Increasing the Volume on Post-9/11 Literature

By

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Thesis submitted for PhD Degree

University of Limerick

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Submitted to the University of Limerick, September 2015
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Abstract:

“Increasing the Volume on Post-9/11 Literature”

By

Clair King-Sheehan

The intention of this study has been to engage directly with several major novels that appeared in the wake of the fall of the Twin Towers. Although it is concerned with the trauma of the 9/11 events, its main interest is with the narratives’ more elusive political voices. It will evaluate work of highly regarded authors whose novels are closely associated with the 9/11 era. It will examine how they spoke out or evaded the issues being presented in the media of the time.

The texts most recognisable as 9/11 narratives, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, will be analysed in order to interpret how they directly engaged with the issues of the day and their immediate aftermath. While it is easy to see how Foer’s novel might be useful in working through the trauma, this research has imagined another perspective from which to view 9/11 using this novel as a vehicle. And although DeLillo’s *Falling Man* provides an accurate fictional portrayal of the experience, it does not overtly display the political prescience of this writer’s previous work.

In *Terrorist*, John Updike moved beyond the actual day and tried to help the American people visualise the experience from outside the conventional U.S. demographic. However, his novel faltered in its mission to accurately represent the “othered” character within U.S. Society.

Barbara Kingsolver’s allegorical comparison of the Bush administration and the reprehensible mid-twentieth century McCarthy period is perhaps the most politically motivated text examined here. Nevertheless the dense layer of historical-political allegory she employs manages to conceal the voice which on previous occasions had proved strident in defence of what she believed.

This study argues that the politics of the era caused writers to constrain their political viewpoints in their definitive novels on the subject of 9/11.
Declaration

This thesis is submitted to the School of Culture and Communication and the Graduate Studies Office of the University of Limerick in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It is entirely my own work and has not been submitted to any other University or Higher Education Institution. Where use has been made of the work of other people it has been fully acknowledged and referenced in the Works Cited.

Signed:                                                                 Date:

___________________________________________

Clair King-Sheehan
Acknowledgements

Dedicated to

Conor

Without whom none of this would have been possible

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the following people who have supported me during this project: to my children, Conor and Robyn, whose confidence in me never seemed to waver; to Kim Arnold, whose knowledge and guidance is deeply appreciated and has been invaluable throughout all my years of study; to my many friends at The University of Limerick, especially, Jack Fennell, Helen Basini, Sarah Hunt, Caitlin Ryan, Lonnie Costello, Geraldine Sheridan, Robert O’Keefe, Joanna McDarby, Mary McCarthy, Cora Lynch, and Amy Healy, who have rewarded me with the pleasure of their company and listened patiently as I worked through the PhD process; finally, I wish to acknowledge the unfailing support of my supervisor, Dr David Coughlan, who showed a great deal of insightful expertise tempered with patience.
List of Appendices

Appendix A: Clair Sheehan email interview with Barbara Kingsolver, November 2013
List of Abbreviations

A: Americana and Other Poems, collection by John Updike

AM: Americana, novel by Don DeLillo

AVM: Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life, text by Barbara Kingsolver

C: Cosmopolis, novel by Don DeLillo

ELIC: Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, novel by Jonathan Safran Foer

FM: Falling Man, novel by Don DeLillo

HTT: High Tide in Tucson, text by Barbara Kingsolver

“IRF”: “In the Ruins of the Future,” essay by Don DeLillo

L: Libra, novel by Don DeLillo

P: Players, novel by Don DeLillo

PO: Point Omega, novel by Don DeLillo

“PoH”: “The Power of History,” essay by Don DeLillo

“RW”: “Reflections on Wartime,” article by Barbara Kingsolver

SW: Small Wonder, text by Barbara Kingsolver

T: Terrorist, novel by John Updike

TL: The Lacuna, novel by Barbara Kingsolver

TN: The Names, novel by Don DeLillo

U: Underworld, novel by Don DeLillo

“VRE”: “Varieties of Religious Experience,” short story by John Updike
Introduction

The Twin Towers

The idea to develop a World Trade Centre in New York City was first mooted at the end of the 1940s just as the victorious U.S. soldiers were returning home from war. America’s credibility as a land of freedom and opportunity had never stood taller, and American hubris, along with its architecture, was also on the rise. As New York City “was already thought of as a center of world trade,” the idea of promoting the area as a commercial hub seemed intrinsic to the ethos of the growing metropolis (Robins 13). Thus envisioned, the World Trade Centre project got to the drawing and costing stage “before being shelved” when the development’s “huge scale and the concept of demolishing and rebuilding a sizable chunk of Manhattan” became too much of a burden on the city’s resources (13). It would take nearly two decades for the project to be considered viable once again and ground-breaking architect, Minoru Yamasaki, employed to oversee the construction. The proposed size, structure, and cost of the World Trade Centre plan made it a controversial subject throughout its construction. But these were not the only concerns New Yorkers and other Americans had with the proposed edifice. Contemporary architectural historian and philosopher, Lewis Mumford, criticised the new development as an “example of the purposeless giantism and technological exhibitionism” which appeared to many to be overtaking New York (342). Because of the hubristic air the buildings were felt to emit they would remain contentious even after the cost and scale of the project became purely reflective. Formally opened in April of 1973, the Twin Towers would continue to be problematic structures from their final completion in 1977 until their momentous erasure from the New York skyline on September 11th 2001.
Although the expression “out of the blue,” as the title to Versluys text emphasises, has been often used to describe the events of 9/11 they were not completely unanticipated. When examined retrospectively the root causes of the attacks can be traced back in time to the Crusades. In modern terms however, the conflict and current tensions were made manifest by the two World Wars of the twentieth century. The turmoil created in 1948, when so “many Arabs felt shocked and betrayed by the support that the U.S. government had given to the Zionist cause,” gave rise to serious conflict in the Arab world which has never truly abated (Wright 11). Robust academic argument continues around the origins of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the later part of the twentieth century, much of which has been ably compared in studies that debate East/West polemics.¹ Placing theoretical contentions aside however, historical evidence clearly foregrounds the political and theocratic issues that led to nineteen Islamic insurgents commandeering four American airliners and infamously piloting them into the World Trade Centre in New York, the Pentagon, and one other abortive attempt at an unspecified target in Washington D.C. While these attacks were unprecedented within the United States, their inevitability, if not their exact method, had not been difficult to predict and can be systematically linked retrospectively to actions that occurred more than half a century earlier in the Middle East. Although it can be argued that these ideologies have been in conflict since the Middle Ages, the more recent defeat of the Arab world during “The Battles of the Sinai” (1948) was to “shape the Arab intellectual universe” into the twenty-first century (Wright 11). The writing of Islamic scholar and theorist, Sayyid Qutb, along with the “politics he would invent” (Wright 17), are argued to have laid the modern foundations for the development of Islamic

