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LRB | Vol. 29 No. 1 dated 4 January 2007 | Daniel Soar

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Bile, Blood, Bilge, Mulch

Daniel Soar

House of Meetings by Martin Amis · Cape, 198 pp, £15.99

Martin Amis's newest book, *House of Meetings*, is a short novel that purportedly describes conditions inside a Soviet forced labour camp. A sick and malingering prisoner is confined to an isolation chamber, where he squats on a bench for a week over 'knee-deep bilge'. A blind-drunk guard, a woman-beater, spends the night outside at forty degrees below – and wakes up, frost-mangled, without any hands. The inmates hack one another apart with machine-tools. There are 'vicings, awlings, lathings, manic jackhammerings, atrocious chisellings'. It's notable that the first and last of these particular gerunds – 'vicings', 'chisellings' – have a specific metaphorical purchase: they allude to the male jaw. Reaching for an analogy to sum up the violence, the narrator recalls a crocodile fight he once saw in a zoo: a sudden flailing, a terrible whiplash; then, 'after half a second', one of the crocs is over in the corner, 'rigid and half-dead with shock', its upper jaw missing. Prisoners on prisoners, guards on prisoners, prisoners on guards: it's peculiar to find a polemicist who – plainly – wants irrefutably to prove the injustice of the Soviet system but doesn't at the same time take the polemical trouble to distinguish between victims and perpetrators of violence, and to deal with them accordingly. Amis isn't Dante. There are no heroic, reasonably virtuous political dissidents among the denizens of his Arctic inferno. Instead, there is an endless round of indiscriminate tortures, indiscriminately administered: those justly an Islamofascistically severed hands, those sexually frenzied jackhammerings, those mechanically vicious 'lathings'. Defacement and defilement are everywhere in Amis's camp. They infect the language.

House of Meetings only 'purportedly' describes conditions at Norilsk, not because the account isn't accurate – though it isn't – but because description isn't the novel's purpose, which is to hope for the moral redemption of his sub-Nabokovian, ex-rapist narrator. At the age of 86, he is returning to the site of his internment on a less than pleasant river-cruise Gulag tour. He has gorged in America, he has had marriages, has made piles of money; now, as he crosses the Arctic Circle, his 'eyes, in the Conradian sense, have stopped being Western and started being Eastern'. This is the cue for confession. He addresses his account to his perfect American stepdaughter, who can't begin to understand the reasons for his twistedness. He tries to make things flippantly plain. 'You see, kid,' he begins, 'the conscience is a vital organ, and not an extra like the tonsils or the adenoids.' Part of his story depends on his relationship with his brother, Lev, an ugly runt who – he found, on Lev's arrival at the camp in 1948 – had unaccountably married the only girl he wanted: Zoya, also known as 'the Americas', being curvaceously shaped like them. The old man's confession circles and skirts a central event that is not fully unveiled until the novel's end: this turns out to be a baroquely paradisal reunion between Lev and Zoya, which takes place – in 1956, with

the camp rules now relaxed – in a small wooden hut known as the House of Meetings. On the windowsill the narrator notices something peculiar, ‘much magnified, now, by a lens-like swelling in the glass. It was a test tube, with rounded base, kept upright by a hand-carved wooden frame. A single stemless wildflower floated in it, overflowed it – an amorous burgundy. I remember thinking that it looked like an experiment on the male idea. A poetic experiment, perhaps, but still an experiment.’ Amis’s ‘experiment on the male idea’ wants to be the idyllic obverse to what he thinks of as the gruesome ‘Soviet experiment’. But, in its ‘amorous burgundy’, this sign of the male idea is pretty gruesome itself.

And it struggles to survive, because human effluent and mashed-up body parts are the base the book is built on. The old man makes a big meal of the degrees of camp degradation, and carefully categorises the prison hierarchy, according to his zoological variation on inmate slang: ‘pigs’ on top, then ‘snakes’, then ‘leeches’. Below them are the ‘fascists’ (a new, unexamined political animal); below those are the ‘locusts’; at the bottom of the pile are the ‘shiteaters’, his colourful and unusual versioning of *dokhodyagi*, more commonly ‘goners’, who scrabble in latrines for scraps and chew boots with scurvy-distorted teeth. The old man says, deprecatingly, that Russian literature – all that Tolstoy and Dostoevsky – gathers its force from being ‘grown on that mulch of blood and shit’, but for all his protestations of conscience he liberally applies a similar fertiliser. Speaking of his earliest, English, wife, he says: ‘Jocelyn wore black, but blackness was what she feared. I dealt with more bilious colours – the browns, the greens.’ Bile, blood, bilge, mulch: these are the effluvia Amis deals in. There is something schoolboyishly English about Amis’s continuing interest in vomit and bowels. ‘Bilge’ – the mulch he thrusts his incarcerated Russians knee-deep into – is also the straight-talking Englishman’s dismissal of foreign ways.

