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Terror and the Liberal Conscience: Political Fiction and *Jihad*—The Novel Response to 9/11

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After the attacks on the World Trade Center and Washington, D.C. in 2001 the Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication devised a new classification. The category, September 11 Terrorist Attacks 2001-Fiction, responds to a distinct genre of political novels. In the light of the philosopher Richard Rorty's contention that the Western novel can clarify the moral and political options that confront the West, the article examines what insight, if any, into the motive for violence, and the capacity to recuperate a sense of liberal progressive purpose, the novels of 11 September afford?

After the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001 the Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication devised a new classification. The category, *September 11 Terrorist Attacks 2001-Fiction*, responds to a distinct genre of political novels that include among others Jay McInerney's *The Good Life*, Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, and John Updike's *Terrorist*. The American novelist's call to the phenomenon of global *Jihad* finds an echo in Western Europe and even Australia where Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, Michel Houellebecq's *Platform*, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist* explore, in different ways, the sociology of the modern city in an age of terror. What light, if any, does the contemporary novelist shed upon that distinctive, new, urban character: the *jihadi* ? Approaching a decade of intellectual reflection on the events of 9/11, what do these novels tell one, more particularly, about secular, modern liberalism adrift in an interconnected, but by no means integrated, cosmopolitan world?

That the modern novelist would derive literary inspiration from terrorism is hardly surprising. As its modern incarnation evolved from the late nineteenth century in the form of the Russian anarchist movement, the *Narodnaya Volya* (People's Will), and its campaign

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against Czarist absolutism, terrorism as a tactical *modus operandi* has sought deliberately to cultivate the drama and symbolism of the violent act. Consequently, the great twentieth-century investigators of the human condition found in its fictional representation an idiom suitable for exploring the conduct of small-group revolutionary political actors prepared to countenance bloodshed to advance their preferred worldly utopias.

At the start of that century, Joseph Conrad dissected the fanatic revolutionary personality and its narcissistic attraction to nihilistic violence. Through characters like “the incorruptible Professor” in *The Secret Agent* (1907), Nikita Necator and the “super revolutionary,” Peter Ivanovich, in *Under Western Eyes* (1917), Conrad revealed the morally challenged inhabitants of a bohemian *demi-monde* preoccupied by *amour propre*, revolutionary ideology, betrayal, and conspiracy.

In the interwar period, André Malraux offered a similarly compelling portrait of the revolutionary terrorist, although with Asian characteristics, through the figure of Ch'en Ta Erh in *Man's Estate* (1933). Ch'en, like “the Professor,” views himself “not as a fighter, but a sacrificial priest” in the revolutionary cause.¹ After 1945, Graham Greene, among others, explored the moral ambivalence of Cold War politics and the practice of terror and counterterror through characters like Alden Pyle in his classic 1955 novel, *The Quiet American*.²

In this context, the philosopher, Richard Rorty, argued that the novel rather than the social sciences, or the “philosophical treatise,” represents “the genre in which the west excelled.”³ For the novel more successfully captures the sources of contemporary cruelty and suffering, and constitutes one of the “principle vehicles of moral change and progress.”⁴ Rorty identified in the modern novel a moral distinction between the terrorist and the totalitarian propensity to violence, and the bourgeois, liberal conscience that considered cruelty “the worst thing we do,” either as political means or end. He further maintained that the virtue of a novelist like George Orwell consisted in his capacity to clarify the moral and political options that confront humankind.⁵ Somewhat differently, in a review written in 2005, Rorty considered Ian McEwan's *Saturday* fulfilled an analogous moral function, bringing one “up to date about ourselves. It makes vivid our uneasiness about the future and our queasy, debilitating agnosticism.”⁶

Given that the political novel has in the recent past demonstrated a flexibility capable of generating insight into the motive for violence, together with the capacity to recuperate, even if only ironically, a sense of liberal progressive purpose, what insight and redemptive possibilities do the novels of *September 11 Terrorist Attacks 2001-Fiction* afford?

Guilt and the City

The novels identified at the beginning of this study as characteristic of this post-9/11 literature are set in a disenchanting modern cityscape inhabited by middle- or lower- middle-class characters—a bourgeois world of commercial transactions, sexual infidelity, status anxiety, and an unremittingly secular lifestyle. The denizens struggle with urban anomie, financial and emotional need, and a city that beyond immediate family and friends sustains only a minimal sense of civil association. Even before any terror attacks take place this is a society that lacks any sense of social solidarity to hold it together.⁷

The characters who inhabit the fragmented modern *urbs* are not so much dead souls as lost ones. In John Updike's *Terrorist* the unlikely hero, Jack Levy, is a sixty-three-year-old school guidance counselor with a master's degree from Rutgers trapped in a stale marriage with his obese, part-time librarian wife, Beth. The latter spends the best part of her day as a couch potato glued to her La-Z-Boy recliner “with a lever operated leg rest,” existing on

a diet of oatmeal raisin cookies and midday soaps. Jack is a Jew, “but not a proud one.” In fact, fear and loathing squirm inside him “like the components of a bad restaurant meal.” His remaining task in the world is “to die, to create a little breathing room on this overburdened planet.” “Uxorious sadism protects his gloom,”⁸ until his interest in Central High student and homegrown *jihadi* Ahmed Molloy ignites him into a brief, guilt-ridden affair with Ahmed’s aging hippy mother, Teresa.

