

Amis, Freely, Husain and terror

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First things first: the Whitworth Hall was a splendid venue for tonight's debate on literature and terrorism. It's an elegant heap of neo-Gothic excess at the heart of Manchester university's campus, with the proportions of a cathedral and an atmosphere to match. Our three speakers arranged themselves behind a narrow white-cloth-enrobed table that looked more than a little like an altar, while behind them soared a monstrous organ, evoking for me a bat in flight or the underbelly of some gothic stealth-bomber. With a near sell-out crowd of 500 in attendance, the scene was set for some serious debate.

And of seriousness there was plenty. Of debate, disappointingly, less so. Perhaps because the conversation cleaved so closely to the "terrorism" side of its remit, there was a remarkable degree of consensus on display, and only at the end did it spark into anything like mutual inquisition. Of the three speakers, in fact, only one was operating at a pitch excitable enough for engagement, and that was Maureen Freely, who appeared at several moments to be struggling to master near-overwhelming feelings and who gave what I felt was the most refreshingly direct perspective of the evening.

Literature, she explained in her initial segment, is too important to be side-tracked by bogus east/west divisions or partisan proscriptions (and she should know what she's talking about, having had a close family member survive the collapse of one of the twin towers on 9/11, and having spent much of her life living and studying in Turkey). Instead, she offered a list of *musts* for those trying to write in the present: keep yourself informed, and keep on finding out more about your times; inform others wherever possible, and challenge distortions whenever you find them; reserve the right to write as you see fit, whether this be obliquely, unconventionally or not at all; and understand that those authors and intellectuals able to express themselves freely in free countries are to some extent speaking on behalf of those elsewhere who are unable to bear witness.

Martin Amis, needless to say, does this kind of event a lot, and while he is always an eloquent and sincere presence, the repetition (along with a few battle-scars) inevitably shows. Since 2001, he argued, Islamist terrorism has posed the world with an evolving moral question for which there are no truly definitive answers, but in the face of which we must try to dispense with the idea that any kind of moral relativism is adequate. The strength of the west, he argued, is its morality and its trust in reason (the princes of our system) and we must stand up and be counted in the defence of these. All of which was obviously heartfelt, and tactfully free of pronouns like "us" and "them": but I could have got most of this without going to see him in person, and couldn't but notice the increasingly well-worn formulae marshalled in support (Josephine, the opera-singing mouse in the Kafka story; the perils of "rationalist naivete"). This is inevitable when you're as public an author as Amis, and as concerned with *bon mots*, but Terry Eagleton's presence was sorely missed when Amis rhetorically asked his audience "do you want me to pretend to be a pious postmodern automaton?" in the context of some of his more controversial recent remarks; as Eagleton would have been quick to note, the *I'm just being honest about my feelings* defence has a pretty poor pedigree in politics and literature.

And then there was Ed Husain, who made his familiar and perfectly reasonable case for the differences between Islam and Islamism - and raised some interesting points about the importance of pro-Islamist literature in his own conversion to extremism, as well as the importance of more enlightened Islamic literature in his journey away from it - without managing to raise any hackles in the room beyond those of

the more shouty pro-Palestinians. He was, perhaps, testing the boundaries of taste in discussing the “silver lining” of 9/11 (that it acted as a wake-up call for moderate Muslims); but the more memorable sight was his and Amis’s heads nodding in time as they enumerated the morally unevolved depravities of much of the non-western world. Their differences, evidently, were far less crucial than the main message of the evening: we need to stop these bastards doing what they’re doing.

Freely, to her credit, tried to get things a bit more urgent and off-script - and managed to recommend at the very end that Amis did a little more “homework” and stop reading “stupid neocon books” before his next blockbuster piece on Islam - but she was largely unable to steer matters away from an uncontroversial pouring of scorn upon violent extremism. Not that one can have too much of that kind of thing, of course (and Amis and Husain are right to highlight the moral dubiousness of anything less than a ringing international howl of contempt for suicide bombings and violent oppression of women and minorities); but it would have been nice for the literary side of the discussion to have been more demanding and nuanced, and more alive to the tricky business of how exactly such a condemnation should be spoken and by whom.

As I’ve already mentioned, Terry Eagleton’s absence was a great shame, and I’d like to take this opportunity to apologise for any jocular aspersions I may have cast upon this in my previous posting; he doubtless had excellent reasons for being elsewhere, and has never been afraid of a good fight. I can only hope, however, that next time his sense of obligation to public debate in Britain will allow him to give the international business a miss.

EDIT: Thanks for the fuller information given in the comments below: clearly, Professor Eagleton is entirely to be left out of any discussion about attendance, and all blame laid at other doors. I’m glad that’s been clarified, and hope to catch him at one of his future appearances in the UK.

1 Response to “Amis, Freely, Husain and terror”

1 Burcu

Dec 4th, 2007 at 1:00 am

Hello,

Thanks for reporting the event, I was wondering what it was going to be like. Also, just because I don’t like situations in which lack of information can lead to misunderstandings, I thought I’d send you the following link: http://www.trinity.unimelb.edu.au/academic_programs/visiting_scholars

I don’t know what you have been told by The University of Manchester but Professor Eagleton’s “international business” was scheduled long before the date for this event was fixed. It seems the university promoted the event before they settled down the final details. It’s the university’s fault, if they haven’t clarified his absence well with the appropriate explanation. And I think it is rather careless of them, since the recent debates between Amis and Eagleton might lead to some untrue inferences regarding this.

While it would be rather difficult to work around a schedule in relation to “Australia” due to distance, I think it’s a bit unfair to criticize his sense of obligation for public debate, considering the fact that he has year-around public appearances all over the UK.

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