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# Imagining the Perpetrator: Reflections on the Terrorist as Other in Updike, DeLillo, and Amis

SYLVIE MATHÉ

Renewing with a form of ancient retribution, in which the punishments visited upon the sinners fit the crimes they perpetrated, Frank Bidart, in his poem “Curse” (2002), apostrophizes the 9/11 terrorists in these terms:

May what you have made descend upon you.  
May the listening ears of your victims their eyes their  
breath  
enter you, and eat like acid  
the bubble of rectitude that allowed you breath.  
*May their breath now, in eternity, be your breath.*

\*

[...]  
Out of the great secret of morals, *the imagination to enter  
the skin of another*, what I have made is a curse.

The poet’s malediction thus consists in literalizing “the great secret of morals,” which is also the great secret of fiction, namely the power of the imagination to enter the skin of another. This essay takes for its cue this great secret, *the imagination to enter the skin of another*, not as the *lex talionis* that the poem calls for but as an ethical exploration of the powers and limits of fiction in relation to the literature of 9/11. More specifically, what I wish to address is the problematic issue of the fictionalization of the 9/11 terrorists, with a view to investigate why, as critic Natasha Walter

writes (and actually titles her essay), “The leap into the terrorist mind appears too great for most authors.” This exploration of the particular challenges, in terms of ethics and aesthetics, inherent in the fictional representation of Islamist terrorists will be based primarily on John Updike’s 2006 novel *Terrorist*. This fictional venture into the forbidding territory of terrorism will then be put into perspective with three other texts in which the historical Mohamed Atta and his sidekicks figure more or less prominently: Updike’s earlier short story “Varieties of Religious Experience” (2002), Martin Amis’s “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” (2006), and Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007). The objective will be to examine how the paradigm of “otherness” is inscribed in these texts and how the Islamist terrorist ends up being construed as an “Ultimate Other” (Versluys). I shall be guided in this reflection, on the one hand, by Edward Said’s concept of otherness in his study on Orientalism and, on the other, by Emmanuel Levinas’s definition of the Other in terms of responsibility for the Other. Said shows that Western views of the East are distorted by a Eurocentric perspective that results in “othering,” i.e., treating the other as alien or inferior. By contrast, Levinas’s “Other” (capital O) implies the recognition of the full singularity of the Other as different from the same, particularly someone belonging to a different ethnicity or culture.<sup>1</sup> So whereas Said argues that “othering” is an act of reduction, of downgrading and exclusion, Levinas insists that the interpellation of the face of the Other is the bedrock of ethics. The face of the enemy is the face of the Other—calling us to the prohibition of violence and the precariousness of life, as Judith Butler eloquently argues. In her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Butler pits the death of anonymous targets against the assassination of the American reporter Daniel Pearl. In so doing, she raises, in Levinasian terms, the ethical issue of the value of life, including the lives of others, by asking, “what counts as a livable life and a grievable death” (xv):

Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life*? . . . Indeed, Daniel Pearl, “Danny” Pearl, is so familiar to me . . . But those lives in Afghanistan, or other United States targets, who were also snuffed out brutally and without recourse to any protection, will they ever be as human as Daniel Pearl? . . . Mourning Daniel Pearl presents no problem for me . . . But at what cost do I establish the familiar as the criterion by which a human life is grievable? (20, 37–8)

#### “TRUTH IS STRONGER THAN FICTION”

What followed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks was a resurgence of political Manichaeism in terms of a division of the world into good and evil, Us and Them, or, as

Benjamin Barber had phrased it in the 1990s, “Jihad vs McWorld.” The geopolitical consequences of this initial response are well known. But what of the novelistic responses? If novelists are characterized by imaginative empathy, if indeed empathy is their trade—“The core skill of a novelist is empathy,” Mohsin Hamid, author of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, reminds us—how do they manage to exercise this skill in a world shattered by terror attacks? How can imaginative empathy be engaged at the service of an event that defies representation? As Henry Perowne, the protagonist of Ian McEwan’s oblique 9/11 novel, *Saturday* (2005), puts it, “The times are strange enough. Why make things up?” (66). Why indeed not stick to fact and nonfiction—a refrain that rings through the critical reviews of the decade?<sup>2</sup> Cullen Murphy, long-time editor of *The Atlantic*, thus accounts for the magazine’s decision to stop publishing fiction starting in 2005<sup>3</sup>:

