

A few notes on the novel after September 11, 2001

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ABSTRACT

For the specific category of novels after September 11, 2001, the contemporary Anglo-American literary theory has created the term post-9/11 novel. Naturally it is a general model which applies to a select group of novels only. As the name suggests, it is a novel responding to the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center. From the aspect of literary theory this definition of the novel is an obvious return to the conception of literature reflecting the spirit of the day. Terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (and in British literature also the terrorist attacks against public transport in London on 7 July, 2005) thus create a new historical experience which must be reflected in the aesthetic experience.

The principal problem: Post-9/11 novel has not yet been anchored methodologically in any theoretical conception. The result is that simply those novels are included that reflect the event. As a methodological key could serve for instance the application of some theses of Georg Lukács, of course without their ideological connotations. One of his principal theses is that "the greater complexity of social relations requires new means for the new poetry." From this aspect the majority of the novels on the theme of September 11 do not represent any change, the "pre-September" means are sufficient. Still there is a group of novels which reflect the change of social relations and are real representatives of the post-9/11 novel, because they reflect the spirit of the new times in its totality. They express the totality of the times and the totality of the connections. The change is the better apparent that the authors of these works of prose are successful writers and their books represent a smaller or greater turn in their work. Although the novels are quite different, they share several features: the date of their origin, the response to the "new world" after September 11, the seeking of roots and causes of the present social situation, and the clear formulation of the author's standpoint, which makes it a committed novel.

Keywords: September 11, 2001 and the novel / Contemporary American fiction / Contemporary British fiction / Theory of the novel / Writers and society

The assumption that one particular historical event can produce a change in the direction of modern prose, sounds at first like methodological nonsense. The contemporary literary theory of course works with the hypothesis of the influence of September 11, 2001 and even appears to have found a new great theme in it.

11 September 2001 and literary theory

On a general level, admission of the influence of a historical context on the style and character of the novel means a revival of mimetic conceptions, in particular the conception of literature as a mirror of the spirit of the times. A discussion on the possible influence of a particular historic event, here September 11, 2001, makes sense only within this methodological frame. That is why the theoreticians when defining these problems often explicitly or implicitly oppose the conceptions denying the mimetic character of literature.

One of the causes of this debate is the ethical failure of some modern theoretical conceptions when they face some extreme events. While persisting within the limits of their methodological approach, they tend to fall into a sort of „ethical trap” – as it happened e.g. to Frederic Jameson, a noted American theoretician, who is based in poststructuralism and Marxism, and who wrote about September 11: „The event in question, as historical, is incomplete and one can even say that it has not yet fully happened.” (Jameson 2001) Although this may be an extreme, Jameson’s words reveal the lack of sensitivity in a type of poststructuralist thinking; to be more precise: evidence of an insensitive analysis detached from reality.

Another similar „ethical trap” of modern theory when it faces a historical trauma is the assertion that (to put it simply) history is a kind of fiction. Against this essential form the writers themselves are in a polemic by their open ambition to comment on the contemporary events, to present artistically the essential contemporary issues. In other words: thinking about the influence of September 11, 2001 on the modern novel would make no sense from the aspect of the theory of fictional worlds. Novel responses to topical events by no means present fictional worlds parallel with „our” reality, with its own laws. On the contrary: they do their best to capture the laws found in „our” new reality. As a matter of fact, Roth’s *The Plot against America*, can be read as a polemic with those who take history for a kind of fiction. Roth believes that history can be taken for fiction only by those people who never experienced anything historical.

For the contemporary western literary theory, the 11th September means a return from poststructuralist and narratological constructs and a return to the thinking about literature as such. That is no paradox – theoretical thinking no longer deals with itself and tries to define the new position of the novel in a new historical reality. The theses of the determination of the novel by historical and social contexts reappear, and the individual existence of man cannot be removed from such a context. In these conceptions the artistic text is anchored in the author’s view of the world. From it is derived the artistic intention, and the world view also shapes the style of the work of art. The importance of a work consists, among other things, in the fact that the conflict in the novel is treated in the whole range of a particular historical reality, depicts the conflict in the novel as *typical* of a particular period, and captures it in the whole *totality*. This shows an effort – on the part of the writers as well as the critics – to return to literature its dignity, even its social role (Head 2008, Tew 2007).

Conception of the *post-9/11 novel*.

