

# Morality as Style

**Benjamin Kunkel**

**KOBA THE DREAD:**

**LAUGHTER AND THE TWENTY MILLION**

*by Martin Amis*

*Talk Miramax, 2002 306 pp \$24.95*

**A**LL NOVELISTS are stylists, but only a few are known chiefly for having what Vladimir Nabokov called “a fancy prose style.” Over the past twenty years, no well-known British writer has seemed more a stylist than Martin Amis. Amis is fancy in the hip, urban way of mixing a thrift-store find with a designer piece; his prose is notable for its slanginess as well as its lexical hauteur. Addressing the ghost of his father in his curious new book about Stalin, he writes: “I suppose . . . that there is one chance in a googolplex that [your daughter, also dead] is now at your side.” We hear the echo of the colloquial “one in a million,” and the dictionary will tell you that a googolplex is the number 1 followed by a thousand zeros. It is all too easy to understand why in writing about Stalin Amis should associate death with impossibly large numbers. But for now the point is only that Amis developed early on a distinctive idiom—showy, jokey, repetitive, fierce, sentimental—and has stuck with it ever since. You may not always recall what his characters were and did; you can always remember the language in which they were dressed.

Yet Amis isn't only a stylist; he is also a moralist. And to him these are one and the same. As he says in his memoir, *Experience*, “Style is morality: morality detailed, configured, intensified.” We can see, then, why it might have especially appealed to him to begin *Koba the Dread* (Koba was Stalin's nickname) with a quote from Robert Conquest's book on Soviet

forced collectivization and the resulting famine: “in the actions here recorded about twenty human lives were lost for, not every word, but every letter, in this book.” Amis goes on to comment: “The book is 411 pages long.” Such a book fulfills, in the blackest possible way, the novelist's dream—of a language almost unbearably thick with human significance. Who could ignore a book in which, as Amis writes, “guileless prepositions like *at* and *to* represent the murder of six or seven large families”?

The sorry answer, of course, is that it was possible among several generations of Western intellectuals to ignore or minimize just what book of revelation Stalin's regime was spelling out. The novelist Kingsley Amis, for one, though he wound up viciously and cartoonishly on the right, was a loyal member of the British Communist Party from 1941 to 1956. In *Koba the Dread*, his son Martin follows up an outraged résumé of Stalin's crimes with an open letter chiding Kingsley's ghost for this utopian indulgence and another to Christopher Hitchens, calling him to account for failure to see, as an erstwhile Trotskyist, not the monstrosity of Stalinism, but its preparation at the hands of Lenin and Trotsky. Yet Amis's tone of personal grievance, his affrontedness and anger, seem directed less at his father and his friend Hitchens, or even at eager dupes on the Old or New Left, than at Stalin himself—that “passionate lowbrow,” Lenin's “underbred mascot,” who detested “anyone higher or better: a numerous company.”

*Koba the Dread* has not been generously received, and you can see why. These days, a denunciation of Stalin seems almost apolitical, like coming out against cancer. Moreover, the book contains no original research (the historian Orlando Figes has even shown that Amis gets a few facts wrong); it forgets the embattled decency of left oppositionists; it treats differing analyses as loose “talk” rather than argu-

ments; and it collapses into bathos when—many reviewers seized on this—Amis likens the cries of his infant daughter to those that must have been heard in “the deepest cellars of the Butrkyi Prison in Moscow during the Great Terror.” It might also be added that its anti-utopianism is taunting and crude. After his right turn, Kingsley Amis could still concede that “The ideal of . . . the Just City, is one that cannot be discarded without lifelong feelings of disappointment and loss.” To Martin this sentence “has no meaning—indeed, no content.” (That would make it the opposite of Conquest’s language.) “Just what is this Just City? What would it look like? What would its citizens be saying and doing all day?” Such words and deeds are indeed difficult to predict, since a just city would also be a free one. But if it is a totalitarian paradox to prescribe in advance the uses of freedom, it should not be beyond us, or Amis, to conceive of conditions of greater liberty than most workers and citizens enjoy, or to realize that speech and action become more circumscribed as jobs become more repetitive and exhausting, political choices fewer, and forms of culture more homogeneous.