In recent years we have found that a certain kind of reporting—long-form narrative reporting—has proved to be of enormous value . . . in making sense of a complicated and fractious world. . . . Certain kinds of nonfiction writing have claimed some of the territory once claimed by fiction. Not because nonfiction writing has become ‘fictional,’ in the sense of taking liberties, but because certain traits that used to be standard in fiction, like a strong sense of plot and memorable characters in the service of important and morally charged subject matter, are today as reliably found in narrative nonfiction as they are in literary fiction. Some might even say ‘more reliably’ found. (Cullen Murphy, quoted in Donadio)<sup>4</sup>

So while writers like V. S. Naipaul argued that “the novel’s time is over” and that only nonfiction can render the complexities of this new world, novelists went on pondering the impact that 9/11 would have on their vocation. “Is it too soon?” asked DeLillo in his seminal essay, “In the Ruins of the Future,” while calling for the salutary, hoped-for “counter-narrative”: “The narrative ends in the rubble, and it is left to us to create the counter-narrative” (34). Following the initial phase of shock, the texts were slow to come and even slower to tackle the question of the terrorists’ representation. If entering the skin of the other—becoming Madame Bovary—has traditionally been the prerogative of the novelist, somehow the leap of imagination required, the ethical gap to be bridged, when dealing with terror attacks and suicide bombers turned out to be arresting factors. While nonfiction writing could thrive on this territory of the “contemporary extreme” (Durand and Mandel), terrorism and terrorists appeared to put in jeopardy the powers of fiction. In his essay “Outtakes and Outrage: The Means and Ends of Suicide Terror,” Samuel Thomas interrogates the impasse that the world of suicide martyrdom

entails: "How then are we to proceed from this impasse? What exactly . . . would constitute an acceptable way of measuring and mediating the humanity of the suicide bomber?" (441). The question of humanity, in its ethical implications, is here central. As terrorist violence, in its very nature, defies humanity, imagining terrorism and its perpetrators forces the mind to court the limits of humanity. Reflecting upon the imagination of evil, the psychoanalyst Ruth Stein stresses the breach of humanity that it implies:

Thinking about evil requires a tremendous effort of the imagination and a willingness to encompass mentally a totally threatening phenomenon. . . . The shocking absence of compassion in evildoing is jarringly discordant with our Western ideals and humanistic values. . . . (396)

How then does the novelist put his powers to work "to understand something that is meant precisely to annihilate any understanding as well as any physical (or normal) existence" (396)? If Conrad, in his exploration of the "heart of darkness," knew how to capitalize on "our fascination with the abomination," "the horror, the horror," it seems that in the context of post-9/11 America the imaginative probing of that horror was severely restrained by a reluctance or a flaw of the imagination to enter into the other's mind. Hence the question: Is the challenge facing novelists attempting to write about 9/11 forbidding in itself, a kind of "blind spot" (Agamben) in representation as is the case with fictional attempts to deal with the Shoah?<sup>5</sup> Or can it be viewed as a corollary of the "irremovable strangeness of being different" (Homi K. Bhabha), resulting in a form of incapacity to perceive the other from within the landscape of cultural difference—what *The New York Times* critic Rachel Donadio zeroes in on when she asks, "for a writer with no Arabic and a limited understanding of Islam, is literary skill enough? . . . How far can the Western literary imagination take us into the minds and motivations of Islamic terrorists?" ("Under Western Eyes")

#### AHMAD

Ian McEwan, for one, argued in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 that "now was the time to just go back to school, as it were, and start to learn" (quoted in Donadio), a cautious admonition to fellow novelists to approach the subject only after undertaking serious research. Yet, while Updike's abundant display of the suras of the Qur'an testifies to his thorough background research for *Terrorist*, the novel paradoxically suffers from this scholastic exhibition. What comes to mind here is Cynthia Ozick's warning, her caveat about another one of Updike's fictional

