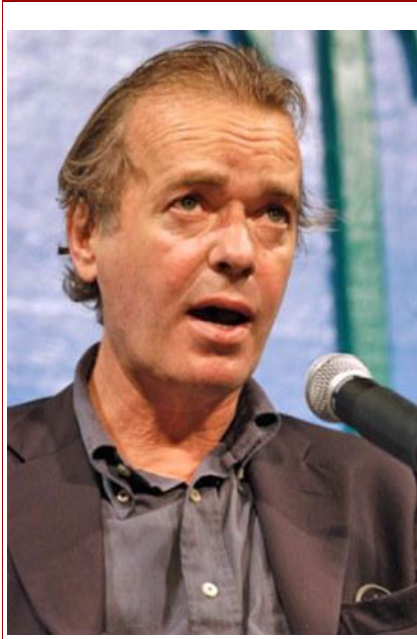


Life and Other Genres: Martin Amis's *The Pregnant Widow*

In 2010 Martin Amis, possibly the most influential - and contentious - of contemporary British novelists, published *The Pregnant Widow*, his most acclaimed novel since *The Information* (1995). Greeted by many reviewers as a "return to form" (Chatfield, "Return," White), "close to a masterpiece" (Cartwright), and worthy of the Booker Prize (Hensher), it was launched with the kind of publicity blitz



that accompanied his earlier novels of the late 1980s and 1990s and won him a notoriety that ensured massive sales and royalty advances. The downside of this orchestrated exercise in public relations has been a widespread misapprehension of what this novel is aiming to achieve. In particular many of the reviewers, including those favorable to the book, cited an interview Amis gave in 2006 in which he described an earlier draft of the novel as "blindingly autobiographical" (Amis, "30 Things"). Amis provides further ammunition for such reviewers by announcing in his opening section, "Everything that follows is true" (5). As Amis subsequently explained, he embarked on an autobiographical novel after the publication in 2003 of *Yellow Dog*, his last poorly received novel. In Easter 2008, after it had reached a length of some 200,000 words, he realized that it was two books. He plucked about a hundred pages from it because they were "the most fictional" (Amis, "G2 Interview," "Prospect Interview"), and spent a year expanding these to the current book's almost 370 pages. Most reviewers ignored Amis's emphasis on the fictional nature of the material because there were still traces of autobiographical (and biographical) origins in the characters of Keith Nearing, the protagonist, who shared Amis's age, height and some of his obsessions, his sister Violet, clearly modeled on Amis's own sister Sally, and a number of Keith's friends such as Neil Darlington (based on Ian Hamilton) and Kenrik (based on Amis's deceased friend Rob Henderson). According to Amis, "The only people who are from life in the book are now dead" (Amis, "Prospect Interview").

This essay argues that *The Pregnant Widow* constitutes a deliberate exposé of the impossibility of incorporating raw life in fiction. The novel shows the two to be mutually incompatible. Within the world of the novel life is repeatedly displaced by the demands of narrative, just as the psychological complexities of subjects are displaced by comic characters (often caricatures), and sexual love by

pomographic fantasy (Keith comes to realize that "you can't write about sex" [91]). The first 300 pages of the novel offer a narrative history of a moment in the summer of 1970 when Keith, his current girlfriend Lily, and a set of friends holidaying in an Italian castle (which "seemed partly fabulous" [24]) experience at first hand the sexual revolution originating in the 1960s. As Hayden White pointed out long ago, history is subject to the demands of narrative, especially to the demands of narrative genre. Amis chooses to emplot his fictionalized historical narrative within the mixed genre of comic satire. Then in the last 57 pages he adds a section titled "Coda: Life," in which he attempts to offer a chronological account of the years between 1970 and 2009, the present time of the narrative. But after 1980 he starts omitting years. The opening paragraph of the chapter in which he first jumps a year begins by describing the various phases that Keith and Gloria (his first wife by then) had passed through, phases that the narrator calls genres: "pornotheological farce, cat-and-mouse, sex-and-shopping, Life" (351). Life has reverted to a narrative genre, just one among several (it is soon succeeded by "psychohorror"). The very first section of "Coda" ends by distinguishing between the "Italian summer—that was the only passage in his whole existence that ever felt like a novel" and that other genre the narrator christens Life. But even Life, or the chronology of Keith's remaining life, takes on an "inherently tragic shape (rise, crest, fall)" that removes it from the shapelessness of actual life, which "comes in the form of sixteen-hour units, between waking up and going to sleep." The Coda's doomed attempt to portray Life as chronology is saved by Gloria who, "at least, will be giving us something that Life badly needs. Plot" (310).