¹ See Geoffrey Nash’s Writing Muslim Identity, John Gray’s Al Qaeda and What it Means to be Modern, Malise Ruthven’s Fury of God, and Meghnad Desai’s Rethinking Islam, among countless others.
extremism, and have been viewed more recently as influential to the growth Al-Qaeda (J. Gray xvii). Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, colleague and brother-in-law to Al-Qaeda leader, Osama Bin Laden, claimed that Qutb’s was the voice that “most affected” their generation of Muslims (Wright 91). Thus, it can be reasoned that Qutb’s mid-twentieth century arguments have helped to create the extremist face which has so violently come to represent Islam for much of twenty-first century Western society.

There were many stages in the political progression toward the 9/11 attacks and numbers of authoritative texts in the area of the political and social sciences have traced these historical developments. In The Looming Tower (2006) Lawrence Wright comprehensively describes the conflicting cultural clash between the east and the west as he examines the rise of Al-Qaeda. He, along with other scholars of the subject, roots that paradigm in the western political ideology that developed during the Cold War. Wright’s narrative surveys this thread through the troubles in Egypt during the 1950s and 60s, and his examination continues through of the events of the Yom Kippur War of the 1970s. From an American perspective it appears that these confrontations had mainly been relegated to disputes on foreign soil. However, although Wright’s study is a logical chronology of events, he does not place as strong an emphasis on the “oil shock” which is clearly indicated as an effective contributing factor in the analysis of Meghnad Desai. Desai indicates that OPEC, the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries, quadrupled the price of oil following their defeat in the Yom Kippur War, triggering “stagflation” in the West. The primary aim of this sanction was to punish the oil dependent West for their support of Israel, “whose triumphant, defiant presence was a sore point for the Arab countries” (Desai 29). The 1973 War and the oil shock created a backdrop of world
events which would enable Osama Bin Laden to “violently open” America’s “hermetically sealed world” by ultimately striking the predominant symbol of western materialism and hubris, the World Trade Centre (Cermak et al. 1).

The destruction of this American icon, the Twin Towers, had also been the obvious objective for earlier radical Islamist, Ramzi Yousef. In 1993 Yousef detonated an explosive device in the basement of the World Trade Centre buildings. His clear intention at that time was to “topple one tower onto the other, bringing the entire complex down and killing what he hoped would be 250,000 people” (Wright 202). Although the 1993 incident had caused “massive disruption” and made for a particularly newsworthy story (Ruthven 4), the “general insulation from the world’s problems” allegedly experienced in the United States, had allowed that attack to be largely absorbed by other, seemingly more pressing, domestic issues (Wright 201). But it was not entirely disregarded. When asked about Yousef’s failed attempt in an interview with CNN’s Peter Arnett, Osama Bin Laden denied all knowledge of the perpetrator, but warned that if:

the American government [was] serious about avoiding explosion inside the US, then let it stop provoking the feelings of 1.25 billion Muslims. Those hundreds of thousands, who have been killed or displaced by Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon, do have brothers and relatives [who] will make Ramzi Yousef a symbol and a teacher. The US will drive them to transfer the battle to the United States. Everything is made possible to protect the blood of the American citizen while the bloodshed of Muslims is permitted everywhere. (qtd. in Desai 106)

Anger and frustration are palpable in these words. The inconsistency in American political policy with regard to the Middle East was undoubtedly giving rise to great
tensions in the Islamic world. By 1998 Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri had formed the World Islamic Front in opposition to western supported occupation of territory claimed by the Islamic group. In the organisation’s initial statement they specified that their intention was to “kill Americans and their allied-civilians and military;” the U.S. Government had been forewarned, and more than once (Desai 107).

As the new millennium dawned Intelligence agencies from a number of Arab countries had “issued dire advisories” to U.S. officials and in April of 2001 the Northern Alliance commander, Ahmed Shah Massoud, warned American tacticians of “al-Qaeda’s intention to perform a terrorist act against the United States” (Wright 381). The Sudanese Government too, are documented as having repeatedly notified Washington of terrorist threats to the nation as early as 1998. Noam Chomsky verified in a 2001 interview that prior to 9/11 two men detained and held in Sudan on terrorism charges had been offered to the U.S. along with other vital information on al-Qaeda’s terrorist network, but this offer was rejected. Leaked FBI memos indicate that,

the FBI wanted [the men] extradited, but the State Department refused. “One Senior CIA source” now describes this and other rejections of Sudanese offers of cooperation as the “worst single intelligence failure in this whole terrible business” of September 11. “It is key to the whole thing right now” because of the voluminous evidence on bin Laden that Sudan offered to produce, offers that were repeatedly rebuffed because of the administration’s “irrational hatred” of Sudan. (Chomsky, 9/11 84)