“others,” the Jewish writer Henry Bech: “Beware of any character requiring more sociology than imagination” (quoted in Shainin). Contrary, for instance, to his brilliant handling of arcane computer science in *Roger’s Version* or of angioplasty procedures in *Rabbit at Rest*, Updike’s use of his Quranic research feels laborious in *Terrorist*. His characterization for once suffers from it, as do his dialogues. Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, his eighteen-year-old Arab American protagonist from New Jersey (who has been indoctrinated by a fundamentalist imam from Yemen and secretly maneuvered by an undercover CIA agent to have a bomb explode in the Lincoln Tunnel) is never the “natural” that Updike’s earlier Pennsylvania protagonists are. When the novel begins, Ahmad, who has grown three inches in the past year, is about to graduate from high school. The opening sentence in italicized free reported speech—“*Devils, Ahmad thinks. These devils seek to take away my God*” (3)—echoes in a familiar way, and we enter the novel moving in and out of the character’s consciousness, feeling securely anchored in Updike territory. As in *Rabbit, Run*, it is springtime, and the halls at Central High smell of perfume. Caught in a web of intertextual references, the reader thus embarks on a journey where the trail is at once new and studded with shocks of recognition.

In terms of sheer weight, *Terrorist* remains the most in-depth investigation so far of why and how a young man beset by otherness in Western culture might opt for the road of terrorism. Spanning a period of six months, between April and Labor Day, Updike’s narrative arc retraces a kind of abortive coming of age, the germination and ultimate renunciation of a homegrown terrorist bent on jihad. Choosing to deal with terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11 from the point of view of a would-be perpetrator from *inside* the nation, rather than from that of a victim, is testimony to Updike’s imaginative audacity. Anna Hartnell rightly points out that “this attempt by a seventy-four-year-old New Englander to penetrate and ventriloquize the mind of an eighteen-year-old Islamist terrorist seems like a huge thematic jump for Updike” (484). While *Terrorist* may not be the “fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship” (153) that Richard Gray and Michael Rothberg call for, Updike’s angle, given the context of the novel’s publication at the heart of the war on terror, is nevertheless one that deserves full recognition: “Updike’s decision to tackle the perspective of the ‘perpetrator’ is a courageous attempt to pull away from the prevalent cultural tendency to privilege the category of ‘trauma’ in treatments of 9/11 that emerged in its wake and with notable rapidity in the years 2005–2007” (Hartnell 478). Moreover, what Updike chose to privilege in his novel is less the political dimension of Islam than its religious impact. Returning to his familiar territory of Middle Atlantic, Middle America, but shifting his focus to

the Arab American community, the novelist thus deliberately set out to explore what Hartnell identifies as “the unnamed source of America’s post-9/11 fear: the Islamist enemy within” (480). The genesis of the novel, as revealed by the author in several interviews, lays bare the religious concern that lies at its core:

I imagined a young seminarian who sees everyone around him as a devil trying to take away his faith. . . . The 21st century does look like that, I think, to a great many people in the Arab world . . . I think I felt I could understand the animosity and hatred which an Islamic believer would have for our system. Nobody’s trying to see it from that point of view. I guess I have stuck my neck out here in a number of ways, but that’s what writers are for, maybe. (quoted in McGrath)

In his interview for the French daily *Le Monde*, Updike further clarified his purpose in writing the novel as a way of “understanding, or at least imagining *the other side*”: “to write a novel from the side of empathy, if I may say.”<sup>6</sup> So, by a leap of the imagination, the young Christian seminarian became the troubled Arab American Ahmad, a teenager from a small New Jersey town in the period following 9/11.

The protagonist’s struggle to retain his faith and live by it is of course familiar ground to Updike. Ahmad, the offspring of a mixed marriage between a “red-haired American mother, Irish by ancestry, and an Egyptian exchange student” (13), who met at the local campus of the State University of New Jersey, has been raised by his mother ever since his father “decamped” when he was three years old. Having converted to Islam at the age of eleven, Ahmad has been following the teachings of Shaikh Rashid, an imam from Yemen who has become his “surrogate father” (13). Burning with the fire of faith, Ahmad feels alienated in his surroundings, and he keeps repeating that his whole purpose is to “hold to the Straight Path” (225). Locked in binary thinking, Ahmad sees devils all around him, “*confusing things and making the straight crooked*” (11), so he lets himself be drawn into a jihad plot to become a suicide bomber and gets prepared to die an apocalyptic death that will be a way to punish his desecrated nation. Unwilling, however, or unable to take him all the way, Updike eventually and unexpectedly rescues his would-be terrorist, having him yield before some unlikely life force that takes over at the last minute and releases him from his doom.

