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## The Middle Years of Martin Amis

Joseph Brooker

Martin Amis (b.1949) was a fancied newcomer in the 1970s and a defining voice in the 1980s. He entered the 1990s as a leading player in British fiction; by his early forties, the young talent had grown into a dominant force. Following his debut *The Rachel Papers* (1973), he subsidised his fictional output through the 1970s with journalistic work, notably as literary editor at the *New Statesman*. His work has remained wryly knowledgeable not only about literature but about the modern literary world, of magazines and manuscripts, impecunious poets and alcoholic editors. Amis's fifth novel, *Money* (1984), won him special attention and respect. It conjured the distinctively new voice – offensive and amusing, by turns or at once – of John Self, a pornographic film director who seemed emblematic of Thatcher's decade. Much of *Money* takes place in New York, but its primary English setting is Notting Hill in West London. Amis has patrolled similar ground in subsequent novels of equal or greater scale: *London Fields* (1989), *The Information* (1995), and his longest post-millennial fiction to date, *Yellow Dog* (2003). These large novels look like the main landmarks of Amis's career; their tone of black comedy and their milieu of urban vice feel like his default setting. But he has also published a host of other works. These include not only novels (three more before *Money*; the novellas *Time's Arrow* in 1991 and *Night Train* in 1997) and short stories (two collections: in 1987 *Einstein's Monsters*, and in 1997 *Heavy Water* which gathered both old and new stories), but also a memoir, *Experience* (2000), and a work of historical analysis, his indictment of Stalinism *Koba the Dread* (2002). His extensive journalism has also been collected, in *The Moronic Inferno*, devoted to America (1986), *Visiting Mrs Nabokov* in 1993, and the extensive collation of reviews *The War Against Cliché* in 2001. Amis has lately become a less prolific journalist, presumably freed from financial necessity. But as the dates above make clear, his rate of publication has not abated with the years.

### Typical Rhythms: Amis and the Contemporary

Amis is a writer of queer contrasts, and like everything else in his work these opposing impulses are taken to extremes. He is at once the most loftily aloof of British writers, and the most committed to busting the *Zeitgeist*. Amis has distinguished himself as a journalist: succinct, mordant and informed. A strong case can be made that he is better at this trade than at fiction. Yet even

when making television appearances or offering opinions in newspapers, he has seemed to stake his own guarded ground; his persona has long worn a certain hauteur. Relevantly, his collections of reviews and interviews include far more encounters with American authors, of the grade of John Updike, Norman Mailer or Philip Roth, than engagements with his British contemporaries and juniors. Interviewing Nicholson Baker in 1992, Amis noted that he had never before interviewed a writer younger than himself (*Visiting* 190.) By the turn of the century, past 50, Amis was becoming an elder statesman of English fiction, and admitting that 'You don't really read your youngers' (Keulks 260). Amis has increasingly shunned deadline and assignment, and sought a notion of the solitude of art. He speaks of the literal seclusion of the novelist; if journalism gets you out of the house, 'Novels, of course, are *all* about not getting out of the house' (*Visiting* ix). But he seems also to seek the isolation of the dedicated artist. Even the frequent repetition of phrases, characters and ideas from one text to another has the effect of threading them together into a totality. At times Amis's work seems autotelic, referring as much to itself as to any external reality or literary context.

But Amis also insists on the reference of fiction – to the contemporary world around it, or even to 'the near future': 'It is about the *Zeitgeist* and human evolution, particularly of consciousness, as well as furniture and surroundings. It's how the typical rhythms of the thought of human beings are developing' (Noakes 17). Even as he edges into veteran status, he continues to want a piece of contemporary action. As elders go he is a Mick Jagger, not a Roy Hattersley, even if this option risks courting the ridicule of the young. *Yellow Dog* arrived with an ominous blaze of 'Amis Is Back' publicity after his protracted excursion into non-fiction; in its pages a tabloid journalist arrives 'at his workstation, with his latte and his brioche' (111), and receives e-mails that read 'u ask also 4 my name' (103) and 'y o y, clint, do people use 6 2 infl8 their own gr&iosity?' (75). *Money*, with its subargot of handjobs, sack artists and rug rethinks, had been not merely on the money, but prophetic of a social mood. Two decades on, some were doubtful that Amis could be so sensitive to his moment. Yet he could plausibly respond that the novel was not simply an attempt to mirror contemporary Britain, but an imaginative distortion of it. Where *Money* refers to the wedding of Charles and Diana, *Yellow Dog* contains the invented royal family of Henry IX, confirming our arrival in an alternate universe. This feint from the actual notwithstanding, Amis remains confident of his ability to render the present: 'it's a very transparent kind of culture, it doesn't hide itself away' (Brookes 4).

