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Come on, bin Laden, make my day

At a debate in London, Martin Amis posed as the Dirty Harry of the Western liberal tradition, telling Islamic terrorists: 'I want to be a target.'

Emily Hill

There has been a rumour circulating that Martin Amis, Britain's 'greatest living novelist', had lost his marbles.

In the Eighties, Amis was the anti-nuclear darling of English letters. He spliced up the decade of greed in a glitter of satirical wordplay, to the beat of what his father Kingsley called 'fucking fool' politics. But with the Nineties, dentistry and divorce, Amis junior entered a period of experimental literature, and then – post 9/11- made some extraordinarily colourful rants about Islamism in the national press.

Last year, he popped up on BBC TV's Question Time suggesting that the murder of Alexander Litvinenko sprang from the 'Asiatic' origin of Russians (you what, Mart?). Suddenly, commentators were arguing that he and Melanie Phillips were level pegging in the 'lost it' stakes: Mart had gone from right-on to neo-con and there was not a damn thing media London could do about it.

Now, matters have come to a head. A couple of weeks ago, Marxist critic Terry Eagleton published an account of Amis' post-9/11 essays which described them as the 'ramblings of a BNP thug'. The press leapt upon Eagleton's attack with glee, kicking at Amis until he was forced to write a letter defending himself to the *Guardian*.

Amis' literary reputation, meanwhile, has gone the same way as the World Trade Center. His recent experiments have included writing the life of a concentration camp doctor, backwards; a detective novel on cosmic suicide; and exploring the Stalinist terror factually. This led Craig Brown to comment that 'most people are agreed that Martin Amis has been producing some pretty unconvincing Martin Amises over the course of the past decade'. Amis' opinions are still treated with reverence by some, however - perhaps explaining the time delay in Eagleton's outburst. As one blogger wrote, 'Long after the nuclear holocaust, when we are all dead, the cockroaches that crawl through the ashes of Western civilisation will still take Martin Amis seriously, although none of them will know why.'

Luckily for those who have guzzled on Amis novels in their time like calves to an udder, he still has some marbles left in his box and he likes to throw them around occasionally. He may make up new words with gay abandon, he may be a bit in love with himself; but he can still hold an argument and not fudge. And in our era of fudged positions, when arguments are denounced as hurtful, might one admire a man who at least stands firm?

Amis claimed in a recent essay that militant Islamism requires a new word to describe it: 'horrorism'. The *Independent* put the following reader's question to Amis in a recent 'You ask the questions' feature: 'The phrase "horrorism", which you invented to describe 9/11, is unintentionally hilarious. Have you got any more?' 'Yes, I have', Amis replied. 'Here's a good one (though I can hardly claim it as my own): the phrase is "fuck off".'

And so to a debate at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London last Thursday (1), where Amis staged a virtuoso jam session loosely based around the rhythm of 'you can all fuck off'. Sitting in Cinema 1, legs crossed, with a glass of white wine, Amis managed to be both laconic and scathing. Frosty about the temples, his thinning hair whipped up from his wide forehead in a backward variation of the Charlton comb-over, he puffed through roll-ups, winding up the back row with his eased-up, fag-honed tones. The room was rammed full of the notepads of media London and earnest liberals weeping at the death of the author who used to be so left-wing.

Put your hands up, said Amis, if you think you are morally superior to the Taliban. When a minority of the audience did so, Amis muttered: 'About 30 per cent...' His implication is that, in our current relativistic climate, it is taboo to assert your superiority to anything – even the Taliban. Anyone who values freedom, Amis says, should have a problem with Islamism. He graphically went through some of the feudal punishments that the Taliban metes out to women who step out of line. 'We're in a pious paralysis when we can't say we're morally superior to the Taliban', he said. His attack on cultural relativism is welcome, and it certainly exposed moral sheepishness amongst the assembled at the ICA. But I couldn't help thinking: is that it? Is that what it means to be 'Enlightened' and principled today – to be Not-The-Taliban? Amis didn't go any further on the matter.