Ahmad’s sudden illumination, as he drives his truck full of explosives through the Lincoln Tunnel, is based on the fifty-sixth sura, “The Event”: that “[God] does not want us to desecrate His creation by willing death. He wills life” (306). The very wording here strikes a familiar chord, echoing in uncanny fashion the last sentence of Updike’s short story “Pigeon Feathers”: “that the God who had

lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever" (33). Though separated by over half a century, "Pigeon Feathers," one of Updike's most celebrated coming-of-age stories, and *Terrorist*, a more risky venture into "the other side," are eerily resonant, and nowhere more so than at the moment of epiphany that concludes both stories. But where the conclusion of the short story carries with it the seal of revelation, *Terrorist* closes the loop of the novel in bleaker fashion: the last sentence, in its finality, "*These devils—Ahmad thinks—have taken away my God*" (310), sends us back to the opening sentence, "*Devils, Ahmad thinks. These devils seek to take away my God*" (3), turning it into a kind of nihilistic self-fulfilling prophecy. If the change of tense strikingly sums up what has been accomplished in the novel, Ahmad's last-minute change of heart in the darkness of the Lincoln Tunnel appears more as a graphic hallucination—the pattern of the tiles "explod[ing] outward in Ahmad's mind's eye in the gigantic fiat of Creation, one concentric wave after another, each pushing the other farther and farther out from the initial point of nothingness" (306)—than as a deliberate decision or a genuine revelation. If anything, the epiphany is negative and, as Peter Herman notes, "Ahmad's final thoughts admit defeat" (707). What future lies ahead for him remains the reader's guess. Thus, the resolution of the plot, contrived through a series of hasty coincidences that defy any kind of plausibility, leaves the novel hanging in a kind of vacuum. If, admittedly, Updike's protagonist was conceived as "an extension of the troubled teenage character in his early story 'Pigeon Feathers,' who comes to feel betrayed by a clergyman" (McGrath), the result with Ahmad is far less convincing than had been the author's earlier portraits of Christian characters undergoing similar crises of faith—most memorable among them, of course, his adolescent persona David Kern.

Why the graft from the seminarian to the Islamic believer does not take, however, has less to do with the plot's short circuits and more to do with the language Updike invents for his eponymous terrorist. By contrast, the character of the fatigued Jewish high school counselor, Jack Levy, who at the eleventh hour jumps into the truck to rescue Ahmad, or the Lebanese American Charlie Chehab, a complex figure whom Updike uses "to bridge the divide separating America and the Islamic terrorist" (Herman 712), seem much more alive on the page. Ahmad, however, remains stranded on *the other side* of the divide, a divide that is first and foremost linguistic. Whereas Charlie's speech, punctuated by his recurring affectionate apostrophes to Ahmad as "Madman," carries the reader in its spontaneous flux, Ahmad's idiom mires him in a no-man's-land. Indeed, what millennial

from New Jersey would speak like Ahmad? His syntax is oddly literary while the vocabulary and rhythm of his speech mimic the many suras that are quoted and commented on in the novel. In his fight against the so-called “devils” of his world—the materialism, obscenity, cupidity, decadence, and nihilism of American society—Ahmad thinks and speaks in some kind of archaic version of the English language, formal and foreign sounding at best, stilted and implausible at worst. The absence of contractions in his speech is the first marker of oddity, giving his exchanges with other characters a strange imbalance that is further compounded by his recurrent formulaic professions of faith and sentential sayings:

- I seek to walk the Straight Path. (148)
- [T]he American way is the way of infidels. It is headed for a terrible doom. (39)
- I do not find that television encourages clean thoughts. (172)
- The obsession with sex confesses the infidels’ emptiness, and their terror. (214)

His daily lexicon, as reflected in his speech, includes such words as “trivialize” (39), “consorting” (70), and “enamored” (180), and such phrases as “menial living” (35), “minion of the state” (141), and “sorely astray” (230). If not exceptional in themselves, these locutions sound out of tune for a millennial, the sentences reverberating an unnatural formality not to say a downright artificiality, as in these few examples:

- There is nothing in Islam to forbid watching television and attending the cinema, though in fact it is all so saturated in despair and unbelief as to repel my interest. (70)
- Is there a plan developing, with these seeds that are being watered? (200)
- [T]he mission is mine, though I feel shrunk to the size of a worm within it. (237)
- It would slay and inconvenience many believers. (292)

Such awkwardness, issuing from an author whose ear for dialogue has always been such a strength, indicates the limits, in this case, of his “logic of empathetic identification” (Thomas 438).

