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The Catastrophist

By LEON WIESELTIER

On Sept. 10, 2001, nobody in America seemed to know anything about Islam. On Sept. 12, 2001, everybody seemed to know everything about Islam. Well, not quite; but it is really a wonder the way the arcane particulars of an alien civilization now trip off every tongue. People who would not know if a page of Arabic is upside down or right side up helpfully expound upon the meaning of jahilliyah. [Sayyid Qutb](#) is quickly overtaking Reinhold Niebuhr as the theologian about whom the un- or antitheological pronounce with the most serene authority. Nothing creates intellectual confidence like catastrophe. After the mind breaks, it stiffens; in the aftermath of grief, it lets in only certainty. In a time of war, complexity is suspected of a sapping effect, and so a mental curfew is imposed. From the maxim that we must know our enemy, we infer that our enemy may be easily known.

THE SECOND PLANE

September 11: Terror and boredom.

By Martin Amis.

211 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$24.

In “The Second Plane,” his collection of noisy, knowing writings about theocracy and terror, [Martin Amis](#) goes out on a limb. He denounces both. Really, he does. He hates Islamism and he hates Islamist murder. And so he should: if certain forms of evil are not hated, then they have not been fully understood. Amis enjoys the moral element in contempt, and he is splendidly unperturbed by the prospect of giving offense. But he appears to believe that an insult is an analysis. He wants us to remember, about the Islamists in Britain, “their six-liter plastic tubs of hairdressing bleach and nail-polish remover, their crystalline triacetone triperoxide and chapatti flour.” He knows for a fact that Islamists “habitually” jump red lights, so as “to show contempt for the law of the land (and contempt for reason).” Iranians, he teaches, are “mystical, volatile and masochistic.” Amis seems to regard his little curses as almost military contributions to the struggle. He has a hot, heroic view of himself. He writes as if he, with his wrinkled copies of [Bernard Lewis](#) and [Philip Larkin](#), is what stands between us and the restoration of the caliphate. He is not only outraged by Sept. 11, he is also excited by it. “If Sept. 11 had to happen, then I am not at all sorry that it happened in my lifetime.” Don’t you see? It no longer matters that we missed the Spanish Civil War. ¡No pasarán!

For all of Amis’s testimonies about the transformative impact of Sept. 11 — which “will perhaps never be wholly assimilable,” whatever that means — there is at least one way in which he has been thoroughly untouched by the atrocity: he is still busy with the glamorous pursuit of extraordinary sentences. What has to happen to shake this slavery to style? Amis is the sort of writer who will never say “city” when he can say “conurbation.” In his first article about Sept. 11, written a week after the destruction, he hoped that the American response “should also mirror the original attack in that it should have the capacity to astonish,” as if retaliation were an aesthetic statement. When, in a trivial bit of reportage about [Tony Blair](#), Amis observes that “the crouched policemen, in their Day-Glo yellow strip, buzz past like purposeful hornets,” this is merely good writing; but when he describes the second plane on its way to the south tower as “sharking in low over

the Statue of Liberty,” the ingenuity of the image is an interruption of attention, an ostentatious metaphorical digression from the enormity that it is preparing to reveal, an invitation to behold the prose and not the plane.

In Amis’s account, the Islamist terrorists are guilty not only of slaughtering people. They are guilty also of proliferating “clichés” and “inherited and unexamined formulations” — and in this respect they are “like all religions,” which were exposed as “fossilizations of dead prose and dead thought,” were they not, by “one of the greatest novels ever written, ‘Ulysses.’” Why can’t they just read “Ulysses”? When he writes that the fear provoked by Sept. 11 is “as audible as tinnitus,” and that “if you closed your eyes” in a Cobra helicopter over Baghdad “you seemed to hear music, military but atonal, like tinnitus,” it is his writing that is like tinnitus. And what is gained by preferring “horrorism” to “terrorism,” except perhaps a round of applause? Amis’s freshness is flat and neurotic and genuinely tiresome. He writes about politics and history as if Orwell never lived. He is dead to the damage his virtuosity inflicts upon his urgency. Instead, he pulls focus, and pulls, and pulls. His book reminds me of what [Heath Ledger](#) is said to have remarked, in disappointment, about [Philip Seymour Hoffman](#)’s Oscar: “I thought it was for the best acting, not the most acting.”

