

‘Extreme Otherness’: Representations of 9/11 in two Anglo-American Writers

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Abstract

This article probes the image of the Muslim Other in Martin Amis’s short story ‘The Last Days of Muhammad Atta’ (2006) and Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007). The phrase ‘extreme otherness’ is not an alternative formulation of the postmodern philosophical concept of absolute otherness, but an attempt at defining a representation (especially of mind) strongly anchored in present social and political discourses. An attempt is made at accounting for Western Islamophobia at the level of the media and of the public sphere in the belief that this can be an effective introduction to analysis of the representation of the Muslim Other in literary texts belonging to the category of 9/11 fiction, by identifying their stereotyping nature, while also emphasising the acutely negative features of this particular form of accentuated alterity.

Keywords: Islamophobia, 9/11 fiction, Muslim, stereotype, Orientalism, Occidentalism

The theory of ‘Islamismophobia’ in literary practice: ‘We respect Muhammad, we don’t respect Muhammad Atta’

Martin Amis’s opinions on Islam, which he began setting out in the press soon after 9/11, not always in the most politically-correct terms, have attracted numerous accusations of racism. The sentence ‘We respect Muhammad, we do not respect Muhammad Atta’ is repeated twice in a piece published in *The Observer* to mark the fifth anniversary of 9/11, suggestively entitled ‘The Age of Horrorism’¹. The author here notably strives to make a clear-cut distinction between Islam and Islamism: ‘We respect Islam - the donor of countless benefits to mankind, and the possessor of a thrilling history. But Islamism? No, we can hardly be asked to respect a creedal wave that calls for our own elimination. Naturally we respect Islam.

But we do not respect Islamism, just as *we respect Muhammad and do not respect Muhammad Atta*' (Amis 2008, p. 50, emphasis added). However, a few days before the publication of this article, Martin Amis had managed to sound extremely radical in an interview for *The Times*.

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. They hate us for letting our children have sex and take drugs – well, they've got to stop their children killing people (Amis in Dougary 2006, pp. 6-7).

A year later in a letter to *The Guardian* (October 12, 2007), Amis retracted the above stating that 'harassing the Muslim community in Britain would be neither moral nor efficacious' and that his earlier remarks were prompted by a state of mind which had soon worn off. Not entirely cautious, but pointing to the distinction between religion and the political and violent engagement in its name, i.e., between Islam and Islamism, in his conversation with the *New York Times Book Review* editor Rachel Donadio, Amis asserts that he is not Islamophobic but Islamismophobic,² reiterating the slogan 'We respect Muhammad, but we don't respect Muhammad Atta'. As if attempting to prove valid the hypothesis that the two opposing poles of the East and West dichotomy accuse each other of virtually the same shortcomings in the relation to their respective Other, the author repeatedly accused of racism and intolerance describes Jihadism as 'racist, homophobic, totalitarian, genocidal, inquisitorial and imperialistic' (2008, p. 31).

Making his prejudices known in order to participate in the public debate, his created worlds 'aspir[ing] to pattern and shape and moral point' (p. 13), Amis's opinions are often informed by ready-made conclusions. For example, in his research for the short story under the lens here, he discovered that the nineteen devout Muslim hijackers had been visited by strippers and call-girls in their days of hiding in Florida, before the fatidic September 11, information which he gave credit to on the grounds of his belief that 'they're hugely hypocritical in their hearts' (Amis in Dougary 2006). Without being explicitly mentioned in the text of the short story, such information burdens it with implications of sexual frustrations

and inadequacy, inscribing it, as Lionel Barber (2008) remarks in his review of *The Second Plane*, in the Amisian theme of manliness and male insecurity, rather than turning it into an attempt at penetrating the mind and motives of the terrorist.