Life, Amis wittily demonstrates, can only be described in narrative terms. The Earth is a "great page-turner," the world "a book we can't put down" (4). Equally literature affects the way we interact and talk with one another. In particular this novel questions how the sexes interact once the sexual revolution has got under way. To show how the old conventions of courtship and marriage canonized by over two centuries of romantic fiction no longer apply, Amis has contrived matters so that Keith, an Oxford undergraduate on vacation, is spending the summer in Italy reading through the great tradition of the classic English novelists. When Scheherazade (a name confined to the world of fiction), a twenty year old beauty whom Keith lusts after, is rude to Gloria Beautyman, a later object of his sexual fantasies, Scheherazade asks Keith to reprove her for her conduct. Having recently read Jane Austen's *Emma*, Keith recalls the speech in which Mr. Knightley reproaches Emma for being rude to Miss Bates ("It was badly done, indeed!"). This reprimand makes Emma realize that she is in love with Knightley. But, Keith reflects, were he to do the same it would not awaken in Scheherazade the same feelings of love, "because things were different now." Sexual license has changed the conventions of both romance and romantic fiction. "Emma did not face Mr. Knightley topless" as Scheherazade does during this conversation round the pool (158-9). And the object of Scheherazade's ridicule, unlike Emma's, is Gloria's "arse like a prize tomato" (153). Ironically Keith refuses to accept Scheherazade's invitation to reprimand her in Knightley fashion, and is rewarded not by an awakening of love on her part, but by her indifference. This is the point in the novel when Keith decides to pursue Scheherazade in purely sexual terms. But he sees it as a change of genre: "No more platonic pastoral. Time for the slatternly shepherdess, the venal wood-nymph, the duped contessa" (156).

The Pregnant Widow is clearly written to be read as a comic literary romp or pastiche. Its hero (or anti-hero) makes literature his profession, becoming a literary editor and reviewer of books. His life is modeled on literary lives, his actions on those portrayed in novels: "As for getting shaved, shat, showered: this was a Russian novel" (92). Many reviewers saw this latest novel as a return to "the traditional picaresque of Amis's first two novels," *The Rachel Papers* (1973) and *Dead Babies* (1975) (Williamson 20). While there are obvious parallels with the twenty-year-old Charles Highway, the

writerly protagonist of *The Rachel Papers*, and with the set of affluent, self-indulgent twenty-somethings of *Dead Babies*, the detached ironic voice of The Pregnant Widow's narrator is well removed from Charles's "pretentious and egotistical" first-person voice or the "comically savage satire" of the third-person narrator of *Dead Babies* (Finney 35, 38). Late Amis has acquired a less virtuoso and more reflective comic voice in this novel, one that enables him to mix high farce, social comedy and moral, social and psychological commentary in a homogenous whole. Amis has continued to subject his youthful years to different narrative genres in later works. As one reviewer wrote, "having looked back on his lost youth first as crisis (in *The Information*), then as hard-won wisdom (in the memoir *Experience*), Amis finally, at 60, gives it a go as what it no doubt mostly was: romantic farce" (Tim Adams 19). What Amis's youth actually was like is irrelevant. What matters is through what genres he chooses to emplot his and his generation's youthful experience. Even his choice of naming his protagonist Keith acts as an intertext with his previous novels, with Keith Whitehead, the "court dwarf" of *Dead Babies* and Keith Talent, the working class fall guy of *London Fields* (1989). Keith Nearing (at first nearing the age of 21, later nearing death) owes more to the careers of these two fictional losers than he does to the career of his creator.