Ahmad is thus a *terrorist manqué*, though less so because of the unforeseen happy ending than because of what turns out to be a failure to fully grasp and penetrate the otherness of the character. James Wood, in his review of the book, makes the point that “it is the otherness of Islamicism that is missing in the book.

Despite all the Koranic homework, there is a sense that what is alien in Islam to a Westerner remains alien to John Updike." Ahmad is too far and too close at once: too far from authenticity, and too close to Updike's earlier Christian protagonists. He, thus, joins the ranks of those "identikit terrorists" of fiction, "[a]ssembled from jihad-mongering journalism and propaganda videos and websites," that the critic Pankaj Mishra derides, characters who "make Conrad's witheringly evoked revolutionaries in *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* look multidimensional."<sup>7</sup> In addition, for all his desire to enter the mind of the other and to set down what he meant to be a "sympathetic," even "loving portrait" (McGrath) of an Islamic believer-turned-terrorist, Updike cannot quite manage to render the other as Other. Mired in scholasticism, his terrorist remains a flawed, unconvincing avatar.

#### MOHAMED, MUHAMMAD, HAMMAD

In his earlier story "Varieties of Religious Experience" (2002), one of the very first fictional attempts at dealing with 9/11, Updike chose a polyptych format to explore the attacks, this time frontally. While *Terrorist* considers the aftermath of the event and its domestic repercussions in the life and psyche of a hyphenated Arab American teenager, "Varieties of Religious Experience" plunges in medias res. Juxtaposing four fragments, each with its own reflector reverberating the events from four different angles, followed by a coda reprising the opening section that resumes the storyline six months later, Updike leads the reader successively into the point of view of the witness, the perpetrator, the victim (in one of the Twin Towers), and finally, the passenger (on one of the hijacked planes).

The story's second section, which imaginatively deals with the perpetrator's experience, serves as a fictional re-creation based on witness accounts of Mohamed Atta's stay in Florida. This narrative strand focuses on the ringleader of the 9/11 hijackers, referred to in the story as plain Mohamed, and his accomplice Zaeed—Ziad Jarrah, the hijacker pilot of United Flight 93. Set a few weeks before the attacks in a sleazy roadside strip joint on the east coast of Florida, the men are downing whisky upon whisky in accordance with their instructions: "their training regimen had inculcated the importance of blending in, and getting drunk was a sure method of merging with America" (90). Contrary to Ahmad Mulloy flaunting his difference in *Terrorist*, Mohamed and Zaeed fake assimilation and pretend to a sameness that is but a semblance, an act. And contrary to the stance of sympathy, even affection, that Updike claimed to be prevalent in his characterization of Ahmad in *Terrorist*, the point of view is here distanced, even though the narrator gives us direct access to Mohamed's inner thoughts. We enter his mind as he wrestles with the obscenity

of his surroundings, which he perceives as a kind of hellish experience—a naked woman entwining herself upside down around a pole, a trio of sexy dancers, the liquor flowing all around—while endeavoring to keep the secret of his mission from being inadvertently revealed: “Within Mohamed his great secret felt an eggshell’s thickness from bursting forth” (94). In spite of the plunge inside the terrorist’s consciousness, resulting in the reader’s direct involvement through the use of free reported speech, what prevails is a sense of estrangement and alienation.