Amis’s material for *House of Meetings* must have been thrown up as a by-product of his reading for *Koba the Dread* (2002), his appalled ‘non-fiction’ book about Stalin and Communism, reviewed in the *LRB* by Frank Kermode under the rubric ‘Amis’s Terrible News’. For the novelisation, his sources – a narrow range – aren’t so much embellished as systematised, artfully reshuffled and newly dealt. In *Koba the Dread* Amis, following Solzhenitsyn, wrote that in the Gulag even illness was managed by quota: to be admitted to a camp hospital for dysentery, a prisoner had to be ‘evacuating (bloodily) every half an hour’. This formula has been refined for the new novel: ‘In camp, even hospitalisation for dysentery obeyed the law of the norm . . . And what was the norm? The norm was more blood than shit.’ There’s a microcosmic pause here, as the Amis full stop makes itself felt. ‘More blood than shit,’ he writes musingly again, thereby exceeding any reasonable quota for repetitions of that phrase.

The scene in the isolation chamber is taken from Janusz Bardach’s 1998 memoir, *Man Is Wolf to Man: Surviving the Gulag*. Bardach, with whom Amis corresponded, is rewarded in the novel by having a character based on him. But Amis adds to Bardach’s account by having his prisoner – the long-suffering Lev – perch on the bench over a sea of his own faeces. Solzhenitsyn says that penalty blocks were routinely flooded with ice-cold water; Amis replaces the water with sewage. It’s an example of the kind of grimly humorous economy he sees as central to the Terror. The subtitle of *Koba the Dread* was ‘Laughter and the Twenty Million’, and Amis has a big laugh at the expense of his prisoner. He’s a character-torturer. No reasonable person would want to be in a novel by Amis, and it’s a pity that Bardach, now dead, can no longer protest.

Nobody was expecting Amis to produce a fictionalised regurgitation of his Stalin book. Part of the reason is that he has lately been much occupied with the ‘war’ on Islamist terrorism, and seems, publicly, to have been thinking about little else. Earlier this year, to an interviewer from the *Times*, he said: ‘They’re also

gaining on us demographically at a huge rate. A quarter of humanity now and by 2025 they'll be a third. Italy's down to 1.1 child per woman. We're just going to be outnumbered.' Amis doesn't take his usual care to predicate his pronouns here – who are 'they' and who are 'we'? – but the message is clear: something must be done. To the same interviewer, Ginny Dougary, in whom he evidently intuited some sympathy, he said:

There's a definite urge – don't you have it? – to say, 'The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.' What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation – further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan . . . Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children. They hate us for letting our children have sex and take drugs – well, they've got to stop their children killing people. It's a huge dereliction on their part. I suppose they justify it on the grounds that they have suffered from state terrorism in the past, but I don't think that's wholly irrational. It's their own past they're pissed off about; their great decline. It's also masculinity, isn't it?

It's masculinity, innit? This alarming tirade – 'strip-searching', 'discriminatory stuff' – descends into confusion in its latter part, in addressing the Islamists' concerns: 'I suppose they justify it,' Amis says, 'but I don't think that's wholly irrational.' The conjunction here ought to be an 'and', unless the *Times* has otherwise mistranscribed Amis's speech – 'irrational' for 'rational' – in which case what he's saying is that 'they' have suffered and that 'they' accordingly inflict suffering on others, but that he doesn't think that this response of theirs is wholly *rational*. Rational, though, is partly what terrorism is: in the sense that it doles out a small measure of the same medicine the great powers trade in. Amis must have been mumbling.