Amis has always provoked controversy. The queue of complainants against him is so long-suffering that he probably views it as a sign that he is doing his job. In earlier decades, he would kindle disapproval by his explicitness, his cheerful depiction of sexist slang and degrading vice, his books' glee in male bravado; his heedless disobedience of literature's 'do not

enter signs' (Bigsby 36). By 2000, he was more likely to offend by his apparent conservatism. The Introduction to *The War Against Cliché* is openly elitist, sceptical of the contemporary 'equality of the sentiments' and certain that literature will ultimately 'resist levelling and resort to hierarchy' (xiii-xiv). *Koba the Dread* arraigns Stalinism – a project with which few would argue, though Christopher Hitchens did muster an impassioned public reply<sup>1</sup> – but also complains that trades union power in the late 1970s was 'profound and retroactive', a 'political deformation' which 'made me believe that the people of these islands had always hated each other' (23). He does not give us confidence in his political judgement when, in *Experience*, he declares that he will always be unreasonably hopeful about the state of Israel – not on any ethical basis but simply because he once slept with a Jewish girl who subsequently gave blood to the Israeli army (263-5).

Jason Cowley has mused that Amis, following his father Kingsley (1922-1995), might be beginning his own slow move to the political Right.<sup>2</sup> That fate would be a heavy defeat in the war against cliché, which is one reason to doubt Amis's enthusiasm for it. In truth, Amis is ageing along long-visible lines. Even at its most youthful, his writing craved the disdainful wisdom of the old. In his second novel, at 26, he satirized his own generation; by 1980, at just 31, he could reckon the liberal 1970s a time of 'thronging credulities' (*Visiting* 184). The humiliating decay of the body has been an endlessly insistent theme, not a recent addition. But this dimension has coexisted with, and somewhat been obscured by, his urge to be contemporary. His prose of restless rhythm and riff has made him seem the most streetwise of writers, even as his cultural values have remained icily mandarin. Amis has been a slumming aesthete, a coruscating penman who elects to make art not from country house and dinner party but from gutter and sidewalk, garish off-license and fraying pub. The airgun wedding of style and subject ('describing low things in a high voice' – Bigsby 23) has made him celebrated as the laureate of fin-de-millennium planet panic. It has been a deft double to pull off, but as a younger generation assumes the task of describing modernity, the sternness and canonical rigour grow more visibly central to his persona.

In another coupling of extremes, Amis is the most comic and the most solemn of writers. His native modes are mockery, wit and bathos, rapidly and relentlessly deployed. *The Information's* protagonist smokes heavily: 'he had long quit thinking about quitting.... Paradoxically, he no longer wanted to give up smoking: what he wanted to do was take up smoking. Not so much to fill the little gaps between cigarettes with cigarettes (there wouldn't be time,

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hitchens, 'Don't Be Silly', *Guardian*, 4 September 2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,3604,785574,00.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Jason Cowley, 'Catastrophe Theories', *Observer*, 8 September 2002, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/politicsphilosophyandsociety/story/0,,787961,00.html>.

anyway) or to smoke two cigarettes at once. It was more that he felt the desire to smoke a cigarette even when he was smoking a cigarette' (111). The passage is pure sport, laughter for its own sake; Amis's ability to keep finding further logical steps in this sequence is ostentatiously marvellous. But such riffs can also ring with truth: Amis is at his most piercingly authentic when anatomizing the humiliating conundrums of addiction, temptation and failure. That is why John Self's massive monologue remains his finest hour: for it is in *Money* that Amis's affinity with stand-up comedy – energized, manic, absurdly excessive yet plausibly observational – is most openly displayed. His comic gift has tended to follow his fascination with masculinity, and this has been among Amis's most influential legacies in the last two decades. Elaine Showalter identifies 'Ladlit' as a key subgenre of the 1990s, and presents the two Amises' *Lucky Jim* (1954) and *Money* (1984) as its major precursors. She persuasively proposes that a younger generation of male novelists – among them Nick Hornby, Tony Parsons, Tim Lott and a congeries of former stand-up comics – have followed Amis in their preoccupation with the newly marketable theme of masculinity.<sup>3</sup> His mixture of sexual confession, cheeky humour and anxious introspection has been vital in shaping the sub-genre, though as verbal craftsmen none of the other writers mentioned by Showalter are fit to light Amis's cigarettes.