Keith and company act as characters who are never fully aware of what narrative genre they inhabit. According to Bharat Tandon Amis is indebted to the Nabokov of *Despair* and *Pale Fire* for this metafictional conception of character (Tandon). Keith is confused because he is "all clogged up with the English novel" (177). He starts off his Italian sojourn as "a K in a castle. But he was still assuming that social realism would hold" (25). This disparity between genres means that "he had to be ready for change, for category mistakes" (120). Keith's largest uncertainty takes the form of the question, "What were heroines allowed to do?" (153) – that is, what were they allowed to do in the new post-Kafka era. He tries to act like the romantic hero of past English fiction. But his modern activities, such as sitting on the toilet in the bathroom he shares with Scheherazade, "did not befit a romantic hero—or even the anti-hero he was destined to become" (71). Approaching his twenty-first birthday in 1970, Keith is transitioning from one genre to a very different one in which he finds himself the object of the narrator's comic satire. No Knightley, he also fails to act with the boldness of Lovelace, Richardson's rapist villain in *Clarissa*, drugging not the woman he desires but his girlfriend Lily to free him for a clandestine sexual meeting with Scheherazade—who fails to show up. Virtually all the characters fail to conform to their counterparts in the English novel. They approximate to what the French narratologist Greimas called *actants*, or types: Lily, Scheherazade, and Keith "were all at the University of London., these three: Law, Mathematics, English Literature. Intelligentsia, nobility, proletariat" (10). In Keith's eyes they all tend to turn into italicized "*characters*", as he puts it, "with their applied eccentricity" (288). Numerous reviewers cited a visiting Italian count, Adriano, as one of the novel's most successful comic creations. But Keith cannot quite believe in him:

Keith felt himself being taken, being slid out of genre. He thought the upper class had ceased to be . . . the source of unobtrusive social comedy. But here, contending otherwise, was Adriano. (76)

In one interview in which Amis spelt out the many ways in which Keith differs from his author (an innocent, a sexual blunderer, a reviewer rather than a novelist), the most interesting difference mentioned is that between Amis, entitled by being the son of an established novelist, and Keith, "an illegitimate orphan, a sort of *tabula rasa*" (Amis, "Prospect Interview").

Onto that *tabula rasa*, Amis inscribes two competing modes – that of English romantic fiction, and that of the postmodern world of sexual liberation that calls for a new literary genre for its representation. Cleverly he invokes an earlier literary distinction between modes of literature advanced by T.S. Eliot who discerned a dissociation of sensibility, a separation of feeling and thought, which supposedly characterized English literature from Milton onwards:

All we are saying is that something analogous happened while the children of the Golden Age were becoming men and women. Feeling was already separated from thought. And then feeling was separated from sex. (244)

So the premise on which Amis constructs his novel and Keith constructs his life is predicated on a generic literary distinction. This postmodern predicament leads Keith to equally misjudge classic English fiction and the women in his life. His verdicts on the novels he is reading are ironically inept. He is disgusted that in *Clarissa* "it's taking [Lovelace] two thousands pages to fuck her" (39). He lusts after "that grasping bitch Rosamond Vincy" in *Middlemarch* (268). As for *Pride and Prejudice*, it "had but a single flaw: the absence toward the close, of a forty-page sex scene" (219). Keith's judgments of women are given the same comic treatment. For instance, he muffs one chance of seducing Scheherazade when he starts playing Dracula only to abandon the charade just when it was winning her over. In this case his reading of nineteenth century English fiction leads him to underestimate the new importance of role-playing in a contemporary world of surface sensations.

