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ESSAY

Amis and Islam

By RACHEL DONADIO

“I’m a passionate multiracialist and a very poor multiculturalist,” [Martin Amis](#) said a few weeks ago. He was on the phone from London, praising his hometown’s ethnic variety — “It’s exhilarating and moving to live in a city with so many races and so many colors” — and denouncing its fissures, particularly over radical Islam. “I don’t think that we can accommodate cultures and ideologies that make life very difficult for half the human race: women.” Amis was explaining his stance in a gloves-off row that’s been raging in the British press since last fall, when the literary theorist Terry Eagleton likened some of Amis’s statements on Muslims to “the ramblings of a British National Party thug.”

On the one hand, it’s a classic English literary donnybrook, full of punchy insults like Eagleton’s claim that Amis was taking after his curmudgeonly father, Kingsley Amis, whom he characterized as a “racist, anti-Semitic boor, a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals.” But the dust-up also touches on the fault lines of multiethnic Britain. In the press, Amis has been accused of lazy thinking and Muslim-bashing. The left-leaning Guardian ran a prominent feature, “Martin Amis and the New Racism,” with an unflattering illustration. Things have only heated up since January, with the British publication of “The Second Plane,” Amis’s new book of essays, subtitled “September 11: Terror and Boredom.” (The book, which received fairly [tepid reviews](#) in England, will appear in the United States in April.)

It all began in August 2006, when Amis granted a wide-ranging interview to Ginny Dougary of The Times of London, [published online](#). Over chardonnay at the Long Island estate of his wife, the writer Isabel Fonseca, and less than a month after British authorities had thwarted an alleged terrorist plot to blow up trans-Atlantic airliners, Amis wondered out loud: “What can we do to raise the price of them doing this? There’s a definite urge — don’t you have it? — to say, ‘The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.’ What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation — further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they’re from the Middle East or from Pakistan. ... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children.”

The interview largely passed without comment until it was [cited in The London Review of Books](#) in January 2007. Soon after, Eagleton, a feisty Marxist academic best known for his 1983 book “Literary Theory,” picked up Amis’s comments in a new introduction to the reissue of his 1991 book “Ideology: An Introduction,” along with Amis’s further musings in that interview on the demographics of Europe. (“They’re also gaining on us demographically at a huge rate. ... We’re just going to be outnumbered.”) These “barbaric” comments, Eagleton wrote, were “not the ramblings of a British National Party thug, but the reflections of the novelist Martin Amis, leading luminary of the English metropolitan literary world.” Amis, Eagleton wrote, seemed to be calling for “the calculated harassment of a whole population” as a way of “humiliating and insulting certain kinds of men and women at random, so that they will return home and teach their

children to be nice to the White Man.”

What would normally have gone unnoticed in the introduction to the revision of an academic book instead [made the papers](#). “The Aging Punk of Lit Crit Still Knows How to Spit,” [The Sunday Times declared](#) in early October. In [The Guardian](#), [Eagleton complained](#) of “a media conspiracy” against him, adding that there was something “stomach-churning” about seeing Amis and other “champions of a civilization that for centuries has wreaked untold carnage throughout the world shrieking for illegal measures when they find themselves for the first time on the sticky end of the same treatment.” In a [letter to The Guardian](#), Amis called Eagleton “a marooned ideologue.” He wasn’t “advocating” anything in his original comments, he said, but “conversationally describing an urge — an urge that soon wore off.” “Can I ask him, in a collegial spirit, to shut up about it?”

The coverage was divided along broad political lines, with Eagleton finding defenders on the left and Amis on the right (and among fellow writers). In [The Independent](#), the columnist [Yasmin Alibhai-Brown wrote](#) that Amis was a “threat to the kind of society I stand up for. He is with the beasts pounding the back door, the Muslim-baiters and haters.” In November, the novelist and screenwriter Ronan Bennett took aim at Amis in a [long essay](#) in [The Guardian](#). “Amis’s views are symptomatic of a much wider and deeper hostility to Islam and intolerance of otherness,” Bennett wrote. Amis, he said, “got away with as odious an outburst of racist sentiment as any public figure has made in this country for a very long time.”

In a [letter to The Guardian](#), the novelist [Ian McEwan](#) defended his close friend. “When you ask a novelist or a poet his or her view of the world ... you may not like what you hear, but reasoned debate is the appropriate response, not vilification,” McEwan wrote. “I wonder whether Ronan Bennett would care to expend so much of his rhetorical might excoriating at similar length the thugs who murdered — in the name of their religion — their fellow citizens in London in 2005.”

On the phone last month, Amis conceded his original comments in [The Times](#) were ill-considered, but held fast to the uneasiness that informed them. “When I made this rather stupid suggestion, or talked about the urge to make the stupid suggestion to make Muslims put their house in order, I was at the peak of my anger” about the aborted plot to blow up airliners. “Everyone else’s anger gets respected all over the place but not that of a normally very peaceful British novelist.”

But didn’t his comments appear to conflate the radical Islamist minority and the nonviolent majority? No, Amis said. He is not Islamophobic, as his critics claim, but “Islamismophobic” — that is, opposed to militant Islam. “My slogan on that distinction is, ‘We respect Muhammad, we do not respect [Mohamed Atta](#).’” Jihadism, he said, is “racist, homophobic, totalitarian, genocidal, inquisitorial and imperialistic. Surely there should be no difficulty in announcing one’s hostility to that, but there is.”

In England’s left-leaning intellectual culture, traditionally somewhat hostile toward Israel and the United States, Amis has emerged as sympathetic to the two countries’ situation. Although he opposed the Iraq war and is skeptical of American power, “[The Second Plane](#)” draws admiringly on books often dismissed by some on the left: [Paul Berman’s “Terror and Liberalism,”](#) [Bernard Lewis’s “What Went Wrong?”](#) and Mark Steyn’s “[America Alone](#).” (He also draws on the neo-atheist Sam Harris.)

On the phone last month, Amis talked about the transAtlantic divide. “The anti-Americanism is really toxic

in this country, and the anti-Zionism,” he said, attributing the sentiments to empire envy. “I think we ceased to be a world power just as America was unignorably taking on that role.” The dominant ideology “told us that we don’t like empires, we’re ashamed of ever having one.” In England, he continued, “we’ve infantilized ourselves, stupefied ourselves, through a kind of sentimental multiculturalism,” Amis said. He called for open discussion “without self-righteous cries of racism. It’s not about race, it’s about ideology.”

Back in November, the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, the second wife of Kingsley Amis (who died in 1995), [defended her former husband](#) against Eagleton’s charges of racism and anti-Semitism and called Eagleton “a cobra pouring out venom.” As for her stepson, she said, “what worries me is that I don’t think he’s quite interested enough in human nature.” Asked about this, Amis chuckled. “I’ll have to take her up on that,” he said. “I’m tremendously interested in it. This crisis that we’re in and have been for six and a half years has appreciatively expanded my interest in human nature.”

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