Guilt also consumes the putative *Good Life* that McNerney’s characters Corinne and Russell Calloway enjoy. Corinne had “become a connoisseur of guilt.”⁹ Her lover, investment banker Luke McGavock, also savors “the unfamiliar taste of marital guilt.”¹⁰ Although dwelling in a more desirable zip code than the Levys, the Calloways nevertheless cling to a precarious existence in a Tribeca loft. Russell is an editor for a big publishing house. Corinne is troubled by her failure as a wife, mother, and aspiring script writer. Her “anxiety was a permanent condition.”¹¹ They used to be a golden couple, “the example that everyone pointed to, the haven of domesticity for their single friends and later a harbor of solace and inspiration to which they returned when their first marriages failed.”

Not any more. Russell, hardened by “two decades in the city,” conducts a seedy affair with Trisha his former assistant. Russell’s betrayal justifies Corinne’s decision to embark on her doomed love affair with Luke. Meanwhile, Luke, who narrowly missed immolation in the disintegrating World Trade Center, is alienated from his style-icon wife, Sasha, and the world of finance capital in which he once functioned as a master of the universe.

Loss, and the fragmentation of family life, rather than betrayal, permeates nine-year-old Oscar Schell’s all-consuming search to come to terms with the death of his father in the World Trade Center at 10:24 a.m. on 11 September in Jonathan Safran Foer’s solipsistic *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.¹² The themes of emptiness and desolation within a sea of familial dysfunction analogously constitute the core of DeLillo’s *Falling Man*. The performance artist David Janiak, who mimics those falling from the North Tower on 11 September, forms the backdrop against which Keith and Lianne Neudecker play out their alienated, uptown existence. The novel begins with property lawyer and poker player, Keith, emerging from the falling towers and finding his shell-shocked way to the apartment he once shared with his estranged wife, Lianne, a freelance editor, and their son Justin. Like the couples in *The Good Life*, angst defines Keith and Lianne’s relationship.

Lianne contemplates abandoning the city after 9/11. Her more resilient mother Nora dismisses the idea:

“Nobody’s leaving,” her mother said. “The ones who leave were never here.”

“I must admit I’ve thought of it,” Lianne avers. “Take the kid and go.”

“Don’t make me sick,” her mother said.¹³

Ironically, Nora, the morally strongest character in the 9/11 novels, subsequently dies from a degenerative disease.

Keith returns to work, but struggles with the rhythm of quotidian existence, finding, instead, a sense, if not of purpose, then of relief in the aleatory world of professional poker. Discussing their meaningless existence, Lianne observes:

I know that most lives make no sense. I mean in this country what makes sense? I can’t sit here and say let’s go away for a month. I’m not going to reduce myself to say something like that. Because that’s another world the one that makes sense.¹⁴

Similarly Keith recognizes that “he wasn’t making enough money” to justify his adopted lifestyle. “There was no such need. There should have been, but wasn’t and that was the point. The point was one of invalidation.”¹⁵

Significantly, the only European character to appear in the New York novels, Lianne’s mother’s occasional lover, Martin Ridnour, finds all this anxiety self-indulgent. Martin, a.k.a. Ernst Hechinger, an art dealer with links in his student past to the West German Baader Meinhoff gang, declares America after 9/11 irrelevant. He even discovers a continuity between his undergraduate disgust with capitalism and the actions of the 9/11 bombers. “We’re all sick of America and Americans. The subject nauseates us,” he somewhat insensitively informs a table of mourners at Nora’s funeral.

Ridnour’s contempt for America’s neurotic self-examination following the events of 11 September is a theme repeated in a number of post-9/11 novels, notably Hamid’s *Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Flanagan’s *The Unknown Terrorist*. Even Ian McEwan, an author far removed from reflexive anti-American posturing, expresses a symptomatic European ambivalence about the U.S. response to 9/11 and its consequences in his novel, *Saturday*.

Unlike the dysfunctional characters in the American novels, McEwan’s Henry Perowne is a well-adjusted, successful neurosurgeon, happily married with two gainfully employed children. Like many of the characters in the *Good Life*, *Falling Man*, and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Perowne enjoys a distinctly upper-class lifestyle, although not on the scale like McNerney’s Luke McGavock or Hamid’s Changez possess as investment bankers. Nevertheless, they are all rich, confused, and insecure. Perowne thus worries, from his elegant Bloomsbury terrace, about the unbearable lightness of being British. Observing the mass demonstration against the War in Iraq on Saturday, 15 February 2003,¹⁶ Perowne oscillates between fear of the burgeoning urban jungle and enjoyment of his professional success and secure family life. His sense of wellbeing resides exclusively in the narrow circumference of the family. Life’s “grandeur,” it seems, consists in his wife’s performance of her matitudinal ablutions:

He wakes . . . to the sound of her hairdryer and a murmuring voice repeating a phrase and later, after he’s sunk again, he hears the solid clunk of her wardrobe door opening . . . then the business like tap of her boot heels on the bathroom’s marble floor as she goes about her final preparations . . . *there is a grandeur in this view of life.*¹⁷

Yet, beyond domestic grandeur, like Lianne or the Calloways, doubt about the city and its ability to sustain the good life besets Perowne,

Despite the troops mustering in the Gulf, or the tanks out at Heathrow on Thursday, the storming of the Finsbury Park Mosque, the reports of terror cells around the country and Bin Laden’s promise on tape of “martyrdom attacks” on London, Perowne held to the idea for a while that it was all an aberration, that the world would surely calm down and soon be otherwise, that solutions were possible that, reason being a powerful tool, was irresistible, the only way out; or like any other crisis this one would fade soon and make way for the next. . . . But lately this is looking optimistic. Against his own inclination, he’s adapting the way patients eventually do to their sudden loss of sight or use of their limbs. No going back. The nineties are suddenly looking like an innocent decade and who would have thought that at the time?¹⁸