Furthermore, by 2001 Jordanian intelligence had provided more credible evidence by passing on to Washington the “rumoured” code name of the 9/11 operation; “The
Big Wedding.” Rather than the beginning of a new life together though, these nuptials heralded the deaths of the guests and the day when the mustashhid grooms would “greet the maidens of Paradise” (Wright 382).\(^2\) It was not only Middle Eastern sources that were highlighting threats and recording terrorist activity within mainland US, America’s allies had also offered important information. A senior member of Congress claimed:

> We were told by German intelligence that they had provided U.S. Intelligence agencies with information about persons of interest to them who had been living in Hamburg and who they knew were in, or attempting to get into, the United States. The impression German intelligence gave me was that they felt the action of the U.S. intelligence agencies to their information was dismissive. (Summers and Swan 374)

Some Americans were apprehensive as well. The behaviour of a French citizen and “radical” Islamist, Zacarias Moussaoui, had seemed suspicious and accordingly had drawn the attention of a flight instructor at a school he was attending in Minnesota (Wright 396). This was supported by information from the French authorities who confirmed that “Moussaoui was a terrorist suspect” (Ruthven 12). Just weeks before the 9/11 attacks, and as a consequence of the initial FBI investigation, Moussaoui was jailed for visa violations. Regrettably, regional agents in the mid-west were not authorised to act further on their suspicions or to look deeper into Moussaoui’s background. Frustrated, when the gravity of his investigation appeared to be disregarded by the upper echelon in Washington, the Minneapolis FBI supervisor presciently argued that he was “trying to keep someone from taking a plane and crashing into the World Trade Center” – a weird premonition that suggests how such

\(^2\) Mustashhid (“self-martyr”) is the term used for Suicide bombers (Ruthven xx).
thoughts were surging through the unconscious of those who were reading the threat reports” (Wright 396).

Neither actual warnings nor prescient feelings appear to have been commonly regarded as the summer of 2001 drew towards the autumn. As history now records, often in idiomatic language or tautology, both New York’s Twin Towers and the hub of U.S. military operations, the Pentagon, in Washington D.C. were attacked on September 11th 2001. War historian John Dower indicates 9/11 “changed the world beyond recall” while the “entire world looked on in real time” (290). It was truly the day that shook the world and the reverberations of that east/west clash were, and are still, felt globally. Apart from the disregarded warnings about the contentious occupation of Muslim territory in the East, these events were foregrounded by a number of U.S. Government policies that appear deleterious when viewed from a global perspective. As Petras reminds us, “[i]n a systematic fashion…the Bush administration [had] abrogated the Kyoto agreement, the anti-missile agreement, the International Court and numerous other accords” (3504). The American planes guided by terrorists, and appearing “out of a clear blue sky” made the date (Ruthven 2), as President Bush would claim, synonymous with the moment that “changed everything,” but they also may well have clouded his contemporary political agenda (xiii). The ostensibly sudden appearance of the lethal passenger jets, which was “replayed time beyond counting for the world to see and see again” (Dower 290), allowed the Government to “overcome the domestic restraints, shock [its] allies into subordination, and justify unilateral US military intervention” (Petras 3505). Even these potent idiomatic and metaphysical depictions were eclipsed however, by the “ideological lynch-pin of the ‘war on terror’” (Holloway 4). This phrase which the Bush administration used to refer to policy-making offered in
response to the 9/11 attacks” (4), was to instigate a “guerrilla war in which the
every could be anywhere” (Holloway 156). The war on terror, along with its
phantom buttress, weapons of mass destruction, was used to shield the post-9/11
homeland, and cynically turn the “American agony…into a casus belli for another of
the republic’s colonial wars” (Swirski 9). In a manner reminiscent of the method
used by the media during the First Gulf War of the 1990s, there was little opposition
to the rhetorical approach taken by the Press or the President in the run-up to war in
2003. As has retrospectively been observed by analysts who recall that “observations
percolating through the mass media reinforced [the] grim diagnosis that groupthink
and herd behaviour had become epidemic” within American society (Dower 448).
This, as Chomsky seemed to realise early on, is the “spectacular achievement of
propaganda, the voices of the Iraqi democrats [were once again] completely
excluded” as were the voices of moderate Americans, and “nobody notice[d]” or
seemed to want to hear (Media Control 55).

In September of 2001 the voices of both the U.S. Government and the
national and international media did ring out loud and clear. They spoke out
articulately, immediately and zealously. The attacks were used to generate “an
unstoppable political momentum which George W. Bush was able to ride by
declaring ‘war on terrorism’” (Ruthven 7). The evening of the attacks President Bush
resolutely faced the nation on national television to reassure U.S. citizens that the
United States remained the “brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the
world.” He went on to remind his audience that their “financial institutions
remain[ed] strong” and that Wall Street would continue to be “open for business.”
He ultimately vowed to make “no distinctions between the terrorists who committed
these crimes and those who harbour them” (Bush 2-3). Many of the subsequent
policies, often made in the heat of the moment by the Bush administration, continue to persist in obscuring the actuality of what happened that day. The search for the erroneous weapons would lead directly to the Iraq War in 2003, to the “disorderly trial and execution of Saddam Hussein” in 2006, and to the detainment of many of those who are still held as prisoners in Guantanamo (Dower 367). Although these issues, along with many of the reactive decisions made at the time have since been repudiated, nevertheless, they persist within the public consciousness even though “[t]he 9/11 Commission, the CIA, even the President himself, eventually acknowledged that no credible evidence had been found…” (Holloway 5). The ramifications of the war on terror continue to endure and are manifest in the ongoing conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. These concerns remain “only the most pronounced of a number of consequences which have emerged” for Americans since 2001 (Randall 1). Meanwhile, as Wright observes, “the War on Terror was transforming Western societies into security states with massive intelligence budgets and intrusive laws” (425). As early as 2002 these intrusive policies troubled political moderates and analysts as they perceived the changes to U.S. political cultures and institutions. Petras made the analogy with earlier repressive years in the United States, when he acknowledged a contemporary: reassertion of the imperial presidency of the cold war era, a paranoid style of politics reminiscent of the McCarthy-Truman era, an expansive arbitrary police state apparatus similar to the era of J. Edgar Hoover and an ideology of permanent warfare comparable to the world-wide anti-communist crusades of the past half century. (3506)

