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Introduction

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Spanning three decades, ten novels, six works of nonfiction, two short story collections, and nearly 400 reviews and essays, Martin Amis's career already testifies to a lifetime devoted to literature. From the appearance of his first novel, *The Rachel Papers* (1973), to his most recent novel, *Yellow Dog* (2003), roughly 30 years later, Amis has inspired some of the most controversial literary debates of the contemporary era. His work has prompted new considerations of realism, postmodernism, feminism, politics, and culture, and his personal life has provided fodder for gossip and tabloid journalism. As is true of anyone whose life has veered into celebrity, such evaluations have not always been civil or reciprocally welcomed. However, they have always been lively, always been edifying, and they continue to confirm Amis's status as one of England's most important living writers.

From the leveling satires of his early period, through the mature flourish of the 1980s, to the ongoing evolution of his latest publications, Amis's career has garnered international attention. His awards include the Somerset Maugham Award for best first novel and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for biography, and his work is routinely shortlisted for other awards, most notoriously the Man Booker Prize, which he has yet to claim despite his numerous literary achievements. Formal commendations aside, few writers can match the spectacle of Amis's literary ascension during the 1980s. After establishing his name with a series of early comedies and satires that centered upon hip, sarcastic, urban youths – *The Rachel Papers*, *Dead Babies* (1975), *Success* (1978), and *Other People: A Mystery Story* (1981) – Amis expanded his stylistic and thematic repertoire to produce his masterpiece, *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984). Twentieth-century literary history stills bears the imprint of this work, which

represents for many scholars the commencement of Amis's middle – and decidedly major – period. Following a collection of essays (*The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America*, 1986) and a book of short stories (*Einstein's Monsters*, 1987), *London Fields* appeared in 1989, joining *Money* as two of the decade's most incisive portraits of apocalyptic anxieties, nuclear fear, and bristling individualism. Indeed, Amis considers these works to form – with *The Information* (1995) – an informal trilogy. Literary scholars have largely agreed, ranking this triptych of novels among Amis's major achievements, a showcase for his distinctive themes, influences, and techniques. Of course such classifications obscure the intervening *Time's Arrow, or, The Nature of the Offense* (1991), a taut yet forceful novel that examines Nazi atrocities through the structural lenses of reverse chronology and split consciousness. Such a work also exemplifies the grounds upon which Amis's detractors have often congregated: some readers objected to Amis's subjugation of history to style, labeling his efforts artistically callous or indulgent. Like *Money*, however *Time's Arrow* is a technical *tour-de-force*, a forum for Amis to re-imagine literary frameworks and forms.

A highly influential, often imitated stylist, Amis has engendered more than his share of literary rivalry, and as is true of most authors, he has struggled to maintain the momentum of his major period. Literary history features relatively few W.B. Yeatses or Saul Bellows, perennial producers of exceptional work, literary longevists. Indeed the author of *Yellow Dog* bears little resemblance to the author of *The Rachel Papers* – as one would expect or hope, given the rigors of experience. After refining his trademark characteristics and summing the pinnacle of literary celebrity, Amis took a semi-hiatus from fiction after 1995, inaugurating a transitional period that would ultimately produce his best nonfiction writing. Although two works of fiction appeared – *Night Train* (1997) and *Heavy Water and Other Stories* (1998) – the highlight of this most recent period remains his memoir, *Experience* (2000), a poignant rumination upon the most pressing relationships in his life: those with his father, his mentors and friends, wives and children, and – perhaps most important – his own aging. Significantly, his authorial perspective is divided in this book. Often he peers at the specter of literary immortality, surveying fame; other times he languishes upon lower terrain – mortality, celebrity, feuds. Of course, there remains only one unsettled feud in *Experience*, and that is Amis's quarrel with death.