Ambivalence is Perowne's Rortyan, haute bourgeois, liberal response to 9/11. Interestingly, Rorty considered McEwan's novel debilitated by an agnosticism about the West's ability to sustain its ideals. As hope, freedom, and equality diminish, Rorty avers, the liberal lifestyle becomes "smaller and meaner."¹⁹ Reflecting this uneasiness, Perowne observes the "purity of nihilism" informing the Islamist assault on the West, yet remains unconvinced by the War on Terror. At the same time, he questions the mass demonstration against the invasion of Iraq that overwhelms his Saturday.²⁰ The state of the world "consumes him," and "the marchers are there to remind him of it." "The world" he perceives "probably has changed fundamentally and the matter is being clumsily handled, particularly by the Americans. There are people around the planet well connected and organized, who would like to kill him and his family and friends to make a point."²¹ Perowne also doubts the motivation of the marchers who claim "an exclusive hold on moral discernment"²² as they gathered in Central London "to express their preference for peace and torture."²³

Somewhat problematically, Perowne's upper-middle-class solution to ambivalence is, well, shopping. He notes that:

The largest gathering of humanity in the history of the islands, less than two miles away is not disturbing Marylebone's contentment, and Perowne himself is soothed as he dodges around the oncoming crowds. . . . Such prosperity, whole emporia dedicated to cheeses, ribbons, Shaker furniture is protection of a sort. This commercial wellbeing is robust and will defend itself to the last. It isn't rationalism that will overcome the religious zealots, but ordinary shopping and all that it entails—jobs for a start and peace and some commitment to realizable pleasures the promise of appetites sated in this world not the next. Rather shop than pray.²⁴

Ultimately, however, optimism turns to pessimism as moral uncertainty and doubt struggle within Perowne. By the end of the novel "he's becoming dim with contradictory opinion, he isn't thinking clearly, and just as bad he senses he isn't thinking independently."

Indecision, domesticity, and an absence of either political or moral purpose influence the practice of the bourgeois and upper-middle-class protagonists of all the post-9/11 novels. What, is one to discern, does all this mean for the future of the city and the notion of a secular public morality beyond either domestic bliss or family dysfunction?

Urban Pathologies

Even before the attack on the World Trade Center, *the city* of the 9/11 novels has lost all sense of a shared public morality. Yet the city had once offered the freedom, and opportunity for self-discovery and self-enactment that all the characters once craved. For the couples in these novels are not only middle class; they are, for the most part, middle-aged and reflect on what they have and have not achieved.

The city—New York, London, Paris, Sydney—functions, therefore, both as character and *mise-en-scène*. In the New York novels it is the attack on the World Trade Center that upsets established relationships, exposes their fragility, and shatters comfortable middle-class illusions. In McEwan's London and Flanagan's Sydney, the prospect of a terror attack radically disrupts the familiar daily rhythm. Meanwhile, for Houellebecq, the city of Jean-Paul Sartre and Ferdinand Céline has almost concluded its journey to the end of the night. Here the city merely facilitates business transactions whether this involves sado-masochistic sex or global tourism. Everything has a price, but nothing a value and

any notion of Aristotelian *koinonia* (friendship) evaporated long ago.²⁵ Professionals like Jean-Yves and Michel are “caught up in a social system like insects in a block of amber.”²⁶ The most important consideration “in any position in this system is salary.”²⁷ The idea of individual destiny has become “a pompous absurdity.” Like Keith Neudecker, Michel finds life meaningless, but with more panache. After they visit Bar Bar, a nightclub that caters for sado-masochistic tastes, Michel’s girlfriend, Valerie declares: “I can understand that torturers exist: I find it disgusting but I know there are people who take pleasure in torturing others; what I don’t understand is that victims exist. It’s beyond me that a human being could come to prefer pain to pleasure.” Michel, by contrast, shrugs his shoulders “as if to suggest that the subject was beyond me—something which now happened in almost every aspect of my life. The things people do, the things they are prepared to endure . . . there was nothing to be made of all this, no overall conclusion, no meaning.”²⁸ In the character of Michel contemporary secular relativism finds its ultimate apogee.

The corrosive social consequences of the amoral city are experienced, however, not in Paris, but in the *banlieus* like Evry to the south of the city, where Valerie works as an executive for a travel agency. “Now,” Houellebecq says, “the local communities had the highest crime rate in France.”²⁹ Commuters run a nightly gauntlet of crime with the threat of mugging or rape as the reward for a day’s work.³⁰ Inside the agency, executives are “well paid beasts of burden. And outside are the predators, the savage world.” Jean-Yves reflects:

I was in São Paulo once, that’s where evolution has really been pushed to its limits. Its not even a city any more, it’s a sort of urban territory which extends as far as the eye can see. . . . The streets are dangerous there . . . the really well equipped gangs have grenades and rocket launchers. Businessmen and rich people use helicopters to get around . . . At ground level the street is left to the poor and the gangs. As he turned onto the motorway heading south he added in a low voice: “I’ve been having doubts lately. More and more I have doubts about the kind of world we are creating.”³¹

New York, Paris, and London are not yet São Paulo but all the novels discussed share Jean-Yves’s concern. The city that once offered the prospect of freedom from conformity, and the opportunity “to invent ourselves from scratch,” has instead turned pathological.³² The ever present threat of violence intimates its imminent dissolution.