Petras was not alone in his condemnation of the government response to 9/11. While foreign political and cultural critics of the calibre of Baudrillard, Derrida, and Žižek
all expressed their deep reservations with Bush’s policies, perhaps the most formidable critic was American philosopher and political commentator, Noam Chomsky. In the autumn of 2001 Chomsky was stationed at the head of the “small handful of American intellectuals who stood opposed to the Bush administration’s aggressive military response to the attacks” (Junkerman 7). Shortly after the 9/11 incidents Chomsky perceptively argued that ardent aggressive reaction to the attacks on the part of the U.S. government would only pander to the needs of the al-Qaeda forces. He contended that since 9/11 there has:

been a solid drumbeat of calls for violent reaction, with only scarce mention of the fact that this will not only visit a terrible cost on wholly innocent victims, many of them Afghan victims of the Taliban, but also that it will answer the fervent prayers of bin Laden and his network…they draw from a reservoir of anger, fear, and desperation, which is why they are praying for a violent U.S. reaction, which will mobilize others to their horrendous cause. 

(9/11 58-9)

In the Editorial Note that prefaces Chomsky’s first responder text, 9/11, Greg Ruggiero points out that Chomsky’s opposition remained steadfast from the weeks directly after the attacks “to those immediately following the assassination of Osama bin Laden…[he] highlighted the lessons of history and advocated adhering to the basic tenets of human rights as the best way to break step from the drum beats for war” (Ruggiero 9). And, as the many talks and interviews Chomsky was invited to participate in since 2001 will attest to, his opinions were in direct contention with the right-wing voices and political opportunism that dominated within American society and their media during the early part of the current century. Since that time many critics have echoed Chomsky’s earlier predictions. John W. Dower, for example
strongly admonishes the Bush administration’s actions, stating if, “they cooked raw intelligence to promote a war desired for other reasons (such as enhanced access to energy resources), their actions were criminal” (447).

**Role of Overtly Political Fiction in the U.S.**

In the past the type of dissention from the status quo that is evidenced in Chomsky’s rhetoric has been ably expressed in the work of American writers. From its very inception the American Literary canon has been underpinned by a democratic political ideology. Indeed, the religious creed that caused the Pilgrims to brave the harsh seventeenth century New England coast, was fundamentally, as De Tocqueville recognised, “almost as much a political theory as a religious doctrine” (38). The earliest texts to enter into the American literary annals, though not fictional in construct, were political in nature. John Winthrop’s “city on a hill” from his “Model of Christian Charity” sermon, though theoretically religious, was political in content (20). De Tocqueville observed this, and recognised that “in America it was somehow possible to incorporate” these “two perfectly distinct elements into each other, forming a marvellous combination…the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom” (46-7). In a similar manner, the spirit of Winthrop’s words has been conflated within the two discourses and the principles laid down in the founding text have become blurred within a modern construction. For a contemporary audience the philosophy displayed in the religiously motivated sermon persists enduringly within the political rhetoric of the United States, and is preserved as a key American political ideal. When considering the development of the seventeenth century American governmental model, Peter Swirski has maintained that there still remains the notion that “the eyes of the world were watching” the progress of a, now aging,
democratic society (7). But the metaphor continues resolutely within the American consciousness. More than a century after the Pilgrim Founders, the work of the Founding Fathers, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine, would set a standard for political writing in the United States that remains to this day the mainstay of American literature courses. But history points out that the political groundwork for the then new and developing nation reaches back before Winthrop arrived in Boston harbour. The blueprint for the democratic design was drawn up a decade earlier in 1620 when the original Pilgrims; the forty-one male passengers aboard the *Mayflower*, agreed to sign a civil covenant which would “become the basis for a secular government in America” (Philbrick 41). With that “seminal American” document (42), “The Mayflower Compact,” these first Americans “combined [themselves] together into a civil body politic” and their ostensibly religious venture became a corporate entity which evolved into the American political ideal (Johnson “Mayflower Compact”).

Some mode of political and/or religious dogma forms the basis of most of the extant writing that emanated from the colonies during the early establishment of what has since become the United States. A political voice with the distinct accent of the English Puritan era informs the work of many of the country’s earliest writers. Thomas Morton’s *The New England Canaan* (1637), William Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1630 – 50), Cotton Mathers’ *Magnalia Christi* (1702) and Jonathan Edwards’ *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (1741), among many others, all attempt to persuade readers toward the particular politico-religious ideology of each individual writer. The conflicting perspectives in Morton and Bradford’s opposing texts supply some of the earliest political argument in American

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3 De Tocqueville observed that this continued to be the case as each separate colony [now state] was established. They each published a contract which laid down the design of their individual civil government (38 n.11).
history. Mather and Edwards’ narratives, along with the sermons of other influential ministers and scholars of the day, inform modern readers of the influence religion had on the political system in America during the Great Awakening, as the colonial settlers of the seventeenth century attempted to achieve eighteenth century enlightenment.