More Amisian bile – much more – was aired in an appearance on *Newsnight*, alongside Benazir Bhutto, and in a 12,000-word essay for the *Observer* on similar themes. The essay, which appeared in September, was called 'The Age of Horrorism', Amis having decided that 'terrorism' was too meagre a term to encompass the world post-9/11. 'All religions, unsurprisingly, have their terrorists,' he says, 'Christian, Jewish, Hindu, even Buddhist. But we are not hearing from those religions. We are hearing from Islam.' That, with its weighty pause, is a nicely macho bit of pulpit proselytising, but elsewhere in the essay he's less sure of his footing. It's time, he declares, to stop asking, too 'rationally', why terrorism happens: 'We are not dealing in reasons because we are not dealing in reason.' But then he contradicts himself: there is in fact one 'rational response', which, he says, is an 'unvarying factory siren of unanimous disgust'. What that factory has to do with free-thinking anti-fascism isn't clear. Amis thinks he believes in reason, in the soft liberal universalist sense: be good to women, hold free elections, drink plenty of booze. But he is uniformly unreasonable towards Islam. That words fail Amis here – when carefully attended-to words were once his most reliable friends – is evidence of the strength of his feeling. This has never happened to him before. Something has changed.

Amis came to Islamofascism late. When the Iraq war began, in March 2003, he was writing in the *Guardian* about the causes of the current crisis, from a realist perspective. The US, he said, was targeting Saddam because he had no WMD, or not many: 'The Pentagon must be more or less convinced that Saddam's WMD are under a certain critical number. Otherwise it couldn't attack him.' He wrote, too, of the causes of anti-Zionism and anti-semitism in the Islamic world: a 'longstanding but increasingly dynamic loathing' in the Middle East of the single remaining superpower is 'exacerbated by America's relationship with Israel – a relationship that many in the West, this writer included, find unnatural.' Also unnatural, he

felt, was the influence of the Israel lobby on the Bush administration, whose born-again contingent welcomed the lobby's message. The *Guardian* essay – with its measured emphasis on cause and effect and the realities of state power – was a form Amis soon abandoned. It may not be a coincidence that he wrote it at a time when he and his friend Christopher Hitchens weren't speaking, or so the papers said: Hitchens objected to a chapter in *Koba the Dread* that accused him of collusion with Stalinist crimes. Perhaps, with the Hitch away, Amis's mind was momentarily open to other influences. But their differences were apparently soon mended, and he began to think about how – fictionally – he could write his way into Islamism, properly understood.

In the long course of 'The Age of Horrorism', Amis describes in detail a nearly finished novella, a 'satire' about Islamist terrorism, which he says he was forced to abandon after 'receiving a new vibration or frequency from the planetary shimmer'. He sounds almost excited about it, and – like the good novelist he used to be – he delays an explanation until the article's end. His reason for abandoning the novella, he eventually thinks, is that 'Islam, as I said, is a total system, and like all such it is eerily amenable to satire. But with Islamism, with total malignancy, with total terror and total boredom, irony, even militant irony (which is what satire is), merely shrivels and dies.'

Satire as militant irony is a formulation that was invented by Northrop Frye, another systematising preacher; and Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* is a model that Amis has always tried to emulate. The collected grotesques that animate all Amis's novels – from the scabrous adolescent narrator of *The Rachel Papers* (1973) to the leeches and locusts of *House of Meetings* – belong in Frye's fourth and final mythic category, 'winter', which stipulates monsters for the apocalypse. But, here as elsewhere, Amis mistakes his Frye: satire is 'militant' not because it is irony with cannons blazing but because it is a distinct genre with its own characteristics and distinguishable moral norms. If Amis now finds satire inconceivable it's because he has left all norms behind. Amis's irony 'shrivels and dies': small wonder, since he's forgotten that irony depends on a certain distance, without which it can only collapse.

The tremulous vibration that Amis – climactically – felt may not have been anything so reasoned as the realisation that the novella couldn't function. There's some transference here. After all, the mystery isn't so much why he had to abort his satirical exercise on Islamism – that much should have been obvious – as what it was that attracted him to it in the first place. Something about it must have shimmered. The unpublished novella, as Amis relates it, is about a 'diminutive Islamist terrorist', a woman-lasher, possessed of a brutal belt known as the RodeoMaMa. Ayed is – explicitly – a modern-day Sayyid Qutb, a fundamentalist figure much favoured by dealers in 'Islamofascism', who like to say that he is Osama bin Laden's favourite philosopher. Amis, who has been reading assiduously, lights on the episode in Qutb's memoir in which a drunken American woman bursts into his cabin on a transatlantic liner and tries to seduce him. For Amis, this moment of revulsion is Qutb's epiphany, and the key to his subsequent politics, all of which stem from a warped attitude to women. Qutb, of course, was chaste. Ayed, on the other hand, and appropriately for an Amis protagonist, is given the full quota of wives (which is four). Small dick he may have, but Amis isn't going to let him out of his clutches without first causing him to inflict a lot of compensatory pain on a lot of women. As soon as he gets time off from work it's back to a round of sessions with the RodeoMaMa. Ayed's day job at the Prism, the terrorist camp he lives in, is to plan the next 'shift in the paradigm' of the order of 9/11. 'I found it reassuringly difficult,' says Amis, 'dreaming up paradigm shifts.' It can't have been too difficult, because Ayed comes up with an ingenious one: to release every convicted rapist he can find and unleash them on the town of Greeley, Colorado. It's as though one man can't do enough sexual hating on his own: to express the full force of his feeling he needs an army of

clones.