Besides *Experience*, the early years of the twenty-first century witnessed the publication of two additional nonfiction books: a

collection of previously published work – *The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews, 1971–2000* (2001) – and the controversial political memoir *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (2002), a companion text in many ways to *Experience*. Solidifying his reputation as a Man of Letters, Amis also composed some of his most forceful essays during this period, especially following the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. In 2003 he returned to fiction with *Yellow Dog*, an ambitious novel that many people consider his least successful work. Fueling the controversies that his work always seems to inflame, the novel has spawned new debates concerning the evolution of Amis’s career, his prodigious talent, his literary reputation and legacy. In 2006 and 2007 Amis is scheduled to publish two new books: *House of Meetings* and *The Pregnant Widow*. The first couples two of the political stories that emerged from the events surrounding September 11, 2001 – “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” and “In the Palace of the End” – with a novella about two brothers and a Jewish girl in the “pogrom-poised Moscow of 1946.” *The Pregnant Widow* is scheduled to be the first novel in a new four-book contract for Amis.

Now that Amis has assumed his position amid the established orders, the “older guard,” of contemporary literature, abdicating his vanguard throne, it has become easier to regard him as a literary father in his own right, someone against whom younger writers are compelled to react or – as has recently become more common – to inveigh. It has also become easier to contextualize his achievements within literary genres and movements. After more than three decades of controversial, critically acclaimed, and popular work, Amis remains a writer in transition, one who has never failed to captivate readers’ interest and imaginations. Beneath the noise of controversy and the triumphalism of prizes, that interest alone ensures an audience and possibly fame.

This volume emerges from, and consequently resides within, each of these contexts. It offers the first collective assessment of Amis’s career. The essays that follow extend the critical dialogues surrounding Amis’s work and shed new light upon the status and stature of Amis’s work – a scholarly field that seems destined to grow, rather than contract, as Amis evolves his subsequent periods. Three features in particular distinguish this volume and separate it from extant scholarship. First, the 12 invited contributors are experts on Amis’s work and contemporary British literature. They also form an impressive international cast, hailing from six different countries. Far better than any monograph or more streamlined collection, this volume

displays the vital cross-section of Amis's worldwide influence and reception, an often overlooked appeal in discussions about Amis's relation to literary London or contemporary English society.

As editor, I have also endeavored to compile a volume that avoids such extra-literary issues as biographical subtexts, literary rivalries, or celebrity. There is nothing wrong with such approaches; indeed many of the contributors, including myself, have published on such subjects before. However, these subjects require devotional monographs for sufficient coverage and are notoriously expansive, thwarting essayistic limitations. Only one casualty derives from this conviction: *Experience*. The decision to bracket this work was not lightly made, and ultimately I determined that the extensive treatment it has received – and the complex biographical issues it raises – justified its omission. It has been analyzed most recently as well: in countless reviews and interviews as well as scholarly monographs by James Diedrick and myself. Too often, as Amis himself has lamented, analysis of his work has swerved into his relations, whether familial, literary, or romantic, and this collection seeks to return discussion, for the time being, to his literary contributions.

Finally, this collection features essays devoted to Amis's talents as an essayist and reviewer, a previously neglected subject in Amis scholarship. It also provides a comprehensive, authoritative bibliography of Amis's nonfiction from 1971–2005. Long before he became a novelist, Amis excelled at composing lively, incisive reviews and essays, some of which appeared anonymously or under pseudonyms. Readers of all levels will be impressed and intrigued by the numerous subjects that Amis has surveyed in newspapers, magazines, and journals. This bibliography and the essays on Amis's nonfiction appear at the end of the collection, which is otherwise chronologically structured. This structure is by no means limiting, however; individual essays may, and in some cases do, tend toward non-chronological configurations. As the following paragraphs clarify, the essays in the collection also form natural thematic clusters.

Neil Brooks commences the volume, exploring the ways that Amis's first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, reworks the "coming-of-age" tradition. Emphasizing the novel's distinctive narrative voice, Brooks analyzes the interplay between identity and textuality, portraiture and self-fashioning that culminates in Charles Highway, one of Amis's most memorable narrators. In contrast to the *bildungsroman* or *Künstlerroman* traditions, however, Charles arguably fails to evolve. He subordinates lived experience to textual representation and remains disconnected,

both from himself and other people. For Brooks, this is the basis of the novel's – and Amis's – social message.