In fact, there probably never was too much opportunity on offer in John Updike’s New Prospect in North New Jersey, at best “a bedroom town” servicing greater New York. No Prospect would probably be a better name for this North American equivalent of Houellebecq’s Evry. Yet, in the nineteenth century, “when the nation was young” the town had prospered, producing “locomotives, horseless carriages and cables to sustain the great bridges that were spanning the rivers and harbors of the Mid Atlantic region.” However, during the long twentieth century, “the economy never recovered the optimism that helped emigrants . . . endure fourteen hour days.”³³ As the Secretary for Homeland Security observes, the dormitory town is “full of Arabs-Arab Americans so called. The old mills brought them in and slowly folded.”³⁴ Consequently:

Those who occupy the inner city now are brown, by and large, in its many shades. A remnant of fair-skinned but rarely Anglo Saxon merchants finds some small profit in selling pizzas and brightly colored junk food . . . but

they are giving way recently to immigrant Indians and Koreans who feel less compelled, as darkness falls, to flee to the still mixed outskirts of the city.³⁵

Even in uptown Tribeca, where the Calloways lead *The Good Life*, they and their peers contemplate moving. Russell and his colleague, Washington, have been “thinking about it.” 9/11 crystallizes their doubt:

Although for years the burbs had been for him and Washington alike, a punch line that required no introduction . . . Among the simple articles of their faith along with a disdain for commerce in its purest form was the belief that lawn care and commuting were incompatible with the higher pursuits, that the metropolis was the source of the life force.³⁶

Now they view the life force resentfully. Russell felt he had been left behind in the 1990s, “relatively impoverished and marginalized in the new boomtown . . . stranding them like paupers in a city of zillionaires.” They feel they are witnessing “the beginning of the end of the whole idea of the city.” Washington pragmatically notes that “technology was already making concentration irrelevant.” Terrorism rendered it impractical. He and wife, Veronica, had already made an appointment with a realtor in Connecticut “for the sake of the kids.”³⁷

All that was solid melted into acrid dust. Even successful investment banker, Luke McGavock, “a zillionaire” facilitating “the movement of capital around the globe like a bee mindlessly carrying pollen,” finds that “Markets if they work correctly, supersede the will and whim of individuals. Which would seem to make me, my career of the past nineteen years irrelevant.” Luke now wonders, after the trauma of 9/11, “how were you supposed to trust your judgment when your sense of proportion and balance had been shattered, when the governing body that generally checked your emotions was overthrown, anarchy threatening to break out at any moment?”

DeLillo’s New York is equally protean. “Wilful trivia” is the only basis of a contingently acquired civic identity and easily dissolves. A moment of social solidarity occurs only once in the novel, three years after 9/11, at a demonstration against the Iraq War. Lianne attends the rally but finds, worryingly, that the “crowd did not return her sense of belonging.”

In a similar vein of metropolitan anomie, amplified by the trauma of a home invasion, Henry Perowne considers London wide open, “waiting for its bomb, like a hundred other cities. Rush hour will be a convenient time,” Perowne presciently observes. He continues, “The authorities agree, an attack’s inevitable. He lives in different times—because the newspapers say so doesn’t mean it isn’t true.” Perowne concludes that one should “beware the utopianists, zealous men certain of the path to the ideal social order. Here they are again, totalitarians in different form, still scattered and weak, but growing, and angry, and thirsty for another mass killing.”³⁸

Yet, in the end, the reader is offered no resolution to this relentless bourgeois estrangement from the city. The reader is left, finally, only with Matthew Arnold’s bleak *Dover Beach* and the fact that Londoners, like New Yorkers and Parisians now inhabit “a darkling plain, swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, where ignorant armies clash by night.”

Understanding Fundamentalism

It is not entirely surprising that anxiety about urban life and its prospects should evoke an ambiguous response to those whose disgust with urban secular attachments finds its

release in *jihad*. In novels like Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist* this ambiguity leads to a radical questioning of the liberal-democratic response to *jihadism* and a somewhat perverse empathy with terrorist motivation. Changez, the narrator and reluctant fundamentalist of Hamid's story, like the characters in the McEwan, Houellebecq, DeLillo, and McInerney novels, is impeccably haute bourgeois. Yet, while the Europeans and Americans post-9/11 remain neurotically attached to their urbanity and their doubt, this is not the case with Hamid's Changez.

Changez belongs to a mobile, ambitious, professional, upper-middle-class diaspora from the non-West. The child of a bourgeois Lahore family, Changez seems to personify the egalitarianism made possible by the American dream. Hard working and clever, Changez qualifies, like the author, for a Princeton scholarship. Subsequently, he graduates to a New York-based boutique valuation company, Underwood Samson. Complete with unstable WASP girlfriend from the Upper Westside, Changez seems perfectly adapted to the new cosmopolitan world order of finance capital. Indeed, in the flat, fast world of Underwood Samson, he immediately "felt like a New Yorker."³⁹

His identification with the city, however, is conditional. Changez finds himself empathizing with the attack on the World Trade Center. He is "scandalously pleased"⁴⁰ by the euphoria and "symbolism of it all" and delights in the "fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees."⁴¹

The reader learns of Changez' rejection of the West's hegemony through the somewhat cumbersome device of a conversation conducted over the course of a day in Lahore, the hometown whence he returns after 9/11 as a lecturer at a local university. Changez "had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world." "Your country's constant interference in the affairs of others is insufferable," he admonishes his silent American interlocutor.

"Finance," he argues, "was a primary means by which the American Empire exercised its power." Despite his success as a broker, Changez considers himself a victim of global finance. In his former life, he now realizes, he functioned merely as a "janissary" extending America's "pragmatic" capitalist imperialist reach (the novel appeared before the sub-prime crisis). Changez contemplates bitterly that he was merely a "servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war."⁴²

Liberated from his false consciousness, Changez resorts to conspiracy theory. The newly emancipated Changez believes that "a common thread seemed to enter these conflicts and that was the advancement of a small coterie's concept of American interests in the guise of the fight against terrorism which was defined to refer only to the organized and politically motivated killing of civilians by killers not using the uniform of soldiers."⁴³ He decides "to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating the project of domination" and returns to Pakistan to facilitate the end, if not the means, of Al Qaeda. He shares his new awareness with his students, one of whom plots to assassinate an American diplomat. Changez briefly appears on U.S. cable news vindicating attacks on U.S. targets, on the grounds that "no country inflicts death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries . . . as the Americans."