Amis has always been interested in anatomising hatred – the Jew-hating of *Time's Arrow* (1991), the class loathing of *London Fields* (1989), the self-loathing of *Money* (1984) – but in trying to address Islamofascism his resources fail him. He hates so much that he can't begin to see what it is that the haters hate. Amis used to have a means of rebutting a vicious argument: a single rhetorical flourish, and the deed was done. In his memoir, *Experience* (2000), he says in passing of someone that he 'has succumbed to the miserably trite belief system of schizophrenia. And it is a system, a wretched little rhombus: Jews, spies, aliens, electricity . . .' That dismissive ellipsis is one way of dealing with anti-semitism: as just another form of madness. One benefit of the Amisian lightly ironising put-down was to deny a hatred the fuel it gains from being taken seriously. But recently Amis has lost his lightness, has become deadly serious. It's possible to watch the transition in action. In *Experience*, he tells an anecdote about a visit to Jerusalem:

Once, in the Arab Quarter, I had a mild altercation with one of the gatekeepers of the Holy Mosque, and I saw in his eyes the assertion that he could do *anything* to me, to my wife, to my children, to my mother, and that this would only validate his rectitude. Humankind, or I myself, cannot bear very much religion.

He might be reading too much in the eyes of the gatekeeper but at least he does it amusingly. That emphatic '*anything*' is another ellipsis: Amis doesn't care to imagine the tortures his gatekeeper might inflict because that would be to give his thinking more weight than he can presently bear. In 'The Age of Horrorism', though, he revisits the same scene:

I will never forget the look on the gatekeeper's face, at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, when I suggested, perhaps rather airily, that he skip some calendric prohibition and let me in anyway. His expression, previously cordial and cold, became a mask; and the mask was saying that killing me, my wife and my children was something for which he now had warrant. I knew then that the phrase 'deeply religious' was a grave abuse of that adverb. Something isn't deep just because it's all that is there; it is more like a varnish on a vacuum. Millennial Islamism is an ideology superimposed upon a religion – illusion upon illusion. It is not merely violent in tendency. Violence is all that is there.

Amis's mother has disappeared from the list of intended targets – mentions of mothers can be comic – and the threat has become specific: this is killing we're talking. In *Experience* Amis told us nothing about the gatekeeper, or why he might think the way he does (if he does); now he is denying the possibility of there being any reason at all for the gatekeeper's hatred: his 'mask' is an effect without a cause. Amis's 'varnish on a vacuum' is a way of sealing an absence of explanation, wrapping it up. Once it has been so packaged – a handy, pocket-sized, neatly labelled black hole – he can make it his subject, or make it his message. The trouble is that without taking cause and effect into account, a novelist can't write a novel.

House of Meetings was initially advertised by its publisher as also containing two stories – 'In the Palace of the End' and 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta' – that appeared in the *New Yorker* and dealt, biliously, with Iraq and Islamism respectively. Both were quietly ditched. 'In the Palace of the End', which was published in March 2004, is a squibby excursus around the idea of Uday Hussein. Amis's narrator is one of several body doubles of Nadir the Next, the son of the ruling dictator. The Palace of the End is a camp divided into two sections: the Interrogation Wing, in which the doubles fulfil their daily quota of torture; and the Recreation Wing, in which senior doubles are permitted to play. The Recreation Wing is plentifully

supplied with women, whom the doubles are instructed to rape. The instruction has been issued because Nadir the Next is impotent, so can't perform the task himself. The doubles find their lives rather tiresome, not least because – so that they can look the part – injuries are inflicted on them to mirror those suffered by Nadir, who is the target of frequent and escalatingly serious assassination attempts (a bullet in the eye, a bazooka attack). Nadir, of course, finally cops it. 'At 1.55, we received three independent reports that confirmed our worst fear: the Next, while crossing the Oder Haff by submarine, had, like his father, fallen victim to the dreaded toilet bomb.' Somebody had planted a limpet mine in the U-bend. This rectal explosion is curious not only for its inventiveness, but because it depends on all sorts of accidental linguistic congruences. The 'U-bend' in the toilet of the submarine that is – inexplicably – crossing the Oder Haff recalls U-boats, along with anything that is generally *unter*, so that the idea of Nazism hovers over the story without the word itself ever appearing. There's another verbal pay-off for Amis here: Nadir finds 'his centre of gravity replaced by a raw hollow', a formulation that fits his current interest in total absence.