For the specific category of novels *after September 11, 2001*, the contemporary literary theory has created the term *post-9/11 novel*. Naturally it is a general model which applies to a select group of novels only. As the name suggests, it is a novel responding to the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center. From the aspect of literary theory this definition of the novel is an obvious return to the conception of literature reflecting the spirit of the day. Terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (and

in British literature also the terrorist attacks against public transport in London on 7 July, 2005) thus create a new historical experience which must be reflected in the aesthetic experience.

Head and Tew strictly differentiate between the *post-9/11 novel* and the culture of the 1990s as a novel restoring the ideological commitment of the writers. The spirit of the period expressed by the *post-9/11 novel* should correspond to the era of socio-political insecurity, which changes the aesthetic views of the writers and the readers. The literature of the 1990s, when we look back, is naive in the postulation of issues of multi-ethnic coexistence or seeing the terrorism as a social threat.

The spirit of the times expressed by the *post-9/11 novel* is above all the spirit of the trauma due to the radical simultaneous changes in personal identity and social order. Literature has always described traumas but here the trauma is conceived as an all-social phenomenon.

The other features of the *post-9/11 novel* are based on the experience of the trauma by the whole society: the novels describe individuals obsessed with the uncovering of their own past, people who search for their identity, and often suffer from a loss of memory or an intensive feeling of alienation. The *post-9/11 novel* presents a nervous world full of fear and conflicts.

Difficulties with the conception...

The conception involves several major problems:

1. Although the term has been used frequently, it has not yet been unambiguously defined. As if the definition was replaced by the name of the conception, which reveals its content. When speaking of the *post-9/11 novel*, instead of a definition we operate with a number of novels. The definition of the conception is replaced by a set of texts, about which the literary theoreticians and critics have surprisingly been unanimous.

2. The texts are relatively not numerous – about 40 to 50 books, which may sound a negligible number when the world production of literature is considered. From the aspect of the skeptical critics it thus may appear that the *post-9/11 novel* is an artificial term, with no support in reality, that there has been no transformation of the novel. Moreover, the concept is still restricted to English and British literature. On the other hand, the supporters of the *post-9/11 novel* point out that the term is linked with renowned writers (see below), about whose books a lively and controversial debate has been going on. The question whether really a change has taken place in the history of the novel, will be answered by the time and further development. Personally I believe that we should accept the conception of the *post-9/11 novel* and even if the interest of the authors later declines, the *post-9/11 novel* by will remain an interesting epoch in the development of modern prose, especially with respect to the exhaustion of postmodernist poetics in the 1990s.

3. *Post-9/11 novel* has not yet been anchored methodologically in any theoretical conception. The result is that simply those novels are included that reflect the event. The problem appears especially when literary publicists try to differentiate the *post-9/11 novel* from the novels of the preceding period.

As a methodological key could serve for instance the application of some theses of Georg Lukács, of course without their ideological connotations. Lukács wrote: "The style of the novel [...] is determined by the character of the relations between being and consciousness, between man and environment. The more comprehensive and complete these relationships, the more realistic in scope and more truthful in particulars, the more significant the novel. One must also look at these relationships historically. For not only is the environment of man, the economic structure of society caught in

ceaseless proces of change, but each particular structure yields a changing and often quite different picture and condition nad consciousness of different classes.” (Lukács 1964) This could help to solve several methodological lapses in the conception but at the same time it would create a new major problem: from the *post-9/11 novel* those novels would be excluded which treat the event only thematically. Why, I am going to explain below.

4. Narrowly linked with this issue is the very important problem that the *post-9/11 novel* is heavily normative in ideology. The existing canon did not define the *post-9/11 novel* explicitly, but between the lines it very clearly implies as the only correct way of writing and thinking about September 11. This is shown by the controversy about those few books that try to advance in thinking and treat the effects of September 11 on a deeper level. In particular in the USA, political correctness is part of this ideological norm.

