to include some consideration of the fabric of a book, the faults of its texture, its clichés.

Over the years Amis has done a lot of virtuous wincing over clichés. John Fowles is a prominent target: 'He managed a wan smile'; 'God, you're so naive.' No expensive talk about Descartes, Marivaux, Lemprière and Aristophanes can procure a pardon for that sort of thing. Other reviewers may commend Thomas Harris for committing 'not a single ugly or dead sentence' but Amis finds enough of them to label Harris 'a serial murderer of English sentences' and *Hannibal* 'a necropolis of prose'. He finds the opposite response of other commentators explicable on the assumption that they aren't listening, and, more generally, because their sense of hierarchy has gone. Some writers really are better than others, though these people lack the power to see that it is so; 'there is a levelling impulse at work.' 'Margot laughed in spite of herself' and 'Bob Sneed broke the silence' are not only dead sentences but an unprovoked pain to all good writers. The fact that Harris, like many others, goes in for the occasional 'fugitive poeticism' only makes things worse. When he says that something is 'truly of the resinous heart' Amis does not know what he means and neither do I, but I catch the poeticism, the theft from Yeats. 'Virtuoso vulgarity' indeed. Amis himself sometimes does a borrowing from high-class literature ('green and pale'; 'promise-crammed'; 'the only end of age') though always when it means something, and where he charitably supposes a decent reader will know not only what it means but where it came from and why it is worth stealing.

And if you quote from memory, get it right. When Andrew Motion, no hero to Amis, says that Larkin's anthology was meant to promote 'the taste by which he wished to be relished' he is adapting a remark of Wordsworth's - 'every author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed.' But neither Wordsworth nor Amis would have passed 'which . . . wished . . . relished'. These are small matters, perhaps, but not if you think them symptoms of a destructive illness, as Amis does, or even as just bad manners.

For writers are to be polite in every sense, courteous in manner and properly skilled in literature. To 'have

to read the sentence twice, even though you didn't want to read it once' is to suffer undeservedly. Worse still is the wince produced by 'genteelisms': 'a forty-minute hike brought the dog and I to the top of the hill.' A belated disciple of Fowler, Amis abhors *Elegant Variation*: 'If the President seemed to support the Radicals in New York, in Washington he appeared to back the Conservatives.' This is not only *Elegant Variation* but *Pointless Chiasmus*, a crime I have only this minute identified.

The severities may seem to be, but aren't, mere pedantries. It might not be worth carrying on a war against the cliché out of nothing more than an usher's blinkered interest in Fowlerian correctness of language. But cliché is a disease that must be stamped out; it infects the mind and even the heart; it makes it impossible to be honest, and that, for Amis, is an unquestionable duty of authorship. He says in his introduction that he has tried not to go on as he did in his youth, slashing, burning, jeering; such antics, however pleasing to the author and his readers in their nonage, do not become men of substance in middle life - an attitude more humane than that of Housman, who made up epigrammatic insults and stowed them away for future use. 'Mutton dressed as lamb,' says Amis of middle-aged slashing, burning and jeering. This renunciation reflects a firm moral position, but it does not excuse him from duty in the war against cliché and 'scruffy writing'.

No one, except Amis's heroes Nabokov and Bellow, is exempt from censure. Angus Wilson, who gets a bit of a drubbing, was capable of writing 'the admirable Admiral Croft' and 'a revolting revolutionary act'. V.S. Pritchett, for whom Amis has a well-considered and affectionate admiration (expressed with less qualification in an earlier essay), doesn't understand the elements of punctuation, his being 'tangled, hectic and Victorian'. Moreover he commits sentences here characterised as 'verbal pile-ups' or 'train-wrecks', over which Amis's pencil, his lifting gear, hovers and is regretfully withdrawn. Iris Murdoch makes a futile attempt to avoid cliché by using inverted commas: 'the wrong end of the stick', 'worthwhile activities'. But you can't slip away as easily as that: 'a cliché or an approximation, wedged between inverted commas, is still a cliché or an approximation.' It does not help that Murdoch was also given to 'train-wreck adjectives'.

An especially favoured site of cliché infection is the adverb. When Don DeLillo has a character say something 'quietly' you know he's drawing on a long tradition of 'said quietly' as a conventional announcement that the remark it follows should be taken as particularly impressive. Ordinary reviewers, and even this extraordinary reviewer, cannot manage without the likes of 'genuinely pleased' or 'brilliantly realised', 'brilliantly told'. These are rare instances of Amis himself catching a dose of the disease, and, like much of his rather less brilliant writing, they tend to occur in essays on the authors he most respects, in this case V.S. Naipaul.

