

Review Article

On Reading “The Janitor on Mars” by Martin Amis

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Abstract

“The Janitor on Mars” by Martin Amis, a British novelist, appeared in *The New Yorker* at Halloween, 1998, recalling the broadcast of another Martian story sixty years before. But unlike the earlier story, this story is a satire on or caricature of ourselves, like *Gulliver’s Travels*. The main part of the story takes place on the day of a live TV interview with a robot left behind as the janitor on Mars after all the Martians perished long, long ago. He had been trip-wired to get in touch with Earth at the appropriate time, which was in September 2048. A human delegation was organized and arrived as the studio audience the following June. They are not told what had tripped the wire until the very end of the broadcast when it comes as a great shock about the Earth’s damaged atmosphere. The Martian history that the Janitor tells his human audience deals with other serious problems that we have on Earth. We watch the TV broadcast in the company of the janitor of an orphanage who is facing not the problem of saving the Earth but of saving one abused child.

Introduction

Halloween weekend 1998 was the 60th anniversary of a radio broadcast by Orson Welles of H.G.Wells’ story “The War of the Worlds” which led more than a million listeners to believe the United States was really being invaded by death-dealing space ships from Mars. The roads were clogged with cars fleeing New York and New Jersey, the center of the “attack”. Last year at Halloween, *The New York Times* had a long article commemorating the event, and *The New Yorker* published “The Janitor on Mars — Reflections on the Future of the Universe” by Martin Amis, a well-known and controversial British novelist.[1]

Although Amis took, I think, a few hints from H.G.Wells about the Martians, his story belongs to a quite different type of Science Fiction. “The War of the Worlds” is a horror story about alien invaders, but “Janitor” is like *Gulliver’s Travels*. The strange imaginary civilization of the Martians is nothing but a gigantic caricature of ourselves: military build-ups and high tech wars, the destruction of nature for human convenience, bio-engineering, nihilism. As if to acknowledge his debt, Amis quotes *Gulliver* half way through the story. (p. 216)

The Janitor on Mars and The Janitor at The Orphanage

The story is divided into ten sections, the longest two parts recounting a live interview with the Janitor on Mars before and after an intermission on June 25, 2049. By that time, space travel was no problem and a carefully selected delegation of sixty-five human beings were present in the studio the Janitor had prepared on August 29, 1949, “the day it became clear that Earth was featuring two combatants equipped

with nuclear arms.” (p. 220) Above the stage was a blackboard and the American and Soviet flags.

The Janitor was a robot the Martians had programmed and set in place four hundred and fifty-seven million years ago shortly before their “kamikaze” style planetary suicide. (p. 220) The robot-Janitor had been “trip-wired” to make contact with Earth “at the appropriate time” (p. 209) and in 1949 it seemed that that time had come. Actually, it did not come until September 30, 2048, and what tripped the wire was not nuclear war – for at that time “for the first time in Earth’s recorded history” no wars were going on – but irreversible damage to Earth’s atmosphere. That is the shock with which the Janitor ends the interview. (pp. 224, 228)

We watch the broadcast from Mars in the company of a “janitor on Earth” – the janitor of an overcrowded boys’ orphanage on the border of Wales – Pop Jones, who, on the day of the broadcast, is facing a problem that had taken him to “the limit of his moral courage”. (p. 211) Amis, who is known for taking up “nasty” topics, tells us right at the beginning (p. 208) that the remote mountain orphanage was “of course, a Shangri-la of pedophilia” and that everyone on the staff was a pedophile. Only Pop Jones “had never interfered with any of the boys in his care, not once” because he saw that it was bad for and unfair to a child to “debauch” him. (p. 210) He, a lowly janitor, really cared about the children, but the more elite members of the staff “had a belief system” to justify “intergenerational sex”, namely, “that the children liked it” (p. 210); so they never used force. But three days before the broadcast – a time when everyone was full of hope that the Janitor on Mars, with his superior scientific knowledge, was going to give us not only a cure for cancer, but the “key” to the aging process (p. 222) – somebody had raped Timmy, a weak and semi-autistic boy who had been getting better but now had relapsed into autism. “Timmy, try to remember. Who did this to you, Timmy?” (p. 210) Only at the end of the story does Timmy find his voice and say it was Mr. Davidge, the principal, as everyone had suspected. (p. 228)

Why This Sub-Plot ?

Why did Amis choose this particular sub-plot as the framework for his story? This is just one of several questions he leaves readers to figure out for themselves by attending to clues scattered throughout the story. In this case, I suppose as follows:

The Martian part of the story concerns the fate of the Earth. “It was a time of hope for the blue planet.” (p. 213) The time of military rivalry, satirized on a gigantic scale in Martian history (and illustrated in another article in the same *New Yorker* in an article on India and Pakistan [2]), is over. Dangerous environmental “levels had all ceased rising and some had started to fall.” The sky that had fallen sick “was getting better again” (p. 210) just as Timmy had been recovering from his autism. But, as the janitor of the orphanage feels, something has gone wrong with “the whole moral order,” (p. 210) not just with the physical earth.