Muhammad Atta in Amis's story hardly stands as a representative Muslim fundamentalist as the West sees him, and as Updike attempts with his Arab-American terrorist in the making. Quite the contrary: in making Atta an unbelieving nihilist Amis deconstructs the familiar image of the Muslim devotee who is ready to die for a cause which he has been inoculated with through religion. This is not to say, of course, that Amis fails to apply many other Western-made stereotypes to Atta, but that, in proposing a character deprived of the (feeble) excuse of being under the influence of religion as societal control mechanism and, what is more, imbued with a list of stereotypical prejudices against Western civilisation, he actually portrays an Occidentalist. The fictional Atta's views on the Western Other resemble those of the Islamist theorist and leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb, summarised in *The 9/11 Commission Report* as follows: 'Western society possesses nothing that will satisfy its own conscience and justify its existence,' being beset with 'barbarism, licentiousness and unbelief' (Kean and Hamilton 2004, p. 51). In the short story, such ideas are forwarded in the discussion between Atta and an imam: 'remember we are in the lands of unbelief'; 'America was responsible for this and that million deaths... power was always a monster and had never been a monster the size of America. There were blunderings and perversities and calculated cruelties: and there was no self-knowledge – none' (pp. 110-11). Amis also makes extensive reference to Qutb in his essay 'The Age of Horrorism' ('Terror and Boredom: The Dependent Mind'), which invites the speculation that many of the ideas attributed to Atta in the short story might have been inspired by this 'father of Islamism':

During his six months at the Colorado State College of Education (and thereafter in California), Sayyid's hungry disapproval found a variety of targets: American *lawns* (a distressing example of selfishness and atomism), American conversation ('money, movie stars and models of cars'), American jazz ('a type of music invented by Blacks to please their primitive tendencies – their desire for noise and their appetite for sexual arousal') and, of course, American women. [...] American places of worship he also detests (they are like cinemas or amusement arcades) (Amis 2008, p. 59, italics in the original).

However, Amis's motivation for writing a short story so closely connected to the attacks on the World Trade Center, with the leading hijacker, Muhammad Atta, at the centre of the narrative, might have been at least partially prompted by the strong media interest in this figure. In the days after 9/11 the face of Muhammad Atta was all over the press, together with his personal belongings, discovered fortuitously (an aspect which no one seems too ready to believe) laying intact in the ashes of the WTC: a four page document in Arabic which describes the preparations for the attacks during the night before and the morning of September 11³, a flight manual, a copy of the Qur'an and the terrorist's passport. Without going too deeply into conspiracy theories, it is fairly obvious that these were used for reassurance purposes – to show the American people and the entire world that American intelligence were doing their best to uncover the perpetrators, and also to flesh out the face of otherness required for the identification of the Other as enemy. To the image of the zealot Atta, as inferred from the written plan of the attacks, interspersed with Qur'an verses and returning to prayer as a necessary step every other two lines, is added the last testament⁴ which gives precise orders that no woman should touch his dead body or even come close to his grave, and an image of the 'gentle and tender boy'⁵ uninterested in politics presented by his family. In Amis's short story these details are subjected both to defamiliarisation, in the Formalist sense, and to the alienation effect (a derived concept developed by Brecht for theatrical performance, to render the observer not involved with or sympathetic to the character.) Robert Eaglestone asserts that, in its engagement with 'the mélange of anxiety and anger that make up the West's fuzzy understanding of the current crisis' (2007, p. 19), Amis's short story, like the other 9/11 fictional texts presented in his article, fails to address this very concern. His contention, at least in Amis's case, proceeds from the misleading hypothesis that, in his imagining of the last hours of Muhammad Atta, Amis 'tries to offer an insight into him' (p. 21). Although it is commonplace in many analyses of Amis's sole contribution to post-9/11 fiction to describe the British author's text as an effort in the direction of a psychological (and even psychoanalytical) investigation into the mind of the terrorist, the view adopted here is that the narrative unwinds in an opposite direction: that of an extreme othering of the Other. Character is distanced as much as possible in accord with Amis's belief that 'suicide-mass murder is astonishingly alien, so alien, in fact, that Western opinion has been unable to formulate a rational response to it' (2008, p. 68). It is useless, in other words, to attempt to find an explanation for such extreme alterity. Amis himself puts it more than clearly: 'it [the terrorist's] is a mind with which we share no discourse' (p. x).

