

British Creators of Fiction Facing Reality on September 11, 2001

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Abstract

This paper sets out to discuss the opinions on 9/11 expressed in the newspaper The Guardian by two important contemporary novelists, namely Ian McEwan and Martin Amis, shortly after the attacks, attempting to trace the way in which their views on the event that had just taken place constituted a starting point for their fictional works on the matter. Under focus will be: two articles signed by Ian McEwan, "Beyond Belief", published on September 12th, 2001 and "Only Love and Then Oblivion", on September 15th, and one by Martin Amis, "Fear and Loathing", published on September 18th, 2001. An important aspect is that, as Amis puts it in a later article, "the novelists were now being obliged to snap out of their solipsistic daydreams: to attend, as best they could, to the facts of life" (2008: 13). In light of this statement, the paper aims at creating a framework for the subsequent analysis of the fictional works by the same authors, starting from the premise that the subjectivity they express in the press articles is enhanced to a greater extent in literature, where practically everything may be said under the pretence of being fictional.

Keywords: writers on 9/11, *The Guardian*, subjectivity, reality and fiction, writers as social actors

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The events of September 11, 2001 have had a significant effect on present-day geopolitics, not only for the United States as a political entity, but for all the actors involved in the making of history. The world has inevitably reacted against the unspeakable deed that brought about the death of 3,000 civilians at the Twin Towers, part of the World Trade Center complex, in New York, at the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania. Following the trend set by the media, the events shall be hereafter referred to as 9/11.

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The news presented by televisions on September 11, 2001 simply provided information on the two crashes and the two subsequent collapses of the twin towers, and featured statements made by President George W. Bush and other officials, announcing the alleged involvement of Al-Qaeda in the attacks and promising “to help the victims and their families and to conduct a full-scale investigation to hunt down and to find those folks who committed this act” (Bush 2001, transcript available online - *Washington Post*). The events precipitated starting with the next day, the US stating their intention to attack Afghanistan, the Taliban-governed country presumably aiding the leaders of Al-Qaeda. September 2001 does not prove particularly rewarding in providing commentaries and analyses on the facts – media are simply content to quote official statements and supply news on the developments of the war strategy. Nevertheless, this period, although partly characterised by bombing the audience with indiscernible information, is under the empire of uncertainty and fury against the perpetrators, which, at the media level, translates in a large amount of editorials signed by important media figures, but not only.

September 12 belongs to the newspapers: the written media around the world provide a detailed coverage of the events of the previous day. A quick look at the headlines on the front page of *The New York Times* reveals a deep plunge into the language of fiction specific to a genre which “shocks and frightens the reader and/ or perhaps induces a feeling of repulsion or loathing” (Cuddon 1992: 416), that is, to horror fiction. Under a huge headline printed in bold typeset, which reads: ‘U.S. Attacked. Hijacked Jets Destroy Twin Towers and Hit Pentagon in **Day of Terror**’, other headlines announce: ‘**A creeping horror**’, ‘President Vows to Enact Punishment for **Evil**’, ‘**A Sombre** Bush Says Terrorism Cannot Prevail’ and ‘Awaiting the **Aftershocks**: Washington and Nation Plunge into Fight with **Enemy Hard to Identify** and Punish’ (Annex, Fig.1). The articles in question also make extensive use of such terms, which, in light of the upcoming events, hints at a possible manipulation of an already frightened audience into accepting the military intervention already decided by the administration.

However, this paper does not further analyse excerpts from the American press, but from the British one, and that for two reasons: firstly, the front page of *The New York Times* is representative enough for the American press; secondly, the written press from the Albion (more precisely, one of its most important newspapers, *The Guardian*), provides an

interesting approach to the events of 9/11 through the eyes of a number of contemporary novelists. The question that arises is whether this enterprise nears fiction to reality, making the novelists “snap out of their solipsistic daydreams” so they could “attend, as best they could, to the facts of life” (Amis 2008: 13), or whether it is a subtle (and maybe involuntary) reversal of roles alluding to the immersion of fiction into reality. Three articles signed by Ian McEwan and Martin Amis have been considered relevant, which is why their content is briefly dealt with in the following lines, with an aim at establishing the connexion with the fictional representations of the same historical event in the works of the respective authors.

An aspect worth discussing in the analysis of these editorials is whether the opinions expressed by their authors could be regarded as authoritative or not, given the subjectivity which characterises their writings. The writers who share their views on non-fictional matters are often respected voices, an aspect supported by the significant number of interferences in the media. However, if one shares attitudes such as the one recently expressed by Terry Eagleton, according to whom “writers are condemned to be perpetually disbelieved” (2003: 90), *The Guardian*’s undertaking seems to be subject to failure, despite (or precisely because of) the celebrity the two novelists enjoy in their country.

