



Mart for Mart's sake

While his novels are acclaimed, the best of Martin Amis lies in his essays, collected together in *The War against Cliché*

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Sunday April 8, 2001

Observer

The War against Cliché: Essays and Reviews 1971-2000

Martin Amis
 Jonathan Cape £20, pp512
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Tied through a quirk of birth to the writing life, Martin Amis is unusually interested in what it means to be a novelist, in what it means to dare to cover the world in language - in your own language, in a style that is inimitably and ostentatiously your own. His method of writing about low-life in a high style, his blokey banter and cool, languorous wit, his ironic fascination with the junk and trash of contemporary culture mean that, for better or worse, he remains the commanding presence of British fiction, the one the new literary lads jostle to imitate, the writer-as-celebrity, the main man.

Conrad famously said that any work aspiring to the condition of art must carry its justification in every line. In this sense and this sense only, Amis's prose has a Conradian urgency: he has always been aggressively competitive, seeking to invent his own idiom and discover daring new ways of writing about the modern world.

'I don't want to write a sentence that any guy could have written,' he once said - and only a writer as anxiously self-evaluating as Amis would have called his new book *The War Against Cliché*, a title that, at once, seeks to elevate (himself) and to challenge (others). Look at my words and despair, he seems to say: you won't find any ready-made formulation between these hard covers, nothing ordinary, banal or commonplace. So Amis is a self-styled gladiator of language, a warrior of words in daily battle against the forces of mediocrity, as represented by the journalist, the genre writer, the hack biographer and the instant opinion merchant, all of whom he remorselessly slays in this book, until there is nothing left but their words: bad words, clichéd words.

But an essential loneliness underscores his quest for absolute originality. So much of what he says and does is motivated by the same questions: What am I worth? How good am I? In one of the essays he suggests that the canon, in which he is steeped as a reader and of which he so longs to be a part, is exclusively the work of writers in early middle-age, from which he has passed. Does this mean that Amis has written his best book; that with the publication first of his memoir, *Experience*, last year, and now this collection, he is taking one last, long, lingering backward glance at the showman he once was before entering a phase that, tentatively, we can already describe as Late Amis?

If so, Late Amis, judging from *Night Train* (1997) - his noir-ish novella about a murder investigation without a murderer - and *Experience*, seems set to be characterised by a peculiarly sombre music, a darkening of mood and tone, a tauter, more controlled artistry and by a diminished desire for cruelty and self-enthronement. In an essay on Saul Bellow, first collected in *The Moronic Inferno* but not republished here, Amis argued that Bellow wrote in a style fit for heroes: the High Style.

'To evolve an exalted voice appropriate to the twentieth century has been the self-imposed challenge of his work. The High Style attempts to speak for the whole of mankind, to remind us of what we once knew and have since forgotten. "It was especially important," [Bellow writes], "to think what a human being really was." '

Does Amis write in a style fit for heroes? Well, he is pre-eminently a prose surrealist: he distorts and parodies as reality is heightened and mangled by comedy. The twin engines of his work are inversion and paradox; he thrives on opposites, polarities, thrilling reversals. And there is something heroic about his attempt to evolve his own exalted voice. But, unlike Bellow's, his fiction has little philosophical or ethical rigour; he hasn't, you feel, really thought hard enough about what a human being really is.

What Amis is, in essence, is a turbocharged cartoonist; no matter how hard he struggles to import seriousness into his work - through writing about the nuclear threat, the Holocaust, Fred West or the new physics - his characters remain trapped between two sets of inverted commas, for ever destined to be lost in the monotonous sublime of caricature, mere puppets controlled by a master who never allows you to forget that you are in the grip of his superior, knowing intelligence.

Which means, in many ways, Amis destabilises his own best instincts: no one reading this book can doubt his immense verbal gifts, his wit and insight. Nor, reading *Experience*, can they doubt his boundless capacity for empathy and love - for family and friends, for the writing life itself that he dignifies as a heroic activity. And yet he remains a resolutely more impressive essayist than novelist. Compared with, say, Philip Roth, who is embarked on a similar mission to recast the modern world in fiction, he is a mere baggage-handler of literature.

Reading Roth's recent trilogy of novels about the corruption of postwar American society and *Sabbath's Theater* before that, you sense that here is a writer, even at the age of 67, who burns to invent. As a result, his fiction has a peculiar moral resonance, an existential frenzy of the kind that is entirely absent from Amis's work, with its wised-up patter and easy grotesques.

The more you read of Late Roth, the more you are convinced he is writing against extinction, that he works to the sound of death panting behind him, feels its cankerous breath on his neck. Equally, the more you read of Roth the more you realise that Amis is wrong about the canon being the work of writers in early middle-age - because Roth is producing canonical work late in life.

Can Amis - changed by the death of his father and humbled by experience - do the same? He certainly owes it to his talent to try, to start writing against, if not extinction, then his own overfamiliar preoccupations, to free himself finally from the entanglement of his own obsessions. So, go on, Mart - let it unfurl.

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