Martin Amis's chronicle of loss

His new novel is an elegy to wasted opportunity

Bharat Tandon

"What can I tell you?" wrote Martin Amis in Experience (2000). "It was the Seventies: the joke decade... It amazes me, now, that any of us managed to write a word of sense during the whole decade, considering that we were all evidently stupid enough to want a private eye back to 1970, to the personal and cultural rites of passage (or accidents of slippage) that went on to define the seventies and beyond. And if Amis was capable of sounding curmudgeonly about the past then, his new, not wholly un-Amis-like protagonist, Keith Nearing, finds more than enough to complain about in the world that surrounds him:

"When he was young, people who were stupid, or crazy, were called stupid, or crazy. But now (now he was old) the stupid and crazy were given special names for what ailed them. And Keith wanted one. He was stupid and crazy too, and he wanted one – a special name for what ailed him."

A similar siege of contraries faces the writer of any historical novel: nostalgia can tidy the pain and inconveniences of the past into an unblemished object of longing, while fictional "Whig histories" shrink it into an unsuccessful but necessary rehearsal for the glorious present. Amis steers clear of both temptations: as befits a novel structured around a series of allusions to canonical nineteenth-century English fiction, The Pregnant Widow shares with George Eliot and Thomas Hardy a sense for how historical novels can also be historiographical ones. Past and present, 1970 and 2009, are repeatedly measured against one another, in order to answer the unspoken question that runs throughout Amis’s narrative: just how did we get here from there? Unfortunately, there are points in The Pregnant Widow where the sound of the question threatens to drown out the conversations around it.

Amis has been candid in interviews about the novel’s autobiographical genesis; but he has also stressed how the work grew beyond his original plans, and the reader is given such a mixture of details that correspond to Amis’s life with details that patentely don’t, that anyone trying to reduce the novel to Amis’s biographical cryptogram is going to look foolish. A more profitable way of reading the novel would be as a long critical dialogue with the works that Amis produced just after the period he represents – most notably The Rachel Papers (1973) and Dead Babies (1975), especially given the fact that both Dead Babies and The Pregnant Widow feature characters called “Little Keith”. It is as if the early novels’ scatological comedy of sexual misdemeanour were being interrogated by the voice of experience (and the voice of Experience).

At the beginning of the novel, in the summer of 1970, Keith finds himself spending his university vacation in an Italian castle, muggling up on the history of the English novel while finding his affections, and his definitively male gaze, wandering between his on-off girlfriend Lily and the aristocratic Scheherazade (“Lily: 5’5”, 37-23-33”); the former is slightly off to one side, by a mysterious aristocratic “Little Keith”. The latter a reformed go-getter only beginning to become sexually aware in the new style. In a plot pitched somewhere between a Shakespeare comedy and an Iris Murdoch novel, Amis depicts his characters not only occasionally grooping one another, but also groping awkwardly for a stable understanding of what is expected of them, at a time when values are in flux, but where the new rules are not yet set down (“New rules – and new and sinister ways of getting everything wrong. He acted like a boy, and so did Lily. But she was a girl, and could do more of it than he could”).

Each character feels this mess of pressures and expectations differently, but since the story is focalized through Keith’s eyes and mind (if narrated slightly off to one side, by a mysterious aristocratic whose identity is only revealed much later), we are closer to his own anxieties as the story unfolds. In particular, he...
carries around the burden of what he would like to think of as
chivalry, laden as he is with guilt over his treatment of Dilkash, an
unworldly past girlfriend, and especially at his inability to save his
younger sister Violet from a life of pathological promiscuity. Keith’s
confusion – as to whether he is a sexual revolutionary, or simply
“pooching off the spirit of the times” – is exacerbated by everyone’s
seemingly being unsure how to use the freedom that is now up for
grabs, and unsure whether it really amounts to freedom anyway. In
the extended absence of her boyfriend, who is on an evangelical
hunting trip, Scheherazade experiments with her nascent self-
confidence by encouraging the attentions of Adrian, a loaded
Italian playboy who happens to be more “vertically challenged”
than Keith:

“Ah,” he resumed. “I know how Tereus felt when he first spied
Philomela. As a forest when a drought wind turns it into a
firestorm.” It was not the voice of a small man, which was
remarkable in its way. Because guess what. Adriano was four foot
ten inches tall.

At the same time, Keith sees an opportunity to bend the inchoate
rules of sexual engagement to his advantage in pursuit of
Scheherazade, even (in an ill-judged impression of an eighteenth-
century fictional rake) attempting to drug Lily in order to make a
secret tryst with the new object of his affections. Into this thicket
arrives Gloria Beautyman, slightly older and perhaps much wiser
than the students. Gloria may be an object of amusement to the
other women on account of her reported drunken sexual exploits,
and her “farical arse”. (“It’s too big,” said Lily. “Much too big.” “I
feel as if I’m seeing it for the first time,” said Scheherazade. “And
it’s absolutely enormous, isn’t it?” “Absolutely enormous.”) Keith,
however, rightly divines in Gloria something he can’t quite read,
can’t quite put his finger on, until it suddenly puts its finger on him
in the novel’s central episode.