As pre-Revolutionary America distanced itself from the influence of Puritanism and reached toward the Age of Enlightenment their most prominent early statesmen began to speak with a distinct and often dissenting political inflection. Benjamin Franklin claimed in the first part of his Autobiography (1771), that one of the pieces written for The New England Courant (1721-1726), a Boston newspaper owned by Franklin’s brother James, had given “Offence to the Assembly” on “some political Point” (Franklin 22). The paper’s recalcitrant opinions were at odds with the contemporary Boston way of thinking, and the governing powers felt there was a need to mute the offending periodical. De Tocqueville noted the “anticipatory censorship” of Franklin’s paper by the ruling political body in Massachusetts, and used it as an example when pointing out that “it would be a mistake to suppose that the periodical press has always been entirely free in America” (ibid). The “tendency of the said journal to turn religion to derision and to bring scorn upon it” ultimately led to closure of the Courant and the jailing of James Franklin for the offense (ibid). Ben would later use the pressure placed on him personally by the Boston authorities as the rationale behind his self-imposed exile to Philadelphia. By removing himself from the control of the oppressive “Assembly” which ruled Boston in the early eighteenth century, Franklin was also able to extricate himself from his apprenticeship and the domineering hand of his brother; a move which may well
have gratified a growing taste for personal independence in this emerging American patriot (Franklin 22).

As the century progressed and the colonies too moved towards union and independence, Thomas Jefferson’s clear political perspective becomes unmistakably audible in the “Declaration of Independence” (1776). The revolutionary position evident in Jefferson’s manuscript was subsequently attested to by all the colonial signatories of that document. However, the political ideology contained in the “Declaration” was preceded earlier that year by the straight-forward view and plain language presented in the forty-six pages of Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* (1776). The popularity of this blatantly defiant political pamphlet was immense:

> [t]here was roughly one copy of *Common Sense* for every five inhabitants of Colonial America, nearly one per every household...most copies were read by or to more than one person... [the end result being that] the audience for *Common Sense* far surpassed that of any other printed work apart from the Bible. (Leill 95)

Although, as Scott Liell perceptively argues in *46 Pages*, a text dedicated to examining and understanding Paine’s political masterpiece, “there were, of course, other events that contributed to the mounting anger and resentment that culminated in the “Declaration of Independence,” nevertheless *Common Sense* was the critical pivot” (17). Historians of that period, and today, place Paine’s pamphlet as the primary text that made it clear to the common American populace that their seemingly unorthodox cause was in fact just; that the thirteen original, yet separate, colonies should indeed rise up in revolt, speak with one voice as one united country, and stridently seek to form a new American nation (Leill 90-94).
Once a democratic administration was actually realised in the United States, political writing remained prevalent and widespread within the newly formed nation. The vision of a representative government, of the people, as it would be practiced, was first presented to the people in the form of eighty-five essays defending the recently drafted U.S. Constitution. Written jointly by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and James Madison and originally published in New York newspapers between 1787 and 1788, these essays were, soon gathered in book format” and entitled *The Federalist Papers* (Parini 31). This document:

that lies at the core of American governance … profoundly affected how Americans thought about themselves as a body politic… [and] formed the bedrock of American government…continu[ing] to shed light on how… [Americans] imagine the political and legal contours and destiny of their country. (Parini 32)

As this brief survey makes evident, much of the earliest American writing was conceptualised by theocrats and politicians. As such, it was primarily resolute in nature, but, as the colonies evolved into the United States, politically satirical works began to assist in the formation of a less restrictive American national character. The pen of chronicler and congressional diplomat, Washington Irving, served to help initiate the construction of an American national identity, the archetype for many of the American literary characters that would follow. Irving’s entertaining and sometimes sardonic, *Sketches*, made him an “American celebrity.” However, it should be conceded that like “all but the rarest of topical satires [Irving’s work] has become increasingly inaccessible to later generations of readers” (“Washington Irving” 934). One Irving story that despite the passage of time has remained significant to later generations, and continues to be studied and analysed precisely
because it retains its satirical and political relevance, is the *Sketchbook* tale of “Rip Van Winkle” (1820). In the story Rip is led astray by the ghost of Hendrick Hudson and falls asleep in New York’s Catskill Mountains a loyal subject of King George the Third. To his great surprise however, Rip wakens from his slumbers a citizen of the United States, having slept through the American Revolutionary War. In the introduction to his examination of 9/11 narratives, *After the Fall* (2011) Richard Gray employs this well-known legend to identify the strong level of disconnect experienced when one sleeps through the most profound political events of one’s generation (2). The tale, for Gray, seems to signal the problems that could arise for an America that would retreat into slumber in the face of more current political issues.

Gray’s own chronology of politically motivated American texts progresses through the nineteenth century and examines how the atmosphere created in the United States by their Civil War affected the work of key writers from that period. He draws attention particularly to the work of Henry James and Mark Twain. James, as Irving Howe points out, “had never been singed by radicalism”, and his novels are generally conservative and largely appear circumspect with regard to the politics of the period they depict (140). The most noteworthy exceptions to this rule are two of his longer narratives, both of which were published in 1886. In the first, *The Bostonians*, James examines the political period by presenting the early American feminist movement from a North/South — conservative/liberal perspective. Howe contends that in this novel “James writes from a conservative scepticism that is more readily understood as a cultural value than as an explicit politics” (189). As such *The Bostonians* is much more Jamesian in sentiment than the more diversely political of the two narratives, *The Princess Casamassima*. For Howe, *Casamassima* is a
“bewildering mixture of excellence and badness,” however, the subject matter James addresses in this narrative, makes it far more valuable for a contemporary political study than much of his substantial and highly regarded oeuvre (141). The renewed notice paid recently to the text is primarily due to the fact that Casamassima is the “prototype and archetype of the modern terrorist novel” (Blesington 119). With this narrative James effectively introduced the concept of a modern style of terrorism to the American literary canon, along with all the contemporary political ramifications. While the topic might seem an atypical area of interest for a purist like Henry James, it was a subject that was entering into the purview of other writers he admired and was conversant with. In an essay entitled “The New Novel” James guides his reader to Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, another turn of the twentieth century text that addressed the burgeoning issue of terrorist actions (Conrad 313). Because of its subject matter Casamassima is mentioned critically in contemporary 9/11 literary anthologies, and has been discussed in relation to existing terrorist novels by contemporary scholars. In “Politics and the Terror Novel” (2008) Francis Blessington reminds readers that like more recent publications, James’s plot was inspired by the “unstable and fearful world and an atmosphere of underworld terror” that permeated the nineteenth century space James occupied (119).

