

LITERATURE

LIVING IN THE FACE OF MENACING 'UNREASON' – MARTIN AMIS'S *THE SECOND PLANE* AS A RESPONSE TO IDEOLOGICAL FUNDAMENTALISMS

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ABSTRACT

This work touches upon Martin Amis's diagnosis of the Western world and its cultural foundations which seem to have been threatened, as maintained by the author, by a specific form of "de-Enlightenment" (2008). Amis, a repository of Western intellectual ethos, steps to the fore to defend reason. In view of the world's unrests, he fosters a thorough investigation of public beliefs, either of a religious or political nature, highlighting how deeply individual freedom has been censored and imperiled by various fundamentalisms. In his highly controversial, often blasphemous, collection of essays and short stories titled *The second plane* Amis renounces in an uncompromising way religious militancy, intellectual insularity, and political dogmatism. Politically incorrect and willfully offensive, the novelist appears unsparing in his criticism of Islamic integrity and right-wing 'theological' intransigence. My intention, thus, is to discuss Amis's overall standpoint referring both to the short story "The last days of Muhammad Atta" and a number of his articles written between 2002-2007.

This paper concerns Martin Amis's diagnosis of the Western world and its intellectual foundations, which appear to have been imperiled, as maintained by the author, by a specific form of "de-Enlightenment". Accordingly, many a writer of fiction has felt compelled to "snap out of solipsistic daydreams" (Amis 2008: 13). Amis, as one of them, advocates a defense of reason, taking a very personal, not to say doctrinaire stand on the world's unrest. Investigating public beliefs, either of a religious or political nature, he is apprehensive of the way individual freedom has been curbed by various forms of fundamentalism. Hence in his highly controversial collection of essays and short stories titled *The second plane* Amis renounces in an uncompromising way intellectual insularity and political dogmatism, but first and foremost, religious militancy. Politically

incorrect, ‘blasphemously’ offensive, the novelist repudiates Islamic integrity and subjects both right- and left-wing ‘theological’ intransigence to severe criticism. My intention, thus, is to construe Amis’s overall standpoint referring both to the short story “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” and a number of his articles written between 2002 and 2007. In the end, his persistent reevaluation of fossilized systems of beliefs brings us back to the tradition of Enlightenment skepticism, always so critical towards hermetic beliefs/ideologies, that recently seems to have placed Western rationale in jeopardy.

First of all, it should be noted that Martin Amis does not seem to be alone in his struggle against fundamentalism. The laconic character of this assertion is in inverse proportion to the dramatic tone set by those who laid the blame on Amis for the alleged racism observable in his polemical writing, and yet it is to highlight the substantiality of his viewpoint. Similar overtones of disapproval, if not condemnation, analogous to those occurring in Amis’s writing one finds, for instance, in the fiction of such eminent British novelists as Hanif Kureishi or Ian McEwan. The former’s standpoint is particularly equivalent to that of Martin Amis. It was Kureishi who, before 9/11, assumed a confrontational attitude towards ideological/fundamentalist rigidity. The world he opted for was to be marked by a *shifting* character of cultural, political and religious boundaries. And although some of his characters, when confronted with different kinds of fundamentalisms [mostly religious], would often retreat to their own niche of socio-political non-engagement; others did attempt to undermine the significance of dogmatic and monolithic categorizations; namely, rampant nationalism, deep-seated religious integrity or cultural determinacy. Kureishi’s multicultural approach had its value in highlighting autonomous individualism which, on rational grounds, was to partake in a constant [re]evaluation of the most fundamental beliefs so as to avoid the imposition of hermetic notions impeding one’s development. He could be regarded as an adherent of the liberal doctrine of the rationalization of one’s actions and an opponent of so-called “unbroken continuities”. As Stuart Hall claimed in “Cultural studies”, in our self-formation we must take into consideration “the significant *breaks* – where old lines of thought are disrupted [and] older constellations displaced” (1998: 664). With this in view, the idea of unbroken continuities as corresponding to the policy of fostering not so much conservative as purist instruments of interpretation seems to have been rejected both by Kureishi and Amis.

Hence the writers’ contesting the fossilization of beliefs as it may lead to seeking solutions to political or socio-cultural problems in fundamentalist orthodoxies. Kureishi, for that matter, in his momentous novel *The black album* presents the menacing presence of Islamism which, by its representatives, seduces inexperienced men into Islamic militancy. As Kureishi’s characters claim, a society deprived of divine laws, derived from the Koran of course, starts to

rot. Given that, there should be no room for renouncing the rigor of religious orthodoxy. As one of the fundamentalists pointed out, “[w]e are slaves to Allah [who] is the only we must submit to, [and whose] skill and power and authority [cannot be] denied” (*The black album* 2000: 80). It seems that both Kureishi and Amis find this argumentation quite horrendous due to its power to incapacitate individuals for intellectual processing of either world or local affairs.