Art is not the only impediment to understanding that Amis places in the way of his reader. There is also the impediment of sex. Among the many theories about Islamism and Islamist terror that appear in these pages, the writer’s favorite is the carnal one: he believes that 2,992 more people would be alive today if 19 Middle Eastern men had only found some satisfaction of the flesh. Like Updike, he chooses to impute the malignity in the terrorist’s heart to lust. More precisely, to frustrated lust; still more precisely, to frustrated male lust. Osama bin Libido! This interpretation has the advantage of returning Amis to his last. Suddenly his theme is no longer exotic. In the only really funny sentence in his book, Amis declares that “geopolitics may not be my natural subject, but masculinity is.” It takes a man to know a man. Amis’s account of Sayyid Qutb lingers long over its subject’s dread of women, especially American women, and the consequent transfiguration of a man’s puritanism into a movement’s ideology. Despite his protestation that he is not an Islamophobe but an “Islamismophobe” — he ceremoniously concurs that the prophet Muhammad was “a titanic figure,” in evidence of which he cites Walter Bagehot! — Amis explains that “the dominion of the male is Koranic,” and more generally that “when challenged or affronted, the believer’s response is hormonal.” We are to conclude, I suppose, that the unbeliever is the master of his hormones.

While the subjugation of women in Islam has been abundantly documented and deplored, it should also be pointed out — but not to weaken our will! — that the sexual stringencies of Islamic law and morality do not differ significantly from the exceedingly unvoluptuary codes of other religions, and that many millions of Muslim men have not become mass murderers as a result of the traditional restrictions on tomcatting. The masculinist account of terrorism brings to mind the feminist account of nuclear weapons, according to which all you need to know about the origin of the danger is the shape of the missile. The genital theory of history may be novelistically useful, but it is analytically silly. In this case, it reduces decades and centuries of philosophies and cultures and religions and tribes and classes and nations and movements and states and empires to the Levantine crotch. Surely we must be able to imagine, not only for the sake of our literature but also for the sake of our security, that there are sexually satisfied enemies of decency and modernity. And enough about those patient virgins in the sky: the threat from suicide bombing, and from the political cultures that prize it, is founded on deformations more worldly and more substantial than a harem fantasy.

Pity the writer who wants to be Bellow but is only Mailer. What we have here is a hormonal unbeliever. Amis's antipathy to Islamism is based upon a more comprehensive antipathy to religion. In Amis's universe, you are either religious or you are rational. Or to put it in the bracingly original terms of "The Second Plane," it is misology that is the cause of thanatism. Amis calls himself not an atheist but an agnostic, but still he is catching a wave to Dover Beach. "Today, in the West, there are no good excuses for religious belief — unless we think that ignorance, reaction and sentimentality are good excuses," whereas in the East, well, you know.

"All religions," Amis rules, "unsurprisingly, have their terrorists." Since [George W. Bush](#) was more religious than [Saddam Hussein](#), "of the two presidents, he is, in this respect, the more psychologically primitive." And most ringingly: "When Islamists crash passenger planes into buildings, or hack off the heads of hostages, they shout 'God is great!' When secularists do that kind of thing, what do they shout?" Well, it depends on whether they spoke French or German or Russian or Chinese or Khmer or Serbian or Kinyarwanda. The historical innocence of secularism is a myth. And if the secular butchers worked in silence, what of it? The crime was the same. There is always too little reason on earth.

But does Amis really think that reason has no blood on its hands? I do not say this to extenuate holy murder, obviously. All murder is unholy. I wish only to suggest that the simpleton's view of the world that Amis is angrily promoting contributes not very much to the study of the passions that are scalding the planet. There are religious people opposing the terrorists and secular people supporting the terrorists. After the 20th century, the question of which worldview kills more, the godful one or the godless one, was made infernally moot. Anyway, the safety of the West cannot wait upon the progress of enlightenment in Waziristan.