This portrayal of the Victorian age as a world of unease and trepidation effectively links the past era to the new millennium via a direct route through the twentieth century. Alongside James at the nexus of the two epochs, and in many ways his counterpoint, sits the writer most closely associated with both late nineteenth century caustic wit and early twentieth-century U.S. politics, the iconic American author and humourist, Mark Twain. His satirical critique spanned much of the Reconstruction Era and colours parts of his acknowledged masterpiece
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. But his tone became particularly biting just as the nineteenth century turned, during the Philippine-American war. The nonconformist content of brief articles like “The War Prayer” offer an alternate voice to the political rhetoric of patriotism which, as Twain’s piece makes clear, so frequently drives and dominates American society during times of conflict. The sentiments of “The War Prayer” closely reflect the earlier quoted material from Noam Chomsky’s 9/11 (58-9). Unlike Chomsky’s objective political argument however, and largely due to the negative controversy Twain’s friends and family feared would follow his parable should it enter the public domain, “The War Prayer” remained unpublished until 1923, thirteen years after the author’s death (Paine). With candour peculiar to Twain, he addressed his refusal to publish the piece, saying “only dead men can tell the truth in this world.” Consequently, he succumbed to the pressure of his friends and only allowed the text to “be published after [his] dea[th]” (Paine). “The War Prayer,” and Twain’s politically provocative Autobiography (2010), were each issued posthumously. The opinions expressed in both these texts however, were to remain disturbingly current throughout the twentieth century, and the observations expressed in each continue to resonate and intrude on the U.S. political agenda into the new millennium. Twain’s “Prayer” was resurrected in the 1960s to protest the war in Viet Nam, but more recently it has had a number of apt incarnations. It was used most effectively in 2007 by Markis Kounalaktis, when he employed the ghost of Twain’s rhetoric to support his animated film of the same name. This film ventriloquises Twain’s voice, and throws his anti-war satire expressively into the twenty-first century in order to criticise U.S. intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks.
Insightful as Richard Gray’s “Introduction” to *After the Fall* is, he does not include in it the crucial contribution to nineteenth century American political fiction made by Harriett Beecher Stowe. When, in 1852, Stowe published her condemnatory fictional narrative, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* she “helped push abolitionism from the margins to the mainstream, and thus moved the nation closer to Civil War” (“Harriet Beecher Stowe” 1700). Although writers as renowned as Ralph Waldo Emerson or as politically aware as Henry David Thoreau, and former slaves as eloquent as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs had raised their voices powerfully in the condemnation of American Slavery, it was Stowe’s romantic novel that captured the attention and touched the conscience of the nation. A contemporary review of Stowe’s narrative from *Literary World* claimed,

> No literary work of any character or merit, whether of poetry or prose, or imagination or observation, fancy or fact, truth or fiction, that has ever been written since there have been writers or readers, has ever commanded so great a popular success. (qtd. in “Harriet Beecher Stowe” 1700)

Although to many modern readers Stowe’s novel can appear to offensively stereotype African-Americans, while over-sentimentalizing the South’s peculiar institution, the impact the text had on the political structure of nineteenth century America cannot be overstated. Henry James, a young man when Stowe’s novel first appeared, claimed the text to be “much less a book than a state of vision” as few narratives could compete with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for the political and emotional impact it had on readers (Parini 134). The novel’s influence is deemed to have infiltrated the highest echelons of the contemporary political sphere. During a meeting at the White House in 1862 President Lincoln is famously alleged to have greeted Stowe with the words, “So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that
made this great war!” (Vollaro 18). As Vollaro points out in his examination of the historical impact of Lincoln’s remark, the incident itself is arguably apocryphal; the evidence that these words were ever uttered remains anecdotal at best. Nevertheless, the fact that the conceivably illusory incident has been accepted by scholars and is used as the opening gambit in the text-books which are often the ones first turned to by students, allows the scene to maintain a persuasive position in American folklore. It also indicates that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s “place in antebellum history is secured by Father Abraham, who reaches across time to reassure late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century readers” of this novel’s incontrovertible impact on the political structure of its era (Vollaro 33).

All indicators suggest that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had a significant bearing on the political atmosphere of nineteenth century America. But the influence of narratives on the socio-political climate of the United States did not end with the abolition of slavery. While this issue remains the controlling topic from that era, there were other socio-political concerns which first came to light for the general public in written accounts. Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Fuller, and Whitman, to name but a few, discussed the legitimacy of war, religion, civil rights, and the thorny topic of equal rights for women in their work, all of which continue to hold a firm place in the American literary canon. When discussing American political thought though, it is necessary to consider the place Henry David Thoreau holds in that list. Thoreau’s writing style is direct and lucid, a clarity that seems to stem from the introspective period in the 1840s that he spent at Walden Pond, in Concord Massachusetts. The text he wrote during that time, *Walden* (1854), has become a part of American philosophy where it remains resolutely to the present day. In *Walden*

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Thoreau presents a subjective argument for simplicity and resisting any restraints placed on an individual by the dominant culture. It is undeniably considered the writer’s *magnum opus*; however, the time spent at Walden Pond would also inspire Thoreau to examine how these insights might be applied to the political. In “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849), his essay on “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau examines issues surrounding political power, specifically, he discusses the power the state holds over people. As Hutchison points out the “catalyst” for this enduring political essay was the Mexican-American war, which Thoreau and many of his fellow transcendentalists viewed as unjust (191 n42). The liberal voice that argues against the war in “Civil Disobedience,” moves unswervingly toward the radical, and would have a profound impact on later political advocates in the twentieth century. The main thrust of Thoreau’s rationale contends that, if each individual refuses to co-operate with a political system that does not “have the sanction and consent of the governed” and cannot “afford to be just to all men” then it should not be allowed to hold sway over the people (Thoreau 245). These thoughts would resonate across the world for adherents to the tenets of “Resistance” when they inspired Gandhi to resist the unjust political policies of British-Rule in India, and more recently in the United States, they would stimulate Martin Luther King in his fight for Civil Rights in the 1960s.