Drawing on a temporal and emotional distinction between the two writing stances – non-fictional/ emotional, and, later, fictional/ analytical – the present analysis attempts to validate the hypothesis that the contemporary fiction rooted in the surrounding reality has a participative dimension, taking most of its inspiration from the media. Construing literature as capable of shifting realities through the alternative worlds it creates, Amis’s and McEwan’s fictional works on 9/11 would be more than representational – they would also acquire a participative function.

The first editorial under the headline ‘Writers on 9/11’ in *The Guardian* is ‘Beyond Belief’, by Ian McEwan, an article probably written while (or soon after) watching the news on television. Unanimously acclaimed by critics as one of the most important voices of the contemporary British fiction, Ian McEwan meets, at the same time, the less sophisticated criteria of the popular readership, his novels often reaching the bestsellers lists. His topics of interest, enumerated by critic Dominic Head in his monograph, are topical and central to our times: “politics, and the promotion of vested interests; male violence and the problem of gender relations; science and the limits of rationality; nature

and ecology; love and innocence; and the quest for an ethical world-view" (2007: 2). Perhaps his acute sense of contemporaneity and his being a "darling" of the middle-class, liberal English readers of *The Guardian* were two of the reasons the editors of the newspaper had when opting for publishing his opinions on 9/11. Both articles published by Ian McEwan in *The Guardian* constitute, to varying extents, primary sources for his contribution to post-9/11 fiction, the novel *Saturday*, published in 2005.

'Beyond Belief' plunges into the realm of the simulacra and unreal from the first lines, which make reference to two domains of fiction: film and literature. Ian McEwan was definitely not the only one to note the resemblance of the images almost frozen for hours and hours on the screens of our television sets with some apocalyptic films, like *Independence Day*, but he was probably the first to bring literature into discussion: "And even the best minds, the best or darkest dreamers of disaster on a gigantic scale, from Tolstoy and Wells to Don DeLillo, could not have delivered us into the nightmare available on television news channels yesterday afternoon" (2001a, par. 1). To him (and to the entire western world), reality was, for a day, transferred to the television screen, and it was nightmarish, horror-like.

McEwan seems unable (or uninterested) to give up the metaphors and dark imagery characterising his early fictional works, like *First Love*, *Last Rites* or *The Cement Garden*. The events he watched on television were suggestive enough to stir his imagination in the direction of re-creating them in writing. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but surely not if these words have been written by Ian McEwan:

The colossal explosions, the fierce black and red clouds, the crowds running through the streets, the contradictory, confusing information, had only the feeblest resemblance to the tinny dramas of *Skyscraper*, *Backdraft* or *Independence Day*. Nothing could have prepared us.

Always, it seemed, it was what we could not see that was so frightening. We saw the skyscrapers, the tilting plane, the awful impact, the cumuli of dust engulfing the streets. But we were left to imagine for ourselves the human terror inside the airliner, down the corridors and elevator lobbies of the stricken buildings, or in the streets below as the towers collapsed on to rescue workers and morning crowds (par. 1-2).

In pointing out that television could not grasp the horror in its whole and awful plenitude, as it did not show actual deaths ("We were watching death on an unbelievable scale, but we saw no one die" (par. 2)), Ian

McEwan actually attains an aim which he might not have had, in the first place: that of making his readers visualise the unseen, “the nightmare left in the gulf of imagining”, “the horror [...] in the distance” (Ibid.). The dimension of the tragedy is further emphasised with his metatextual reference to Greek ancient drama, which also kept death off stage. As McEwan’s fondness of the meta- dimension of writing is notorious, one may speculate that the British writer actually hinted at a degree of fictionalisation in the media coverage, comparable with that on (and off) the ancient stages. The main argument in this respect is the rest of the article, which does not concentrate on the event per se, but on its representation in the media and on the reception of the news, a shameful thirst for information, in his opinion, one which does not allow the viewers to think about the misery of those who lost a dear one, nor “to contemplate the cruelty of the human hearts that could unleash this”:

Now my son and I surfed - hungrily, ghoulishly - between CNN, CBC and BBC24. As soon as an expert was called in to pronounce on the politics or the symbolism, we moved on. We only wanted to know what was happening. Numbed, and in a state of sickened wonderment, we wanted only information, new developments - not opinion, analysis, or noble sentiments; not yet (par 3).