This reading of 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta' endorses Gray's assertion that 'Amis dehumanizes and, in doing so, puts the obscene acts of the terrorists beyond our understanding; they are acts performed by "them", a demonized other' (2011, p. 176). The criticism laid against Amis that it was reckless, inappropriate and even obscene of him to adopt the point of view of a terrorist (Dawes 2010, p. 496) misses its object, as his story actually represents a counter-narrative which 'subvert[s] conventional projections of villainy, thus contributing to a configuration of both the literary history of evil and of the larger imaginary of terrorism' (p. 502). Constructing a character that could not be more different from its real eponym as represented by both media and official accounts – *The 9/11 Commission Report* describes the real Atta as 'charismatic, intelligent, and persuasive, albeit intolerant of dissent', possessing an 'abrasive and increasingly dogmatic personality' (pp. 160-61) – Amis pushes the Other beyond the familiar boundaries of stereotyping towards the realms of the Great Unknown. Atta, the man who invokes the name of God to justify mass killing, becomes in Amis's fiction Atta the incomprehensible murderer driven not by 'jihadi ardour' (2008, p. 101), but the mere hatred of everything: women, the West and its power - 'power was always a monster and there had never been a monster the size of America' (p. 110) - himself and his peers. Above all, sadistic pleasure moves him: 'The core reason was of course all the killing – all the putting to death' (p. 122).

Although the title announces a record of *the last days*, Amis's short story captures only the final hours in the existence of the real man directly responsible for crashing a plane into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. The short story begins and ends with the exact same words: 'On September 11, 2001, he opened his eyes at 4 a.m. in Portland, Maine; and Muhammad Atta's last day began' (p. 95; p. 124). The plurality in the title may signify, as Kristiaan Versluys suggests, 'the impossibility of coming to a closure' (2009, p.161). According to Däwes's explanation, it may also point to metafictional practices: the narrative circuit, she says, 'follows a metafictional trajectory: the story of the abject does not have closure; it needs to be re-told' (p.506). In the light of Amis's well-known fondness for metafiction, we might say the author, present at times in the text (without effectively boarding American Airlines Flight 11 or conversing with the perpetrators, but more covertly, through subtle authorial comments), denies Atta's fall into oblivion. However, what seems to remain unforgotten in post 9/11 cultural memory is not the murderous personality of the terrorist but the day of September 11 itself, which is relived over and over again through cultural and media artefacts.

The fictional character Muhammad Atta reveals a completely unreliable Westernised reasoning. The stereotypical patterns of Western thinking about the Muslim Other are transposed into words and meanings that Muslims would never use to characterise themselves, which gives support to the assumption that the short story is intended to defamiliarise rather than to explain. For example, Amis questions the reward granted by the Qur'an, the virgins (see *supra*), relying on a Western theory on mistranslation, which claims that the promised virgins were actually raisins. The theory has been long debunked and, even if it were not, it is not something that a Muslim, instilled with the Qur'an's teaching since childhood, would ever accept. Atta even mocks at the idea: 'how could he believe in such an implausibly, and dauntingly, priapic paradise?' (p. 102) Another instance of Western thought is the use of the word terrorism, which Arabs would never employ to describe their struggle against the Christian West: 'whatever else terrorism had achieved in the past few decades, it had certainly brought about a net increase in world boredom' (p. 108). Boredom is an overused concept in the long essay 'Terror and Boredom: The Dependent Mind' (2006, repr. 2008, pp. 47-93). Amis employs it 'not thinking of airport queues and subway searches' but of 'the global confrontation with the dependent mind' (p. 78), while also having in mind the perspective of the capitulation and universal conversion to Islam, which would bring about 'a world of perfect terror and perfect boredom, and of nothing else – a world with no games, no arts, and no women, a world where the sole entertainment is the public execution' (p. 78). None of these understandings of the term seems in the least plausible when uttered by an Arab terrorist – which is why they are sooner read as authorial intrusions, like the commentary to Atta's afterlife expectations: 'He didn't expect paradise. What he expected was oblivion. And, strange to say, he would find neither' (p. 102). Not only does the last sentence speak of Amis's atheism; it also points to the transformation of the real Muhammad Atta into a media show after 9/11.