As the generation of African-Americans that had been born into slavery began to recede, other problems of inequality emerged in the land that had been dedicated to freedom with the aim of providing “liberty and justice for all.” The novel that was to next exert its transformative power on late nineteenth century American politics appeared just as the century moves towards its final decade. The utopian elements of Edward Bellamy’s socially conscious narrative, *Looking
Backward (1888) exposed the growing divide between “capital and labor” and the creation of a labour economy in America’s capitalist system of government (Auerbach 24). Studies instigated just before World War II, which were intended to identify the “most influential books published since 1885,” all put Bellamy’s work alongside Karl Marx’s Das Kapital in social and political significance (Fromm v). Fromm goes on to assert that it would not be an “exaggeration” to declare that the judgment of men as central to American ideological thought as philosopher and reformer John Dewey, and socialist politician and union organiser, Eugene V. Debs, had been “changed” by reading Looking Backward (vi). Looking Backward became the “manifesto of the Nationalist Movement, and [was] instrumental in the emergence of the People’s Party. ...it had a widespread influence on political opinion at the outset of the modern era” and goes on to inform utopian models into the current century (Carey 284).

As this modern era came into full view the power of Bellamy’s positive utopian political vision was to be displaced by the dystopic revelations which haemorrhage from Upton Sinclair’s disturbing novel The Jungle (1906). As has been noted by Irving Howe, when an American novelist of this period “chose a political theme he generally did so in order to expose the evils of corruption in government” (161). The very title of Sinclair’s narrative is indicative of this hypothesis. The Jungle depicts early twentieth century America as a society based on concepts derived from nineteenth century laissez-faire theories of Social Darwinism. In the novel, the civil structure of the United States is viewed as a jungle, a place where the strong prey on the weak and the wealthy use the ubiquitous problems of the poor to their own advantage. Sinclair, an ardent socialist, capable journalist, and insightful investigative reporter, was commissioned by the “leading socialist periodical of the
time,” *Appeal to Reason*, to examine the lives of Chicago’s stockyard workers (Eby viii). Because of this setting *The Jungle* has become a useful narrative for many categories of study, and it remains a “key account of urban life at the turn of the twentieth century” (Eby viii). *The Jungle*’s depiction of political graft and corruption, alongside the more harrowing details of tenement existence, remain compelling for historical commentary. However, as Christopher Wilson points out, historians often credit this “historical context, for the novel’s popularity” while in fact, Sinclair’s intention was not to provide an historical perspective; instead his motive was to deliver a political framework to allow readers to evaluate the conditions suffered by the workers in America’s democratic society (Eby 513). Through this novel Sinclair had planned to wage an attack on capitalist America, a social order that he portrayed as avariciously devouring its workers. He was not alone in this crusade. A group of reforming American journalists of the period were confronting the problem of capitalist cupidity and had been endowed with the colloquial name of, the Muckrakers. *The Jungle* was one amongst many relevant muckraking manuscripts from the period. Others that remain in America’s literary annals include, Ida Tarbell’s *A History of the Standard Oil Company* (1902), David Graham Phillips’s *The Treason of the Senate* (1906), and Lincoln Steffen’s *The Shame of the Cities* (1904), but there were numerous articles and critiques which faded in significance once the scandal they exposed was eradicated, or perhaps concealed. In circumstances that mirror the reception of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Sinclair’s fictional *The Jungle* caught the public imagination in a manner that these journalistic texts could not. Although, by the author’s “own admission” *The Jungle* missed its intended capitalist target, it still “remains the preeminent example of muckraking, or the literature of exposure” and “forges a crucial link in the literature
of dissent that extends backward through abolitionist writing and forward through protest novels by writers such as Richard Wright” (Eby ix). Upton Sinclair focused the public’s attention on the socio-political problems that faced his generation. His politically motivated novel provoked political changes leading to the passing of the Food and Drugs Act (1906). The divisive text continues to hold a primary place in the American canon.

The nationalism and xenophobia which accompanied the First World War effectively ended the socialist ideals which had been initiated by the work of the Muckrakers. But the recognised position of the investigative reporter turned novelist that began with Mark Twain, or arguably with Ben Franklin, and extended to the Muckrakers, was becoming a growing trend in twentieth century American writing. In an approach similar to the one taken by the editors of Appeal to Reason with regard to Sinclair, during the Depression The San Francisco News commissioned their reporter, John Steinbeck, to follow the exodus of the Dust Bowl Migrants as they journeyed from their devastated mid-western homes to the illusionary land of milk and honey in California. Steinbeck alleged in his reports that the use of corrupt practice on the part of corporate America and the larger landholders, along with the ecological ignorance that had been practiced in the American mid-west for decades, had led to the catastrophe. His newspaper articles, along with Dorothea Lange’s arresting photographs, are testament to the desolation and ignominy of many migrant families during the Great Depression. But the genuine plight of these “Harvest Gypsies” only truly came to the attention of the general public when Steinbeck brought out The Grapes of Wrath (1939). In a manner similar to the reception received by Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, The Grapes of Wrath became a part of twentieth century American consciousness. The narrative became the bestselling
novel of 1939; however, political controversy surrounded it. The negative depiction of capitalist practices and the image created of California’s farming community “caused an uproar in [the] nation” which lead to the text being banned from the public library of the area it exposed (Palos). As with Twain’s banned novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, censorship only increased its popularity. It went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction that year. Nevertheless the bar against its use in some schools wasn’t lifted fully until 1972. *The Grapes of Wrath*, along with much of Steinbeck’s oeuvre, had a significant impact on the author’s life. It was instrumental in furthering Steinbeck’s career and allowing him to stand alongside Upton Sinclair, when his “keen social perception” admitted him to the company of the few American authors to attain the prestigious Nobel Prize for Literature (1962).

