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Martin Amis and the boredom of terror

Despite moments of brilliant wordplay, one is hard put to take Amis too seriously

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Martin Amis

THE SECOND PLANE

September 11: 2001–2007

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In the foreword to *The War Against Cliché*, his 2001 collection of reviews and essays, Martin Amis recalls his early writing days with some nostalgia:

My private life was middle-bohemian-hippyish and hedonistic, if not candidly debauched; but I was very moral when it came to literary criticism. I read it all the time, in the tub, on the tube; I always had about me my Edmund Wilson – or my William Empson It might have been in such a locale that my friend and colleague Clive James first formulated his view that, while literary criticism is not essential to literature, both are essential to civilization.

Taking his cue from Henry James (T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis are also invoked), Amis characterizes his own literary criticism as “a campaign against cliché. Not just clichés of the pen but clichés of the mind and clichés of the heart”. And the opposite of cliché? “Freshness, energy, and reverberation of voice.” The Amis of the 1970s and 80s had plenty of the latter.

The War Against Cliché is studded with brilliant aperçus about this or that writer, including a 1996 review of Hillary Clinton’s *It Takes a Village* that is unusually prescient in its account of the then First Lady’s machinations, from “Cookiegate, Cattlegate, Travelgate, Fostergate, Whitewatergate to Thankyougate” – the last having to do with the fact that Hillary neglected to acknowledge her chief ghostwriter, the head of a team that helped her to produce words of wisdom for mothers and caregivers such as the following: “In addition to being read to, children love to be told stories”. “By the time everybody’s done,” Amis remarks dryly, “we are out there on the cutting edge of the uncontroversial.” Such reviews – and there are many striking pieces in *The War Against Cliché*, whose subjects range from Elvis Presley and Gore Vidal to Jane Austen and James Joyce – show how seriously Amis takes his “moral” responsibility as critic. But what happens when the critic, familiar as he is with the literary specimens he has read so assiduously “in the tub, on the tube”, turns his attention from text to event – to the political event of global proportions? Amis has already made one move in this direction, *Koba the Dread* (2002), his compelling exposé of the horrors of Stalinism, based on such sources as Robert Conquest’s groundbreaking *Harvest of Sorrow*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago*, and Evgenia Ginzburg’s *Journey into the Whirlwind*. Never mind that the controversial case for the moral equivalence of Nazism and Communism had already been made in Stéphane Courtois’s encyclopedic *Livre noir du communisme* (1997), cited by Amis in a single footnote; Amis *Made It New*, more or less, by collaging memorable quotes to make a highly readable book.

But the present poses a different challenge to the writer who wants to take the longer view. *The Second Plane* focuses on a single event – the terrorist attack in New York on September 11, 2001 – and its aftershocks. A short book, it includes fourteen pieces – two short stories and twelve essays and reviews – written between that watershed date and its anniversary in 2007. For Amis, the reference must always be to “September 11”, never to 9/11 (that “blithe and lifeless Americanism”), for, apart from creating confusion – 9/11 sounds too much like “911”, the emergency phone number in the US – “numerical shorthand” is

deemed unseemly, especially given the fact that “these numerals, after all, are Arabic”. This clever observation is not made in jest: Amis’s attack on Islamism, a term he is careful, in his opening note, to distinguish from Islam (“I was once asked: ‘Are you an Islamophobe?’ And the answer is no. What I am is an Islamismophobe”), is virulent. Amis wants you to know that what he hates is not so much Islam itself as what he takes to be the West’s excessive tolerance of Islam.

A fine distinction, to say the least, but one meant to counter those – and there have been many, most notably Terry Eagleton – who have in recent months attacked Amis as racist. In the introduction to the second edition of his book *Ideology* (2007), Eagleton calls Amis’s father, Kingsley, “a racist, anti-Semitic boor, a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals”, and adds: “Amis fils has clearly learnt more from [his father] than how to turn a shapely phrase”. This insinuation led to brouhaha at the end of last year, in the pages of the *Guardian* and elsewhere, especially since Eagleton and Amis are now colleagues at the University of Manchester, the former as Professor of Cultural Theory, the latter of Creative Writing. One need not take sides in a nasty war of words – the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, Kingsley Amis’s second wife, called Eagleton a “spitting cobra”, while Eagleton referred to Martin Amis’s talk of the “definite urge” to inflict “suffering” on the Muslim community as “stomach-churning” – to find *The Second Plane* an off-putting book.