The swaggering lad and the crumpled bloke are both frequently sighted in Amis's pages, and they are often the same character. *Money* was the keenest instance of this combination: John Self is both a cocksure oaf and an insecure narrator eager for the reader's approval. More recently, male sexual appetites and success are extensively portrayed – in the promiscuous thug Keith Talent in *London Fields*; in the giftless but bestselling author Gwyn Barry in *The Information*; in Xan Meo who begins *Yellow Dog* as Amis's image of a perfect husband. But Amis generally gets more capital from imagining failure and decline, and in his work sexual and financial omnipotence can swiftly topple into their opposites. Reviewing *Money* in 1984, Eric Korn already complained that it must be 'retiring age for the worry about falling teeth and falling hair' (Tredell 58). In fact such worries have had ever more work to do in the subsequent two decades. Richard Tull in *The Information*, five years older than Self, is a physical wreck: three minutes after having a picture taken for his passport, he is 'shredding the strip of photographs with his fingernails – photographs in which he looked, at once, incredibly old, incredibly mad, and incredibly ill' (294). Spared no male frailty, Tull is also impotent: 'In the last month alone, he had been impotent with [his wife] on the stairs, on the sofa in the sitting-room and on the kitchen table. Once, after a party outside Oxford, he had been impotent with her right there on the back seat of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Elaine Showalter, 'Ladlit', in Zachary Leader (ed), *On Modern British Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.60-76.

Maestro' (90). Tull is a plaything especially abused in the novelist's hands, but his plight is not entirely his own: characteristically, Amis seeks to present it as part of a wider male predicament. *The Information* begins with a panoramic evocation of modern cities in which men cry in their sleep, immune to their partners' comforting words (9). Even when he is not alleging crisis, Amis still offers opinions on supposedly universal male experiences; when Tull and Gwyn Barry enter a pub, we learn that 'All men are eternally confronted by this: other men, in blocs and sets' (103).

Here is one quality that marks Amis out from his imitators: even during a deadpan digression, we are not reliably far from portentous assertion. We can observe this characteristic mix of tones in *The Information*, when the 'spiritual bond' between junk novels and airports stirs Amis toward syllogism:

Junk novels were about people in airports, in as much as junk novels needed airports to shift their characters round the planet.... Some junk novels were *all* about airports. Some junk novels were even *called* things like *Airport*. Why, then, you might ask, was there no airport called Junk Novel? Movies based on junk novels were, of course, heavily reliant on the setting of the airport. So why wasn't one always seeing, at airports, junk novels being made into movies? Perhaps there really was a whole other airport, called, perhaps, Junk Novel Airport, or with a fancier name like Manderley International Junk Novel Airport, where they did them all (317-8).

The writer drives his terms through numberless hoops; the sheer accumulation of reflections – trivial, yet plausible – builds comic force, as the reader wonders how long Amis can keep this up. The notion that 'Junk Novel Airport' would be a fancy name if only 'Manderley International' were added to it is a characteristic throwaway absurdity. Yet the whole passage closes in a different key, with the assertion that 'Airports, junk novels: they were taking your mind off mortal fear' (319). The tone is still cool, but the thought now stares levelly at doom.