'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta', which was published in Britain in the same month as 'The Age of Horrorism', goes deeper into the raw hollow. The 'last days' are, strictly speaking, the 'last day', since the story it tells begins when Atta wakes up at 4 a.m. on the morning of 11 September 2001 and ends less than five hours later, when he flies his plane into the World Trade Center. The plural is introduced by Amis, condemning him to relive his last day in perpetuity. As it describes those five hours, Amis's effulgent prose circles round the repeatedly mentioned 'core reason' for Atta's action – the full disclosure of which, in Amis's usual way, is deferred until the story's end. In the meantime, after a long description of Atta's constipation, Amis invents a circuitous explanation for the last-minute detour Atta made to Portland, Maine before catching his final flight to New York. Atta, according to the story, goes to Portland to visit an imam, from whom he retrieves a bottle which the imam claims contains holy water from Medina; Atta – a non-believer, an apostate – knows it doesn't. But that doesn't stop him swigging the 'holy Volvic' anyway: this is another empty narrative vessel.

Amis's Atta is dismissive of the other terrorists: unlike him they aren't acting for the 'core reason'. The 'core reason', he says, has nothing to do with the six dozen virgins a martyr is granted. 'How could he believe in such an implausibly, and dauntingly, priapic paradise?' he asks, establishing himself as another sexually inadequate Sayyid Qutb. 'The core reason' – finally – 'was, of course, all the killing, all the putting to death.' Unexpectedly, Atta has in view many more corpses than those in Washington and New York. His imagination, in a great proleptic embrace, takes in all the future killing-fields that 9/11 will lead to: 'He was thinking of the war, the wars, the war-cycles that would flow from this day.' War flows, rollingly in a sentence, and death flows, as if in compensation for the 'ungainsayable anger of his bowels'. 'Now even the need to shit felt right and good as his destination surged towards him.' Beautiful. Death is a release from constipation.

There is more than one instance of prolepsis in the story. Here's how it happens: 'Shaving was the worst because it necessarily involved him in the contemplation of his own face. He looked downwards while he lathered his cheeks, but then the chin came up and there it was, revealed in vertical strips: the face of Muhammad Atta.' 'The face of Muhammad Atta' is the face that was repeated on TV screens worldwide in the months that followed 11 September. What Atta sees in the mirror is his future self, multiplied and magnified; he sees the image that has subsequently bombed its way into Amis's brain and become unignorable. Atta can't see himself in his reflection, and Amis can't see him either: which makes him not a person but a narrative black hole. As Atta progresses through the endless rounds of airport security – 'Did

you pack these bags yourself?' 'And did anyone ask you to carry anything for them?' – there's a moment of reflection: 'If the planes operation went ahead as planned, Muhammad Atta would bequeath more, perhaps much more, dead time, planet-wide.' Amis suggests in 'The Age of Horrorism' that one of the legacies of 9/11 has been a vast increase in planetary boredom, but his only example is the check-in queue; to Atta, however, he bequeaths a purgatorial boredom that has been in him from the womb. 'It had occurred to him before that his condition, if you could call it that, was merely the condition of boredom, unbounded boredom, where all time was dead time.' Dead time doesn't do anything for fiction, which needs time to function, and if – as here – past, present and future are collapsed together then fiction is impossible. 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta' is a technical singularity; for Amis, this is a point of no return.

It's clear why the two *New Yorker* stories were left out of *House of Meetings*. What is less clear is why the forced labour camp novel was left in. It also fails as fiction, and is distorted by all the hatreds that have possessed Amis over recent years. The continuities with the other stories are everywhere, beginning with the shit. And then there's the boredom. The old man of *House of Meetings* returns to the formulation Amis ascribed to Atta: 'I became convinced, around then, that boredom was the second pillar of the system – the first being terror.' The post-Stalin era, the old man says, was the 'age of the titanic nonentities'; in 'The Age of Horrorism', Amis writes that one of the horrors of the post-9/11 world has been the 'drastic elevation of the nonentity'; elsewhere in the recent spate he has written that Osama bin Laden is 'an enormous stirrer – a titanic mixer'.