A similar scene, with a father and a son browsing through the news channels to find nude information, and not expert opinions, is to be found in the novel *Saturday* (2005: 29-37), following an alleged terrorist attack on London, at the sight of a plane in flames heading to Heathrow, which was proven afterwards only the ‘disappointing’ result of a technical error. Once again, the connexion between reality and fiction tightens, this time with the help of the metafictional comments on the *media representation of 9/11*, inserted in the *media and literary representations of 9/11* produced by Ian McEwan.

Written on September 11, ‘Beyond Belief’ may be read, from a psychological perspective, as a result of shock and denial, similar to those affecting the television anchors who unsteadily (hence, unprofessionally) expressed their personal feelings and disbelief regarding what *they* were showing to a numbed audience made up of billions of people. However, McEwan’s apparent cold-heartedness, his focus on representation, and not on the tragedy itself, may also be an effect of the excessive mediatisation (not mediation) of politics [1].

Probably compelled by the shame he admitted to feel at his morbid curiosity with regard to the fall of “the world’s mightiest empire in ruins” (2001a, par.6), the novelist publishes, on September 15th, a follow-up article, ‘Only Love, and then Oblivion’, a much more emotional re-evaluation of the events in America. Here, McEwan tries to explain the resorts of psychological motivation of people watching news on tragedies and their need to comment on them. Between shock and fury, there is another psychological state: that of grief. Or, in the more crafted words of the novelist: “Emotions have their narrative; after the shock we move inevitably to the grief” (2001b, par 1). Grief is hardly political, despite the existence of some imposed national manifestations (the national days of mourning, for example). Grief is personal, which is why McEwan’s take on this overwhelming sentiment focuses on the farewell messages sent by people on the four planes, on the impact the event had upon the bereaved: “Each individual death is an explosion in itself, wrecking the lives of those nearest. We were beginning to grasp the human cost. This was what it was always really about” (par. 5). His assumption, that “if the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed” because “it is hard to be cruel once you permit yourself to enter the mind of your victim” (par. 16), seems to anticipate future fictional accounts of the motivation of the terrorists (in De Lillo, Updike and Amis), although, as the following lines will try to prove, the latter’s approach to the events and his understanding of the resorts of the Muslim perpetrators could not be more divergent from the idea that the suicidal murderers may have repressed their humane feelings in order to be able to proceed with the massacre.

Martin Amis, another renowned novelist from Ian McEwan’s generation, with whom he shares the prominent status of a highly significant figure of contemporary British fiction, but who has always been – in his writings and not only – much more radical in opinions than the latter, is the next writer to express his views on 9/11 in the column initiated by *The Guardian*. His title, ‘Fear and Loathing’, announces a great departure from McEwan’s view and, at the same time, the attaining of the following stage in the psychology of the people stricken by a tragedy: fury. Martin Amis’s authorial presence at this stage should not be so surprising: if Kingsley Amis was an ‘angry novelist’, his son might be labelled a *furious* one. His opinions on Islamism [2] have been particularly controversial, attracting accusations of racism, which he

refuted, by claiming that “not only that [he] respect[s] Muhammad, but that no serious person could fail to respect Muhammad - a unique and luminous historical being... ” (2008: 49). In other words, he respects Islam, but he can hardly be asked to respect Islamism, “a creedal wave that calls out for our elimination” (50).

With his views and statements, and his literary catalogue comprising two novels on the Holocaust (*Time's Arrow*, 1991, and *The Zone of Interest*, 2014) and two on Stalinism: *Koba the Dread*, 2002, and *House of Meetings*, 2006), Amis may be considered a novelist with a pronounced political stance and a postmodernist appetite for historiographic metafiction. It is all the more surprising that he has not written a novel on contemporary history and politics yet, if one considers his publication of a collection of political essays, *The Second Plane 2001-2007*, which also comprises two short stories, *In the Palace of the End* (about a fictional son of Saddam Hussein) and *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*, which is part of the literary corpus analysed in the present thesis. The article published in *The Guardian*, ‘Fear and Loathing’, has been reprinted in the volume mentioned above, under the title ‘The Second Plane’ [3], without any cuts, as the author states in the introductory note, although he is aware that it “has a slightly hallucinatory quality (it is fevered by shock and by rumour)” (2008: ix). Notwithstanding this later acknowledgement of his exaggerations, the present subsection has set out to look into the tone of the commenters in the aftershock phase.