The next essay comes, appropriately, from Richard Todd, who was among the earliest commentators on Amis's work. In an illuminating analysis of “mirror narcissism” and “reflectiveness” in Amis's early novels, Todd analyzes Amis's use of doubles, one of his signatory narrative strategies. Imaginatively working backward to reveal how *Money* helps us reconsider, or reread, Amis's first four novels, Todd clarifies the ways that mirror imagery functions as a structural framework. These essays by Brooks and Todd – coupled with James Diedrick's later in the collection – comprise the first scholarly cluster, surveying Amis's early period, which had, until now, remained under-examined. They therefore function as companion pieces as well as necessary critical correctives – two common rhetorical strategies in this collection.

Tamás Bényei follows next with a sophisticated, in-depth analysis of *Money*, Amis's most complex novel. Comprehensively annotating the work's extensive use of allegorical frameworks, Bényei unmasks how the narrator, John Self, is equally conditioned and constituted by metaphors of commerce, shame, and exhibitionism. Excess and surplus – both textual and performative – are crucial to Bényei's reading, and his essay is the most authoritative examination to date of the shifting levels of allegory within this seminal contemporary text.

Joining Bényei on *Money* is Emma Parker, who turns attention to the most controversial dynamic in Amis's oeuvre – gender portraiture. Informed by queer theory, her reading counters charges that Amis's novel should be seen as sexist or misogynistic and argues instead that its transgressive sympathies are inherent in its critique of hegemonic masculinity. Challenging “heteropatriarchal” assumptions, the novel privileges dissidence and disruption to register a taxonomic crisis rooted in same-sex desire. Despite Self's homophobic and pornographic attitudes, the novel revels in the dissolution of gender and sexual boundaries.

Philip Tew continues this controversial debate, exploring how the male protagonists of *Money* and *London Fields* struggle for definition under the often suffocating weight of class and urban angst. Coupling gender to class, he cautions against programmatic attempts to theorize such issues separately. He concurs with Emma Parker that Amis's characters often elude and therefore undermine systematic rubrics, and his analysis strives to contextualize the interlinked material and ideological underpinnings of masculinity, a masculinity that ranges in class

and character from John Self to Keith Talent but uncovers common ground in its treatment of working-class masculinity.

Susan Brook completes this collection's tripartite analysis of Amis's gender schematics. Her essay explores the relationship between Nicola Six, the heroine of *London Fields*, and a series of oppositions that Amis invokes and problematizes: between mediation and the real, the unnatural and the natural, the text and the body, creation and destruction. On one hand, she contends, Nicola is pure form and order, a "shapely" moral aesthetic standing in contrast to masculine amorality and formlessness. On the other hand, she thwarts representative control through her performative engagement with fantasy and transgression, both sexual and authorial. She thereby expresses an anxiety common to Amis's work: the anxiety that literature, in assuming form and shape, also sanitizes, mediates, or evades the real. In many ways, *Money* and *London Fields* pose questions about gender that are as historically significant as those in works by Virginia Woolf or D.H. Lawrence, and the companion essays by Parker, Tew, and Brook not only expand the debate about Amis's gender portraits but will no doubt figure prominently in future examinations of the subject.

Brian Finney next adopts *Time's Arrow* as his subject, exploring how the novel filters history through the lens of the "postmodern sublime." Since the mid-1980s, controversy has saturated the subject of postmodernism – whether perceived as historical period or descriptive label. The historical background for *Time's Arrow* is mid-century Nazism, of course, and Finney elucidates how Amis both engages and dissents from this problematic, subordinating history to aesthetics in order to revitalize morality and humanism. Accentuating the importance of irony to narrative perspective, Finney provides a method for reconciling stylistic experiment and historical horror, tracing Amis's figurative war not only against cliché but against all ideologies that would rationalize atrocity.