During the intermission in the broadcast when Pop Jones goes to see the heads of the orphanage about moving Timmy to a room without TV[3], Mr. Davidge and the others

“were all smiling with just their upper lips.

For a moment Pop Jones felt with frightening

certainty that he was in a room full of strangers.” (p. 222)

We feel that the others are all Martians or robots programmed by their pedophilia, but Pop is a human being.

The story makes it clear that Pop Jones’ inclinations are just as pedophilic as the rest of the orphanage

staff. Thus Amis raises the question: If an ordinary man like Pop Jones can disregard his inclinations in order not to harm weak children like Timmy, could not all of us ordinary consumers on the Earth have been able to do without “the forty-seven billionth self-cooling cola can” and many other things we are inclined to, in order to save our weak planet? (p. 224) That comes almost at the end of the story when the Martian robot tells us what had tripped the trip-wire and (as the late Martians had programmed him to do) made him get in touch with Earth just when it was too late to save it.

In this way, the Martian story and the orphanage story come together at the end.

Apologia for “Bad Language”

The Martian robot made contact with Earth through “the most frankly glamorous of CNN’s main newscasters” in Los Angeles and her husband who worked for SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence), an actual facility in California for catching messages from the universe. (pp. 208-9) The robot communicated first in code, then in written messages on the TV screen, but during the live interview he spoke in “semi-educated American English” (p. 214) which Amis as well as the robot has mastered with comic effect.

Like Amis in his novels, the robot-Janitor frequently offends by his vulgar language, especially by the most popular all-purpose American obscenity, usually used as a mere expletive without its original sense of “copulating.” (It is printable in *The New Yorker* but maybe not in this Journal.) In the story it is first used by a male nurse referring to the mechanism of the TV system at the orphanage (p. 211), but when the robot first uses it in an E-mail to the *New York Times* modifying “monkeys” (p. 212), I imagine Amis has read reports on the bonobo, the recently discovered species even closer to human than the chimpanzee. In context it means the robot considers religion and politics to be the two areas in which mankind shows the most “agonizing retardation.” (p. 222) “Monkeys no good. Just send me the talent.” (p. 212)[4] No “clerics or politicians” are invited to Mars. (p. 212)

In that case, he used his “obscenity” meaningfully. It applied to the bonobo. In his welcome speech to his studio audience on Mars he used it again just to mean “I couldn’t be bothered to up-date this room” and noticed that the audience, in particular Miss World (the beauty queen he had especially wanted to see), looked offended. So he explained why he used such language:

“...the universe is profoundly and essentially profane. I think you’ll be awed by some of the things I’m going to tell you. (But) ...emotions like fear and contempt (will predominate). Or better say terror and disgust.” (p. 214)

Amis seems to be saying that fashions in language are more than just fashions but reflect views of the universe.

The Martians’ Contempt for and Disgust at Earthly “DNA”

The Janitor on Mars addresses human beings as “DNA” because, at the time the Martians had programmed him, DNA had not yet developed very far in the direction of intelligent life, though they were sure that it would. The Martians had had a slight “head start” (p. 214) in their competition (as they saw it) with Earth and had “pursued aggressive bioengineering from a very early stage” ... “with remorseless teleological drive.” They view “DNA” with contempt for its backwardness. The robot, though his views

are “poisoned” by this contempt (p. 224), has developed sympathy with human beings, “particularly over these last ten thousand years.” The Martians had felt also disgust at the fleshliness of life on Earth.

Early in the live interview, Miss World had politely asked the Janitor what the Martians had looked like. (p. 214) The Janitor had not seemed happy with this question (presumably because the Martians would have won no beauty contests) but he tells her a few facts: “Not unlike you now, at first... We did not excrete. We did not sleep. And of course we lived a good deal longer than you do” ... even before we started bioengineering.

We gather from other places in the story that the Martians’ source of energy was photosynthesis, not food, that they lived long like trees and duplicated themselves by cloning like H.G.Wells’ Martians. That explains why the Janitor wanted Earth to send “examples of male and female pulchritude” (p. 212) as “male, female and beauty” were all missing on Mars. (That is why Miss World was there along with Nobel Prize-winning scientists, artists and philosophers.)