Example One

With a controversial reception has met e.g. the collection of shorter texts by Martin Amis on the theme of 11 September and its impact on the present life, *The Second Plane* [2008]. Amis accurately demonstrates that in the American perception the 11 September has become a cliché – he speaks of the cliché of the mind and the cliché of the heart. His book emphasizes the independence of mind and secularism, in opposition to the religious fundamentalism. Unfavourably received was his thesis that contemporary life is marked by enormous boredom, which is an accompanying feature of terror. He meant the boredom felt by ordinary people in the searches and the security measures. He himself writes of the boredom felt when at the airport a bag of his six-year-old blonde daughter was checked. The references to the colour of the hair brought Amis accusations of racism: Amis’s comment on the typical colour of the complexion of Islamic terrorists was not in line with political correctness either. He was sharply criticized by Terry Eagleton, who called Amis a rightist; *The Second Plane* makes Eagleton’s Marxist stomach sick (Amis 2008, Perloff 2008).

Why not September 11 as a theme

The above objections should not be a deconstruction of the *post-9/11 novel* or its rejection. In order to be able to work with the term, it must be handled with correct methodology and its features should be defined because the development of modern novel shows that the *post-9/11 novel* exists as a type. But it is necessary to re-examine critically the texts which form the *post-9/11 novel* because if this novel wants to be an expression of the change in the development of the novel, the change must be primarily reflected by the novels themselves.

The novels on the theme of September 11 do not represent merely a change in the theme – the authors came with a new theme. The event itself – however global and traumatizing its impact was – cannot be a change if it concerns the sujet only. The change consists in turns of thinking and perception of reality due to this event. A turn in literature will take place only when the spirit of social change, a new spirit is reflected in the literature.

The assertion of a change of the world after September 11, 2001 on one hand has become a cliché, on the other a paradigm. Literature as such should serve for our understanding of the world. What is important in art is the substance behind the reality. The *substance* hidden behind random phenomena of every day. The capturing of the *complexity of the epoch*. This complexity cannot be understood thematically – the issue is not external phenomena but a system of interlinked

phenomena. So if the claim of the change brought about by 11 September is a paradigm, the novel should point out the aspects of the paradigm.

The novels of September 11 which only have this theme, mostly lack such depth. There is no insight into the paradigm, no attempt at capturing the complexity of the phenomena. The terrorist attacks and their repercussions often impress the reader as something accidental, replaceable and banal, as unnecessary for the subject. Often there is no deeper relation between the events and the characters. The authors as if became resigned to the capturing of inner connections.

Most probably this resignation to deeper connections is due to the saturation (or even oversaturation) of the readers by visual presentation of the events and the exhaustive treatment of the theme by the media. There is hardly anybody who had not seen at least once the picture of the plane hitting the WTC towers or a picture of the blazing skyscraper. As if on one hand we did not need the novel in order to „understand“ the event, and on the other hand as if the event avoided an artistic presentation. This may be called the *problem of imagination*. If the *post-9/11 novel* is to present the experience of the terrorist attack in a new, more intensive way, it will reach the limits due to the fact that the writers (mostly) start from the same sources as the readers.

Examples no.2 – problem of imagination:

Don DeLillo in the *Falling Man* [2007] builds his story upon the atmosphere of fear and the trauma after November 11. The problem of this ambitious novel is absence of action and deeper psychology of the characters: Keith survives the collapse of the WTC towers and as a consequence of the horror she experienced he reunites with his wife. Lianne (his wife) leads a therapeutic group of people suffering of Alzheimer's disease and she herself lives in fear of this disease. Her ailing mother after some time dies. Mother's friend Martin in the seventies belonged to a group of German leftist terrorists. Keith forms an attachment to a woman who shares with him the trauma of September 11. The alienation increases, Keith begins to look for the sense of life in playing poker and finally ends up in Las Vegas. The story is interspersed with fragments of the story of "the falling man", a street performer who in commemoration of the victims of September 11, hangs himself upside down in public spaces, and with chapters about the preparation of Islamist terrorists for the attack. In the very conclusion this line intersects with Keith's line, when the action returns in a circle to the collapsing towers.

The characters of the novel are not heading for anywhere, they do not develop, they only find themselves in increasingly deeper stereotype and alienation. All these alienations and emotional scars are very banal and make the novel one great emotional cliché. Emptiness in itself cannot create sense and likewise ambiguity (as to meaning) does not make a novel intellectually stimulating. This is aptly illustrated by the problem with poker to which Keith became addicted. Why exactly poker, what is its function in the novel? How should it be understood? In a Marxist way - as a symbol of capitalism? In an existential way - as a reaction to the trauma of September 11 in the form of escape to the ritual of playing cards and numbers, which have no meaning? Or as an expression of the philosophical interest in the mechanism of chance?