**S**TILL, MARTIN AMIS has produced a useful book. It offers such a quick, pained, and vivid account of Stalin’s psychopathic career that Amis and his intelligently marshaled sources can’t help but induce that pity and disgust that segments of the Western left for many years failed to feel. (For myself, I was made freshly ashamed of certain casual ideas about the Soviet Union I’d had as an undergraduate, and glad to have left no record of them.) The astronomical quantum of suffering endured by Stalin’s victims “will not”—as Pasternak said, and Amis quotes—“fit within the bounds of consciousness,” but the mind’s best approximation has got to be in shuttling back and forth between the anecdote and the statistic, and this Amis does with a skill made brisk by anger. Besides, in many instances Amis’s language is furiously apt, as when he refers to the “ideological debauchery” of Stalin’s remark that “together with the Germans we would have been invincible,” or when he notes the killing irony “that a ruling order predicated on human per-

fectibility should reward, glorify, encourage and indeed necessitate all that is humanly base.”

There is something funny about people who exactly misdescribe themselves, and this is part of the answer to the question burdening Amis: how, knowing the nature of Stalin’s rule and the approximate number of his victims, can we ever laugh at communism? Yet it is comic, bleakly but genuinely, that Stalin reacted as he did when a Soviet census gave a smaller figure than he’d wanted: where, wondered their murderer, could all these missing people be? Stalin had the census-takers killed.

*Koba the Dread’s* grievance against Stalin is so manifestly personal and—with no large company of Stalin-fanciers out there—so politically negligible, that one goes looking to Amis’s other work for its source. His novels from *The Rachel Papers* to *The Information* are, above all, comedies—playful, riffing, splashed with one-liners—and they inspire the thought that the laughter troubling Amis these days is his own, heard as an echo. In the letter to Hitchens he borrows Hamlet’s words: “I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth.” What was this mirth like when he had it? Suppose we want to know what morality it entailed: what, then, was its style?

In Amis’s book of criticism, *The War Against Cliché*, the most decorated writers are Nabokov and Saul Bellow, and Amis evidently would like to be considered the successor of both. Yet Amis lacks their sharp eyes, and is visually acute mostly when his senses have been quickened by disgust. He sees more clearly than anything else such things as a cabbie’s neck, “pocked and mottled, with a flicker of adolescent virulence in the crimson underhang of the ears,” and Indian dogs with their air of being “abruptly promoted rats, bemused by their sudden elevation.”

But Amis’s prose is rhetorical rather than imagistic, and likes to proceed by incremental variation on repeated words or notions. Its characteristic and paradoxical moods are of a workmanlike gaiety, an energetic weariness, a relished disdain. Here is unprepossessing Terry, from an early novel, *Success* (1978), lamenting his reversals of sexual fortune, especially as these compare with the triumphs of his toothsome brother: “Ah but from that

highpoint, let me tell you, from that proud peak, things definitely took a turn for the worse, things ceased to gel in the way they had been doing, things started to go wrong." Nine years later, in *Einstein's Monsters*, a collection of parables and black fantasies on the theme of nuclear war (another case of death allied with astronomical figures), we have: "The world gets older. . . . The world has been to too many parties, been in so many fights, lost its keys, had its handbag stolen, drunk too much. It all adds up. A tab is presented. Our ironic destiny. Look at the modern infamies, the twentieth century sins."

These are first-person narrators talking, but Amis writes like this in all his voices. His style, which can seem founded on the principle that some things bear repeating, is a natural vehicle for his preoccupations, which are often with what everyone knows and no one can accept. *The Information* (1995) concerns a middle-aged failure of novelist continually aghast at his age and unsuccess: recalling the axiom that at a certain age a man has the face he deserves, Richard Tull looks into the mirror and thinks that "no one deserved the face he had. There was nothing on the planet it was that bad to do." He knows what his life has been and still asks himself: "What happened?" *Time's Arrow* (1991) tells a different story on a very different scale, but is likewise a darkly comic protest against established results. The novel plays on rewind, as it were, the life-story of a Nazi doctor—a brilliant conceit, because the reversal of time also makes for an inversion of moral value: only in this backward world do Nazi doctors heal their patients and uphold the Hippocratic oath.