Amis’s article (whose initial title alludes intertextually to the novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* by Hunter S. Thomson, a countercultural critique of the American values), is much more politically oriented than McEwan’s, its overall discourse having, beyond some inherent elements of literariness (like the abuse of metaphors, for instance), two main purposes: that of demonstrating (by repeating the same argument a few times) that America is hated, and is hated for a reason, and on the other hand, that the Americans are entitled to have their revenge, which he expects to “become elephantine” (2008: 9). He comments on the American nation, whose “various national characteristics – self-reliance, a fiercer patriotism than any in Western Europe, an assiduous geographical incuriosity” (8) has determined their carelessness with regard to whatever may happen beyond their borders, and – at the same time – their unawareness of the fact that their very Americanism is what makes them hated. Rightfully noting that

"terrorism is political communication by other means" (3), Amis enlarges upon what the attacks wanted to *communicate*: "the message of September 11 ran as follows: America, it is time you learned how implacably you are hated" (*Ibid.*).

Providing a detailed account of the development of the events, Amis makes the same remark as McEwan a week before him: that the attacks outdid the imagination of any creator of fiction: "such a *mise en scène* would have embarrassed a studio's executive storyboard or a thriller-writer's notebook" (3-4). In addition, Amis is probably the first to look for meanings in the symbolism of the two towers, a discussion which will be later tackled by two contemporary philosophers, Jean Baudrillard and Jürgen Habermas. He also tries to speculate in the direction of an attack against the entire Christian world – "the duomillennial anniversary of Christianity" (5), however, it is a path he does not take any further, probably convinced, even at that moment, of the thinness of such an argument.

To Amis, the moment of the crashes is "the apotheosis of the postmodern era – the era of images and perceptions" and "an unforgettable metaphor" (5). Among other aspects that he is one of the first to notice, one may mention the much-discussed (later) span between the former and the latter crashes, construed by many as a strategy of the terrorists, who wanted "to give the world time to gather around its TV sets" (4), so that everybody catch the second crash, an act that would "torture tens of thousands and terrify hundreds of millions" (7). Someone less acquainted to Amis's views on Islamism might sense a kind of admiration to their deed of a "demented sophistication" (6), which is probably why he bursts out, towards the end of the article, into a fierce attack to the Islamic world: "all over again the West confronts an irrationalist, agonistic, theocratic/ ideocratic system which is essentially and unappeasably opposed to its existence" (6). Making reference to the 'traditional' enemy of the West, the Soviet Union, Amis mentions the utopian nature of its ideology, which led eventually to its dissolution, although "socialism was a modernist, indeed a futurist experiment" (9). By contrast, he sees Islamists as being "convulsed in a late-medieval phase", implying that there should pass some hundred years more before they would become civilised. To him, the suicidal self-sacrifice of the terrorists is rooted in a religious hysteria which does not have a Western counterpart: "Clearly, they have contempt for life. Equally clearly, they have contempt for death". This idea will be also forwarded

in the short story *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*, using almost the same phrasing: “A peer group piously competitive about suicide [...] was a very powerful thing, and the West had no equivalent to it. A peer group for whom death was not death – and life was not life either” (2008: 116). Amis will later incorporate many concepts and ideas from his non-fictional essays, as a starting point for his fiction. This is not because he would take greater liberties in literature, where practically everything may be said under the pretence of being fictional, but because he manages to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction through the subjectivity he displays in both his authorial instances.

Instead of focusing on the hypothesis that discourse has manipulative means and ends (an aspect which has become a truism along the years), this paper has strived to depict the element of fictionality in the political/ media discourse, its aim being not to destabilise their credibility as sources of imparting information, but simply to create a bridge between the communicational spheres in focus: the so-called objective discourses based on facts versus the subjective literature. To put it otherwise: whilst fiction can never be considered reality, reality can be altered through discourse and can, consequently, acquire a certain degree of fictionality. “Inasmuch as fact and fiction are opposites”, David Lodge says, “the novel as a literary form is founded upon contradiction, upon the reconciliation of the irreconcilable” (1996: 28). However, he admits the immersion of the real into the imaginary, though carefully concealed behind “defensive manoeuvre[s] to disclaim any representation of real people and institutions” (*Ibid.*). The purpose of this paper was to demonstrate a converse view: the real may be inserted in fiction in various forms, but fiction may be also inserted to the same extent in a presupposed rendition of reality.

Notes

[1] “Mediatisation of politics is a complex process that is closely linked to the presence of a media logic in society and in the political sphere. It is distinguished from the idea of “mediation”, a natural, preordained mission of mass media to convey meaning from communicators to their target audiences. To define politics as “mediated” is a simple truism, in that communication and mass media are necessary prerequisites to the functioning of political systems.” (Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999: 249)

[2] The distinction between Islam and Islamism is political and ideological. Strongly rooted in religion, Islamists support the implementation of Sharia law and the elimination of the Western influences from a unified Muslim world. Islamism is “political Islam”, “activist Islam”, “militant Islam” or “Islamic fundamentalism”.

[3] All references to Martin Amis’s article have been made to the version included in the 2008 volume.

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