The sketch, as seen through the eyes of the drunken protagonist, remains hazy and seems eerily discordant, placed as it is in the story between the reactions of a witness, Dan Kellogg, whose faith in God suddenly vanishes as he watches the World Trade Center South Tower collapse from the vantage point of his daughter’s apartment in Brooklyn Heights, and those of two victims: Jim Finch, trapped in his office in one of the Twin Towers as the smoke gradually invades the floor; and an elderly woman from Princeton named Carolyn, one of the passengers on board United Flight 93, who tries to make sense of the confused situation as the plane plummets into a Pennsylvania field. These three narrative strands, which culminate respectively in Dan Kellogg’s “revelation of cosmic indifference” in front of the crumbling tower, Jim Finch’s desperate rallying of his “nine-to-five family” before jumping from the tower (99), and Carolyn’s final cry for God’s mercy before the fatal crash of United Flight 93, are meant to engage in dialogue with the Florida sketch of Mohamed and Zaeed in the “land of infidels” (93). But the story fails to achieve an overall effect of integration. The scene featuring the drunk Mohamed has something dreamlike or nightmarish about it, betraying an impossible empathy, an “othering” of the imagination. When the story returns at the end to Dan Kellogg, back in New York six months later, the sense of dislocation is further heightened. Dan’s “conversion to atheism had not lasted” (110), for beyond the question of faith, he has discovered that attendance at the Episcopal church with his fellow members is a necessary part of his life, akin to a civic pledge—“part, and not the very least part, of getting along, of doing their best, of being decent citizens” (111). Yet what light the resolution of his religious crisis sheds on the other fragments remains murky. In keeping with the title, borrowed from William James’s famous study (1902) of individual religious experience, the “varieties of religious experience” tackled in this portmanteau story all bear the stamp of singularity. All of the fragments raise, in one form or another, the question of faith, of confrontation with the other, of death and the “sickness of the soul,” yet they remain disjointed and the narrative strands formed by these “varieties” do not cohere. As Versluys argues,

In this case . . . the gravitational pull of the story fails to position terrorism within manageable reality. The far-flung narrative strands do not come together. No overarching image or metaphor can be found to tie up all loose ends. The story is an example of the heteropathic imagination, but at the same time it announces its defeat. In its very structure, the story dramatizes terrorism as an impossible topic (167).

The historical figure of Mohamed Atta resurfaces, with a different spelling, in British writer Martin Amis's short story, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta." Prior to approaching 9/11 in fiction, Amis wrote numerous nonfiction pieces, beginning with "Fear and loathing" (which later became the essay "The Second Plane"), which appeared in *The Guardian* just a week after the attacks. This essay interestingly ends on a plea for what he calls "species consciousness":

[S]omething over and above nationalisms, blocs, religions, ethnicities. During this week of incredulous misery, I have been trying to apply such a consciousness, and such a sensibility. Thinking of the victims, the perpetrators, and the near future, I felt species grief, then species shame, then species fear. ("Fear and loathing")

The sense of a species community, however, soon vanished as Amis grew increasingly querulous and critical of Islamic fundamentalism. This shift in spirit culminated in the three-part essay he published in *The Guardian* for the 5th anniversary of 9/11, called "The age of horrorism." In this vindictive piece, Amis tackles the question of suicide-mass murder, which he writes is

[A]stonishingly alien, so alien, in fact, that Western opinion has been unable to formulate a rational response to it. . . . Suicide-mass murder is more than terrorism: it is horrorism. It is a maximum malevolence. The suicide-mass murderer asks his prospective victims to contemplate their fellow human being with a completely new order of execration. ("Age of horrorism")

And it is precisely this "new order of execration" that Amis fictionally enacts in his contemporaneous short story, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta," through the imaginative reconstruction of the last two days of Mohamed Atta's life.

Beginning in Portland, Maine and ending at the moment of impact on the North Tower, the story portrays Atta as the very "horrorist" of the *Guardian* essay. The graphic physicality of the portrait, the insistence on the character's acute chronic constipation and sexual frustration, the detestation that can be read in his face, the hostility that transpires from his every pore, everything conspires to make of him an alien in his world. Dismissing political as well as religious considerations, Amis confines the terrorist's motivations to an abstract hunger to kill: killing

becomes “the core reason” for everything, the means to enact Atta’s “all-inclusive detestation,” “his pan-anathema” (161): “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, and with an almost sinister precision” (154).

The focus on the last two days of Atta’s life allows Amis to intersperse known facts—the data compiled about the hijackers’ whereabouts in the days preceding the attack, Atta’s last will and testament, the final jihad instructions—alongside imaginative forays into Atta’s body and soul. Employing physical details, such as Atta’s contemptuous and grimacing expression on the widely circulated picture of his face, Amis projects into the character a pathological intestinal blockage bordering on the grotesque, which leads Atta to seek a vial of “holy water” from a dying imam, whom he visits in a hospital in Portland. This alleged “holy water,” supposedly from the town of Medina, is to be drunk “when you feel your trial is near,” says the imam. It will, in fact, trigger the explosive release of Atta’s bowels, simultaneous with the explosion of the tower. In return for the bottle of water, the imam asks Atta to tell him about his induction by the Sheikh, namely Osama Bin Laden. Totally undocumented, this episode is part of the imaginative reconstruction of the character, allowing Amis to account in his fiction for what remains unexplained in Atta’s last moves, i.e., why he and his sidekick Abdulaziz al-Omari drove to Portland on September 10. The penetration into the other thus becomes a kind of subjective fantasy for Amis, a projection of his own “horrorist” bias. Mishra here again riles against “Amis’s genitals-centric analysis [constipation and sexual frustration] of radical Islam.” As such, “Atta is utterly ‘othered’” and the portrait of the horrorist becomes “an exercise not of the heteropathic but the idiopathic imagination” (Versluys 160, 159).