Muhammad Atta's fictional representation is, at first glance, surprisingly irreligious:

Muhammad Atta wasn't like the others because he was doing what he was doing for the core reason. The others were doing what they were doing for the core reason, too, but they had achieved sublimation by means of jihadi ardour. [...] Atta was not religious; he was not even especially political. He had allied himself with the militants because jihad was, by many magnitudes, the most charismatic idea of his generation. To unite ferocity and rectitude in a single word: nothing could compete with that. [...]

If you took away all the rubbish about faith, then fundamentalism suited his character with an almost sinister precision (p. 101).

As apparent from the above, what Amis seems to have at stake is precisely the deconstruction of the apologetic theory that fundamentalist Muslims act in accordance with a concert of factors which have influenced them since the early stages of their existence. Whilst acknowledging that 'militant fundamentalism is convulsed in a late-medieval phase of its evolution' (Amis 2001/ 2008, p. 9), the British author chooses, nevertheless, to expose the terrorist acts as being triggered not by religious faith ('jihadi ardour') or ideological constraints and societal control, but by 'nihilistic insouciance' (p. 107). Their goal ceases to be their duty to Islam or their hatred against America; it is simply the pleasure to kill, because 'suicide mass-murder [...] is a maximum malevolence' (Amis 2006/ 2008, p. 71). However, from Atta's rambling interior monologue emerges the idea that 'joy of killing was proportional to the value of what was destroyed' (p. 124), which points in the direction (suggested by Amis in 'Fear and Loathing') of 'an edifice so demonstrably comprised of concrete and steel would also become an unforgettable metaphor. This moment was the apotheosis of the postmodern era - the era of images and perceptions' (Amis 2001/ 2008, p. 5).⁶

In the article cited above, Amis also asserted that 'all over again the West confronts an irrationalist, agonistic, theocratic/ideocratic system which is essentially and unappeaseably opposed to its existence' (2001/ 2008, p. 9). Although he was writing under the strong impression of the event, at that point Amis seemed able to see the influence of religion as a constraint beyond the terrorists' acts. However, the short story he writes five years later is intent on 'othering the Other' and on finding no excuses in their belonging to a society under ideological control. To this end, he deliberately dehumanises his protagonist, Muhammad Atta is endowed with a blasphemous voice which carries the overtones of Amis' controversial statement ('The Voice of the Lonely Crowd') that 'a religion is a belief system with no basis in reality whatever; religious belief is without reason and without dignity, and its record is near-universally dreadful' (2001/ 2008, p. 14). Thus he completely annuls the possibility of the character being considered a victim of indoctrination (although real facts about the life of the real Muhammad Atta indicate this specific aspect). The fictional character Muhammad Atta is just malicious. He is that 'evil' which President Bush's immediate post 9/11 speech claimed had tried 'to frighten [the] nation into chaos and retreat.'⁷ Thus, Martin Amis's short story is a literary piece representative of the Western pattern of presuppositions and

stereotypes about the Muslim Other, one which not only acknowledges his alterity, but also highlights it.

Breaking into the Western world: Don DeLillo's falling Muslim men

As if to nuance Amis's statement that we share no discourse with the terrorists' mind, Don DeLillo constructs in *Falling Man* a narrative made up of two separate discourses, clearly delineated as ours and theirs, which only come together the moment the first plane crashes into the North Tower. Sharing no discourse would be less unsettling than a discursive (and a factual) clash. It would be that clear delimitation of selfhood from otherness theorised by Levinas, which is no longer possible in the context of globalization and free circulation. The others are no longer the distant strangers whom one may only encounter by colonising and subjecting their space: they have broken into the Western world, bringing along their anti-Western discursive control mechanisms and their 'Occidentalism.'

Specifically, the three parts of *Falling Man* which feature the representation of Muslim terrorists, 'On Marienstrasse,' 'In Nokomis,' and 'In the Hudson Corridor,' artfully underline this irruption of the Other into the Western world. It is, therefore, an aim of this section, aside from the overarching one of discussing the presence of the Muslim other in DeLillo's contribution to post 9/11 fiction, to demonstrate that the disruptive quality of the pages dedicated to the hijackers who led the planes into the World Trade Center, far from being a flaw, is among the elements which construct and reinforce otherness. An idea foregrounded by DeLillo in, 'In the Ruins of the Future,' considered here a reference point for the subsequent writing and publication of his post 9/11 novel, *Falling Man*, is that 'the terrorists of September 11 want to bring back the past' (2001, p. 34). The axis of time DeLillo imagines accentuates the difference between *us* (the Americans in his particular case, but standing for the entire Western civilisation) and *them*: neither we nor they are living in the present; contemporaneity could not be more relative.