The climax of the perplexity is the conclusion returning to the beginning, the attack at the WTC. At first sight this is spectacular but in reality it means that the life stories of DeLillo's characters have no effect. The conclusion of the novel, which might have brought some culmination (or something formerly called a catharsis), is replaced by the beginning.

In the novel *The Good Life* [2006], Jay McInerney avoids the 11th September. The book begins on September 10 and next jumps to September 12. 11. The left-out day was commented upon by the

author in an interview: „...everybody can fill this space himself. Everybody saw the towers crashing, though perhaps on television only.“

The awarded novel by Ken Kalfus [2006], *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* will surprise you by the absolute banality and lack of inventiveness in the description of the tumbling of the New York towers. It is hard to say whether this is due to the writer's resignation (for the same reasons as in McInerney) or whether it is due to his limited writing talent.

The source of the trauma of the child character in the novel by Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* [2005], is the death of his father in the WTC building; still, for the sujet itself, the terrorist attacks have no major motivation; the character implies that he could be equally traumatized by the death of his father in a car accident or a fall from the stairs.

All these texts have one thing in common: their authors on one hand know of the importance of the theme, on the other hand are unable to treat it in its complexity. There is no deeper causality between the attack at the WTC and the subsequent trauma of the novel's characters – the trauma can have originated in anything.

The problem of imagination is treated by Terry Eagleton, when he in his book *Holy Terror* [2005] deliberates about the possibilities of the artistic presentation of terrorism. Eagleton here makes use of the analyses of two classic texts – *The Possessed* by Dostoyevski, and *The Secret Agent* by Conrad, which he reads through the eyes of a person with the historical experience after 11 September 2001, and comes to the conclusions that explain the failure of (e.g. Updike's *Terrorist* [2006]) and the ambivalent reception of some ambitious texts (e.g. the provocative story by Martin Amis, *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* [2006]) classified with *post-9/11 novel*. Eagleton believes that the mind of a terrorist is so remote from human understanding that it prevents the reception of the novels; and at the same time the writers are unable to enter the mind addicted to this form of extreme violence. Eagleton's theses are of course refuted by the novel by Salman Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown* [2005], published in the same year.

Example no. 3 – Can a terrorist's mind be understood?

Eagleton's thesis that the terrorist mind is so deranged, so different from human comprehension that it cannot be artistically captured, is confirmed by John Updike in the *Terrorist* [2006]. Updike's novel reveals that he knew of this problem - and in the end rather cleverly avoided it – his “hero” is no terrorist.

The main character is Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, a young man of eighteen, son of an Egyptian father (whom he never saw) and an Irish mother. The story takes place from April to September 2004 and is set in the city of New Prospect in New Jersey. Ahmad lives only with his mother and is just finishing high school. He is deeply religious, regularly attends the study of the Koran with the fundamentalist Imam Rashid. According to his advice, after leaving school he takes the driving test and gets a job in the Excellency furniture store run by Muslim immigrants. His educational adviser at school, Jack Levy, objects to this. This Jewish renegade, aged sixty-three, frustrated and poisoned by the work routine, by the stupidity of American youth and by his failed marriage believes that the intelligent and sensitive Ahmad should continue in his studies. Both characters, however contrasting in age and however antagonistic, as most people believe – a Muslim and a Jew – share the rejection of the superficial consumer American society, its aridity and alienation. Frustration due to the impossibility of uniting one's personal goals and the direction the society is taking is of course solved in a contrasting way: in Levy by resignation and atheism, in Ahmad by action and fervent faith. In the

Excellency company, Ahmad lets himself be recruited by Charlie Chehab, the owner's son, for another strike against the Great Satan. Charlie's hostility to the West has purely economic foundations: he can see the poverty in Muslim countries exploited by greedy capitalists. Thus Ahmad is preparing for the holy mission of a suicide assassin.

In the mean time Jack Levy becomes the lover of Ahmad's mother and is thus able to watch what the young man is doing. The sister of Levy's wife works at the Ministry of Interior Security and regularly informs Beth of what is going on in the office. In this way information about the activity of a terrorist cell in New Jersey gets connected with Levy's knowledge of Ahmad's work. FBI, however, bungles the job and Ahmad succeeds in leaving with a truck loaded with explosives on his suicide mission: to blow up, in the morning rush hours, the tunnel under the Hudson in New York. On the way Levy enters the vehicle and tries to talk him out of it. When the explosives are to be detonated, Ahmad realizes that the true substance of God is life and he defuses the charge.