The results of Amis's clumsily mixed cocktail of rhetoric and rage can be eccentric, or worse. In a commemorative piece published last September, he plays a little game with the expression "9/11." He cleverly hits upon a perplexity that has nagged at every thinking person for seven years — that in Europe the numerical shorthand for the calendar is the other way around; and then he resourcefully proposes that the attacks in London on July 7, 2005, furnished a palindromic solution to the problem, with "7/7"; and then he mordantly reflects that this solution will work only if the horrors of the future occur on Jan. 1 or Feb. 2 or March 3 or April 4 and so on. Even Amis's commemorations are performances. But this performance ends without charm. Protesting that numbers are a paltry way of remembering the dead, Amis gets to his Limbaugh-like point, which is that "the only imaginable rationale" for the use of numbers to this end is "that these numerals, after all, are Arabic." I cannot be sure, but I think he is serious.

Or consider another crudity, a review entitled "Demographics," in which Amis is rattled by, of all things, a book by Mark Steyn, from which he is distressed to learn that the West is "in demographic decline." We are not making children at the replacement rate of 2.1 births per woman. The birth rate in Somalia, by contrast, is 6.76, and in Afghanistan it is 6.69 and in Yemen it is 6.58. There are ways of evaluating such an anxiety intelligently, but this is Amis's evaluation: "Will the culture of choice be obliged to give ground to the culture of life? Itself profoundly retrograde, Islamism may force retrogression upon us all. While we're at it, we could take a leaf out of the book of revolutionary Communism. After the startling census of 1936, Stalin immediately abandoned the progressivist social agenda. His new measures included mass kindergartenzation, the introduction of maternity medals, the legalization of inheritance, the solemnization of the marriage ceremony, the prolongation and complication of the divorce process and the recriminalization of abortion. It worked for a while. In the 21st century, deprived of totalitarian invigilation,

Russia is losing Russians at the rate of about a million a year.” In the deathless words of [Dick Cheney](#) — so? Perhaps there is an irony in Amis’s homily, but I have had no luck in locating it. Anyway, the passage is not designed to persuade, it is designed to surprise.

You get the feeling, reading these pages, that for his side Amis will say almost anything, because being noticed is as important to him as being right. The complication is that there is considerable justice on Amis’s side. He is correct in insisting upon the moral and historical primacy of the battle against theocracy and terror. He is correct that the West possesses the moral advantage in this battle, and that the defense of Western conceptions of freedom and equality is not an exercise in ethnocentrism. He is correct that the skeptical discussion of religious ideas and practices must not be abrogated by the skinlessness of multiculturalism, or by its cunning. He is correct that opinions that seem not only spectacularly false, but also lethally false, do not have to be intellectually respected even if they have to be politically tolerated. He is correct that in Islamism the many doctrines of antimodernism, anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism are one doctrine. I have never before assented to so many of the principles of a book and found it so awful. But the vacant intensity that has characterized so much of Amis’s work flourishes here too.

Is it a coincidence that “The Second Plane” is appearing in the same season as “[Human Smoke](#),” or is it a malign providence? [Nicholson Baker](#)’s popular book — I tremble for my country when I regard the best-seller list — is a pacifist repudiation of World War II, and I have no doubt that Martin Amis would despise it; in this cause, too, I would march with him. And Amis clamors whereas Baker whispers. Yet the two books are peculiarly alike. They are both productions of misplaced literariness. They treat the most fundamental matters of politics and philosophy — what individuals and societies should live for and what they should die for — as occasions for the display of artifice and the exhibition of temperament. The consideration of their arguments is regularly diverted by the consideration of their effects. For this reason, such writings will have more impact than influence. The criticism of language may be required for the criticism of politics, but politics is not mainly language. History may be generously lighted by the bright beams of the imagination, but the student of history is not primarily an artist. And the great campaign against the medievals of our time will be dreary and long and homely.

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