The Janitor emphasizes again and again with disgust the smelliness of “DNA”: “While you were just some (obscenity) ... germ, stinking up the shoreline,” we were up and running. (p. 214) When Martians had achieved Total Wealth and were fighting their million-year nuclear wars, “You ... were still doing your imitation of a septic tank.” (p. 218) But in spite of his disgust, the Janitor had thoughtfully arranged for an intermission; when the time came, he told his guests, “There are ... facilities in the rear there. No soap, I’m afraid.” (p. 222, ... in original)

The Janitor is not fleshly but metallic, a “machine” manufactured by the Martians. (pp. 228 & 216) But at the time of his manufacture, “there was on Mars no distinction between the synthetic and the organic. Everyone was a mix, semi-etherealized, self-duplicating.” (p. 216) Like *Gulliver’s Travels*, this story satirizes tendencies we can already see on Earth which some welcome as great steps forward.

The Janitor’s Contact Person on Earth, Incarnacion

In contrast to the “semi-etherealized” Martians who had programmed him and who felt disgust at the fleshliness of earthly “DNA”, the Janitor made contact with Earth through the newscaster, Incarnacion Buttruguen-Hume and her husband Pickering Hume whom she was allowed to bring along. Why did Amis give his newscaster, whose voice is described as “*warmly* aspirated, extravagantly *human*” (p. 211, italics added), the unusual name of Incarnacion? It obviously recalls “The Word was made flesh” – Incarnacion (John 1 : 14), though in other works and also this one (p. 224), Amis shows little appreciation for Christianity.

At least it seems significant that the Janitor of such an unfriendly planet made contact with Earth through a harmonious couple – the sort of couple who wondered which of their friends was playing a Martian hoax on them – (p. 209) whom the Janitor suddenly addressed by name as if they were his old friends.

The Janitor’s Theology

After the initial contact, the Janitor on Mars sent many messages to the Earth, sharing his much more advanced science and technology with “DNA”. Though offended by his language, “Earth trusted his intelligence, believing... in the ultimate indivisibility of the intelligent and the good.” (p. 213)

When questioned about the cosmos he would only say that “The Big Bang and the Steady State theories are both wrong. Or (rather) they are both right but incomplete. It pains me to see you *jerk back* from the apparent paradox that the universe is younger than some of the stars it contains. That’s like *Clue One*.”

(Adding the word “like” makes this English “semi-educated”). (Italics added for *jerk back*.)

I was surprised at the words “jerk back.” I knew nothing of Martin Amis but wondered, “Is he another C.S.Lewis presenting theology through science fiction?” I half expected to see some readers jerking back from this story in the *New Yorker*’s MAIL column.

Later, when his studio audience has come to Mars, the Janitor tells us what Martians and others had jerked back from, and it is indeed theology. This comes as he gets near the end of his account of Martian history, leading up to how they perished.

Once the Martians were “up and running” they quickly became masters of their habitat, “having gotten rid of all the animals and the oceans and so forth ... ” (p. 216) They had had peace up to that time, but now they were “Ready for war” because “what *else* was there to do?” The Martians divided into two sides. War with each other kept them busy for millions of years.

Then they united to face a common enemy “in our own backyard.” (p. 218) (“In our own backyard” is a phrase used in the U.S. about problems in Latin America.) The Janitor lets his Nobel Prize-winning audience guess which planets Mars attacked, and gets three answers providing satire on three nationalities, Russian, British and Japanese.

Just when Martians were planning “a pre-emptive strike against Earth ... Because – Hey. Action on the blue planet. Photosynthesis,” ... something “happened that changed all our perspectives. Suddenly we knew that all this was bullshit and the real action lay elsewhere.” (p. 219)

What happened? Martian astronomers had been wrestling with the same kind of cosmic paradoxes mentioned earlier. “Then we kind of flashed it. The answer had been staring us in the face *but we had to overcome a mortal reluctance* to confront its truth.” (Italics added. This means the same as “we jerked back.”)

The truth that was so hard to confront was that all the galaxies had been “*engineered* ... Including our own.” (p. 219)

The Martians decided with “immediate unanimity ... that this subjection was not going to be tolerated.” From this point on, the motives and the action have so much in common with parts of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* that I feel sure Amis must have had it in mind. In *Paradise Lost* the angels that could not bear “subjection” (Book II, line 239) hoped:

“That self same day by fight, or by surprise
To win the Mount of God, and on his Throne
To set the envier of his State, the proud
Aspirer... ” (Book VI, lines 86-90)

And to that end they invented all the most modern weapons that existed in Milton’s day. (Book VI, lines 464-634)

The last weapon the Martians invented was “exquisitely perilous” and was of “a strictly illegal type... based on the void-creating yield of false vacuum. A bubble of nothingness expanding at the speed of light.” (p. 220) Before that, they had already “*faked* auto-annihilation.” They had moved underground, “blew off our atmosphere and paralysed our core.” That’s why the surface of Mars looks so barren now – “it’s just set-dressing.”