For Amis wants to be prophet as well as stand-up. While his collapsing men look into toilet bowls, he strains to stare into the abyss. If one feature divides his later from his earlier work, it is its relentless pursuit of gravity. Amis is the English novel's Woody Allen: the early funny stuff gives way, from about the late 1980s, to furrowed introspection and wintry warning. Admittedly, Amis has kept producing hefty comic novels, and an entropic and apocalyptic tone has sounded through them at least since *Money*. But alongside this accustomed mode, he has steadily added a body of work devoted to death and catastrophe: *Einstein's Monsters*, *Time's Arrow*, *Experience*, *Koba the Dread*. While solemnity punctuates all the later novels,

*Time's Arrow* is boldly distinctive. It pursues a Nazi doctor backwards through time, from death to birth: and value, as well as time, turns out to be inverted. The doctor's legitimate medical work appears to involve maiming defenceless citizens; Auschwitz, by contrast, becomes a massive industry for creating Jews, who are then released into a progressively harmonious German society. To apply such an outlandish narrative strategy to history's most notoriously unspeakable episode is plainly risky. But the book's inverted motion is powerfully utopian, and by the same token a devastating indictment; 'only if you reversed the arrow of time', Amis explains, 'would Auschwitz be what they thought it was, which was something good' (Bigsby 35). The book's inbuilt structural elegance, the simplicity of a lone conceit, allows it to make an unmitigated, if uncontroversial, moral case.

Since *Time's Arrow*, Amis has pursued historical horror through non-fiction. Here again he meets a contemporary trend: the drift into documentary and memoir. Jonathan Coe has fretted that the public's appetite for true stories may now exceed its desire for invented ones.<sup>4</sup> Some writers in this period (Iain Sinclair, W.G. Sebald) have not so much favoured fact over fiction as creatively blended the two. Amis's foray into fact is somewhat different. *Experience* is carefully wrought, intricately subdivided; Amis notes that the book demonstrates 'the novelist's addiction to seeing parallels and making connections' (7). Yet it is clearly labelled as a memoir, and not to be confused with his fiction. We note the artist's skill that shapes the book, but this does not mist its factuality, as Sebald's enigmatic reveries do. More substantial genre trouble derives from the frequency with which material from the fiction shows up in the memoir. *The Information*, in particular, shares many motifs with *Experience*. Yet the effect of this is not to make Amis's facts into dubious fictions: rather, it demonstrates the extent to which his fictions are crammed with his own opinions, stuffed with vignettes and intellectual set-pieces he thought too good to leave out. The repetition of material dilutes the impersonality of the novels, yet next to Sinclair, Amis still seems a writer who values fiction as a distinct genre: who retains a certain traditional respect for the Novel. The contemporary trend of which *Experience* really partakes is the confessional, the survivor's tale: the genre at the heart of what Roger Luckhurst terms our 'Traumaculture'.

Amis admits this. 'We live in the age of mass loquacity. We are all writing it or at any rate talking it: the memoir, the apologia, the c.v., the *cri de coeur*. Nothing, for now, can compete with experience – so unanswerably authentic, and so liberally and democratically dispensed' (6). A note of disdain for the loud, inartistic public sounds here, though it is somewhat spoiled within a page when Amis admits that his reasons for writing include

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Coe, 'Nothing But The Truth', *Guardian, Review*, 17 June 2005, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/samueljohnson2005/story/0,,1508741,00.html>.



'the same stirrings that everyone else feels' (7). The book relates in detail the death of Amis's father, and also addresses the murder of his cousin by the serial killer Frederick West. Both episodes could raise questions of propriety – of Amis's right to narrate them at such length. His main answer seems to be that these matters were already public: his own contribution merely sets the record straight. Still, his readiness to do this is framed by an era of self-revelation and literary catharsis. In *Experience*, as Luckhurst puts it (36), 'exceptionality is precisely what renders his writing so generic'.<sup>5</sup>

Amis's willingness to dramatize his own life continues in the sequel, *Koba the Dread*, where an account of the deadly tolls of Stalinism is juxtaposed with family reminiscences and open letters to Christopher Hitchens and the shade of Kingsley Amis. In one quite superfluous bout of self-advertising self-criticism, Amis goes out of his way to inform us of his shame at comparing his baby daughter's cries to those of Stalin's prisoners (258-261). *Experience* includes a 'Postscript: Poland, 1995' describing a visit to Auschwitz, and meditating on the Holocaust and the murders of Fred West. In themselves, Amis's reflections on Nazism are eloquent and thoughtful. But it is hard to see that they belong here: the postscript seems to seek an extra dose of gravitas which the memoir does not need. The prose of these books is careful and clear; the sentences of *Experience*, which Amis warns will not shed 'formality' (7), are as stark and unsmiling as any he had published. And both books carry important literary and political freight. But they also veer into a slack self-indulgence, the distended pages of a writer so celebrated that he can get away with publishing his correspondence. It is understandable that Amis is interested in his father, but the many pages of *Experience* devoted to the older man depict a deeply wearisome character. Significantly, though, *Experience* offers extended airings of an Amis subtly different from his black-comic norm. Its publication stirred some to hope for a different fiction – less immersed in irony, more open to bereftness and pathos – in future (Keulks 245-251).

