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## Martin Amis isn't finished yet

He may be 60, but it would be a serious error to write him off as past-it



Not going anywhere gently ... Martin Amis. Photograph: Juan Ferreras/EPA

Today, Martin Amis turns 60 and I wish him happy birthday. I have a hunch, though, that other people will be a bit nastier. For a start, there will be a little frisson of shock at the news, as if (a) Martin Amis's date of birth were not a matter of public record and (b) people born in 1949 haven't been turning 60 all year. The reason for this is that, for a long time, Amis has been described as the enfant terrible of English letters; nowadays, though, he gets called "the one-time enfant terrible of English letters", and is held up as an example of an old guard of past-it reactionaries, whose hogging of the limelight holds up the triumphant march of modern British writers such as ... er ... such as ...

It might be time to point out one or two things here. The first is that people are still interested in Amis. There may be wide variations in the consensus as to the quality of his later fiction (to put it politely) but no one is going to be indifferent to the prospect of any new work of his. Furthermore, he is not lazy; at the level of the sentence, he's still the supreme stylist of the English language. As an essayist, his only peer is his old friend Christopher Hitchens, and if it appears at times as though his opinions seem to be coming from an unexpected and unwelcome direction, since when did it become a crime to court controversy, or even – dare one say it – to modify one's perspective with the years?

Max Beerbohm once drew a caricature of an aged Lord Byron, florid, plump, and side-whiskered, entitled "But for Missolonghi"; in other words, a deft representation of complacent senescence. It's a good joke, and you might wonder whether something similar is going on when people express surprise that Amis is approaching retirement age (without, thankfully, being retiring – for all that he has been saying *eheu fugaces* ever since he was 40). In one sense, people are similarly scandalised by the simple fact of ageing; it is not so much Amis's progress through the years they are bemoaning, as their own. For a 60-year-old, Amis is looking pretty good; and the mind is as nimble as ever. His style, which is, really, not much more than precise and correct observation, with the English language being used properly, and with the skill of a surgeon, is a simple contradiction of the current trend towards the enshrinement of illiteracy. It is very much *de haut en bas*; it says: "I'm a better writer, and therefore a better thinker, than you; so pay attention", and this enrages the Calibans among us.

Above all, he is never bland. It is a commonplace observation, I know, but there really isn't a dull sentence in his work. He has not become comfortable, or flabby. He wrestles with the contemporary condition on a permanent basis; it is his default condition. To see him as a cosy or complacent pundit is unimaginable. You might not like what he says at times, but the way he says it is unignorable. And of whom else can you say that these days?

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