It is in this light that the larger significance of the work’s major
allusions becomes clearer. Amis’s title comes from Alexander
Herzen’s worrying thought, repeated more fully in the novel’s
epigraph (“what is frightening is that the departing world leaves
behind it not an heir, but a pregnant widow. Between the death of
the one and the birth of the other, much water will flow by, a
long night of chaos and desolation will pass”). And as with the
characters in Dead Babies, it is implied that Keith and his friends
are as much victims as they are participants, the collateral
damage of a socio-political shift that is still working itself out.
Similarly, the parallels and contrasts Keith draws between his
present and the fictional past return insistently to questions of
sexual roles and power relations: “So Keith understood why the
girls cried. But now the rules had been rewritten, and the generic
proprieties no longer obtained. The question had to be asked
again, What were heroines allowed to do?”. It is apt that of all the
nineteenth-century novelists Keith co-opt, the most prominent is
Jane Austen. At a simple level, she provides a field of debate, a
means for Keith to map out the new territory of sexual mores with
both Gloria and Lily:

“Mm. Mm. I suppose you’re in love with her now.”

“Who?”

“Emma.”

“Oh, definitely. She’s a bit flash, Emma, but I fancy her, I admit.
Clever, handsome, and rich. It’s a start.”

An Austenian vein runs deep throughout the novel, even surfacing
at moments in the form of stylistic inflections (“His minimal
handsomeness, his plausible tongue, his sincere enthusiasm, and
a certain wit clever but ingratiating coldness”). It may initially seem
“wacky” to parallel the 1810s with the turn of the 1970s, but
Austen was in her own way the documenter of the “pregnant
widow”, not so much a comedian of manners as the comedian of a
culture actively debating the very nature and existence of manners
themselves; and as hinted at by Keith’s misremembering the
opening sentence of Emma, the limitations of his own critical
reading also suggest the shapes around him that he can’t fully
discern (“Keith was good on the big picture. But the immediate
situation . . . this he often saw with unreliable eyes”).

To depict protagonists who aren’t wholly aware of the genre of
story they are in has long been a staple of Amis’s ironic art, and
one of his notable inheritances from the Nabokov of Despair and
Pale Fire. For example, John Self in Money (1984) and Samson
Young in London Fields (1989) are, despite their radically different
attitudes towards books, united in their inability to “read” their
own circumstances. The Pregnant Widow, much the same length as
those two large predecessors, makes its own use of the device,
but to less significant effect. It is odd that a novel with so much to
admire in it should fail to cohere adequately, but The Pregnant
Widow feels more impressive in its moments than as a whole. This
may have something to do with its long gestation, and its
attendant change of focus, leaving it reading like a palimpsest of autobiographical novel, comedy of sexual misunderstanding, and the kind of pubby-clubby sociology familiar from Amis’s 1980s satires (compare some of the narratorial musings on the politics of dress and undress with the infamous ‘tight bright white underwear’ sequence from London Fields). It is as though Amis has lived with the ideas so long that he can’t let anything go – including some wincing thigh-slappers about which even Thomas Pynchon might hesitate (‘Sexual intercourse had come a long way’; ‘Spin this out, Scheherazade’).

However, if the friction between the novel’s layers doesn’t always generate excitement, the conceit of layers does contribute to its greatest strengths. At the very beginning of the story, Keith in 2006 is described as entering “the great dig of London”, and The Pregnant Widow works best as an archaeology of the ageing body, an analysis of what Helen Small has pointedly described as “the failure of a preferential version of the future in which one’s own freedom was the overriding object”. In this regard, the novel’s multiple time frames give Amis the chance to measure Keith’s increasing physical frailty and stretchedness unsparingly against his younger self (“As you pass the half-century, the flesh, the coating on the person, begin to attenuate. And the world is full of blades and spikes”), raising the uncomfortable possibility that it may be worse for a man’s ageing body to be parodically recognizable than changed utterly.

Nor is this the only kind of wasting that sets Amis’s imagination going. The Pregnant Widow stands alongside novels such as Ian McEwan’s On Chesil Beach and Philip Roth’s Indignation as part of a contemporary subgenre, the elegy to wasted opportunity. As in McEwan’s novella, the last section of the story fast-forwards through the future lives and losses of some of the characters, a trajectory of unfulfilment and mis-fulfilment that is deliberately braced against the unsuspecting world of 1970, as if the sheer weight of narrative itself could somehow preserve the ghostly energy of what didn’t go on to happen. “The revolution was a velvet revolution, but it wasn’t bloodless; some came through, some more or less came through, and some went under”: although much of The Pregnant Widow feels – like the period it describes – pitched uncomfortably between two stools and styles, it also shows Amis growing into a new mode, as a chronicler of loss and uncomfortable metamorphosis. If his next novels continue in this vein, then this book’s own awkward transition will have been worthwhile.

Martin Amis
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