In the novel several controversial moments appear although they are cleverly hidden by Updike's narrative superiority. In the first place it is a very positive portrayal of Ahmad: his faith in God is pure and sincere and results from frustration over the world. God is for him a refuge, a companion in his solitude, God mediates contact with his father, whom he never knew. Ahmad is a perceptive, sensitive and bright: his fundamentalism is rather an outcome of manipulation. Negative characters are – literally – Imam Sheikh Rashid, a demagogue, manipulator and coward, and Charlie Chehab, a CIA agent- provocateur planted in the Islamic community, abusing Ahmad for his own ambition. Ahmad thus on one hand represents the repulsive fundamentalism, on the other hand he is a bit of the rebellious American teenager. To the positive aspect is added the author's social feeling of Ahmad's situation. So there are actually two Ahmads, a rebel and an Islamic fundamentalist, and these two contrastive roles (a most logical question: why Ahmad does not rebel against the transparent dogmatist Sheikh Rashid, when he rebels against his liberal and tolerant mother?) are not satisfactorily joined to form one coherent personality.

Ahmad's fundamentalist views are sort of expected, they confirm rather than create our idea of the way a fundamentalist thinks. Even the end of the novel is a trap for the author: If Ahmad had performed the act of terrorism, it would have been what was expected. Its failure is again an unconvincing solution.

Jack Levy is psychologically a more plausible person but even he exudes certain artificiality – especially because he is to stand for something higher than an ordinary man, something allegorical. Levy is clearly associated with *levee* (pronounced in the same way): Jack Levy is thus literally a "barrier", a "protective wall" against Islamic terrorism. His courageous deed, making Ahmad change his mind and thus preventing the disaster in the Lincoln Tunnel, appears too much inducing, or directly didactic.

One of the ill-fated features of novels after September 11 as a hypothetical genre as well as of thus thematized culture – American in particular – in general (especially film) is patriotism and a tendency toward political correctness: the definition of the only one correct way of thinking about problems brought by September 11. Thus even the Terrorist offers subliminal ideological manipulation. The opponents and at the same time partners in the story are a Jew and a Muslim. But both are primarily American. Updike in his novel several times suggests that Muslims living in the West and supporting terrorists show absurd ingratitude because they have a good life in the democratic West. As a positive example for a Muslim community the Chehab family is presented: they love the U.S.A. for the chance they obtained. Charlie is so much fond of his new country as to become a CIA agent. The didactic feature, ideological manipulation, providing readers with correct models of behaviour (the brave Levy, Muslims loyal to the USA), turn most against Updike.

The novel after September 11

I had mentioned the possibility of applying the methodological stimuli of Georg Lukács to a better understanding of the problems of the *post-9/11 novel*. One of his principal theses is that the greater complexity of social relations requires new means for the new poetry. In the essential Lukács essay "Narrate or Describe" we can read: "The new style developed out of the need to adapt fiction to provide an adequate representation of new social phenomena. [...] New styles, new ways of representing reality, though always linked to old forms and styles, never arise from any immanent dialectic within artistic forms. Every new style is socially and historically determined and is the product of a social development." (Lukács 1978). From this aspect the majority of the novels on the theme of September 11 do not represent any change, the „pre-September“ means are sufficient. Still there is a group of novels which reflect the change of social relations and are *real* representatives of the *post-9/11 novel*, because they reflect the spirit of the new times in its totality. They express the totality of the times and the totality of the connections. There are even two pictures typical of the *post-9/11 novel*: in American literature it is the picture of the falling man, in British literature the obsession with the planes as possible sources of danger.

The change is the better apparent that the authors of these works of prose are successful writers and their books represent a smaller or greater turn in their work. Although the novels are quite different, they share several features: the date of their origin, the response to the „new world“ after September 11, the seeking of roots and causes of the present social situation, and the clear formulation of the author's standpoint, which makes it a committed novel.

