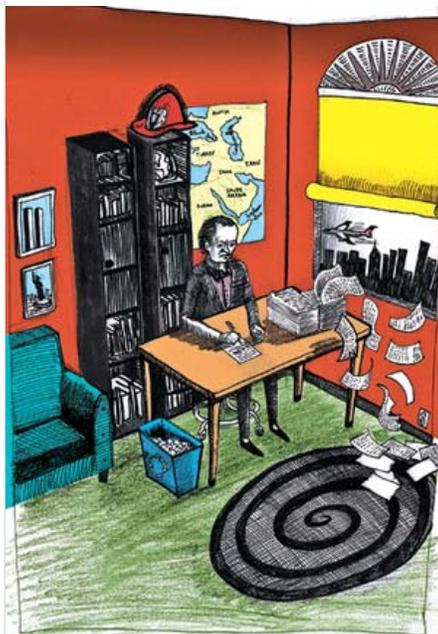


The Writing Man's Burden

By [ADAM KIRSCH](#) | March 26, 2008

IF THERE IS ONE AREA IN WHICH BRITISH LITERARY JOURNALISTS DEFINITELY EXCEED THEIR AMERICAN COUSINS, IT IS IN THE WHIPPING UP OF degradingly personal scandals. And whenever such a scandal erupts, it is a fair bet that [Martin Amis](#) will be involved somehow. Ever since he published his first novel, "The Rachel Papers," in 1973, Mr. Amis has been the target of much free-floating envy, thanks to his literary pedigree, his undeniable talent, and his precocious success. (The world's unlikely book title, the joke went, would be "Martin Amis: My Struggle.") In 1995, Mr. Amis's decision to spend some of his latest advance on getting his teeth fixed provoked a kind of outrage in [London](#) that would be unimaginable here. It wasn't clear whether Mr. Amis's crime was caring too much about his appearance or having the means to do something about it, but either way he was treated as a kind of traitor to his country and his profession. So deeply did the attacks hurt him that he devoted a section of his memoir, "Experience," to explaining that the dentistry was not cosmetic but medically necessary — and besides, it really hurt.



C. Davison

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Mr. Amis's new book, "The Second Plane" (Knopf, 212 pages, \$24), comes wreathed in a new controversy; but this time there is more at stake than teeth. Last year, the British Marxist critic [Terry Eagleton](#), one of the more noxious presences on the academic literary scene, fiercely attacked Mr. Amis for comments he had made to an interviewer on the subject of Islam. Musing on how to combat Islamic terrorism in [Britain](#), Mr. Amis had said: "What can we do to raise the price of them doing this? 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."

The irresponsibility of this is only partly mitigated by Mr. Amis's explicit disclaimer that such retributive measures were just "an urge." But Mr. Eagleton put himself in the wrong when, rather than rebuking or rebutting Mr. Amis, he attacked him as no better than "a [British National Party](#) thug." Mr. Eagleton went on to suggest that Mr. Amis had inherited his prejudices from his father [Kingsley Amis](#), whom he characterized as a "racist, anti-Semitic boor, a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals." This was the signal for a general literary melee, in which Mr. Amis and Mr. Eagleton were joined by a host of friends, enemies, and even relatives. (Mr. Amis's stepmother, the novelist [Elizabeth Jane Howard](#), took the prize in this fight, for her withering dismissal of Mr. Eagleton in the Daily Mail: "I can't see the point of being him.")

For all its unifying aspects, the latest Martin Amis scandal is important to keep in mind when reading "The Second Plane," a collection of fiction and journalism written in the wake of September 11, 2001. It serves as a reminder that, when Mr. Amis writes as a strong, consistent, and unambiguous foe of Islamic extremism, he is bucking the timidly relativist consensus of the British intelligentsia. At a time when even the Archbishop of Canterbury is prepared to see sharia become the law of the land, Mr. Amis's unequivocal defense of liberal, secular values — of feminism, humanism, skepticism, and democracy — is genuinely brave.

This makes it all the more troubling that Mr. Amis, as always when he tackles morally intricate subjects, is not really the best spokesman for his views. The strengths and the weaknesses of Mr. Amis's critique are captured in the title of the most substantial essay in the volume, originally

published in the Observer in 2006 as "The Age of Horrorism." ("Suicide-mass murder," Mr. Amis writes in reference to Palestinian Arab terrorism, "is more than terrorism: it is horrorism. It is a maximum malevolence.") In "The Second Plane," Mr. Amis has given the piece a new and more ambiguous title, "Terror and Boredom."

This emphasis on the connection between religious violence and boredom is Mr. Amis's distinctive contribution to the subject. More than its violence, what appalls Mr. Amis about Islamic fundamentalism is the vengefully puritanical vision it would impose on mankind. The world according to [Osama bin Laden](#), he writes, "would be a world of perfect terror and perfect boredom, and of nothing else — a world with no games, no arts, and no women, a world where the sole entertainment is the public execution."