It seems indecent but also unavoidable that someone consulting the bathroom mirror and someone contemplating the Holocaust should suffer versions of the same wish: to push the rewind button. And while it may sound snide to say that Amis's big "modern infamies" and the world's unequal distribution of physical attractiveness and other marks of prestige compete, thematically, for top billing in his work, I don't mean it in quite that way. The firms taking out advertising space in the A-section of the *New York Times* clearly understand that it isn't any trick to move from sighing over the

global woe to wondering if you could use a face-lift or a new shirt. Martin Amis's novels are peopled mainly by educated liberal urbanites, among whom (and I am no dissenter here) it might be hard to find more consensus than on how terrible mass murder is, and how nice it must be to look nice. What you do in the morning is look in the mirror, then look in the paper.

The great passions of Amis's characters, especially in *Money* and *The Information*, are for getting laid, getting drunk, and getting ahead, and he is never a better writer than when following these worthy if often undignified campaigns. But it seems that to Amis the action of his novels is tainted by a fatal triviality. For years he's sought to give his work moral weight by worrying explicitly about nuclear war, or remembering the Holocaust, or now by enumerating Stalin's victims. Yet although we know that the world in which people die too quickly to count and the world in which we ourselves get and spend are in fact the same world, this is difficult to feel. It's like putting one hand under hot water and the other under cold; you won't be able to experience both temperatures at once. And the inability to bring the extremes of modern life into a relationship is part of what accounts, I think, for the impression throughout Amis's work of a frivolity at odds with itself.

**A**MIS IS ONE of those who like to define the twentieth century in terms of enormous body counts. This has a way of implying that life where it is tolerable is somehow marginal, thin, unrepresentative. Consideration of murder by the million alters the look of life; we stare through civilization to its potential breakdown and through human variety to a common extinction. Life and its meanings fearfully contract into mere survival.

It's telling that Amis's last two novels have been haunted by the night sky as a vista of randomness and oblivion. *The Information* abounds with observations such as this: "It seems that the universe is thirty billion years across and every inch of it would kill us if we went there. This is the position of the universe with regard to human life." And in *Night Train* (1997), a female police officer investigates the

suicide of a beautiful, wealthy, brilliant astronomer, discovering that “On the evening Jennifer Rockwell died, the sky was clear and visibility excellent.” It may sound like sleuthing of my own, but I suspect mass murder and the night sky preside very similarly over Martin Amis’s fiction; they are black voids understood, if at all, by means of fantastically large sums, and they imply that the jurisdiction of moral law is very local indeed.

Here again, this time from *Koba the Dread*, is Amis’s credo: “When I read someone’s prose I reckon to get a sense of their moral life.” There is not much trouble in ascertaining Martin Amis’s judgments, or our own, when it comes to Hitler and Stalin. The worst of modern events are hard to look at—but they are also easy. We know with as settled a knowledge as politics affords that the Great Terror and the Holocaust and Cambodia’s Year Zero and Rwanda’s Hutu Power genocide were abominations. And if morality and politics by their nature involve vexing, imperfect, and necessary choices, then the thought of “the twentieth century sins” hardly engages our morality or politics at all. Heaping curses on a long-dead and all but universally reviled dictator is not a credible summons to intellectual conscience.

In *The Information* Amis jokes that “in the street outside, the old divisions of class and then race were giving way to new divisions: good shoes versus bad shoes, good eyes versus bad eyes (eyes that were clear, at one extreme, ranged against eyes that were far fierier than any Tabasco).” This is kind of funny and kind of true, and anyway excites more interest and uncertainty than what we would get if confronted with goose-stepping boots. The streets of New York and London have accommodated perfectly those rivalries of success and failure, of snobs and yobs, of attractiveness and still more keenly registered ugliness that animate Amis’s fiction. But it seems to have escaped him that these streets could equally have sponsored just the serious moral dilemmas he has obviously craved for a subject. Great Britain may be little more than an accessory where American power and culture are concerned, but Martin Amis nevertheless belongs to the upper reaches of an intensely stratified Anglophone civilization that is as abundant

with moral problems as it with so much else. If these don’t strike us as starkly as those posed by the powers defeated in the Second World War and the cold war, they do possess the advantage for the novelist of being intimate—which is not to say they aren’t also vast. It isn’t a necessary or sufficient condition of good fiction that it deal with moral problems at once private and public, but to write such novels is a high calling, and one Amis seems to have heard.