Conspiracy theory and the assumption that Western democracies marginalize the Muslim as an alien "other" in order to conduct a war on terror abroad and curtail civil liberties at home, also informs Tasmanian Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist*. While Hamid explores the fundamentalist's reaction to American imperialism, Flanagan, by contrast, explores what he sees as the problematic democratic response to the political environment engendered by 9/11. Flanagan considers his novel "a parable." "All around the west," he

maintains, “you see the language of Stalinism being invoked” to justify an assault on individual freedom. Terrorism has, he argues, become a tainted term. “It blinds us. Terrorism is simply murder. What is it we dislike? We dislike murder.” Murderers like Al Qaeda should simply be treated as criminals. However, because the United States viewed 9/11 as “an attack on their national honour . . . it led them into the madness that the world is now paying for.”⁴⁴

Flanagan’s novel explores the antipodean consequences of this “madness” when the New South Wales police discover three unexploded bombs near Sydney’s Homebush Stadium. The discovery unleashes a frenetic search for the putative terror cell. It focuses on Tariq al-Hakim, a computer operator moonlighting as a drug and people smuggling mule and his pole dancing one-night stand, the Doll, a.k.a. Gina Davies, who gyrates nightly at the sleazy Chairman’s Lounge in the city’s red light district of King’s Cross.

Tariq is quickly disposed of and the media in the form of cynical, Channel Six reporter Richard “shitcart” Cody, and radio shock jock Joe Cossuck conduct a three day “wild pig hunt” for the unfortunate Doll. The Australian Secret Intelligence Organization (ASIO) “spook” Siv Harmsen orchestrates the pursuit. Using recent antiterror legislation to suppress any doubt about the Doll’s Islamist credentials and feeding pliable journalists like Cody with a diet of disinformation, the (then) conservative government of Prime Minister John Howard, in collusion with a willing media, transform Doll into a homegrown *jihadi*.

It does not matter, of course, that the Doll is innocent. For an apparatchik like Harmsen the security state “everywhere apparent and nowhere visible” must prevail over minor details like evidence and the rule of law. “The terrorists want to turn all our cities into Baghdad. It’s bloody frightening,” he informs a skeptical New South Wales police counterterror expert, “and people need to be frightened.” “The people are fools” and “unless they’re terrified, they won’t agree with what we do, and why we have to do it.”⁴⁵

ASIO therefore manipulates a “loser” like Doll to serve the purposes of the developing security state.⁴⁶ “This is Australia not Nazi Germany” characters as diverse as the cynical journalist Cody and Doll’s naïve friend, Sally Wilder, assert at various points in the novel. Such labored irony together with the government manipulation of a non-existent threat, and its overbearing concern with security, has placed Australian democracy it would seem on the rocky road to Auschwitz. This imminent prospect explains Flanagan’s otherwise curious dedication of his novel to former Australian Guantanamo internee, David Hicks, and the biblically challenged identification of Jesus Christ as “history’s first . . . suicide bomber.”

Who are the Real Terrorists?

For self-confessed critics of the U.S. War on Terror, like Flanagan or Hamid, the terrorist is, therefore, either a fiction of the democratic state, deliberately created to maintain its power, or the reluctant response of those who resist its creeping authoritarianism. Terrorism from this perspective is both a Western invention and a response to Western imperialism.

By contrast, the politically unaligned novels of DeLillo and Updike depict the *jihadi* character in more plausible, if somewhat stereotypical, terms. Thus, in *Falling Man*, Hammad, a fictional participant in the attack on the World Trade Center, follows the injunctions of his mentor, Amir, better known as Mohamed el-Amir el-Sayed Hatta, a man “with a mind in the upper skies, making sense of things, drawing things together.”⁴⁷ Hammad believes that “Islam is the struggle against the enemy near and far.”⁴⁸ Unlike his far enemy in uptown New York, however, Hammad’s life “is predestined. We are carried towards the day the minute we are born . . . finding the way already chosen for us.”⁴⁹ Driven by the belief that

“the world changes first in the mind of the man who wants to change it,”⁵⁰ he considers that those he murders “exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them.”⁵¹ Given their ineluctable fate, Hammad’s only observation about his intended victims is that they ought to be “ashamed of their attachment to life.”⁵²

Hammad’s Koranically inspired assault on the North Tower on 11 September crystallizes the contrast between his unquestioning belief and the paralyzing uncertainty that configures the parallel life of Lianne Neudecker. Significantly, Lianne finds the Koran’s claim that “this book is not to be doubted” in conflict with the existential fact that she implicitly “doubted things. She had her doubts.” In fact, “she was stuck with her doubts.”⁵³

A similar contrast between doubt beset Jack Levy, and the certainty of his terrorist protagonist, Ahmed Ashwamy Molloy and Ahmed’s mentor, Sheikh Rashid drives the plot of Updike’s *Terrorist*. Rashid, like Hammad, is a one-dimensional character who seduces the naïve and impressionable Ahmed into the path of martyrdom in his seedy mosque, housed above a Vietnamese nail parlor.⁵⁴