### **Morality Detailed: Style and Value**

Above all things, Amis is a stylist: a performer in language, an artist of the sentence, a tactician of noun and adverb. He is both unfailingly precise – the least comma and colon in his books is deliberate and decided – and endlessly energetic: he routinely completes linguistic leaps that would sprain most writers. Individual touches may seem unremarkable, but they accumulate into paragraphs of rare verbal intensity. In a London park, 'One man and his

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<sup>5</sup> *Experience* is predictably well-turned, but was still not the best-written traumatic memoir in English published in 2000: that was Paul Morley's *Nothing*.

dog went by the other way, man as thin as a fuse, dog as cocked and spherical as a rocket'. We note the borrowed cliché with which this starts, then the clipped economy of the linked similes. 'The sloping green was mud, churned and studded, beige and dun, half soil, half shit': adjectives are held in a mobile symmetry. A boy looks 'at the loners, the ranters, the post-pub staggerers, all those born to be the haunters of parks' (*Information* 136): Amis never runs short of another category of the destitute, or misses the rhythm and elegaic irony of that last phrase. His lyric gift, as Adam Mars-Jones astutely sees, is distinctive not merely in its quality but in its application: a poet's ear is cocked to the notes of disgust and decay, verbal finesse renders the world's decrepitude rather than its beauty (Tredell 155). But amid the entropic vistas, he can still conjure sudden glory: 'I know I live on a fierce and magical planet', the narrator of *Time's Arrow* muses, 'which sheds or surrenders rain or even flings it off in whipstroke after whipstroke, which fires out bolts of electric gold into the firmament at 186,000 miles per second' (23). The sorcerer's certainty with which that lyrical line is held is worthy of *Lolita*: 'With a swishing sound a sunburst swept the highway...'<sup>6</sup>

That is no coincidence: Amis seeks his peers in a gilded past. In *Experience* he dares to make his name the third of a trio of 'noted stylists', after James Joyce and Vladimir Nabokov (113). Genuflecting to his masters, he asserts that his relation to Nabokov demands the deference that Nabokov expresses toward Joyce – though he adds that Nabokov's sincerity is 'by no means complete' (117), so Amis's own is left swinging a little. He is right to assert his inferiority to those forebears, but that he sees himself in this company at all is a sign of how he conceives of his own work. For him more than for any British contemporary, 'to write' is the intransitive verb that Roland Barthes called it. His prose is self-delighting, flaunting a joy at its own capacity. Fredric Jameson once declared that the 'deepest subject' of Ernest Hemingway's work was not courage, love or death but 'simply the writing of a certain type of sentence, the practice of a determinate style' (*Marxism* 409). We might likewise say that even when Amis's books seem to be about nuclear war or urban decay, those themes are pretexts for the sentences that explore them. In a 1991 interview he admits that it is 'writing' that interests him, not 'story': from a plot or structure he seeks 'chances to describe the things that I am interested in' (Bigsby 31). Where Kingsley Amis lamented his son's 'terrible, compulsive vividness', the younger man alertly asserts that 'you should not waste anything. There should be no dead areas.... Style is not an icing, it is an ingredient, perhaps the main ingredient of your way of perceiving things' (Bigsby 31). That claim is extended – interestingly, but riskily – in *Experience*. A footnote recounts Kingsley Amis's reaction to *Lolita* (1955). Father tells son that Nabokov's writing is 'just flimflam, diversionary

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<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (London: Penguin, 2000 [1955]), p.218.

stuff... That's just style'. Martin Amis's response to this view bears the solemnity of a major tenet: 'Whereas I would argue that style *is* morality: morality detailed, configured, intensified. It's not in the mere narrative arrangement of good and bad that morality makes itself felt. It can be there in every sentence' (*Experience* 122).