A similar distancing may also be noticed at the level of the literary text. DeLillo's Muslim others 'populate' three chapters completely alienated from the rest of the novel, which, bound together, could easily be read as a short story not too different from Amis' 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta', but whose relevance is actually revealed through the contrast they create with the main narrative which focuses on the life of the American everyman after 9/11. The novel takes 9/11 as a temporal point of reference, but, whilst the Americans are presented *after* the fall of the two towers, trying to cope with trauma and the changes the attacks brought

into their lives, the Muslim terrorists are depicted moving *towards* this event. On the same axis of time, 9/11 is the present; everything that takes place after it is the future, whereas everything before it is in the past. The crash, the only point at which the two moments in time/civilisations collide, is a symbolical contamination of the future with the horrors of the past. Versluys comes to a similar conclusion in his trauma-oriented analysis of *Falling Man*: ‘DeLillo indicates that September 11 can only be understood geopolitically as the clash of two opposing frames of reference, two worlds on a collision course’ (2009, p. 44). The narrative of the terrorists’ preparations and arrival at the moment of the attacks is not woven or embedded into a main narrative frame; it is simply another narrative of another time. In a period dominated by the annulment of boundaries, the temporal alterity, their yesterday opposing our today or even our tomorrow, is by far more significant than the spatial differences between East and West. As Dawes (p. 510) notes, ‘space is no longer a reliable category’ in regard to the Self-Other dichotomy.

From the point of space, the titles of the three chapters are designed as so many places on the terrorists’ map, guiding them towards their final status as suicidal martyrs. ‘On Marienstrasse’ refers to the apartment on 53 Marienstrasse, Hamburg, Germany where Muhammad Atta lived and plotted together with other future participants in the 9/11 attacks (Kean and Hamilton, p. 162); ‘In Nokomis’ provides the spatial frame for the final nine months of preparations, including the perpetrators’ flight training. The locality is a small, suburban area near the city of Venice, Florida, whose name is not mentioned in *The 9/11 Commission Report*, but which other sources locate as the residence of the nineteen men. The most obvious source is *Los Angeles Times* reporter Terry McDermott’s *Perfect Soldiers: The 9/11 Hijackers, Who They Were, Why They Did It*, which reads: ‘they rented, for \$550 a month, a small pink stucco house in Nokomis, the next town north [from Venice FL], where they stayed for several months’ (2005, p. 195). DeLillo paraphrases: ‘they rented a little stucco house on West Laurel Road. [...] The house was pink’ (2007, p.171). Lastly, ‘In the Hudson corridor’ represents the flight route along the Hudson River in New York, which the American Airlines Flight 11 and also the United Airlines Flight 175 took until their deviation towards Manhattan and the crash into the towers. References to the Middle East and to the training camp in Afghanistan are present only in the form of analepsis in the terrorists’ thoughts or conversations, but otherwise the setting of these chapters is the Western space, which points to the Muslims’ breaking into the Western world, just as their insertion between the chapters dealing with the United States after September 11 represents a disruption in the

logical order of the narrative, not at all different from the disruption produced by the presence of the plane appearing on the Manhattan sky, 'silver crossing blue' (p. 236).

Another piece of evidence which supports the hypothesis that DeLillo foregrounds otherness in the three chapters which focus on the Muslims is two very small, but probably relevant elements of structure. On the one hand, the novel is divided into three parts, whose titles are the names of people: 'Bill Lawton,' which is a mispronounced variant of Bin Laden; 'Ernst Hechinger,' the real name of Martin Ridnour, a character in the novel; and 'David Janiak,' the name of 'the performance artist known as Falling Man' (p. 219), the ekphrastic leitmotif. All the titles point to identities – more or less real, but identities nevertheless. By contrast, the names of the chapters concerned with the Muslims are not eponyms but toponyms, underlining the importance of setting and not that of the characters. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that, while the chapters in the three main parts run from one part to the next (the last chapter of 'Bill Lawton' is number five, the first chapter of 'Ernst Hechinger' is six), the chapters in between are neither numbered, nor even seem to belong there - additional proof that DeLillo probably assumed this apparent lack of structure on purpose, with the aiming of distance the others as much as possible. Time allowed this separation, but space did not, which is why the distance is artificially created by the novel structure.