Unlike Changez, Updike’s Sheikh cuts an unattractive figure. “His nose was thin and high-arched and the skin of his cheeks pale, but not pale as Anglo-Saxons or Irish were, freckled and quick to blush . . . but pale in a waxy, even impervious Yemeni way. Within his beard his violet lips twitched. He asked (rhetorically) ‘The cockroaches that slither out from the cupboard, do you pity them?’ ”⁵⁵ For the Sheikh, cockroaches like the *kaffir* “are manifestations of Satan and God will destroy them without mercy on the day of final reckoning.”⁵⁶

The Sheikh’s disciple, Ahmed, by contrast, represents Updike’s attempt to explain the radicalization of a vulnerable high-school student, the product of a one-parent family and a failed union between a New York Irish nursing assistant and an Egyptian exchange student. Like Hamid’s Changez, however, Ahmed is prim, and self-righteous, and his character offers little insight into why an otherwise unremarkable adolescent might convert to *jihad*. Unlike the actual homegrown terrorists of the London 7/7 attack or recent U.S. plots, whose radicalization occurred via the group socialization of “a bunch of guys,” who graduate from the hood, through petty crime to religion, and eventually *jihad*, Ahmed is a loner.⁵⁷ This is not entirely surprising given his tendency to dismiss his fellow students as “Devils” who “seek to take away my God.”⁵⁸

Adrift in a world that is slave to false images of happiness and affluence, Ahmed becomes the Sheikh’s tool and a willing recruit to martyrdom. Thus, in a scene that Monty Python might have scripted, the Sheikh informs Ahmed that

“There is a way . . . in which a mighty blow can be delivered against His enemies.”

“A plot?” Ahmed asks.

“A way,” Sheikh Rashid replies fastidiously. “It would involve a *shahid* whose love of God is unqualified and who impatiently thirst for Paradise. Are you such a one Ahmed?”⁵⁹

Ahmed indeed thirsts for paradise and the *houris* that await him. The novel proceeds to its unlikely finale where Jack Levy persuades Ahmed not to detonate the truck bomb he has driven under the Lincoln Tunnel. Acting against his indoctrination, Ahmed somewhat fortuitously realizes that God “does not want to desecrate His creation by willing death, He wills Life.”⁶⁰ Jack and Ahmed subsequently drive off, if not into the sunset, then at least to the relative safety of the Port Authority Bus Terminal.

Altogether differently, McEwan, McInerney, Foer and Houellebecq sensibly resist the attempt to characterize, or caricature, the *jihadist*. Instead, terror functions as a *deus ex machina*, a protean, comminatory presence against which the novelist's bourgeois characters explore their frailty and eke out their anxious lives. For McEwan and McInerney the terror threat amplifies the moral doubt that already corrodes the possibility of the good life. Meanwhile, for Houellebecq the Islamist terror attack on the Thai resort where Michel and Yvette cater, on a commercial basis, for both their own and the European market in sexual fantasy tourism, represents the novel's bleakly apocalyptic finale.

The Political Consequences of 9/11 Fiction

The category of 9/11 fiction leaves one with a range of responses to the new *ihadism*. Ambivalence, despair, solipsism, guilt, and anomie by turns dominate the mood of the secular, urban characters that inhabit these novels. What Richard Rorty found in McEwan's *Saturday*, namely that the West had "exhausted its strength" before it could realize its secular ideals applies to all these post-9/11 novels.⁶¹ By contrast, only the committed terrorist persona, or their fellow travelers, intent on destroying this Western secular order, possess the will and ideological purpose for decisive action. What does this tell one about the current state of the liberal conscience? Following Rorty what, if any, insight into the contemporary political condition might one glean from these novels?

By the term *political* here one understands a distinct condition that assumes the existence and association of different men and women in an urban space. As Hannah Arendt expressed it "man is realized in politics in the equal rights that those who are most different guarantee each other."⁶² For Aristotle or Cicero politics and the city complement each other. They both accommodate human plurality. Those political philosophers who revived this classical understanding in the twentieth century like Arendt, Leo Strauss, Bernard Crick, or Michael Oakeshott recognized that in an increasingly complex modern condition speech and action characterizes political behavior while distinction and equality constitute the two principles that inform its practice.

From this perspective, the more acute philosophers of the modern political predicament considered the terms of civil association very differently from those presented in the 9/11 novels. It is its capacity to permit the articulation of difference that distinguishes the political condition. It is through association as equal but different citizens that politics as an activity becomes a plausible form of rule and political freedom itself a possibility.

More precisely, in the context of the urban anxieties expressed in the 9/11 novels, it was in the lived experience of the city, where men and women from diverse backgrounds inhabited an environment not reducible to a single family, tribe, or clan that necessitated political rule, *politeia*: that is, rule according to the laws chosen by different but equally free citizens. Politics, then and now, therefore, is a distinctive response to the emergence of the city, one that offers a particular and not necessarily universal "Western" solution to the problem posed by the association of different men and women.

Undoubtedly, the enduring theme of political philosophy properly understood is the relationship between, as Leo Strauss termed it, the city and man.⁶³ At its best, the city was for the Greeks the only form of association "capable of being devoted to the life of excellence."⁶⁴ The pursuit of excellence, the true, as opposed to the ironic good life, however, required not only a distinctive political regime but also an active public or civic morality. As Strauss maintains in *The City and Man*, "for the foreseeable future, political society remains what it has always been: a partial and particular society whose most urgent and primary task is its self-preservation and whose highest task is its self-improvement."⁶⁵

The pursuit of wealth for its own sake and a permissive public morality promotes an urban regime conducive neither to excellence nor political freedom. Indeed, the luxurious city, the one most familiar to the characters of the 9/11 novels, has in many ways ceased to be a political city.