For a 'noted stylist' to declare style the measure of morality looks suspiciously self-serving. But linguistic flair as such is no guide to goodness. 'You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style', declares Humbert Humbert at *Lolita's* outset (9). Happily for Amis, this claim is untrue. But the criminal Humbert's book-long spree of matchlessly fancy prose suggests that linguistic capacity and moral rectitude need not be united. Perhaps Amis's meaning, then, is that ethical care is reflected in a care for language; that moral responsibility – for people, and for their surrogates, literary characters – demands that the detail of writing should be equally responsible. The issue is clarified somewhat by its negation, when Amis finds his own intuition confirmed by the thought that D.H. Lawrence, 'perhaps the most foul-tempered writer of all time (beater of women and animals, racist, anti-semitic, etc., etc.), was also, perhaps, the most extravagantly slapdash exponent of language' (*Experience* 117).

That point is well scored, and Amis's extravagance is anything but slapdash. If his own style carries virtue, it may be in a descriptive capacity that strengthens our sense of the world's quiddity: of the particularity of people and things. When the moral-minded critic James Wood admires such touches as 'a loose flock of city birds reared up like a join-the-dots puzzle of a human face or fist' (*Information* 103), it is partly because redescription is a kind of renewal.<sup>7</sup> Amis himself once spoke of Nabokov's style as 'his tireless attempt to pay full justice to the weird essence of things' (Keulks 44). Some of his own writing can seek that ethico-aesthetic justification. But this formulation understates another element: aggression. Adam Mars-Jones finds 'both a fear and a desire' in Amis's writing: an anxious propensity to attack, in which each sentence must pugnaciously 'declare the presence of its author' (15). No writing, perhaps, is entirely disinterested. But Amis's is peculiarly wired and spiky, primed for strafing, ready for combat. This writing lacks vulnerability; it wants to be ready for anything, and to get its retaliation in first. It is not coincidental that Melvyn Bragg dubbed Amis 'faster on the phrase than any of the other inky cowboys on the streets', or that such a description would feel so inappropriate if applied to so many other noted writers.<sup>8</sup> We do not speak of Julian Barnes being a hotter wordslinger than Michèle Roberts, or Graham Swift gunning down Jonathan Coe. That bespeaks Amis's stylistic status. But his ascendancy also encodes a weakness:

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<sup>7</sup> See James Wood, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), p.195.

<sup>8</sup> Bragg's comments appear at the front of the paperback of *The Information*.

a dearth of peace, an inability to write with calm attention to the world, which must instead be outblazoned. Phrase-making can teeter from revealing the real to obscuring it, as the task of looking is forsaken for the thrill of the riff. Amis is a devotee of literary tradition, but the traditional virtue he most signally lacks is John Keats's 'negative capability': a readiness to sublimate his bristling literary ego into the world's rich alterity. To return repeatedly to characters plainly different from himself – unlettered bruisers, abused floozies – is not a solution to this but part of the problem. For such monstrous and garish figures are a diversion from the difficulty of imagining life-sized, life-like people.

Amis's creative relation to reality is variable. He will speak of the novelist's responsibility to the present – 'We write about change, planetary change, changes in consciousness' (Noakes 18) – as though his vocation were eagerly mimetic. But he also declares his impatience with life as literary material. 'The trouble with life (the novelist will feel) is its amorphousness, its ridiculous fluidity. Look at it: thinly plotted, largely themeless, sentimental and ineluctably trite. The dialogue is poor, or at least violently uneven. The twists are either predictable or sensationalist' (*Experience* 7). The complaint is tongue-in-cheek, but the nature of Amis's fiction makes it look more telling than it should. There is indeed a running conflict in fiction between the reality effect and the yearning for form.<sup>9</sup> Yet it would be a sleight of hand to assert that 'the trouble with life' makes Amis's fictional method necessary. His alternative to life's 'ridiculous fluidity' has been a ridiculous schematism. A disabling division in Amis has often been observed: between fineness of style and crudity of plot; between perfect phrase and cardboard character; between molecular brilliance and molar crapulence. The part (the peerless sentence) is always more impressive than the whole (the creaking plot, many-paged but still motive-hungry). In this light, Amis's assertion that 'morality' can inhere 'not in the mere narrative arrangement of good and bad' but in style looks like a self-interested defence, as well as an important truth. For once we rise above the level of the sentence and consider his husbandry of fictional worlds – their 'narrative arrangement of good and bad' – then Amis leaves far more to be impatiently desired.