Atta reappears yet again, not as main subject but as minor character, in the plot of Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007). DeLillo’s case, of course, stands apart in any study of the literature of 9/11, insofar as he is the novelist who has been said to have “invented” 9/11. “There is a curious knot that binds the novelist and the terrorist,” he writes in *Mao II*, and much of his fiction indeed builds upon this knot, making of his preoccupation with terrorism and conspiracy the center of the plots of most of his earlier works, from *Libra* to *Mao II*. Though the bulk of *Falling Man* is concerned with the story of Keith Neudecker, a survivor of the attacks on the Twin Towers, each of the novel’s three sections concludes with a counternarrative dealing with a fictional terrorist figure by the name of Hammad, one of the “muscle men” assigned to assist Atta in the hijacking of AA 11, along with

a second character, Amir, who is an avatar of Mohamed el-Amir Atta himself. The novel thus retraces in kaleidoscopic fashion Hammad's itinerary: his radicalization in Hamburg, his reading of the Qur'an and attendance at the mosque, his conversion to Jihad in Afghanistan, the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, the wait in Florida, and finally the descent into the Hudson Corridor on board the hijacked plane. DeLillo skims through these topoi in neutral fashion, as though leafing through a how-to-become-a-terrorist brochure. Atta's presence by Hammad's side remains rather shadowy, as a kind of domineering, fanatic guide on the path of jihad:

Amir said simply there are no others. The others exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them. This is their function as others. Those who will die have no claim to their lives outside the useful fact of their dying. (176)

Though impressed by what sounds to him like "philosophy," Hammad is nevertheless divided, having to resist "the need to be normal" (83) and the attraction of the comforts of the West: "He had his visa card, his frequent flyer number. He had the use of a Mitsubishi" (171). Yet he will turn himself over to his mission for it is what gives shape and direction to his life and, most importantly, what makes him a part of the brotherhood: "Shed everything but the men you're with. Become each other's running blood" (83).

Within the larger structure of the novel, the effacement of the self within the group echoes the main protagonist's similar reactions following 9/11: incapable of surmounting his trauma, Keith lets his life drift, absent and alien to himself, increasingly drawn to the oblivion he finds in casinos and the world of poker. In this sense, Keith becomes the Other. The impact of the plane on the North Tower, as lived by Hammad in the cockpit, and the explosion felt by Keith inside the tower operate like the baton of otherness passing from terrorist to victim. The collision literalizes the "convergence of the victim and victimizer" (Gamal 102) in this ultimate "encounter with strangeness," a tour de force that can be read as answering Martin Amis's dual interrogation in "The voice of the lonely crowd": "What was it like to be a passenger on that plane? What was it like to see it coming towards you?" This syntactic and symbolic transfer, bringing the novel full circle and back to the beginning, has nothing to do with empathy. Keith is said at one point to be "becoming the air he breathed" (230). Having physically survived the explosion in the tower, he psychically dissolves in the ruins of the disaster. Just as his body now includes "organic shrapnel . . . human flesh that got driven under the skin," the air he breathes is from the aftermath of the catastrophe, that makes him turn to ash inside. Meaning "evaporates" (Versluys 39) in the here and now; melan-

choly takes over. Thus, far from being the necessary, salutary “counter-narrative” DeLillo was calling for in his essay “In the Ruins of the Future,” the novel is in fact “death-driven,” “an utterly aporetic and deliberately antiredemptive narrative”: “the terrorist attacks in no way precipitate a cleansing or catharsis” (Versluys 21). What follows the collapse of the Twin Towers is a form of numbness and death in life, a “self-othering” (27) that destroys everything vital in the characters.