A more obvious device for constructing alterity through subtle elements of structure and chapter arrangement is to focus on the other directly, to create characters that can be unmistakably understood as representations of alterity, of the strangers among us. Recipients of the largest media exposure of the Muslim figures related to 9/11: Osama Bin Laden, the mastermind of the Al-Qaeda operation, and Muhammad Muhammad al-Amir Awad al-Sayyid Atta, are personages who could be best exploited by writers with the view of creating fictional counterparts. Atta, the most prominent executor, is best known in the Western world by his first and last name, which, in DeLillo's novel, becomes a sign of anonymity through Westernisation: 'he received certain sums of money wired to a Florida bank in his name, first and last, Mohamed Atta, because he was basically nobody from nowhere' (p. 172). While both Bin Laden and Atta are represented in *Falling Man*, focus is laid on Hammad, a generic figure with an equally generic name who is however without a real counterpart in the list of the nineteen hijackers. Much more than Amis's Atta, whose character was purposefully created against the grain, Hammad is a quintessential image of the Muslim Arab terrorist as constructed in the mind of the Westerner, and certainly a more balanced character than Ahmed, Updike's terrorist, who subsumes all the available stereotypes and prejudices.

DeLillo's Hammad is not one of the sketchy representations of the Arab Muslim presented by the media either. The bearded 'murderous fanatic' seems to be neither the murderous type, nor the particularly fanatic one: he is just easily convinced to embrace a cause which he fails to fully comprehend even in his final minutes.

Falling Man is also presentable as an exercise in Orientalist discourse bent on demonstrating that Islam's inability 'to adjust itself to the West's modern developments indicates its inherent inferiority' (Pirnajmuddin and Borhan 2011, p. 123). This inability, not of Islam, but of a group of Islamists, is indeed alluded to in the novel, without pointing out categories of inferiority and superiority, but simply difference. The imprint of DeLillo's Americanness cannot be denied in the construction of Hammad, Amir (the name given to Atta throughout McDermott's account of the lives of the terrorists and borrowed by DeLillo), and of their peers. Some indeed believe that 'DeLillo trivializes the terrorists by minimizing the attention he pays to them' (Rowe 2011, p.123). Therefore, if Amis disregards Western sensitivity by writing a short story centred on Muhammad Atta, DeLillo does not give them sufficient space in a novel which is, after all, about the American trauma. It seems that there is no right way of fictionalising this topic. Sascha Pöhlmann's thesis is that *Falling Man* 'ultimately fails to leave dominant ideological frameworks [...] and, despite its occasional resistance, does not succeed in imagining the terrorist as anything other than an Orientalist construction of an Islamist terrorist' (2010, p. 51), which owes to the fact that DeLillo 'does work with binary oppositions' (p. 53) between the American victim and the Islamist aggressor. Nevertheless, the critique is not targeted at DeLillo's alleged inability to represent a realistic terrorist but at his making caricatures out of the terrorist characters. Focus is laid on the American characters' ideological representations of their Other, and less on the parts exclusively dedicated to the group of hijackers, which are regarded as 'echo[ing] both crude jihadist propaganda and Western clichés of Islamist paranoia, anti-Semitism and blind hatred of the West' (p. 60). Without fully assenting to or dissenting from the opinions of the German scholar, nuancing is necessary in order to demonstrate that DeLillo's approach is subtler than the traditional Orientalism he is accused of. Unlike Martin Amis, who imprints regrets on Muhammad Atta's final seconds as a form of fictional vengeance against the perpetrator of 9/11, DeLillo refrains from speculating whether Hammad found his inner peace and eternal life or not, because, in an artful twist, focalisation shifts from the aggressor (Hammad) to the victim (Keith Neudecker). The reader witnesses the former's death and the latter's survival in the course of the same sentence (DeLillo 2007, p. 239). Hammad is left behind, in the past,

where he belongs, and the last pages of the novel concentrate on the future, on life during and after the unimaginable.

