

Martin Amis and the Lower Depths



by Theodore Dalrymple

When I learned that Martin Amis, the novelist, had died, I felt a stab of sorrow. I did not know him personally, and heard him speak only once, at the memorial service for an acquaintance of mine. He spoke well, but it was not an occasion for rhetorical brilliance. He behaved like a perfectly civilized man, and in a dignified and modest manner.

Part of the reason for my sorrow was that Amis was only six weeks older than I, and therefore his death brought home to me by how thin a thread my own life is now suspended. He died of cancer of the esophagus, like his friend, the journalist Christopher Hitchens, and this is not a disease from which an easeful death is to be expected. Perhaps it is illogical to feel more for a stranger of one's own age than for a stranger of a very different age, but man does not live by logic alone.

I had read a few of Amis' books, but little remains in my mind

of them except for their atmosphere, which I found uncongenial. Sometimes I thought that his writing was cleverness in search of a subject. In an interview in *The Paris Review*, he said that he had noticed that the people who lined up for signed copies of his books tended to be what he called *sleazeballs*, in contradistinction to the lines for signings by other authors. The word he chose to describe his enthusiasts seemed to me a horrible one, but I admit that, when it comes to vocabulary, I am as chaste as a Victorian maiden. Such words (except in reported speech) bring a blush to my cheek, half of embarrassment and half of disgust. I could list several others in common usage but will refrain from doing so.

The *Guardian* newspaper, reporting his death, which from my present perspective seemed untimely, said that Martin Amis was "an era-defining novelist," but this appears to me to have something profoundly snobbish about it, in the same way that *le tout Paris*, taken to mean "everyone," is snobbish. Amis was certainly not a national figure as was, say, Charles Dickens, and in any case national figures do not necessarily "define an era." It is often the case that those who stride the world like colossi—the literary world, that is—are forgotten ten years after their deaths, their giant reputations deflated to nothing, like pricked balloons. Sometimes they undergo resuscitation years later, more often not. One has only to peruse the list of Nobel Prize winners to grasp the fleetingness of much literary fame. Time will tell whether Amis will be read in fifty years' time (though not by me, that much is certain); but if I had to bet, I would bet against. Perhaps this will be because no one will be interested in the era he supposedly defined, or perhaps it will be because his work is not of sufficient interest, *sub specie aeternitatis*, to survive into another age. I may be wrong.

Amis depicted a loveless, solipsistic world in a satirical,

and therefore critical, manner, but one suspects that he also wished to be part of it, and that in any case he was so absorbed in and by that world that he could not envisage any other. Certainly, a return to the relatively ordered world of his childhood (albeit that his father played his part in bringing about its destruction) was not possible, any more than one can remake fresh eggs from an omelet. The relatively ordered world of the first half of the 1950s was in some respects less free than the horrible world of Martin Amis' London novels of the 1980s and '90s, in which personal excess and its concomitant dissatisfactions were the norm.

Amis, I think, loved what he hated. This is not an emotional contradiction unknown to me, indeed I experienced it for much of my career. My subject was the social breakdown in Britain, a source of endless interest to me. Often I was not sure whether I should collapse with laughter or rush up to the roof to throw myself off. Who would not feel this odd and contradictory pair of impulses when told in all apparent seriousness, as I was, by a woman who was describing her latest horrible boyfriend, "I've asked him not to strangle me in front of the children." The absurdity of it is hilarious, but the social world to which it points is horrifying: one in which strangulation is taken as a normal part of relationships (she did not suffer from autoerotic asphyxia, that strange condition in which people, usually men, strangle themselves in order to heighten the sexual arousal of their fantasies).

The fact is that the lower depths, which we feel ought not to exist, are always fascinating, in the way that vice is always more interesting than virtue. Authors find it much easier to depict villains and villainy than heroes and virtue, and are usually more successful at it. (One of the triumphs of Alexander McCall Smith's Mma Ramotswe series of books, about the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, is that he has created a good heroine who is actually interesting.) Similarly, we can imagine a thousand hells but not a single heaven.

Thus, our head tells us one thing, that the lower depths should not exist, but our heart tells us the opposite, that life would be the poorer without them.

I suppose the problem arises when the lower depths predominate; that is to say, when much of society comes to resemble its former lower depths, whose way of life is fashionable rather than merely the object of prurient interest. When Martin Amis said that the people who wanted signed copies of his books were *sleazeballs*, or what might once have been called degenerates, I do not think he was being self-critical, but rather self-congratulatory. *Sleazeballs* had one great virtue or advantage over those who stood in line for signed copies of, say, the books of Julian Barnes. The latter, according to Amis, were civilized, middle-class, educated professionals. Therefore, one may infer, Amis felt that they were artificial, not *authentic*; the *sleazeballs*, by contrast, were *authentic*. Thus, to be sincere is to be horrible; but even I, in all my misanthropy, do not go so far.

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