The title essay, written within a week of the attack, is a bravura performance, graphically describing the horror on the ground in response to the recognition that not just one plane, but a second, had turned itself into a missile and was crashing into the other tower of the World Trade Center. “The moment”, for Amis, “was the apotheosis of the postmodern era”, and he gives a dark forecast of the violence and horror to come: “Our best destiny, as planetary cohabitants, is the development of what has been called ‘species consciousness’, something over and above nationalisms, blocs, religions, ethnicities. During this week of incredulous misery, I have been trying to apply such a consciousness, and such a sensibility”. Unfortunately the eloquent and humane mood doesn’t last. In the next piece, “The Voice of the Lonely Crowd” (originally published in the *Guardian* in 2002), a self-protective knowingness sets in. Citing Lord Rochester’s “Satyr against Reason and Mankind”, Amis finds that “On any longer view, man is only fitfully committed to the rational”. This truism prepares us for the recognition that “September 11 was a day of de-Enlightenment. Politics stood revealed as a veritable Walpurgis night of the irrational”.

However terrible “the twentieth century – that ‘age of ideology’” with “its scores of millions of supernumerary dead” – the incipient “age of religion” is judged to be ten times worse. For – and here we come to Amis’s key obsession, both in this essay and throughout the book – “an ideology is a belief system with an inadequate basis in reality; religion is a belief system with no basis in reality whatever. Religious belief is without reason and without dignity, and its record is near-universally dreadful”.

Which leads to the punchline: “if God existed, and if he cared for humankind, he would never have given us religion”. Such aphorisms become tiresome. Rather than do anything as lowbrow as to argue his case, Amis soon puts on his memoirist hat, recalling with some pride that “My apostasy at the age of nine was vehement”:

In my house, it would please me to claim, God just never came up. But that’s not quite true. Later – we were now in Cambridge – my father spent a day with Yevgeny Yevtushenko, during which there was the following exchange. YY: “You atheist?” KA: “Well, yes, but it’s more that I hate him”. And in the home, when things went wrong, there was a certain amount of hating God, who was informally known as BHQ, or Bastards’ Headquarters. At Cambridgeshire High School for Boys, I gave a speech in which I rejected all faith as an affront to common sense. I was an atheist, and I was twelve: it seemed open-and-shut.

The sleight of hand whereby an ostensible discussion of how to respond to Islamic terrorism has turned into name-dropping anecdote about the author’s charmed household is characteristic of Amis’s discourse. An index to its curious self-absorption is the use of the initials KA, for an author whose full name (not exactly a household word in twenty-first-century America) has nowhere occurred earlier on. Dates are not allowed to be abbreviated, but the names of celebrated novelists are. Literature, in any case, trumps religion as “the most persistent candidate for cultification, partly because it nonchalantly includes the Bible and all other holy texts”. But even the study of literature, as personified by such critics as F. R. Leavis, was soon debased: the Leavisism of the master’s “clerisy” – and here Amis digresses to take a potshot at Leavis’s favourite Modernist – “might have ended up with a single text; and that sacred book would have been the

collected works of an obvious sociopath – D. H. Lawrence”. Bad literary taste, it seems, is synonymous with religion, which is, in its turn, synonymous with PC (another abbreviation!). “PC is low, low church, like the Church of England; it is the lowest common denomination.”

The smart rhetoric should not blind us to the flabbiness of Amis’s propositions. There is, in fact, no necessary connection between a devotion to literature and an ability to make sound political judgements, and surely no connection between sound political judgement and the rejection of all religion. In “The Wrong War”, itself a fairly PC piece published shortly after the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Amis returns to his religious theme, this time to do a little bashing of George W. Bush. For example, “All US presidents – and all US presidential candidates – have to be religious or have to pretend to be religious. More specifically, they have to subscribe to ‘born-again’ Christianity”. The first sentence is true. But except for Jimmy Carter and, in his recent incarnation, the younger Bush, none of the Presidents of the past half-century have been evangelicals. John F. Kennedy was Roman Catholic, Richard Nixon a Quaker, George Bush and Gerald Ford tepid Episcopalians, Ronald Reagan a Presbyterian who almost never went to church, and Lyndon B. Johnson a reluctant member of a sect called the Disciples of Christ. Which of the above was misled by his religious convictions? And if evangelicalism stands behind war, how did Jimmy Carter end up with the Nobel Peace Prize?