Grotesques, vamps and thieves; working-class women who say 'Eez me yusband' and aristocrats who declare 'It may interest you to know that my inamorata happens to be... "bleck"' (*Heavy* 127, 105). An endlessly unfortunate writer whose work hospitalizes its every reader, and his talentless but endlessly fortunate nemesis: as James Wood remarks (190), one 'expects to be able to peel them off the page'. A 'dream husband' (*Yellow* 5) whom a blow to the head turns, with yawning essentialism, into a stinking,

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<sup>9</sup> For a recent discussion of this see Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: an Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp.10-21.

snarling yob. Not all these conceits would be worth a short story. Spread over 300 or 500 pages, they leave the reader not only weary but mystified. Why is his generation's prose master so dedicated to absurd binary oppositions, chimerical extremes, characters and stories with so tenuous a toehold in the real? Amis once wrote of P.G. Wodehouse's fiction as an autonomous world which reflects only its own norms (*War* 204-6), but he seems not to have worried about this fate overtaking his own work – even as he regularly avers the responsibility of fiction to bring us the world's news. A like dereliction is visible in Amis's dismissal of the idea of human motive. 'Fuck the why', *The Information* advises (169); the theme is picked up in *Night Train*, and is at least as old as *Money* (370). This sounds like a cool-headed determination to face life's real complexity, in which stagey motives have no place. But of course Amis is not really seeking that difficult richness ('thinly plotted, largely themeless'), but evading it altogether: producing, not the overdetermined subjects of a Virginia Woolf, but a conveyor belt of conveniently motiveless cartoon thugs and inexplicably lascivious belles. It is all too often in his own work that 'the twists are either predictable or sensationalist'.

To tax so severely this instinctively comic writer may appear a category mistake. But *Ulysses* and *Pale Fire* are comic. Martin Amis is one of the few living British writers to pen sentences that might stand their company. It is disappointing, then, that after thirty years of publication he still sees *Yellow Dog* as his paradigm. The returns have diminished since the cheeky, gross brilliance of *Money*; it is unlikely that Amis can better that performance in his favourite sub-genre. Other writers seem to sense the self-imposed limitation. Alan Hollinghurst observes *Yellow Dog*'s descriptive highlights – 'moments of magical vigilance' – and ponders the different writer Amis could have been.<sup>10</sup> Or could yet be? The best recent evidence for a different kind of Amis novel (as against the non-fiction in which he has been soberly effective) is among his least-mentioned books, *Night Train*. That novel is modest: 150 quick pages, a muted pastiche of the American police procedural. Its initial surprise is its female narrator, the unglamorous, unillusioned detective Mike Hoolihan. Reviewers understandably scrutinized this strategy in the context of Amis's long strife with feminism. He himself comments that from the first word 'I knew I was much deeper in' (*Experience* 177). But the book's great distinction is not Hoolihan's sex but her air of reality. Amis indeed seems deeper in, simply because he lets his narrator grow into a plausible figure: bruised and resilient, shrewd but not brilliant. The book does possess other aspects. Dedicated to Saul and Janis Bellow, it is a literary performance of American English, in which Amis's relish at the smallest touches can be detected: capital letters after colons, 'Too' at the head of a sentence. And it is clouded by the

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<sup>10</sup> Alan Hollinghurst, 'Leader of the Pack', *Guardian*, 6 September 2003, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,,1036460,00.html>.

usual metaphysical weather, meditating on human slightness in a forbiddingly vast universe. But it is extraordinary in the Amis canon simply for the author's readiness to make his fictional creature serious and sympathetic.

It is still not too late for Amis to board that train into a different literary terrain. For a writer with such a strong signature, the middle years of Martin Amis have seen a surprising variety of directions essayed. Singular but effective diversions (*Time's Arrow*, *Koba the Dread*) have alternated with works that hint at new tonal possibilities (*Night Train*, *Experience*). But Amis himself, through it all, seems to cleave to a belief that his metier is in the protracted riffs and compulsive vice of *The Information* and *Yellow Dog*. He has already given the world more than enough of that genre, and the world has begun to tell him so. But as he claims not to read his critics, the nature of late Amis must be a decision for Amis alone.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Emma Brockes, 'Amis: I don't read my critics', *Guardian*, G2 section, 29 August 2003, p.3.

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