Insofar as Kureishi expressed such views before 2001, Martin Amis along with his words of protest emerged after the tragedy of 9/11. However, he went one step further and was more radical, compared to Kureishi, in his criticism of various forms of fundamentalism. His radicalism and anxiety originate from the fact that in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks he began to perceive himself less as a writer and more as a Westerner committed to a civilization founded on the ideals of the Enlightenment. In view of Alexander’s theory of cultural trauma, Amis could be identified as one of the members of “a collectivity [who] feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their consciousness” (2004: 1). This collectivity in turn, according to Smelser, must be construed as part of “a post-September 11 reality [with] the events [they] would never be able to forget” (2004: 266). Martin Amis highlights the infection of our collective mindset due to the imprint terrorism has left on individual consciousness. As he vividly describes, “terrorism [became] part of the atmospheric ‘pollution’ of Western cities. Bomb New York and you pollute Madrid; bomb Madrid and you pollute London; bomb London and you pollute Paris and Rome, and repollute New York” (Amis 2008: 77). What happened cannot be easily metabolized since it appears to be extremely difficult to crush, with the power of the “ratiocinative”, the rage of the irrational that gathered momentum in the first half of the new millennium. Amis, most alarmingly, asserts that recent terrorist attacks, particularly 9/11, contributed to

loosen[ing] the ground between reality and delirium. So when we speak of [them], let’s call [them] by [their] proper name; let’s not suggest that our experience of [those] event[s] has been frictionlessly absorbed and filed away. It has not. [...] it goes on with all its instability, and its terrible dynamism (Amis 2008: 206).

Recovering from the trauma seems extremely difficult, since certain notions underlying the foundations of the Western world have been symbolically reduced to rubble by the collapse of the Twin Towers or the 7/7 London blasts. Elucidating the entrenched sense of menace, Kenan Malik points to the symbolic level upon which two different worldviews stand out against each other. On the one hand, there are “liberal democratic traditions, a scientific worldview and a secular, rationalist culture drawn from the Enlightenment; on the other is [militant Islamism] with its disrespect for [freedom], [...] for rationalism and deeply [undemocratic] attitudes on [almost] everything” (Malik 2009: x). Addi-

tionally, in Amis's eyes, all symptoms of anxiety and trepidation were brought about not only because the democratic rules of coexistence were trampled on but also because deeply disturbing emotions were awakened; as he further clarifies, they were underpinned by "unfamiliar intensity – intensity that secular democracy, and the rules of law and civil society, [...] always tend to neutralize" (2008: 204).

Taking into account the above, it comes as no surprise that Martin Amis decided to engage in a polemical writing fiercely against doctrinaire beliefs which, as he sensed them, threatened not only his personal interests but in fact the entire cultural heritage he had been nurtured on. As a result, in his essay concerning the 'dependent mind', Amis wrote that fiction at some points must give way to the real. Thinking of the possible consequences of losing the war with Islamism, he temporarily ceased to create fiction. Why was this so? Because "[i]n the West, writers are acclimatized to freedom – to limitless and gluttonous freedom. And [he] discovered [that] writing is freedom; and as soon as that freedom is in shadow, the writer can no longer proceed" (Amis 2008: 51). His capacity to write freely and independently was brought down, and so was his existential freedom. The world he knew began to fall apart on the grounds of the ideological orthodoxy of a specifically radical theological derivation.

Unsurprisingly he does not consider himself an enthusiast of the religious. According to him, "[t]oday, in the West, there are no good excuses for religious belief – unless we think that ignorance, reaction, and sentimentality are good excuses" (Amis 2008: 49). Far-reaching as this view is, it should not lead to a conclusion that Amis is a fury-ridden author aiming at the eradication of religion from any public life altogether. Rather than contesting it he is engaged in fighting off 'talibanization', or the deformation of the theological realm. And so he set up a struggle against "a pathology" which "the rejection of reason" denotes: "When those sanguinary yokels [...] chant their slogan, 'Throw reason to the dogs', they are making the same kind of Faustian gamble: crush reason, kill reason, and anything and everything seems possible – [...] for instance, presiding over a planetary empire cleansed of all infidels" (Amis 2008: 203).