Examples no. 4 - *post-9/11 novel*:

Salman Rushdie was among the writers who as the first wrote about the change of mode of writing after September 11. In his essay „*Step Across This Line*“ we can read:

„The Attack on the World Trade Center was essentially a monstrous act of imagination, intended to act upon all our imaginations, to shape our own imaginings of the future. It was an iconoclastic act, in which the defining icons of the modern, the world-shrinking aeroplanes and those soaring secular cathedrals, the tall buildings, were rammed into each other in order to send a message: that the modern world itself was the enemy, and would be destroyed. It may seem unimaginable to us, but those who perpetrated this crime, the death of many thousands of innocent people were a side issue. Murder was not the point. The creating of a meaning was the point. The terrorists of September 11, and the planners of that day's events, behaved like perverted, but in another way brilliantly transgressive, performance artists: hideously innovative, shockingly successful... [...] Like every writer in the world I am trying to find a way of writing after 11 September 2001, a day that has become something like a borderline. Not only because the attacks were a kind of invasion, but because we all crossed a frontier that day, an invisible boundary between the imaginable and unimaginable, and it turned out to be the unimaginable that was real. On the other side of that frontier, we find ourselves facing a moral problem: how should a civilized society [...] respond to an attack by people from whom there are no limits at all, people who will, quite literally, do anything...“ (Rushdie 2003).

Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* [2005] is a historical novel about the birth of Islamic terrorism, based on the hypothesis that modern world events cannot be taken in isolation because everything is connected with everything else. The novel goes to the roots of the contemporary epoch and courageously seeks historical connections. Rushdie abandoned his former poetics and burlesque exaggeration, his conception of history as an absurd grimace, and sets his characters in the merciless

world of revenge and retribution, in a history in which it is no longer clear what the cause is and what the effect is, and where the endless cycle of violence leads to an absolute destruction.

“Everywhere was now a part of everywhere else,” says at the beginning of the novel one of the major characters, India Ophuls. “Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another’s, were no longer our own, individual, discrete.” (Rushdie 2005)

This is an expression of one of the central ideas in the novel. Its story covers more than sixty years and takes place in almost the entire world. When the events are arranged chronologically, *Shalimar the Clown* starts in the prewar Strasbourg, continues with its occupation by Germany and with participation of one protagonist, Max Ophuls, in the French resistance movement. We also get to Delhi in the second half of the sixties, to London in the seventies, Los Angeles from 1991 to the eve of September 11, 2001 (the destruction of the twin towers is a signal for the transformation of the relation to the Muslim community after the first bomb attack against the WTC in the mid-nineties). Further episodes are set in New York, Egypt, Pakistan, the Philippines. In the center of attention is of course Kashmir and its modern fifty-year-long history. Rushdie watches the transformation of a small part of earth from a paradise idyll into a war zone, full of fear and senseless violence. All these different places and different times interweave in a chain of causes and consequences gradually uncovered by the reader: the events from the French resistance are linked with terrorist activities of the Kashmiri separatists. The author makes these links in a clever way, the parallels are original and provocative (e.g. when he points out the relativity of “resistance”: in wartime France heroism, whereas in Kashmir the resistance against Indian occupation is terrorism) but especially without the least sign of artificiality.

The story begins in L. A. in 1991, when the eighty-year-old Max Ophuls, a former U.S. Ambassador to India, is murdered on the threshold of the house where Ophuls’ twenty-four-year-old daughter India lives, by his Kashmiri driver. The murder is at first seen as a political attack but its cause is much more personal. In the second part we move more than forty years back to Kashmir, the village of Pachigam. The whole Kashmir is described as a paradise full of tolerance, love and mutual understanding. Pachigam is inhabited by a Hindu – Muslim – Jewish community but religion plays not role, all of these people are Kashmiri. A symbol of the multicultural society is the gradual merging of Hindi and Muslim cuisine so that finally no one can tell whose meal they are eating.

In the centre of the novel is the love of Shalimar and the beautiful Bhúmi, nicknamed Bhoonyi. He is a Muslim, she is a Hindu, and their love is in the danger of developing into a religious conflict but their village becomes united and the village council permits the marriage. After the some time the temperamental Bhoonyi, dissatisfied with her husband Shalimar, who continues to be in love, and with the idyllic immobility of the paradise Kashmir, takes the first opportunity of running away. She becomes the mistress of Max Ophuls, U. S. Ambassador to India. Shalimar, disgusted by the times, broken down by Búni’s betrayal, decides to join the rebels. At first the secular branch, later the fundamentalists. From his past, only a desire for vengeance survives. After several years of waiting, he kills Bhoonyi. Next he makes use of the worldwide net of Islamist fundamentalists and in L.A. kills Max.

