

## Feedback

Issue No. 6, January 2007
---------------------------

Prompted by **Multiculturalism and the 'war on terror' Rising East 4**

- **Susie Thomas and Jesse Thomas Attaboy!: Martin Amis's 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta' and 'The Age of Horrorism'**
- **Phil Cohen Veiled Threat: losing face and gaining respect in the crisis of multiculturalism**

### Attaboy!: Martin Amis's 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta' and 'The Age of Horrorism'

—Susie Thomas and Jesse Thomas

Suicide bombers deserve no sympathy; indeed they place themselves beyond either our compassion or our retribution. Although jihadists appear to believe that martyrdom opens the gates of paradise, it may also be that self-slaughter is a means to evade capture and humiliation by the enemy. If so, Muhammed Atta failed: there can be few posthumous punishments more mortifying to a mujahaddin than to be fictionalised by Martin Amis.

Like Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, the starting point for Amis's 'The last Days of Muhammad Atta' was an obscure fact. Amis prefaces his story with a quotation from the 9/11 Commission Report: 'No physical, documentary, or analytical evidence provides an explanation of why Atta and Omari drove to Portland, Maine, from Boston on the morning of September 10, only to return to Logan on Flight 5930 on the morning of September 11'. What follows purports to take us inside the mind of the terrorist and to offer a possible account for his mysterious detour.

In the Author's Note to *The Secret Agent*, Conrad informs us that its inception was the anarchist 'attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory [in 1899]; a blood-stained inanity of so fatuous a kind that it was impossible to fathom its origin by any reasonable or even unreasonable process of thought'. The tale is Conrad's attempt to mentally lay hold of 'the fact of a man blown to bits for nothing even most remotely resembling an idea, anarchist or other'.

Both writers offer an exploration into the psychology and motivations of terrorists. Indeed Conrad's Professor, who straps explosives to his body which he can detonate with a press of a button, is the first would-be suicide bomber in English literature. He is malignant, misanthropic, nihilistic, apocalyptic and physically puny:

*And the incorruptible Professor walked, too, averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind. He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable – and terrible in the simplicity of his idea of calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men.*

Given the different historical contexts which produced late nineteenth century anarchism and early twenty-first century Islamism, what is striking is how little Amis adds to Conrad's portrait. The fictional Muhammed Atta's 'disgust', 'animus' and 'detestation of everything' makes his face so 'comically malevolent' 'that he is amazed he is still allowed to walk the streets'. He is merely a nihilist masquerading as a mujahaddin.

Amis repeatedly tells us that Atta 'wasn't like the others': 'he was not religious; he was not even especially political.' He is an 'apostate'; 'he didn't expect paradise. What he expected was oblivion'. He is indifferent to 'people dying in Palestine'; he is not 'persuaded' by arguments about 'moral equivalence'. We are told that the others nurse grievances against America, holding it 'responsible for this or that many million deaths', but Atta views this as the unintentional clumsiness of the all-powerful: 'Every time it turned over in its sleep it entrained disasters that would have to roll through villages'.

Moreover, Amis's explanation of Atta's mysterious detour – that that he goes to collect 'holy water' from a dying Imam, which he knows to be Volvic, so that he can telephone the others claiming that the water will absolve him of the crime of 'self-felony' while they will burn in the 'hell of jet fuel' – not only leaves the mystery as impenetrable as ever but also prompts the question: if Atta is so completely atypical, what insight into the mind of an Islamic terrorist is his story supposed to provide?

According to Amis, Atta's 'core reason' is a desire to get in on the action: 'He had allied himself with the militants because jihad was, by many magnitudes, the most charismatic idea of his generation.' In Amis's essay, the motivation for terrorism is glossed as the desire 'to feel you are a geohistorical player'; it is the 'drastic elevation of the nonentity'. Repeatedly, Amis refers to Atta's rivalry with the others, as if they were little boys competing to see who can piss higher against the wall: 'the peer group piety contest'; 'his group was competitive not only in piety but also in nihilistic élan, in nihilistic insouciance'; and again 'the emphasis of their rivalry was not jihadi ardour so much as nihilistic insouciance'; 'a peer group piously competitive about suicide'. These repetitions suggest, not only that the suicide bombers are in fact all the same, but also that none of them has any conviction or motivation beyond coming first in the Pop Idol contest for Martyrdom.

Conrad too had contempt for his revolutionaries whom he described as variously lazy, envious and resentful (Verloc), personally