Islam, in Amis' view, 'is a religion that's having a nervous breakdown'. And Islamism is a variation on a death cult – an 'ideology within a religion, a turbo-charge, steroid version of murderous belief'. He made some interesting points about suicide bombing, describing it as a 'paltry' act, signifying nothing but a 'besplattering' of the self. What the Islamic world needs, he said, is dramatic progress: 'Martin Luther, John Calvin... religious wars, then Enlightenment, then you enter the modern world 300 years after that.' He argued that it is the Western world that is giving Islamism its power to commit atrocity, even helping to legitimise that atrocity, by trying to 'understand it'. Society does not question or interrogate Islamist values openly out of fear of becoming the target. Amis, however, is the Dirty Harry of the literary world. Come on, mad mullah, make my day. 'I want to be a target. There are no Switzerland positions here', he said.

Amis was particularly scathing in his assessment of certain Western liberals who, in the course of 'listening' to Islamist grievances, end up treating the views of Osama bin Laden – and those who blow themselves up at his bidding – with respect. Bin Laden, he announced, 'is the Che Guevara of the current age, the poster boy for this amoral doctrine'. Amis argued that some admire bin Laden's ascetic lifestyle. 'He lives in a cave, drinks contaminated water, suffers.' It's eco-friendly, borderline holy. But in truth, Amis said, Osama and his crew are not only murderous criminals, they are completely ridiculous figures. 'At one time', he said, all Osama's henchmen 'had one eye. They are tin-legged zealots, amputeed mullahs, they're all in bits. Osama is a very stupid man. But he did at least have the wit to stay in one piece.'

John Pilger, the veteran investigative journalist, also came in for a hiding, as did London Mayor Ken Livingstone. Amis quoted Ken's words: '[T]he Palestinians don't have jet planes, don't have tanks, they only have their bodies to use as weapons. In an unfair balance, that's what people use.' Amis then puckered up his lips and blew a fully formed raspberry of disgust. Is blowing yourself up really going to *help* matters, he asked?

There are many problems with Amis' argument. It is juvenile to melt down Islamism with Nazism and Stalinism into one big cauldron of evil – first, because these are three very different things; and second because violent Islamism, certainly of the al-Qaeda variety, remains a pretty insignificant threat to the Western way of life. Nor can the threat of Islamism simply be countered by Western liberals telling the Islamic world what to do about it ('Luther, Enlightenment, wait 300 years', etc). Indeed, over the past 50 years Western intervention itself – in Egypt, the Middle East, Afghanistan – did a great deal to nurture Islamic zealots as a counterweight to genuinely secular and anti-imperialist mass movements. Some of the very zealots who Amis loves to hate are a product of not-very-Enlightened policies on the part of Western governments. I would rather trust the people of the Islamic world to sort these zealots out, rather than officials in London or

Washington or notable authors seated on the stage of the ICA.

And yet, it is important that Amis is allowed to speak as freely and as radically as he pleases. And he is only made to look better by the petty attacks that have recently been launched upon him. Towards the end of the debate at the ICA, a curly-haired member of the back row asked Amis for his views on the Muslim Brotherhood. Was he saying they're all murderers? 'I think Islamists subscribe to a murderous ideology', Amis replied. 'So you mean they're all murderers?' demanded guerrilla comedian Chris Morris (for it was he!). 'No, but I believe the ideology they subscribe to is murderous', Amis restated.

This went on and on – Amis sticking to his guns, while '[TV's greatest satirist, the shaggy-haired Swift of our age](#)' got more and more upset. 'What about Palestine?' Morris wanted to know. Amis muttered something about Israel being surrounded by hostile countries but was instantly cut off with a wail from Morris: 'Oh my God, he's defending Israel now!'

It seems that in our era of bland consensus, even liberal medialand can't bear to hear anything that smells like an alternative view.

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(1) [Martin Amis and Andrew Anthony: On writing and radical Islam, ICA](#)

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