Perhaps another article in the same *New Yorker* (pp. 164-177) on the thought of Al Gore, the American Vice President, says the same thing about modern civilization in less symbolic language: The lack of “connections between different parts of ... our civilization – (especially) science and religion” has resulted

in a “modernist ‘flatland,’ a world shorn of depth and meaning.” We need to set about “reintegrating science and religion, and so put meaning back into our lives.” (Pages 172-3)[5]

Amis’s Martians turned their planet into a “flatland” rather than face that which they “jerked back from.”

“That’s Enough about Mars. Let’s Talk about Earth.” (p. 220)

In the last five hundred million years the Janitor has “had access to an information source that was not available to” the Martians. (p. 216) He knows that Mars was a “Type-V world” and like all Type-V worlds in the post-historical phase it went insane. (p. 218)

Earth, however, is a Type-Y world. (Type-Z worlds are dead worlds. p. 216) Unlike Mars, Earth has not gone according to Type. “Among the countless trillions of Type-Y worlds so far catalogued, none ... presents a picture of such agonizing retardation as Mother Earth.”(p. 222) The Janitor on Mars has been watching us from the beginning. “I sometimes feel that I, too, have become partly human, over these many, many years.” He is sorry for the bad news he must give at the end.

The Janitor lists the ways in which Earth has been backward compared to Mars:

“First ... the utter failure of your science. Next: terrestrial religion and its scarcely credible tenacity ... Everyone else wants ‘God’, too – but from a different angle.... Why yearn for a power greater than your own? Why not seek to become it? ... O.K., on Mars we had to face – and maybe we never truly faced it – our actual position in the order of being. It goes on and on and up and up.”

This may be the Janitor’s most theological statement, but he thinks that at the top of all, “maybe he’s just a janitor – the Ultrajanitor. This entity created life on Mars. And what am I supposed to do about Him? *Worship* Him?” Adding his favorite obscenity he says, “You must be out of your mind.”

The question, “What am I supposed to do about Him?” echoes an earlier question: The Martians made war because: “What else was there to do?” If Amis was thinking of *Paradise Lost* when writing this story, his idea of worship may have been influenced by that poem, too:

“... to celebrate his Throne
With warbl’d Hymns ... how wearisome
Eternity so spent in worship paid
To whom we hate.”

(Book II, lines 241-2 & 247-9)

The robot-Janitor has more to say on Earth’s backwardness, some of it, at least, sympathetic:

“In my own musings I adopted the view that your science and politics were... depressed in order to foreground your art.... Art is not taken very seriously elsewhere in this universe ... Nobody’s interested in art. They’re interested in what everybody else is interested in: the superimposition of will.” (p. 222)

“Oh yeah. The other thing that slowed you down was the unique diffuseness of your emotional range. Tender feelings for each other, and for children and even animals.” (p. 224) The Martians, we were told earlier, got rid of all their animals.

Finally the Janitor muses about art: “I like art now.... What you’ve got to do is tell yourself, ‘This won’t actually get me anywhere,’ and then you don’t have a problem. It’s strange. Your scientists had no idea what to look for or where to look for it, but your poets, I sometimes felt, divined the universal... ” (p. 224)

For him, art is halfway to religion: “Now, I know I’m halfway there on religion. Surely this is how it is. It’s like a tapestry sopping with blood, right? You had to do it that way: for the art . . . ” In the Janitor’s voice sometimes we hear the voice, or catch the prejudices, of the dead Martians who programmed him, but sometimes surely it is the musings of Martin Amis that we hear. I should like to read his future works in the light of these musings of the Janitor on Mars.

References

1. *The New Yorker* Nov. 1998: 208ff.. A longer version of “The Janitor on Mars” has now appeared in *Heavy Water And Other Stories* By Martin Amis Knopf, 1999.
2. Ghosh, Amitav. “Countdown.” *The New Yorker* Nov. 1998: 186-197.
3. All the orphanage children except Timmy had been sent to the beach to keep them from hearing the interview with the Janitor on Mars. As Pop Jones explains to a male nurse who has just used an obscenity twice in two short sentences, “It may be quite unsuitable for children. There may be some bad language.” (p. 211)
4. Amis used the word “talent” in a similar way in a short story “The Immortals” in *Einstein’s Monsters* first published in 1987 (Penguin edition 1988). The narrator, an earlier version of the Janitor on Mars – that is, a detached yet concerned observer of life on Earth from its beginning to its end in nuclear war in the 21st century – says: “Know what my favourite period was? Yes: the Renaissance. You really came through. To tell you the truth, you astonished me. I’d just yawned my way through five hundred years of disease, religion and zero talent.” (Penguin edition page 126) A surprise at the end is that the “you” the narrator is talking to is Jesus Christ, on whom he seems to blame the sorry state of the Earth. (p. 131)
5. Menand, Louis. “After Elvis - What’s in Al Gore’s head?” *The New Yorker* Nov. 1998: 164-177. See pp. 172-3.