To a writer, Mr. Amis suggests, this imaginative drought is especially loathsome, because it stands in direct opposition to the imaginative fertility of the novel. "A novel is a rational undertaking," he writes in "The Voice of the Lonely Crowd," an essay published in the summer of 2002. "It is reason at play, perhaps, but it is still reason." This secular playfulness makes fiction doubly antithetical to religion, which Mr. Amis conceives of as both irrational and joyless. "Belief is otiose; reality is sufficiently awesome as it stands," he writes, in a familiar humanistic avowal. The same point was made more eloquently by [Joseph Conrad](#), whose author's note to "The Shadow-Line" Mr. Amis quotes at length: "I am too firm in consciousness of the marvelous," Conrad declared, "to be ever fascinated by the mere supernatural."

Mr. Amis's position, as we see it develop over the six years covered by "The Second Plane," is an intelligible one, and it has its own integrity. But it also has certain obvious weaknesses as a moral argument against totalitarianism, or as a rallying cry for the Enlightenment. For one thing, Mr. Amis often reduces his defense of the novelist's freedom to a mere guild concern, as though what bothered him most about September 11, 2001, was that it made it too hard for novelists to finish their manuscripts. "An unusual number of novelists chose to write some journalism about September 11," Mr. Amis observes. "I can tell you what those novelists were doing: they were playing for time. The so-called work in progress had been reduced, overnight, to a blue streak of autistic babble."

Mr. Amis even complains that the title of his own book of essays, "The War Against Cliché," was suddenly outmoded by the attacks. "We can live with cliché," he is forced to admit. "What we have to do, more testingly, is live with war." This is not only foolish — even before September 11, was bad writing the world's most pressing problem? — it is bizarrely tone-deaf, an example of Mr. Amis's chronic inability to realize when he is coming across as a narcissist. The worst example of this tone-deafness, in "The Second Plane," comes in the brief foreword, where Mr. Amis writes: "if September 11 had to happen, then I am not at all sorry that it happened in my lifetime." (I am sure the relatives of the dead will be glad to hear it.)

This kind of vulgarity, which has always been characteristic of Mr. Amis's attempts to come to grips with serious themes, also helps to explain why the two pieces of fiction in "The Second Plane" miscarry. "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta," which traces the terrorist's thoughts in the hours before he piloted

American Airlines Flight 11 into the [World Trade Center](#), suffers from the same programmatic quality that afflicted [John Updike's](#) novel "Terrorist." In the absence of true empathy with a terrorist — empathy of the sort that [Dostoevsky](#) brought to bear in "The Possessed," or Conrad in "The Secret Agent" — Mr. Amis can only recite Atta's motives, as though checking off points on an outline. His fear of women, his "ferocity and rectitude," are mentioned but not inhabited. The character only comes alive in Mr. Amis's hands when he suffers from extreme constipation — that is, from the kind of petty bodily humiliation that has always lain at the heart of Mr. Amis's comedy.

This problem is much more conspicuous in the other short story, "In the Palace of the End," which imagines the daily routine of a body double for the son of a tyrant — obviously, but not explicitly, one of the sadistic offspring of [Saddam Hussein](#). The logic of the story, however, is strictly cartoonish. When Nadir, the tyrant's son, is injured in an assassination attempt, for instance, his many doubles must receive the exact same injury ("every double lacks a right kneecap, a left heel, a left shoulder blade, and the fourth and fifth fingers of his left hand"). This is one of Mr. Amis's patented sick jokes, not an attempt to come to grips with the physical or psychological truth of violence. And when it turns out that the secret engine of Nadir's insane cruelty is his sexual impotence, we are thrust back into the childish pornographic territory of "London Fields" or "The Information." Here, as in Mr. Amis's recent novel of the Gulag, "House of Meetings," the suggestion that sexual impotence is the worst affliction and most difficult test a man can face effectively exposes the narrowness of his moral imagination. (Besides, wouldn't the dictator have access to [Viagra](#)?)

"The Second Plane" leaves the reader feeling that Mr. Amis is right for the wrong reasons. One cannot help admiring his refusal to make mental compromises with fundamentalism, or his gadfly's insistence on reminding the British of what they stand to lose in a theocratic world. But his aesthetic, not to say hedonistic, understanding of liberalism will not be able to inspire, in most readers, the kind of devotion that the defense of our liberties requires. The category of the sacred, which Mr. Amis dismisses along with religion itself, must be reclaimed by liberals if human freedom is to be considered sacrosanct. Only if more is at stake than our pleasures does it make sense for Mr. Amis to write: "The forces of darkness are arrayed against the forces of light; and we cannot afford to lose."

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