Turning attention to *The Information* – the work which concludes Amis's major period as well as his self-described "informal trilogy" – essays by Catherine Bernard and Richard Menke elevate scholarship on Amis's most significant novel of the 1990s. Along with the essays by Finney and Keulks (below), these essays form another important scholarly cluster, highlighting Amis's shifting relations to realism and postmodernism, two modes whose representational strategies demarcate much twentieth-century literature. Bernard theorizes these dynamics through *The Information's* opposition between nostalgia and satire, showing how Amis "fetishizes emotion" in a complex gamble that

unveils the “failed promise of universality” within contemporary culture. Focusing upon tropes of melancholy, writing, and loss, her essay convincingly charts the novel’s stratagems for depicting vulnerability and negativity, contingency and realism, universality and the culture industry.

Richard Menke subsequently decodes the novel’s sophisticated presentation of “informatics.” Exploring how information not only “resists assimilation” but also mediates “mimetic play,” Menke unravels how the novel thwarts revelation, whether theorized in terms of character rivalry or more comprehensive depictions of informational saturation. Crucial to his discussion is the significance of pixelation – strategies of blurring, filtration, interpolation, and compression – which relate to the entropic epistemology of the novel. What emerges, he concludes, is an account of culture as “mediated information” rendered increasingly powerful because of its relation to “modern informatics.”

Concluding the cluster on Amis’s relation to realism and postmodernism, my own essay speculates how the novels *Night Train* and *Yellow Dog* – the inaugural texts of his “late” phase, I theorize – potentially foreshadow a recuperative form of “sanitized postmodernism.” Rather than dismiss these works as derivative missteps, as some have done with *Yellow Dog*, I explore how Amis embeds a dialectic between realism and postmodernism within their plots and polarized characters to express his dual discomfort with radical postmodernism as well as any wistful retreat to realism. The questionable success of these novels within Amis’s corpus confirms the tentative, exploratory nature of his efforts to chart a period after – or beyond – postmodernism, the trend that solidified his fame in earlier decades.

The collection culminates with two essays on Amis’s essays and reviews – although James Diedrick’s essay comments also upon Amis’s early novels. As Diedrick and M. Hunter Hayes document, Amis’s nonfiction writing deepens readers’ understanding of his novels and artistic concerns. Whether writing about other authors or books, television programs or sporting events, royalty or celebrities, Amis repudiates simplistic distinctions between “popular” and “high” culture. Especially during the 1970s and early 1980s, Amis often approached his subjects with iconoclastic exuberance. As his career assumed form, and his subjects became more serious, Amis consciously evolved a more authoritative persona to pontificate about politics and society. Focusing upon the science fiction reviews that Amis published under his first professional pseudonym – Henry Tilney – Diedrick proves that

Amis's assessment of J.G. Ballard's work provides a key to his "self-mythologizing" and "increasing literary status anxiety." He then traces the effects of these changes, especially on *Dead Babies* and *Other People*, recovering the connections between Amis's nonfiction persona and his early novels. Diedrick's essay thereby links thematically with Brooks's and Todd's, concluding the collection's survey of Amis's early career.

M. Hunter Hayes tracks this conflict between mainstream fiction and high art – or populism and pontification – onto new terrain, concentrating on Amis's anxiety of influence with F.R. Leavis, the Cambridge don who popularized the "Great Tradition" and was the leading critic of his age. Elucidating Amis's own form of emergent, rival "Leavisism," Hayes chronicles Amis's alternating adoption and subversion of Leavite values through numerous reviews, including two written under Amis's other pseudonym, Bruno Holbrook. These reviews strove to broaden literary tradition and to authenticate a space for Amis's own satiric forms and his American literary mentors. The essays by Diedrick and Hayes are accompanied by a comprehensive bibliography of Amis's nonfiction writing from 1971–2005. The majority of these entries appear here in print for the first time, and their essays and bibliography will undoubtedly illuminate numerous avenues for subsequent scholarship.

Analysis of any living writer always poses unique challenges: new works appear, modifying traditions; styles and interests change; artistic habits recede. This collection presents the first extended analysis of Martin Amis's career from diverse nationalities and critical perspectives. These 12 articles stand equally as individual contributions or as representative clusters or thematic constellations. Amis's authorial evolution remains far from concluded, and as he continues to publish new work, and as readers and scholars continue to assess those achievements, it will remain exciting to track his significance and influence. This collection testifies to his already distinguished and celebrated career, and it has been an honor to bring it to print.

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