Hence Amis's readiness to counteract them, which originates from his conviction that in present conditions a writer is obliged, as if, to respond to the actual, which he associates with nothing else but the afore-mentioned process of "de-Enlightening". If that is the case, Amis tends to speak in the name of any "rational undertakings" of a textual sort where "*reason* is at play" (2008: 13; italics mine). In this way the author underlines his own contribution to the cultural background he perceives as being under threat. Analogous to Amis's standpoint were the opinions expressed by Kureishi who denounced radical Islamism as a formula that is "incapable of making any significant contribution to culture and knowledge because [of] extreme puritanism and censoriousness

[that] can lead to a paranoia [...], [where] the Word as well as independent, critical thought [are regarded as] dangerous” (2005: 11), and as such should be eliminated. Amis corroborates this diagnosis resorting to a comparison between Islamism and twentieth-century totalitarianisms. From his perspective one could, without much difficulty, find in them particles of frenzy and madness which puts them in a line with ideological fronts being “anti-liberal, anti-individualist, anti-democratic, and, most crucially, anti-rational [...] death-driven and death-fuelled” (Amis 2008: 80).

Against this backdrop of radical anti-intellectualism and anti-dialogism, Amis in a short story, “The last days of Muhammad Atta”, thematizes the threatening attitude assumed by one of the leading 9/11 terrorists. We have the chance to observe a man totally committed to the obliteration of the rotting material world around him. With no doubts and no critical thoughts the protagonist is drawing a veil on the complexity of worldly affairs. This quasi-religious, fundamentalist certitude makes Atta, in his own eyes, a deadly messenger who “was doing what he was doing for the core reason and the core reason only” (*LD*, 101).¹ Beleaguered by a world inhabited by the unworthy, he lapses into paranoid silence. Yet, unlike the typical representatives of the syndrome of a “besieged mentality”, as defined by Zygmunt Bauman, Muhammad Atta does not “grope into the dark” (2006: 112) looking desperately for a way out. He knows his destiny and objective which is to “[f]orget and be oblivious to the thing which is called World; [...] to unite ferocity and rectitude in a single word – jihad” (*LD*, 101). For obvious reasons Atta’s self-righteousness will petrify, due to the fact that it defies all logic and reason, sanctioning the legitimacy of irrational comprehension. Bearing in mind this picture, one reckons that Amis would find Susan Buck-Morss’s opinions concerning a constructive/dialogic potential of Islamism rather disagreeable. According to her, it is a legitimate political discourse aiming at a “debate [...] expressed in multiple voices, encompassing varied and conflicting theoretical positions that are meant to have practical, political effects” (Buck-Morss 2003: 43). Amis, however, is not eager to acknowledge this potential. Hence, in depicting Muhammad Atta, the author puts the “fundamentalism [which] suited his character” into the context of Islamic non-dialogic and unbending extremism whose aim is, if not to annihilate, then at least to overpower the antagonist.

Atta’s fundamentalist fury makes him incapable of any constructive approach. His insistence on the significance of the “core reason” is in no way related to the analytical and commonsense skepticism which laid the foundations for Western rationalism. True, Atta acknowledges the need for “the belief sys-

¹ Henceforth, all references to Amis’s short story, “The last days of Muhammad Atta”, will be indicated by the following initials – *LD*.

tem”, but in his understanding its validity must neither foreclose, nor play down, the power of retributive rage:

The core reason was of course all the killing – all the putting to death. Not the crew, not the passengers, not the office workers in the Twin Towers, not the cleaners and the caterers, not the men of the NYPD [...]. He was thinking of the war, the wars, the war-cycles that would flow from this day. [...] he did believe in death. [...] Killing was divine delight (*LD*, 122).

Paradoxically, behind all this irrational fervor stands a specific methodology of violence wherein destruction requires a calculated coordination. Amis, constructing his real/fictitious lunatic character enables him to work, ironically, quite ‘sanely’ on the master plan of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Muhammad Atta’s calculation, though monstrously logical, is underpinned by loathing of life, particularly in its Western dimension; therefore, he turns out to be, to use Charles Tilly’s terminology, an extremist who “specializes [only] in the deployment of [destruction] undertaking [...] the program of annihilation of [enemies/infidels]” (2003:14).

Uncompromising in his beliefs, ruthless and deprived of even a shadow of doubt, Atta resembles the actual radicals Kureishi came across and further described in his essay “The Carnival of Culture”. The encounter was remembered as most disturbing, for everyone there “believed they had access to the Truth [...]. There could be no doubt – or even much dispute about moral, social, political problems [...] [F]or them, to argue with the Truth was like to disagree with the fact of geometry” (Kureishi 2005: 99). The analogous, unflustered mindset of Atta is tormented, mockingly, by glimpses of a more sound consciousness. Exactly at the moment of extinction his certitude is marked with reservations:

American 11 struck at 8.46.40. Muhammad Atta’s body was beyond all healing by 8.46.41; but his mind, his presence, needed time to shut itself down. The physical torment – a panic attack in every nerve, a riot of the atoms – merely italicized the last shinnings of his brain. They weren’t *thought*; they were more like a series of unignorable conclusions, imposed from without. Here was the hereafter; and here was the reckoning (*LD*, 123; emphasis original).