As Edmund White pointed out in reviewing the novel, the action often echoes the plots of the novels Keith is reading (White). Even some of the chapter headings ("Sentimental Education," "The Metamorphoses") echo these fictional works. Keith reads about a villain planning to drug and rape the heroine not just in *Clarissa* but in Smollett's *Peregrine Pickle*. The difference is that while Lovelace succeeds Peregrine fails in his attempt on Emily, his wealthy fiancée. Like Amis's novel, *Peregrine Pickle* is a comedy that anticipates Keith's similar failure. Amis claims that all the good novels are comic and that *Clarissa* fails because it takes itself seriously (Amis, "Prospect Interview"). In another comparison to these two novels Amis recounts an incident from Gloria's immediate past when she disgraced herself by getting drunk, diving into the swimming pool where (she claimed) her bikini bottoms got sucked off by the Jacuzzi and subsequently being felt up by a succession of men on the dance floor. "*In vino veritas*," Lily observes. Keith reflects to himself, "So Clarissa Harlowe and Emily Gauntlet, when drugged, were behaving truthfully?" (59-60). While immediately rejecting this misreading, Keith does conclude that Gloria did reveal the truth about herself when drunk, that she is sexually uninhibited. Amis has contrived things to ensure that Gloria is ahead of her time. She is Jerry-built" as he puts it (Amis, "Prospect Interview"), already completely sexually liberated, because, as we learn in a surprise discovery near the end of the book, she is ten years older than the other 20-year-olds while pretending to be their age. She is the quintessence of postmodernity, what Lyotard terms "the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)" (81).

So she becomes the novel's agent for introducing Keith on his 21st birthday to the new mode of sexual conduct, the new genre. Love has been replaced by sexual desire (and instant satisfaction), inner feelings by acted out sensations. This of course is the revolution that the novel's title (extracted from the epigraph from Alexander Herzen) refers to. Between the death of romantic love (and literary romance) and the birth of sexual liberation comes this pregnancy or interregnum, this "long night of chaos and desolation" (Herzen, Epigraph). Amis sets his novel during the sexual revolution's interregnum and introduces Gloria as an advance representative of the new era, "the equalitarian phase" when women acted like men because, Amis has explained, they had only the male model as an alternative to their past role (Moss 10). Gloria introduces Keith to a purely sensational set of sexual practices and positions (never described, only obscurely implied) that make his traditional love making with Lily pale to insignificance. Apart from Gloria's penchant for anal intercourse (invoking *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as precedent, a book that Keith is concurrently trying to incorporate in his review of 'Antinomianism in D. H. Lawrence') she also introduces Keith to sexual role-playing. The chapter describing the night following his transformational experience with Gloria

(“Keith, after all, had spent the day in a genre that belonged to the future” [251]) is titled “Elizabeth Bennett in Bed.” In it Gloria turns literary critic to argue that Elizabeth Bennett shows all the attributes of a man and qualifies as “a cock,” the attribute that Amis amusingly (or provocatively) employs in the novel to designate those women who have liberated themselves from “social realism” to become the equals of men. This explains Gloria’s otherwise unusual last name – Beautyman. To prove the validity of her interpretation of Elizabeth Bennett, Gloria follows up her reading of Austen by dressing up as Elizabeth in her wedding dress for their next sexual encounter. When Keith next makes love to Lily he evaluates the experience in esthetic terms as “satirically antique, like a round of morris dancing” (251). Soon Keith starts introducing sexual role-playing to Lily. When Lily asks him, “Why aren’t you normal any more?” he replies, “But normal’s changing, Lily. Soon all that will be normal. In the future . . . sex will be play, Lily. A play of surfaces and sensations” (268).