The slippages between horrorist Islamofascism and murderous Bolshevism go both ways. There are peculiar, supernumerary parallels between the old man and Atta. They both hate music, which enters both their minds 'as pain'. Atta, taking his place on a 19-seater plane before dawn on 11 September, finds that, 'excruciatingly, he had to wedge himself in next to a fat blonde with a scalp disease and, moreover, a baby, whose incredulous weeping (its ears) she attempted and failed to slake with repeated applications of the breast.' This – with its murderous fancy flourishes – is an instance of indirect speech that is far too free with its tone – very close to the sustained tone of the would-be Humbert Humbert who narrates *House of Meetings*. The parenthesis weirdly ascribed to Atta here ('its ears') is an echo of a phrase from *Lolita* – 'my very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three' – that has wormed its way into the wrong story. Perhaps Amis sees his two protagonists as mirror images.

It's not just the continuity in wording: Stalinism and Islamism also follow the same rules. The tidy hierarchy of the forced labour camp is a reflection of the systematic hierarchies that organise the stories: the strict pecking-order in Nadir the Next's Palace of the End; the arbitrary divisions in Ayed's terrorist camp, where work is carried out in three sectors – the Known Knowns, the Known Unknowns and the Unknown Unknowns – that are named after everybody's favourite Rumsfeldism. In 'The Age of Horrorism' Amis insists that, when thinking of Islamism, 'our' ideology – he calls it 'Westernism' – 'weakens us in two ways. It weakens our powers of perception, and it weakens our moral unity and will.' The feebleness of Westernism is also a theme in *House of Meetings*: in thinking about the Gulag, the narrator tells his stepdaughter, her woolly Westernism can't apply. These coincidences of thinking are no surprise: to Amis, the Soviet Union might as well be Saudi Arabia which might as well be Berlin 1936. All three merge. 'One hardly needs to labour the similarities between Islamism and the totalitarian cults of the last century,' Amis writes in 'The Age of Horrorism', and then proceeds to labour them. 'Anti-semitic, anti-liberal, anti-individualist, anti-democratic and, most crucially' – and unusually – 'anti-rational, they too were cults of death, death-driven and death-fuelled. The main distinction is that the paradise which the Nazis (pagan) and the Bolsheviks (atheist) sought to bring about was an earthly one, raised from the mulch' – there he

goes again – ‘of millions of corpses. For them, death was creative, right enough, but death was still death. For the Islamists, death is a consummation and a sacrament; death is a beginning.’ The ‘main distinction’ is no distinction, since death is a beginning to the narrator of *House of Meetings* too. He always has it in mind. To his stepdaughter he says, recalling her visit to an anorexia clinic: ‘I will just add that when you went to the other place, the one called the Manor, and I saw a hundred of you through the wire around the car park, it was impossible not to think of another iconic 20th-century scene.’ This may be a parallel too far.

Why is Martin Amis so angry? And why is it all so personal? An unjust but tempting answer would be that he is – as a writer – jealous of the extremity and transgressiveness of his most vicious subjects: Islamism, the concentration camps. He is fascinated by their power, and needs something of it. In 1973, when he was 23, Amis reviewed J.G. Ballard’s *Crash* for the *Observer*. It was, he wrote, ‘heavily flawed’, though he refused to be shocked by it. In 1996 he praisingly reviewed David Cronenberg’s film of Ballard’s book for the *Independent on Sunday*. There he remembers the ‘flurry of nervous dismay’ that the book had induced in reviewers. Every writer, he says, had a defence against it: ‘I’m not sure if anyone else adopted the disguise I wore: sarcasm.’ In 2001, in *The War against Cliché*, he republished his 1973 piece and, in a footnote, says that – in fact – ‘*Crash* sensationally and scintillatingly succeeds’: ‘My review, here, is so straitlaced that I hesitate to preserve it. But I do: readers should always be wrestling with the writers who feel intimate to them.’ Yet the old Amis can’t quite come out and name the moral fastidiousness that he feels the younger Amis suffers from, in *The Rachel Papers*, in *London Fields*. Ballard is one of a number of writers Amis has been troubled by: he wasn’t able to live up to Ballard’s brand of perversity, or to Nabokov’s nymphet, or to Bellow’s vast inclusiveness. But now – in Islamism, and in Stalinism, and in the hatred he finds there – he has a subject large enough for his needs.

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9 January 2007

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