The most substantial piece in *The Second Plane* is “Terror and Boredom: The dependent mind”, written in the wake of yet another “day of de-Enlightenment”, July 7, 2005, when terrorist bombs exploded in London. The essay is sprinkled with such ominous statements as “All religions, unsurprisingly, have their terrorists: Christian, Jewish, Hindu, even Buddhist. But we are not hearing from those religions. We are hearing from Islam”. Amis tells us that “in this, the Age of Vanished Normalcy”, his decision was to abandon the “thriving novella” he had been writing, for “Writing is freedom; and as soon as that freedom is in shadow, the writer can no longer proceed”. There are indeed times so dark that writing fiction feels like a gratuitous activity, but Amis then goes on to recount the plot of the novella he hasn’t yet written. Its narrator, Ayed, “a diminutive Islamist terrorist who plies his trade in Waziristan” (Osama bin Laden country), is planning a terrorist attack. Ayed’s story prefigures a short story that did get written, “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta”, but whereas Atta’s tale has to honour at least the outlines of that terrorist’s actual biography, Ayed is a polygamist with four wives and a succession of “temporary wives”. Purchasing a belt by mail order from Greeley, Colorado, he is last viewed summoning his wives whom he plans to murder en masse. He is thus “the first to bring martyrdom operations into the setting of his own home”.

Why does Amis dwell on Ayed’s brief stay in Greeley, Colorado? Because – and here a second narrative intersects the first – this boring little dry town was where the Egyptian philosopher Sayid Qutb came, in 1949, to study at the Colorado State College of Education. Amis draws on Paul Berman’s well-known study *Terror and Liberalism* (perhaps also on the New York Times Magazine extract from that book titled “The Philosopher of Islamic Terror”, March 23, 2003). The leading intellectual of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 60s, Qutb wrote volumes about Islamic law as a complete system of morality, justice and governance. But Amis is less interested in the philosophical argument running through these books, than in an imaginative re-creation, drawing on Qutb’s own commentary, of the repressed sexual obsessions of this puritanical zealot, especially his remarks about the provocative appearance of the American women to whom the young man, a lifelong virgin, was exposed. Whereas Berman “goads himself into receptivity” of Qutb’s philosophical writings, calling the work “rich, nuanced, deep, soulful, and heartfelt”, Amis invokes the parallel of Hitler. Qutb’s *Milestones*, he writes, “is known as the *Mein Kampf* of Islamism”.

Sayid Qutb deserves a more substantive dismissal (or acceptance) than Amis cares to give. Perhaps Amis knows this, for, as is regularly the case when he makes pronouncements about days of de-Enlightenment, he is soon changing the subject back to the personal: in this case, a little anecdote about how annoying and boring it was, en route to New York from Montevideo, to wait at the ticket counter for half an hour while airport officials carefully searched the carry-on rucksack of his six-year-old blonde daughter. All of us have had similar boring experiences; few of us would draw the following lesson:

The age of terror . . . will also be remembered as the age of boredom . . . a superboredom, rounding out and complementing the superterror of suicide-mass murder. And although we will eventually prevail in the war against terror, or will reduce it, as [Norman] Mailer says, to a “tolerable level” . . . we haven’t got a chance in the war against boredom. Because boredom is something that the enemy doesn’t feel. To be

clear: the opposite of religious belief is not atheism or secularism or humanism. It is not an ism; it is independence of mind.

Like its crudely contrived fictional counterpart about Muhammad Atta, "Terror and Boredom" displays a failure, not so much of doctrine, as of imagination. Those in the last century who fought in the trenches on the Western Front in 1918 or were imprisoned, twenty-five years later at Auschwitz, at Katyn, at Treblinka – all surely sites of massive boredom that occurred between the "terror" suffered – have uniformly testified that they would have gladly given up any and all "independence of mind" in order to survive. The mind can come back; it is the dead body that cannot.

It is always risky to picture one's own "crisis" as unique – more terrible than all those other crises our parents and grandparents lived through. Thus, despite moments of brilliant wordplay – the narrative of Amis's travels with Tony Blair, for example, paints a witty, nasty, but also endearing picture of the Prime Minister going about his daily routine – one is hard put to take Amis's elegantly turned sentences seriously.

The war against cliché has a curious way of morphing into the cliché against war. Consider the following, from a passage praising secularism as the only reasonable alternative for the twenty-first century: "Secularism contains no warrant for action. One can afford to be crude about this. 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?" The question is meant to be rhetorical. But there's a simple answer: they shout "Heil Hitler!"

Marjorie Perloff's recent books include *The Vienna Paradox* and *Differentials: Poetry, poetics, pedagogy*, both 2004, and *Twenty-First-Century Modernism*, 2001.

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