Nonetheless, it is the case that Western authors make use of statements regarded by the West as most absurd which are no doubt intended to underline the alterity of Islamist thinking. For example, Qutb's wrath against the American lawns, quoted by Martin Amis, is also used by Don DeLillo: 'this entire life, this world of lawns to water and hardware stacked on endless shelves, was total, forever illusion. [...] People water lawns and eat fast food.' In stark opposition to these superficial pleasures, 'they received instruction in the highest jihad, which is to make blood flow, their blood and that of others,' although the less convinced Hammad 'ordered takeout at times, undeniably; every day, every five days, he prayed, sometimes less, sometimes not at all, [and] he watched TV in a bar near the flight school' (p. 173).

Whilst Amis subverts the image of the fundamentalist brainwashed by the power of religion, constructing an Atta who is neither religious, nor political, but merely evil, DeLillo bestows upon Hammad both doubts and a propensity towards a normal existence – he even had a girlfriend whom he sometimes wanted to marry. He used to eat too much and pray too little, while knowing all along that 'he had to fight against the need to be normal; he had to struggle against himself first, and then against the injustice that haunted their lives' (p. 83). There are at least three possible interpretations for DeLillo's gestures to Hammad's normality. Firstly, he is intended to counter the image of the evil terrorist created by the media. Or, oppositely, he can be precisely that other who appears to be harmless but proves extremely dangerous in the end – as is often the case with terrorists and serial killers described in hindsight by their neighbours or colleagues as quiet and polite people. At some point in the novel, Hammad wonders if the simple American people, 'the people jogging in the park... these old men who sit in beach chairs' even notice him. 'He wonders if they see him standing there, clean-shaven, in tennis sneakers' (p. 173). Thirdly, Hammad may represent the image of the 'normal' Muslim turned terrorist as a result of political manipulation of religious constraints imposed by the Qur'an. In this sense, Atta - Amir in *Falling Man* - could be said to act both as trusted leader and as a manipulative conscience.

Amir is undoubtedly the representation of the real pilot of the American Airlines Flight 11, introduced as follows: 'Amir spoke in his face. His full name was Mohamed el-Amir el-Sayed Atta' (p. 80). He speaks of changing the world by firstly changing one's mind, and about the sense of losing their history while 'being crowded out by other cultures, other futures, the all-enfolding will of capital market and foreign policies' (p. 80). For Hammad,

Amir is a ‘very genius’ (p. 79), ‘his mind was in the upper skies, making sense of things’ (p. 81), he thought ‘clearly, in straight lines, direct and systematic’ (p. 175) and his words ‘sounded like philosophy’ (p. 176). In fact, he is sketched as a voice of the Islamist manipulator, someone for whom ‘the others exist only to the degree that they fill their role we have designed for them’ (p. 176). He is respected by the other Muslims for having made the pilgrimage to Mecca and it is from his position as a *hajji* that he alleviates his men’s fears of disregarding the Qur’an by committing suicide, as well as Hammad’s doubts about this being the only way he could accomplish anything (‘But does a man have to kill himself in order to count for something, be something, find the way?’ (p. 175)).

The end of our life is predetermined. We are carried toward that day from the minute we are born. There is no sacred law against what we are going to do. This is not suicide in any meaning or interpretation of the word. It is only something long written. We are finding the way already chosen for us (p. 175).

Once convinced, the men no longer have ‘the burning spirit of the days on Marienstrasse; they were beyond that now, in full and determined preparation’ (p. 172). Even Amir puts an end to his Islamic propaganda: ‘Amir had stopped talking about Jews and Crusaders. It was all tactical now, plane schedules and fuel loads and getting men from one location to another, on time, on place’ (p. 173), his manipulative purpose achieved. Hammad’s discourse shifts from questioning their plan to uttering the credo of the jihadi fighter, who thinks of himself as above others because of his willingness to sacrifice: ‘We are willing to die, they are not. This is our strength, to love death, to feel the claim of armed martyrdom’ (p. 178). This statement, presented in a style that might be considered Orientalist, is, in fact, typical Occidentalist discourse, which sets forth the dichotomy between selfhood and otherness and, at the same time, insists on the inferiority of the latter. The control mechanism, represented not by the Qur’an in its entirety but by the literal interpretation of some of its verses, inoculates the young men. The persuasive voices of certain political leaders act on them, leading to the most unfortunate of outcomes. Hammad is just an image – perhaps stereotypical at times – of these young men who chose to end their lives while taking the lives of many innocent others. However, this is not to say – and DeLillo does not say it anywhere – that this image is representative of all young Muslim men, but only those who, in the spirit of the novel, turn themselves into falling men (figuratively and literally speaking).