The lives of the protagonists interweave with the rise of the separatist rebellion, which produces terrorist groups; the guerilla actions turn into a war of everybody against everybody else. The rebels split into fractions, get more radical, Taliban arrives, Al-Kaida, mujahideens and the rest. The original secular separatists, who only desired a “Kashmir for the Kashmiri” became a minority and the uprising develops into a religious conflict. Islamic fundamentalists kill both Hindus (neighbours become nonbelievers) as well as the more liberal Muslim families. Ethnic purges conducted by the Indian army cannot prevent the exodus of Hindus from Kashmir. Suicide killers make their appearance. Rushdie brilliantly captures the logics of violence: revenge follows revenge, action is followed by

counteraction, although it does not make sense. The endless cycle of violence produces horrors hard to describe.

Rushdie resorts to the time-tested approach of looking at great events from below. Fundamentalism is confronted with the needs and pleasures of everyday life. The existential experience of simple village people is seen by Rushdie from two angles. On one hand frustration and the rising feeling of the whole world as an enemy, which makes young men fight against everybody because everyone is an enemy, and on the other hand the shock of older people, for whom the “new times” destroyed their world, ideals and illusions. But this is not the feeling of the Kashmiri only. When the war begins, Max old parents shut themselves into their inner world because the coming times have nothing for them, and Max himself remains the same when old. His and Búni’s daughter India perceives him as a man of the past; he used to be a visionary, he can be an ironic commentator of contemporary America but he no longer knows how to live there. After Max dies, India watches TV news: she can see Gorbachev as he suddenly became an unimportant man from the past because Yeltsin took over the power, she can see Nelson Mandela being released from prison and walking hand in hand with his wife Winnie... “India understood that she was looking at an allegory of the future, the future her father did not want to imagine... Morality and immorality, the beatified and the corrupted, walked towards the cameras, hand in hand, and in love.” (Rushdie 2005)

The old world falls as a victim of the new but not to its beauty, to its brutality. The knowledge that harmony and peace were mere illusions because violence and tyranny are the norm, leads to fatalistic resignation, to a feeling that it is useless to live like a good man... “Our natures are no longer the critical factors in our fates. When the killers come, will it matter if we lived well or badly?” (Rushdie 2005)

Powerlessness, bitterness, horror and their experience give Rushdie’s novel a dimension that previously we were unaccustomed to find in him. The writer’s former time-tested method of attack against authority and leaders by ridiculing them, exaggerating their negative features ad absurdum, gives way here to the feeling of being powerless. As if ridicule was no longer a weapon against evil because you cannot laugh at evil.

Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* [2005] can be interpreted through the Rushdiesque thesis that increasingly more imagination is necessary for understanding the world. *The Plot Against America* is a novel about how tyranny cannot win unless we regard it as something normal and that totalitarian regime can be achieved even via institutes of a democratic society. And also about the fact that mass oppression is due not only to the decisions made by the government executives but also by the assiduous, and non-personal work of careful employees, the particular executors on the lowest level. It is a novel about how easily the *unimaginable* can become *real*.

In the centre of *The Plot Against America* and *Shalimar the Clown* are not individuals but families and communities which got into the wheels of history and absurd mass hatred. Both writers, each in his own way, cope with something that eludes imagination. Both novels - in Rushdie’s explicitly, in Roth in the background – deal with the situation after September 11, 2001; the events of that day, however, are depoliticised, taken out of a particular historical moment, made general and depersonified.

The Plot Against America and *Shalimar the Clown* show how easy it is to produce the image of a hated enemy when we look at him through the collective perspective of the non-personal THEY. In this as if the two modern classics saw the power of the stories – to show that there are never any THEY, there are only particular people with particular lives. Their protagonists face nonsensical dogmas,

incomprehensible decisions. Man in the wheels of history, one of the cardinal themes of the modern novel.

The genre of can be defined as historical antiutopia. It takes place between June 1940 and October 1942 and is based on the idea of *what would happen, if* – if in the presidential elections in 1940 instead of F. D. Roosevelt the presidency had been won by a Republican candidate (Republicans opposed the entry of the USA in the war and promoted strict isolationism), Charles A. Lindbergh. The famous American pilot was, like Henry Ford and senator Burton Wheeler, in sympathy with Hitler's Germany, though they were not American Nazis. Roth in his novel shows how easy and fast and in a constitutional way a democratic country can turn into a totalitarian regime.