Amis has his own ideas about how the sexual revolution changed social and sexual conduct. After modeling themselves on men for a while, women “realized very soon that it wasn’t in their interests.” This is because “it was the women who had to do the hard work, the adapting, the changing, the throwing off of what they had been taught with such consistency for hundreds of years” (Amis, “Prospect Interview”). *The Pregnant Widow* gives comic/satirical shape to this view of history. Could all those earlier romantic novels that Keith read have become obsolete? Reflecting on the fact that the English novel for the past two or three centuries asked only one question, whether the heroine would fall, he asks, “What’ll they write about . . . when all women fall?” (269). Comedy exposes what is lost when individuals behave in ways that falsify their inner feelings. If a play of surfaces is the new normal, then women can be reduced to their vital statistics. Amis comically exploits this possibility by reducing the three women to their body measurements. Scheherazade has huge breasts while Gloria has an arse so prominent that even Amen, a gay character falls for her. Each has vital statistics that are virtually the obverse of the other’s: Scheherazade measures 37-23-33 and Gloria 33-22-37. Poor Lily by comparison measures an average 34-25-34. For good measure (pun intended) Amis throws in the statistics of the fountain (44-18-48) to indicate the absurdity of reducing women to their external dimensions. Too many of the book’s reviewers focused on Amis’s take on the sexual revolution as if he were writing social history rather than fiction, and proceeded to judge it by its sexual politics. One reviewer concluded that Amis had “produced a fiction in which politically unpalatable views are wrapped up in a humour so uneasy that it sometimes seems like a sneer” (Williamson 20). He added that the novel “is apparently intended as a rebuttal of feminist triumphalism about that era.”

The novel is not a rebuttal of anything. It offers a clever comic riff on the effects of the sexual revolution of the 60s and 70s on relations between the sexes, especially on the way those relations were affected by their representation in narrative fiction. Amis’s assumption that the sexual revolution “is still in its second trimester” provides the foundation on which to build his elaborate fictional superstructure (Amis, “30 Things”). In a postmodern age Amis converts lives to texts, incidents to intertexts, dialogue to quotations. As Amis has observed, “the curious thing about life is that it is dead when you write it” (Gore). To bring writing on the page to life you need literary skill and artifice; you need genre; you need style. These Amis brings to this new novel in abundance.

Take, for instance, his heavy use of intertexts. The novel is littered with references to other classic English and Western texts. Amis has made this more palatable by choosing for his protagonist an undergraduate studying English literature, whose brother is equally literate (they exchange letters appropriating numerous literary quotations). Inevitably the parallels between characters and events in the novel and in the canonical English romances are exploited, primarily for the humorous disparities that become apparent. He also makes frequent reference to such key texts as Philip Larkin’s “Annus Mirabilis” – “Sexual intercourse began / In 1963 / (which was rather late for me)” – which is quoted on the first page of the novel. What Amis calls “Larkinland” (315), that territory filled with loss and longing, becomes the destination of some of the characters by the end of the book. Nearly always the intertext is relevant, as it is in Larkin’s case, and creates that semantic productivity that Julia Kristeva argued is the essential attribute of intertextuality (37). There are many references to Shakespeare, not just to his comedies of gender disguise that offer obvious parallels to Gloria’s endless sexual charades, but to the tragedies. Book One is titled “Where We Lay Our Scene,” taken from the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*, a romantic tragedy that Amis is about to pastiche as pseudo-romantic farce. In the final coda Gloria finds herself compelled to participate in a Shakespeare ball as a female character from *Othello*. Fittingly she chooses Bianca, “Cassio’s slag” (332). Dressed up as a high-class whore, she keeps the other characters from *Othello* waiting in the car while she seduces Keith who is made to fill the humiliating role of Cassio. Naturally *Paradise Lost* features frequently. In one of many references, Keith and others have been discussing Gloria’s “monokini” that covers so little of her enormous arse that they decide it functions solely as a fig leaf. This leads Keith to recall Milton’s lines about the expulsion from Eden: “And the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew they were naked.” Keith reflects, “you didn’t need a fig leaf until after the Fall” (262). What makes this so pertinent is that in the preceding chapter Keith had experienced his own fall at the hands of Gloria, a modern Eve with her advanced sexual practices. Amis adds another postmodern intertext from Saul Bellow’s *Humboldt’s Gift*: “I never yet touched a fig leaf that didn’t turn into a price tag.” (262).