Assessing the 9/11 novels from this political perspective, it is necessary initially to distinguish those novelists like DeLillo, McEwan, McInerney, Houellebecq, and Updike who consider Islamist terror an existential threat to the political order of the city rather than a “symbolic” response to American hubris and its single-minded pursuit of global financial and political power. The latter view, held with varying degrees of incoherence by Mohsin Hamid and Richard Flanagan, asserts that *jihadi* violence against New Yorkers, Londoners, or Sydneysiders is either the rational reaction of those most alienated from the projection of American, anglospheric imperialism or a deliberate fiction of the liberal democratic order to justify an assault upon human rights at home and weak states abroad.

This fictional representation of terrorism as a modern Western myth reflects a wider and increasingly fashionable academic and media orthodoxy. Thus, *The Guardian*'s literary critic, Stephen Moss, considers Flanagan's work “an essential political tract for our time.” For Moss, Flanagan “sets up a stand-off between truth and power.” It is “a book,” he writes breathlessly, “born of such anger with the political obfuscation and media complicity that have marked ‘the war on terror’, that art has to take second place.”⁶⁶

Meanwhile, the Man Booker prize committee shortlisted Mohsin Hamid's novel. Interestingly, only a Muslim critic, Animah Kosai, writing in the Malaysian newspaper *The Star*, struck a dissenting note in the general chorus of literary approval. Describing Changez as “a mere stereotype,” Kosai perceptively observes that Hamid is “undoubtedly clever at showing the average western reader a view of the other. Oh, that's how a Pakistani living in the United States feels.” However, “to a Malaysian, who sees many other Muslim views, it rankles.” Hamid “delights in symbolism and grand gestures,” but the novel fails to explain why a Muslim “so seduced by the West would perform such an about face and turn to fundamentalism.”⁶⁷

Yet, in the end, for both Hamid and Flanagan and their self-loathing Western admirers understanding the Islamist character is irrelevant. For the War on Terrorism is simply the West's fault: end of argument. From this relativizing perspective, that ultimately undermines the foundations of political association properly understood, the West deserves the home grown threat for its failure to address terror's root cause, namely the liberal state's rejection of the non-Western “other.”

Conversely, writers like McEwan, Updike, McInerney, DeLillo, and Houellebecq reject this understanding, or at least, question it. In Updike's *Terrorist*, DeLillo's *Falling Man*, and McEwan's *Saturday* the ever present threat is real and reflects the fact that Al Qaeda launched a war against the United States and its allies on 9/11, rather than committing a trifling breach of the New York state criminal code. But having noted the threat and its corrosive impact on urban life, the characters in these novels confront it with a mixture of fear, impotence, indecision, and despair.

Houellebecq has already abandoned himself to the apocalypse and sees the modern city as a tribal gangland temporarily checked, for those who can afford it, by privatized security and gated communities. *Saturday* consists of Perowne's internal monologue about the continuing possibility of a bourgeois lifestyle in Prime Minister Tony Blair's not-so-cool Britannia, while the couples in *The Good Life* as well as Lianne in *Falling Man* brood over middle-class flight to the suburbs. The Levys, meanwhile, are stranded in New Prospect, a town discarded to the global diaspora.

Faced with the imminent collapse of public order and public morality, the bourgeois protagonists retreat into the fragile confines of the nuclear family. Perowne contemplates, throughout his Saturday, the threat facing his secular world but his response is ultimately equivocal. In DeLillo's novel, Lianne is beset by doubt, while Keith loses himself in poker. Elsewhere, guilt gnaws at the Calloways' once stable marriage.

To the extent that McEwan, Updike, and McInerney retain an attenuated faith in the possibility of political life, it does not consist in any sense of public morality. Regret, indecision, and anxiety, those most postmodern of emotions, permeate the narrative of both the New York and the contemporary European and Australian novels. The public has become anomic. To the extent that life retains an idea of the good it exists in the bonds of family and friendship. Yet, ironically, with the exception of Perowne's marriage, selfishness, deceit, and the threat of imminent dissolution beset all the families in these novels. Infidelity and betrayal dominate what remains of family life.

The only possibility of sustaining the political order resides not in reviving public morality, but in the vague hope that the sensory and material charms of capitalism will erode the fanatical will of the terrorist. McEwan, in a manner not dissimilar to the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume before him, hopes that the joys of consumption will tame the passion for *jihad*. Likewise, Updike's novel opens with an epigraph from Gabriel Garcia Márquez, "Disbelief is more resistant than faith because it is sustained by the senses." It concludes with a vision of Eighth Avenue, its denizens busily pursuing their selfish interests, but, as if by an invisible hand, creating a vibrant spontaneous order.

The great city crawls with people, some smartly dressed, many of them shabby, a few beautiful but most not, all reduced by the towering structures around them to the size of insects, but scuttling, hurrying intent in the milky morning sun upon some plan, or scheme, or hope they are hugging to themselves their reason for living another day, each one of them . . . fixed upon self advancement and self preservation. That and only that. "*These devils,*" Ahmed thinks "*have killed my God.*"⁶⁸

Updike's image of the city awakening evokes Conrad's conclusion to *The Secret Agent* where "the incorruptible Professor" walks the commercial streets of London "averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind." But in contrast to the 9/11 novels Conrad was sufficiently familiar with the revolutionary-terrorist character to know that sensory incorruptibility constituted its enduring strength. The Professor, like the current day *shahadist* was "a force." "His thoughts caressed the images of despair. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world." Conrad also recognized that the terrorist and the ideology that fueled his fanatical commitment rendered him a political "pest in the streets full of men."⁶⁹ Indeed, Conrad still provides the most compelling dissection of the terrorist and "super revolutionist" personality.⁷⁰

Conrad, unlike the 9/11 novelists, recognized the invincible narcissism of the terrorist persona. He was also aware of the non-negotiable threat such characters pose to modern, urban, political life. Contrastingly, not only do the 9/11 novels offer little apprehension of the *jihadist* psyche, they offer even less in the way of hope for recuperating the possibility of urban political purpose. Certainly, if, following Rorty, one looked to these novels for any political insight into the condition of the modern West, one would come to the dispiriting conclusion that both the city and the liberal project it once hosted is fatally damaged. In its place the 9/11 novelists leave a mixture of guilt, anxiety, despair, and self-loathing.