Normally he protects his health and virtue by ranging as far as possible from adverbial conventionality. I made a list of *recherché* adverbs, of which this is a selection: 'beamingly upbeat', 'lurchingly written', 'deeply unshocked', 'embarrassingly good', 'tremendously unrelaxed', 'fruitfully uneasy' (Pritchett), 'pitifully denuded' (admittedly apt, for a Leavisian bookshelf), 'janglingly discursive', 'remorselessly indulgent', 'scarily illusionless', 'hugely charmless', 'promiscuously absorbed', 'customarily rotted', 'chortlingly habituate', 'finessingly cruel', 'implacably talented', 'bicker halitotically'.

The great thing about these expressions is that the author can be fairly sure they will never be used again, much less become new enemies of clear thought and virtue. If Amis occasionally allows himself something a bit less 'off the beaten track' (as Miss Murdoch might have said) like 'cruelly burdened' instead of, say, 'crunchingly loaded', or argues that a book has 'aged dramatically' (when he might well judge that adverb, used by another author, to be a vulgarity), or writes that somebody 'espoused . . . free love', he gets

off because of the merit acquired by his 'ceaseless labour' of cliché avoidance over such a 'long haul'.

It has not evaded the writer's notice that there are other, equally subtle ways of thwarting clichés, whether of the page, the mind or the heart. He regards Joyce as the great master of the art of 'hoisting' the cliché 'with its own petard'. 'The summer evening had begun to fold the world in its mysterious embrace': so begins the Nausicaa section of *Ulysses*, described here as 'one of the greatest passages in all literature'. Its heroine, Gerty MacDowell, is, as Amis accurately remarks, 'a beautiful slum of clichés'. Observing that 'Joyce never uses a cliché in innocence,' he describes the whole novel as being '*about* cliché'. A moderately unhappy consequence of this purgative achievement is that *Ulysses*, being itself, as a whole, a 'structural cliché', can be boring. The scene in the cabman's shelter is a deliberate insult to the very idea of writing: 'a nightmare of repetitions, tautologies, double negatives, elegant variations, howlers, danglers: "Mozart's *Twelfth Mass* he simply revelled in, the *Gloria* in that being, to his mind, the acme of first class music as such, literally knocking everything else into a cocked hat.'" And after many pages of this sort of thing Amis has had enough: 'This writer has the power to take you anywhere (nothing is beyond him); but he keeps taking you where you don't want to go.' It is relevant that '*Ulysses* takes about a week to read, if you do nothing else.' Amis always feels able to acknowledge greatness without denying that it can be boring and make insolent demands on one's time. This combination of unaffected admiration and critical honesty is very attractive.

He thinks it a pity, but not a pity worth spending much precious time on, that the canon is dead and literary criticism, as he knew it in his youth, a thing of the past. All the same, he has visited the canon and here and there shows a dwindlingly acute interest, not in the great men of the age of literary criticism, like I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis and Northrop Frye, but in what might be called, rather vaguely, the Hazlitt tradition. Yet he is still mildly bothered by the old Intentional Fallacy, and it causes an occasional disturbance of logic: 'Although writers' lives are no more than optional extras in the consideration of their work, the dull fact of Jane Austen's spinsterhood - her plainness, her childlessness, her virgin death - invests her comedies with disappointment, and with a sense of thwarted homing. It also confirms one's sense of the diminishing physicality of her later heroines.' And the virgin Austen is reproved for being cruel to Lydia Bennet. 'The reader begins to feel that artists should know better than that; we expect them to know better than that.' For all its 'eternal humour and élan', *Pride and Prejudice* fails the test as art, and the question is, whether we'd have known this if we hadn't also known about the disappointments of the author's plainness and spinsterhood.

That said, or, as Amis allows himself to say, 'simply put', we have here a literary critic of startling power, a post-literary-critical critic who, incorrigibly satirical, goes directly to work on the book. Often, being right and being funny are, in this book, aspects of the same sentence. Often, as one reads on, one finds oneself quietly giggling, or gigglingly quiet. The precision of the attack is astounding, and is matched by the bluntness of the condemnation. Alexander Theroux is scolded for 'pseudo-elegant variation' when he switches from 'which' to 'that' in mid-sentence. Worse still, the sentence in question is in any case 'a wreck: ugly, untrue and illiterate'.