The most prominent intertext is Ted Hughes’ translation of Ovid’s tale of Echo and Narcissus in *Metamorphoses*. Using part summary, part quotation, the story is recounted in five intervals spread throughout the novel. The final interlude, recounting Narcissus’s death from loving himself too much, ends:

We are given to understand that the dissolution—the fading, the shrivelling—of the glassy youth was completed in the course of a day and a night. In this he differed from his children, the children of the Golden Age. (245)

It takes them many decades to feel the disintegrating effects of their cult of the self. The castle in which Keith and the other children of the Golden Age spend the summer of 1970 is imbued with the qualities of Echo and Narcissus. When they walk down its stone passages “the echo was louder than the footfall,” and “you kept seeing your reflection, too, in unexpected places” (66). When they lie around the pool half naked they “were the Eyes, they were the Is, they were the reflections, they were the fireflies with their luminescent organs” (67). In a narcissistic world the inside becomes the outside (“Nowadays pants are part of what girls wear on the outside” [110]) and the loved object is the reflection of the self. So when Scheherazade dives into the pool “she dives into her own reflection. When she swims, she kisses her own reflection.” (80). Rebuffed by Scheherazade, Adriano swims as if he were fighting the water: “Perhaps it was his own reflection Adriano wanted to destroy” (117). Gloria offers the most extreme example; nude in front of the mirror, she improbably declares, “Oh, I love me. Oh, I love me so” (249). Lily suffers from a lack of self-love, of “strenuous narcissism” (111). Due to this lack she cannot enter into the sexual role-playing Keith demands: “The thing that mattered was whether Lily loved Lily. And she didn’t—or not enough” (282). In a postmodern world narcissism, a characteristic that led to the death of its classical mythic protagonist, has become the new normal – in art and in life that depends so heavily on art as its model.

After his “animal birthday” with Gloria, Keith finds himself wondering, “What genre did I visit?” He is sure “it wasn’t romance.” “It seemed to make sense only when you watched it in the mirror” (254-5). The heroes and heroines of earlier fiction saw themselves primarily through the eyes of others. But in a narcissistic world of surface pleasure only the mirror can reassure the “I”, because in the mirror the body is “reduced to two dimensions. Without

depth and without time” (358). The 300 plus pages set in 1970 virtually put time on hold. Then in the Coda time takes control of the characters and rushes them towards old age and death. Amis withholds the identity of the narrator until the last section of the Coda. He turns out (not wholly convincingly) to be Keith’s superego, “the voice of conscience,” a voice from which Keith had separated himself in 1970 and to which he grew back close “between his first and second marriages” (364). This narrative voice contributes added comic distance to the novel, often employing a flippant metafictional tone: “Timmy’ll be along in a chapter or two” (40). “Twenty pages passed . . . but then a paragraph later . . .” (82). The narrator also makes asides to the reader: “(between ourselves)” (114), “as we shall soon discover” (135). At times he assumes a pedantic tone, especially when offering dictionary definitions and derivations for a word he has just employed. Amis has justified this motif, claiming that finding out what a word means and what its origins are will deepen it: “For instance, what does obsess come from? Obsidere. To besiege. To lay siege to. You know that, and you know the word better. You’re more intimate with the word” (Medley). Amis briefly defines *obsession* in the novel when the gay young man Amen cannot get himself to join the others round the pool because he is terrified of Scheherazade’s enormous bared breasts: “Keith considered. Obsession—positive, negative. From L. obsidere ‘besiege.’ Amen, besieged by Scheherazade’s breasts” (58). Even this pedantic streak is enlisted in the service of the comedy.