HE GETS CLOSER to fulfilling his ambition when he writes about suicide than when he writes about historically distant mass murder; it’s then that he almost asks what sort of life is worth living. But just as soon as the question is posed, it is mooted by Amis’s perspectives on the cosmic and the mundane. If the size of the universe and the endlessness of death mock our daily cares, it’s hard to see how they permit the crimes of Stalin or Hitler to remain a big deal either. Meanwhile, Amis writes about his Londoners and New Yorkers in tones his father once identified with journalism—those of a “non-committal superiority,” a “pervasive unspecific irony.” His characters are morally undifferentiated, all appetite and status anxiety, and when a condition like this looks inescapable, it can’t be meaningfully judged. Boasting many colorful surfaces, Amis’s books lack a moral texture.

And yet style, as postulated, does suggest morality. Amis’s language is proud and ostentatious; his most eloquent attitude is a vicious superbity. His remarks on love and friendship are commonplaces of sentimentality, provoking no more reflection than his evaluation of evil. His *explanation* of evil, however, is something else, and a counterpart to his style; he tends to ascribe it to envious inferiority. The serial killer Frederick West was a “sordid inadequate” just as Stalin was “underbred” and a “lowbrow.” No doubt envy inspires much crime, and much of the worst. But the envious and the arrogant are mostly in agreement on what constitutes value, and the morality they share is an ugly one, whatever the beauty on one side. Martin Amis found his undeniably smart and sparkling style when he was very young, and has since refined without really revising it. This

fancy prose remains reminiscent of something Robert Musil said about another young writer's idea of his own work: "[H]e was more dazzled by its brilliance than able to see what was going on in light of it." But not only youthful ambition and certain kinds of moral pride show

a greater desire to shine than to see by the light one gives off. So do good shoes, and many other things radiant throughout any unjust city with fame, glamour, and success. ●

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# The Left and Democracy

*The Triumph of Realo-politik*

**Sheri Berman**

FORGING DEMOCRACY: THE HISTORY OF  
THE LEFT IN EUROPE, 1850-2000  
by Geoff Eley  
Oxford University Press, 2002 720 pp \$35

“DEMOCRACY,” Eduard Bernstein once said, “is both a means and end. It is a weapon in the struggle for socialism, and it is the form in which socialism will be realized.” Although not quoted, this argument lies at the heart of Geoff Eley’s massive new book *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000*.

The main goal of Eley’s book is to remind us of the centrality of the left in the struggle for democracy. He takes aim in particular at two views that continue to characterize much popular rhetoric and thinking about democratization: that liberalism and the bourgeoisie have historically been the “carriers” of democracy, and that it has generally emerged naturally alongside modern capitalism. In contrast, Eley argues that for the last 150 years or so it has been not the liberal middle classes but the socialist movement that has “most consistently . . . held up the banner of democracy.” And in Europe, he notes, “democracy did not result from natural evolution or economic prosperity. It certainly did not emerge as an inevitable by-product of individualism or the market. It developed because masses of people organized collectively to demand it.”

The book’s narrative covers three broad periods—the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the interwar years, and the postwar era—and describes a common pattern playing out in each, with mainstream left parties taking two steps forward in the political arena but falling one step back thanks to their timidity and neglect of social issues. The left’s push for democracy really began in the 1860s, Eley notes, when a system of liberalized nation-states “solidified” and the “legal and constitutional conditions . . . for popular democratic parties” were created. During this era the socialist movement turned its attention away from utopian communities, producer cooperatives, and the like and toward the national political arena, organizing the world’s first modern, highly institutionalized political parties. These parties, in turn, enabled socialists to transform the economically and socially disadvantaged working classes into a potent political force. Eley documents how these parties struggled to force *ancien régimes* to accept full democratization—and “struggle” is indeed the right word, because in no European country was full democracy achieved without a fight. It took strikes, protests, and, most of all, persistent political organizing to get recalcitrant elites to recognize worker demands.

The battle, moreover, was not just against conservatives, Junkers, and other easy-to-demonize political reactionaries, but often against liberals and the middle classes as well. The latter may have been eager to establish the rule of law and curb the power of monarchs and illiberal elites, but they were also fearful of the