Even greater names are not spared. An essay on *Don Quixote* begins as it means to go on: 'While clearly an impregnable masterpiece, *Don Quixote* suffers from one fairly serious flaw - that of outright unreadability.' Anybody could make bold to say that, but few could justify the remark so lightly and ably as Amis does in this piece.

Neat tricks of style co-operate in the business of judgment. Meditating a long-past crisis in the

management of the English football team, he decides that 'it is all too easy to blame Ron Greenwood. Yet I think we should blame Ron Greenwood.' Greenwood is then thoroughly blamed, mostly for choosing a goalkeeper who 'came cartwheeling off his line to flail at innocuous crosses; all night he looked capable of being nutmegged by a beachball.' Of course that was twenty years ago, before stern charity and moderation of language became the name of the game.

Amis likes games and seems especially keen on tennis and poker, but he spends more time on chess. He does what might by some be described as a 'splendid job' on Bobby Fischer, and a genial one on George Steiner's book about the great Reykjavik encounter: 'There's not one detailed comparison,' he writes admiringly, 'between a middle game and Bach's *Die Kunst der Fuge*. Page after page goes by without any reference to Auschwitz.' All the fine writing (what Amis ungraciously calls 'the old apocalyptic beefcake') is confined to chess itself: 'The dynamic dovetailing of the whole game, the unfolding ramifications of its crystalline armature are implosive in the very first move.' The youthful critic, after properly acknowledging the merits of the book, takes the liberty of advising its famous author to cool it, and to discover the difference between brilliance and dazzle.

The kind of writing this writer belongs to is the novelistic kind, so we expect, and get, more detailed comment on novelists, especially 20th-century novelists, than on poets, playwrights and the like. Here are penetratingly friendly notices of Ballard and Burgess: 'the failure is (vexingly, boringly, ineffably) a failure of language.' Michael Crichton has a bad case of cliché rot ('animals - especially, if not exclusively, velociraptors - are what he is good at. People are what he is bad at. People, and prose.' Crichton has 'herds of clichés, roaming free. You will listen in "stunned silence" to an "unearthly cry" or "a deafening roar".') Evelyn Waugh 'wrote *Brideshead Revisited* with great speed, unfamiliar excitement, and a deep conviction of its excellence. Lasting schlock, the really good bad book, cannot be written otherwise.' Malcolm Lowry is 'a world-class liar'. The response to John Updike is slightly chilly, but loses its cool when required to be respectful: 'enduringly eloquent . . . in a prose that is always fresh, nubile and unwitherable'. (Yes, it does say 'nubile'.) Philip Roth is admired, though Amis seems uncharacteristically terrorised by *Sabbath's Theater*: 'an amazing tantrum . . . You toil on, looking for the clean bits.' Mailer is 'grandiose and crass'. And so on. It's all deeply interesting and interestingly deep, especially when the subjects are the American masters alongside whom, one can't help feeling, this writer would choose to be assessed. Hence the long eulogies on Nabokov and Bellow: 'the world has never heard this prose before,' he writes, all irony discarded, 'prose of such tremulous and crystallised beauty'. Don DeLillo later gets into the side, while Updike still frets on the bench.

There are, however, some good writers on this side of the ocean. The Naipauls and Larkin must be praised. The long central *New Yorker* essay on Larkin is probably the most considered and the most permanently valuable part of the book. It recycles some earlier remarks to great defensive effect. More than any other piece it confirms one's opinion that Amis is the best practitioner-critic of our day - just what Pritchett was in his prime, though without the bad punctuation and the jangling train-wrecks.

Of his pieces on nuclear weapons and global warming I will merely say that they are virtuously impressive. It remains to ask two questions. The first may seem a bit academic. Why did Kurt Vonnegut, as reported in one of these reviews, call the central figure of his novel *Galapagos* 'James Wait' - a name pre-empted long before, and with good reason, by an even better writer? Somebody must know, and I'd have expected Amis would - he himself has played the name game in his fiction - but not a word. Finally, the acknowledgments page states that the 'pieces in this book were compiled by Professor James Diedrick.' We thought they were

all compiled by Martin Amis. A double, a *nom de guerre*? An affable familiar ghost? President of the Society for the Elimination of the Cliché? We need to know.

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**Frank Kermode's** Tanner Lectures on the aesthetics of the canon are out from Princeton as *Pleasure and Change*. He has recently published *Pieces of My Mind: Writings 1958-2002*.

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