A number of reviewers felt that Amis’s penchant for moralizing had overwhelmed the comic spirit of the book. Williamson wrote: “the editorialising mind . . . has been allowed to grow up and strangle its author-host” (Williamson 20). Another reviewer claimed that in the 50-page Coda “Comedy slides over into the passenger seat; sociology takes the wheel” (Anderson). Yet a third reviewer called Amis “a moralist” who “seeks universal significance” (Anthony 42). These charges are principally leveled against the views Amis incorporates in the novel on the historical nature and effects of the sexual revolution that originated in the 1960s, and on ageing and death. But Amis rarely loses control of the comic mode in which he is writing. Instance his observations on sexual mores:

The Me decade wasn’t called the Me decade until 1976 . . . The 1940s was probably the last we decade. And all the decades, until 1970, were undeniably he decades . . . But the Me Decade was also and unquestionably the She Decade. (49)

His novel is subtitled “INSIDE HISTORY,” and he is offering a comic vision of a revolution that, he says, “we are still living through . . . and will continue to do so for a long time” (Gore). He is not writing a historical novel. He is giving fictional expression to lived experience that is itself a reflection of a change in literary genre. He has stated that he was partly motivated to write the novel to account for the early death of his sister Sally who was an alcoholic and “pathologically promiscuous.” Amis saw her as “one of the most spectacular victims of the [sexual] revolution” (Stephen Adams). Violet, Keith’s sister who is modeled on Sally, is a minor character whose conduct is largely reported from a distance. She is simultaneously caricatured: “Violet is the kind of girl who dates football teams” (237). She becomes the novel’s most dramatic comic instance of what the narrator refers to as “hidden clauses to the new sexual contract”—another written genre (135). The revolution, Keith informs Jane Austen’s Emma Woodhouse in imaginary conversation, entails a contest of external attributes that turn it into “a beauty contest, a popularity contest”, “and therefore some will fail, some will lose” (160). The new genre means that Keith loses for a long period following the summer of 1970, a period during which he suffers from impotence. Gloria loses by failing to catch Huw, a wealthy heroin addict, as a husband. Rita, a promiscuous visitor to the Italian castle, loses by failing to have the ten babies she announced in 1970 she was going to have. “I sort of forgot to,” she tells Keith in 2009 (363).

Like any good novelist, Amis is offering a personal and comic vision of the sexual revolution from within history, not a pseudo-objective history in retrospect. Like any good comic writer, he knows that comedy needs to incorporate at least the potential for tragedy as a shadow lurking behind the comic action, a Jaques or a Malvolio slinking off the stage to leave comedy in the ascendant. In the novel’s world of universal narcissism death remains inescapable - “Death—the dark backing a mirror needs before it can show us ourselves” (364). As one reviewer wrote discerningly, “this is a book about youth and sex that’s really about age and death” (Leith). But just as Malvolio is portrayed as a comic character, so are ageing and death rendered comically, largely through Amis’s witty and unique prose style, which virtually every reviewer praised. The long 1970 section of the novel is bracketed by a section titled “Introductory” set in 2006 and the “Coda” (1970-2009), and is interrupted by five “Intervals” set in 2003. The five segments of the tale of Echo and Narcissus are told during the five Intervals. Most of the reflections on ageing and death are confined to these retrospective sections of the narrative and are rendered in exaggerated comic mode. For instance on the third page of “Introductory” Amis portrays the fifty-six-year-old Keith staring at his deteriorating image in the mirror:

When you become old, you find yourself auditioning for the role of a lifetime; then, after interminable rehearsals, you’re finally starring in a . . . low-budget horror film, in which . . . they’re saving the worst for the last. (5)

The second Interval elaborates on Keith’s later state of mind: “Keith was now well launched on the bullet train of his fifties, where the minutes often dragged but the years tumbled over one another and disappeared” (92). In the third Interval, after recounting Echo’s death and Nemesis’s determination that Narcissus should “perish of anguish” (135), Keith acquires new insight into the ageing process: “Old age wasn’t for old people. To cope with old age, you really needed to be young” (136). Amis’s comic handling of this dark material prevents it from becoming “editorializing” or “moralizing” or “sociological.” Instead it provides the comic distance needed to give the more farcical elements of the main narrative depth and feeling. In a 2010 interview Amis said, “writing *Experience* made me think that the emotion which I had always thought was present and detectable to a good reader would be given more room” (Amis, “Prospect Interview”). This is possibly the distinguishing feature of later Amis - a new empathy for his unfortunate characters who are still portrayed as the victims of his comic spirit and equally of changes of genre.

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