In conclusion, what these four texts present us with are four modalities of imagining the perpetrator: rendering the Other as the same (*Terrorist*); staying confined in the heteropathic imagination and dramatizing terrorism as an impossible topic (“Varieties of Religious Experience”); othering the terrorist as the “horrorist” in a projection of the idiopathic imagination (“The Last Days of Muhammad Atta”); and finally, operating a transfer between the Other and the same at the level of estrangement and alienation (*Falling Man*).

This is, of course, but a small sample of the literature of 9/11, though coming from some of the most seasoned novelists of our time. In each case, however, the ethic and aesthetic responses to the challenges posed by the representation of the perpetrator seem to remain incommensurate to the task. Seen “under Western eyes,” the Islamist terrorist appears beyond the pale of a convincing fictional representation, as though the words of Theodore John “Ted” Kaczynski, the notorious “Unabomber” of the 1990s, could be applied to the perpetrators of 9/11 and their followers: “You couldn’t figure me out then, and you can’t figure me out now.” This may explain why much of the response to the literature of 9/11 has been lukewarm at best, and downright critical in most cases. If DeLillo, Updike, and Amis fail in their “struggl[e] to define cultural otherness,” it is for want of “a capacious moral vision,” says Mishra, one that would recognize the overwhelming power of “belief and ideology.” Instead, for these writers, Islam and the East remain empty abstractions, often filled by self-appointed defenders of Western civilization in order to identify alien and dangerous “others” (Mishra). In other words, what this literature foregrounds is a radical deficit in the apprehension and comprehension of the Other.

To break this deadlock of representation, what is needed perhaps, as Versluys points out, is “an attempt to triangulate the situation” in order to break the binary thinking of Us and Them. Witness, for instance, Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Laila Lalami’s *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* or, in a different context, Yasmina Khadra’s *The Attack*.<sup>8</sup> Another track to follow might be what Derrida calls for in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (2003): “the deconstruction of the notion of terrorism is the only politically responsible course of action” (xiii, italics mine). This might be another way out of the deadlock not only in politics

but also in fiction. Yet the question remains of how to penetrate otherness in order to deconstruct it, and the risks this involves.

By way of conclusion, we might remember what Toni Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark*:

I am interested in what prompts and makes possible this process of entering what one is estranged from—and in what disables the foray, for purposes of fiction, into corners of the consciousness held off and away from the reach of the writer's imagination. . . . [I]magining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, *becoming*. (4)

Can one *become* the Other, the terrorist, if, as Philippe Roger writes about DeLillo, terrorism like the sun cannot be confronted face to face?

#### NOTES

1. The "Other" corresponds to Paul Ricœur's *ipse*, i.e., the other in the singularity of his trajectory and promise, the other as subject engaged in history.

2. Among other titles, "Truth Is Stronger Than Fiction" (Rachel Donadio, *The New York Times*, Aug 7, 2005); "Dangerous Characters" (Benjamin Kunkel, *The New York Times*, Sept 11, 2005); "The leap into the terrorist mind appears too great for most authors" (Natasha Walter, *The Guardian*, July 24, 2006); "Does literature sell 9/11 short" (*The Guardian*, Feb 23, 2007), "Novels about 9/11 can't stack up to non-fiction" (*USA Today*, Sept 11, 2007).

3. Updike's short story "Varieties of Religious Experience" originally appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* (November 2002).

4. See, for instance, Lawrence Wright's remarkable study of the genesis of Al Qaeda, *The Looming Tower* (2006), or C. J. Chivers's exemplary accounting of the Chechen terrorist attack on the school in the Russian town of Beslan, "The School," in *Esquire Magazine* (June 2006).

5. This essay is part of an ongoing reflection on the question of the fictionalization of 9/11 terrorists. An earlier, shorter version has appeared under the title "Representation and Excess: Is the Figure of the Terrorist in 9/11 Fiction a 'Blind Spot' (Agamben) in Representation?" in *Excess(es)*, Mounir Guirat editor (Med Ali Editions, 2016, pp. 85–97).

6. *Le Monde*, Interview with Lila Azam Zanganeh (January 5, 2007, p. 12, italics mine).

7. Mishra, in his attack, is lumping together Updike, DeLillo, and Amis.

8. See Nash, "Writing Back to America," 108–115.

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