From the options offered in the post-9/11 novels the prospect for the city and the political order it exemplifies appear bleak indeed.⁷¹ To sustain that order, one has to look, instead, to the tradition of political thought for guidance. That tradition affords both a more measured exposition of the character and appeal of the totalitarian mindset as an ideological response to modernity together with an assessment of its political alternative. As twentieth-century political philosophers like Michael Oakeshott, Hannah Arendt, or Leo Strauss observed, it was the city that generated the possibility of the good life through the practice of civil association. Reflection on that associative life occasioned a public morality or a grammar of self-enactment and self-disclosure. The terms of that condition required a practice conceived in terms of both equality and distinction, or civic virtue, not self-indulgent solipsism.

It is increasingly clear that the global *jihadism* the West faces is a war of perception and propaganda. As Strauss perhaps presciently foretold, “the crisis of the West consists in the West having become uncertain of its purpose. The West was once certain of its purpose . . . of a purpose in which all men could be united and hence it had a clear vision of its future. . . . We do no longer have that certainty and that clarity. Some among us even despair of the future, and this despair explains many forms of Western degradation.”⁷² A society accustomed to understanding itself in terms of a universal and progressive purpose cannot lose faith in that purpose without becoming utterly bewildered.

The fact that these novelists may be helping to write the West into a state of denial or bewildered moral collapse is therefore deeply worrying. It is worrying not only for devising strategies to defeat extant threats, but also for sustaining the survival of one’s own political self-understanding. Maintaining political life ultimately requires the recovery of a Western sense of purpose and a shared public morality. This demands something more substantive than admiration for domestic grandeur and a willingness to equivocate on the crucial moral and philosophical questions of the age through an escape into conspiracy theory or the doubtful joys of urban anonymity.

Notes

1. André Malraux, *Man’s Estate* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p. 4.
2. From a different perspective Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* (London: Macmillan, 1941), Vladimir Nabokov’s *Bend Sinister* (New York: H. Holt, 1947), and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949) investigated the arbitrary terror of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, capturing, via their fictional dystopias, what all too frequently eluded political and social science.
3. Richard Rorty, “Heidgger, Kundera and Dickens,” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 68.
4. Richard Rorty, “Introduction,” in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: University Press, 1989), p. xvii.
5. Richard Rorty, “The Last Intellectual in Europe: Orwell on Cruelty,” in *Contingency Irony and Solidarity*, p. 173.
6. Richard Rorty, “A Queasy Agnosticism,” *Dissent Magazine*, Fall 2005, p. 304.
7. Social scientists, following Emil Durkheim, have argued that the conditions of modernity require a shared sense of solidarity in a political community. See, inter alia, Anthony Giddens, *Durkheim* (London: Fontana, 1986) and *Sociology: A Brief but Critical Introduction* (London: Macmillan, 1982).
8. John Updike, *Terrorist* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), p. 20.
9. Jay McInerney, *The Good Life* (New York: Vintage, 2006), p. 4.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 355.

12. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005).
13. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (New York: Scribner, 2007), p. 34.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
16. An event, of course, which actually took place.
17. Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2007), p. 55.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
19. Rorty, "A Queasy Agnosticism," p. 2.
20. McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 33.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
25. See Aristotle, *Politics* (London: Penguin, 1976), where he argues that the *polis* is more than a tribe but not a city of strangers and constituted through recognition of fellow citizens.
26. Michel Houellebecq, *Platform* (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 163.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
32. McInerney, *The Good Life*, p. 162.
33. Updike, *Terrorist*, p. 12.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
36. McInerney, *The Good Life*, p. 124.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 123–124.
38. McEwan, *Saturday*, pp. 276–277.
39. Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007), pp. 31–32.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
44. Richard Flanagan quoted in Stephen Moss, "The Art of Darkness," *The Guardian* 20 April 2007.
45. Richard Flanagan, *The Unknown Terrorist* (London: Picador, 2006), p. 142.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
47. DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 80. Hatta was of course the leading light in the planning and execution of the attack on the World Trade Center.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
54. Updike, *Terrorist*, p. 90.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
57. See Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Batt, *Radicalization in the West: The Home Grown Threat* (New York: New York City Police Department 2007), and Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

58. Updike, *Terrorist*, p. 3.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 234.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 306.
61. Rorty, "A Queasy Agnosticism," p. 1.
62. Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), p. 154.
63. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 1.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
65. *Ibid.*, *The City and Man*, p. 6.
66. Moss, "The Art of Darkness."
67. Animah Kosai "The Booker Books," *The Star* (Malaysia), 21 October 2007.
68. Original italics, Updike, *Terrorist*, p. 310.
69. Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), p. 283.
70. Thus, Nikita Necator, in *Under Western Eyes*, regards himself a celebrity of the militant revolution and only succumbs to petit bourgeois emotions when Razumov, the unknown, putative assassin of a Czarist minister, outdoes his feats of violence. On meeting Razumov, Necator performs "his horrible squeaky burlesque of professional jealousy exasperated like a fashionable tenor by the attention attracted to the performance of an obscure amateur." Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001) p. 198.
71. Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 171.
72. Strauss, *The City and Man*, p. 11.