Roth achieves a remarkable effect. He makes use of historical characters, authentic period documents, interspersing them with fictional documents and in particular brilliantly imitates the rhetorics of political speeches and the language of the official power.

History is only a background to the story – no historical characters are present directly, they only appear as agents of news, broadcasting, newsreels. In the foreground is the life of the family of the narrator (and the author's alter ego) Philip Roth, in the beginning a boy of seven. *The Plot Against America* pretends to be an autobiography: a family of four, an elder brother, Summit Avenue in the working district of Newark, the school, Father's job – all this is authentic. In the novel the Jewish quarter comes to life with its individual characters – traders, rabbis, Jewish mafiosos, and street gangsters. The evocation of the local colour and the *memories* of the idiosyncrasy of everyday life in the Jewish neighbourhood forms an important line in the novel. The choice of a child's look emphasizes the confusion and complete derailment of the everyday order, which is brought to the Jewish neighbourhood by Lindbergh's candidature for presidency. The child's look thus is not the usual form of a special view but it intensifies one of the cardinal themes of the novel – the expression of *alienation* of the world of "great history" from the world of the "common" people.

The theme of alternative history is nothing new in literature but Roth does not use it for postmodernist effects or for developing conspiracy theories but to express the most topical contemporary problems: rejection of isolationism in the world, where everything is connected with everything else, expression of the feeling of alienation of political power from principles of morals and reason, or demonstration how even in a democratic system one national or cultural (or other) minority can become citizens of second category if not an enemy destined for liquidation, and how the mentality of group hatred operates.

Other important post-9/11 novel:

Philip Roth – *Indignation* [2008]: this novel set in the early fifties, with the Korean War as a background, is a similar attack against conservatism, militarism and intolerance personified by American Republicans as *The Plot against America*. Like each quality novel set in the past, *Indignation* refers to the present epoch: the Korean War clearly refers to American military commitment in the Middle East, the conservative small college in Ohio to the xenophobic intolerance of Bush's administration. The title itself clearly says what emotions are awoken in the main character when his life is deformed on one hand by the fear of being conscripted and sent to the war, on the other hand by the conformist pressure of revering the „American way of life“ and all the „great American values“ linked with it.

Ian McEwan – *Saturday* [2005]: One of the most earnest and artistically successful attempts at capturing the contemporary spirit – fear, uncertainty and vulnerability in a world full of anarchy and destructive violence. McEwan is most ahead in the complex description of the times. Each thought

and act of the protagonist is typical of the period and his social class. The novel takes place on February 15, 2003, the day of an enormous demonstration in London against the forthcoming invasion of Iraq; the protagonist, however, does not take part in it and even has doubts about its justification. Henry Perowne is a neurosurgeon, a member of the upper middle class and he knows that his development and life are linked with the development and life of London, which is linked to the rest of the world. So it is a similar feeling of the global character of actions like in Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*. In order to preserve the living standard and the security of his family and all London, it is necessary to attack Iraq, even though he is conscious of the ambivalence of the war and its consequences. The threat to the protagonist is paralleled by the threat to the West from the Islamic extremists. The brutal Baxter is a sort of fictional equivalent of Saddam Hussein. On this the objections raised toward *Saturday* were based. One was voiced by the novelist John Banville, who called McEwan's novel as a climax of the arrogance of the West, interested only in its own problems and its own culture.

In spite of the doubts (and in spite of the uncertainty about the prognosis of the next development), September 11, 2001 can really be regarded as a milestone in the development of the novel – in the sense that for the description of the new reality, new methods and means are needed. I understand them more in the ontological than in the purely formal sense. It is characteristic that the burden of this change is shouldered by the writers who through their previous work acquired the status of postmodernists and provocateurs (which sometimes is and sometimes is not the same). The new spirit of the new novel describing a new social situation consists in its liberation from strictly literary themes, the obsessive individualism and self-concentration, the postmodern playful treatment of the relation between fiction and reality, while it moves closer toward commitment, courage and readiness to speak about the topical issues of the day. The novels such as *The Plot against America*, *Indignation*, *Saturday*, and *Shalimar the Clown* show that there really is a *post-9/11 novel* and that it really is a product of normative innovation.

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