In the end Amis denies Atta ultimate satisfaction as “his mind [...] fumble[s] a self-cancellation” and ‘grants’ him a sense of rather unsympathetic disappointment. Amis, as an adherent of the rational, has no tolerance for the cult of revengeful death, hence the unsolicited affirmation of life the terrorist happens to experience at the moment of self-annihilation:

And where was the joy [...] – where was that joy, that itch? Yes, how gravely he had underestimated it. How very gravely he had underestimated life. His own he

had hated, and had wished away; but see how long it was taking to absent itself [...]. Even as his flesh fried and his blood boiled, there was life, kissing its fingertips. Then it echoed out, and ended (*LD*, 124).

Committed to the defense of Western ideals as he is, Martin Amis should not be labeled as a devotee of a particular party line. His intolerance for the cult of unreason makes him an enemy of various forms of fundamentalist fossilization. In his general disregard towards those who undo the rational approach, Amis has acquired a reputation as a merciless foe of intellectual blindness. His stinging remarks concern both important politicians as well as ordinary citizens. In the case of the former, Amis expressed strong opinions somewhat similar to those uttered by Harold Pinter who at one point dared to compare Tony Blair to a puppet, incapable of making independent, if not rational decisions.² Amis's evaluation, for example, of Bush's guiding principle was quite devastating. The president's frame of mind, according to the author, paralleled the Taliban's as his only aim was to become "more theological". The interesting thing is Amis's elucidation of the process of the theologization of the president's mindset:

Why, in our current delirium of faith and fear, would Bush want things to become more theological rather than less theological? The answer is clear enough, in human terms: to put it crudely, it make him feel easier about being intellectually null. He wants geopolitics to be less about the intellect, and more about gut-instincts and beliefs (Amis 2008: 23).

On the other hand, Amis comments on the attitudes of ordinary people show that it would be hard to pigeonhole him. To be acclaimed neither a right- nor a left-winger, Amis in his personal crusade against unreason and dogmatism turns out to be allergic to popular conformism. During one of the public debates on fundamentalism, he happened to say that in his opinion we should do everything to instill democracy in Afghanistan, not forgetting about "tearing up the earth of Waziristan in its hunt for the remnants of al-Qaeda". In response he was attacked with the orthodoxy of correct beliefs: "[...] what I saw were the gaps

² In 2002 Harold Pinter, addressing an anti-war meeting at the House of Commons, strongly criticized the militant policy of George Bush and his administration. Tony Blair, as the president's closest ally, was presented in Pinter's speech as someone who yielded submissively to the more powerful. Through an anecdote we are informed of the following: "There's an old story about Oliver Cromwell. After he had taken the town of Drogheda the citizens were brought to the main square. Cromwell announced to his Lieutenants: "Right! Kill all the women and rape all the men." One of his aides said: "Excuse me General. Isn't it the other way around?" A voice from the crowd called out: "Mr. Cromwell knows what he's doing!" That voice is the voice of Tony Blair "Mr Bush knows what he's doing!" But the fact is that Mr Bush and his gang do know what they're doing and Blair, unless he really is the deluded idiot he often appears to be, also knows what they're doing" (Pinter, 2002).

and frowns, not of disagreement, but disbelief. Then a young woman spoke up, in [...] with passionate self-righteousness, saying that it was the Americans who had armed the Islamists [...], and that therefore the US, in response to September 11, ‘should be dropping bombs on *themselves!*’. Any discussion seemed impossible, Amis explains, as his “thoughts were scattered by the sound of unanimous applause” (Amis 2008: 199). His conclusion brings to one’s mind Ian McEwan’s novel wherein the protagonist, a man of reason, traumatized by the effects of terrorist campaigns, too often, at home or on the streets of London, runs into people carrying on their banners slogans indicating an analogous talibanization of political beliefs.³

Martin Amis has been often criticized for being too radical and too controversial. But in the end, one has to ask a question: What is Amis’s objective? The answer turns out to be rather straightforward. Fighting the menacing rage of dogmatism, Amis urges us to remember about such fundamental ideals of the democratic world as freedom, dialogic exchange and most importantly reason. Do we really dare to label him a radical?!

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³ Ian McEwan, in his 2003 novel, *Saturday*, expresses a certain disregard towards a specific version of political dogmatism carried on the banners of Western liberalism. The main protagonist, Henry Perowne, observing the marches against the war in Iraq, begins to perceive the crowd as incapable of a more critical and profound approach to the complexity of worldly affairs. Trying to discredit the anti-terrorist crusade, they fall victims of their own fundamentalist insularity: “A small crowd round the cart wants to buy stuff before the vendors are ready. The general cheerfulness Perowne finds baffling. There are whole families, one with four children in various sizes of bright red coats, clearly under instruction to hold hands. [...] They have already unfurled their banner which proclaims simply, Peace not Slogans!!” (*Saturday* 2006: 61).

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