Conclusion

While possessing the potential for becoming enormous protagonists in Western 9/11 narratives, terrorists are more usually absent, relegated to the past from where they came, while focus is laid, naturally enough, on the thoughts, actions and feelings of the Westerner actors. Nevertheless, the canon of 9/11 fiction comprises texts which centre on the most aggressive form of alterity of the twenty-first century, written by some of the most important novelists of today. As such, the short story 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta' and the novel *Falling Man* represent otherness by employing textual practices that many consider ill-predisposed to the Oriental Other and which often feature in discussions of Western Islamophobia. The image of the terrorists supplied by the two texts is certainly by no means positive; Martin Amis, who is particularly outspoken and politically incorrect, imagines a Muhammad Atta who barely resembles the real one – as described by various factual sources – with the intention of highlighting his otherness, his *out-of-this-world-ness*, and not in the least to make him a representative Muslim figure. Arguably, since it employs direct quotation of the ideas of some well-known Islamist thinkers and agitators, Amis's short story is not a stereotypical generalisation, nor an exercise in Orientalism. Although accused of embracing the totalising hegemonic discourses of the West, neither is DeLillo's *Falling Man*. As far as the image of the Muslim Other is concerned, DeLillo's text is closer to a stereotypical representation born inside the mind of a Westerner, but, again, what is foregrounded is not the image of the Muslim per se, but that of the 'Muslim' terrorist. Both authors incorporate at least allusively intertextual references to famous Occidentalists texts, which is at least indicative of the fact that they have attempted to probe the mindset of the perpetrators of 9/11, including their aims, before turning them into literary characters. Perhaps each came to the conclusion that indoctrination is as powerful a tool in the Eastern world as it is in the Western, and that the socio-cultural context and its mechanisms of control have the potential to trigger disaster. Amis' text seems to foreground and accentuate a familiar stereotype, that of the evil Muslim terrorist, while at the same time defamiliarising him by taking away his religious faith and the indoctrination that goes with it. For his part, leaving this figure in the background, DeLillo delivers the estrangement effect in an opposite manner: by constructing a character 'normal' by Western standards who is however subject to manipulation of a kind that Western minds cannot comprehend.

Notes

¹ Reprinted as 'Terror and Boredom: The Dependent Mind' in M. Amis (2008) *The Second Plane*, London: Jonathan Cape, pp. 47-93.

² In the preface to *The Second Plane*, Amis amends the term, claiming that he would prefer being considered an anti-Islamist because 'phobia is an irrational fear, and it is not irrational to fear something that says it wants to kill you' (p. x).

³ Released by the FBI and translated for *The New York Times*. Available from: <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/30/terrorism.september113>>

⁴ Dated 1996, the translation of Atta's testament was released by the FBI soon after the attacks. Available: <<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/atta/resources/documents/will1.htm>>

⁵ In an interview published by the German newspaper *Bild am Sonntag* in 2002, Atta Senior claimed that his son had been framed by Mossad to appear as one of the hijackers, but that he was still alive and in hiding. See Connolly, K. (2002) 'Father insists alleged leader is still alive,' *The Guardian*, September 2, 2002. Available from: <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/sep/02/september11.usa>>

⁶ The postmodern idea was also explored by philosophers Jean Baudrillard, in *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2003), and Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida in their dialogues with Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophies in a Time of Terror* (2003).

⁷ 'A Day of Terror: The President; A Somber Bush Says Terrorism Cannot Prevail,' *The New York Times* September 12, 2001.

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Notes on Contributor

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