The Nobel Prize is a useful benchmark for understanding how a novelist’s work has been appreciated within a society. It is awarded for assessing the impact that a writer’s entire corpus has had on their culture. In the past half century the Nobel Prize for literature has only been awarded to an American four times and three of those recipients were naturalised citizens of the United States. In a country that prides itself on the achievements of its people, it is remarkable that in 2015 Toni Morrison remains the only living American author who is also a Noble Laureate. While it is often perceived that Morrison received the prize in 1993 for her intervention in American political memory with her 1987 novel *Beloved*, she was in fact, awarded the honour for her entire oeuvre; for novels that are “characterized by visionary force and poetic import, [and gave] life to an essential aspect of American reality” (nobelprize.org). While much of Morrison’s work is socially relevant and speaks profoundly of provocative twentieth century cultural issues, *Beloved’s* distinct voice from a conflicted historical past makes it stand out as Morrison’s
masterpiece. While in the text the author steps back from blatantly politicising the horrors that she depicts, with this narrative she successfully intervened in America’s collective amnesia surrounding the nation’s involvement in the nineteenth century slave trade and the domino effect that system has had on African-Americans for more than two centuries.

**Reds Under the Beds: A Twentieth Century Crisis**

In 2002 James Petras mirrored the Bush administration of the early twenty-first century to the “paranoid style of politics” which Americans had been forced to become familiar with during the 1950s (3506). However, Petras has not been alone in noting this resemblance. Many political theorists had recognised the radical policy changes made during the Bush administration as the “most extensive overhaul [of political policies]…since the McCarthy years” (Jackson 14). McCarthyism and the second Red Scare (1947-50s) developed directly from the first (1918-1920), which had its roots firmly embedded in the socialist movement which had impelled Sinclair and Steinbeck to examine American social conditions during the first half of the twentieth century. By mid-century The House Un-American Activities, whose own activities dominated post-war American media, had come to represent fear in the minds of many within the United States. Originally formed during World War II to uncover Nazi sympathisers within the U.S. the House was well placed and organised when, in 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy’s allegations seemed to authorise his emergence “as American anticomunism’s very own Grand Inquisitor” (Hutchinson 97). While McCarthy’s purview included all of those living in the United States, there seemed to be particular emphasis placed on those involved in the Arts. In *Political Fiction and the American Self* John Whalen-Bridge argues that much of the
focus of McCarthy’s investigation centred on “[l]eft-of-center writers and freelance critics” (24). They were to become “the quarry of McCarthyism, as did those actors and professors who could in any way be associated with the Communist Party” (24). There was however, some direct opposition to the growing trend toward neo-conservatism within this “free” republic. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of those who would draw attention to McCarthy’s authoritarian regime also came from within the Arts. Significant among these was American writer and playwright, Arthur Miller. Through his play, The Crucible, Miller’s name would become synonymous for Americans with the term, political witch-hunt.\(^5\) Miller’s allegory suggests that the Salem witch-trial proceedings of 1692 mirrored the contemporary, mid-twentieth century panic created by the hearings conducted by the House Un-American Activities Committee. Although no firmly substantiated Communist leanings could be linked to Miller, many of those involved in the Arts were not so fortunate. McCarthy’s Blacklist of suspected communists residing in the United States impacted negatively on the lives of numerous authors of the period and remains in the living memory of many of today’s writers. An inbred fear of a similar inquisition may well have caused, as Barbara Kingsolver has argued, a sense of unease in post-9/11 writers which feasibly prevented them from addressing political dissention in the work that they would produce during the twenty-first century war on terror. As David Holloway observes, “[a]s late as the invasion of Iraq...high profile figures in the US who spoke publically against the war ran into difficulties” (33).

In a further link between mid-twentieth-century and post-9/11 representations of politics, Holloway also points out that during the aftermath of 9/11 filmmakers resurrected some of the “classic Cold War Hollywood films… present[ing]...
American audiences with what it called ‘regime change in our country’” (81). The critique was not however, left only to mainstream producers. Work by liberal writers, directors and filmmakers like Michael Moore, *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), or Participant Productions’ socio-politically comparative picture, *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), allowed for a few voices opposing the geopolitical line of reasoning driven by the Bush administration’s rhetoric and policies. *Good Night, and Good Luck* presents an historical account of the fervent stand taken against McCarthyism by CBS anchor-man, Edward R. Murrow, during the early days of televised discussion. Like Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Lacuna*, the film’s director, George Clooney, used the events of this earlier era to remind viewers of the danger of allowing “fear to stifle political debate” (Brooks). With Moore’s style of film analogy though, the viewer does not need to envisage any comparative elements in the story-line. His work is far more blatantly critical of the contemporary government’s policies than Clooney’s historical representation. *Bowling for Columbine* ardently engages with successive governments’ policy surrounding gun control and the climate of fear that permeates in a society that encourages relatively uncontrolled access to weapons. Moore became even more outspoken than his film, when, in 2003, he used his Academy Award acceptance speech as a platform to denounce the Bush administration’s U.S. led invasion of Iraq, a pertinent issue as the offensive had begun just days before the Oscars were awarded. The very title of Moore’s next critique, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, toys with the similarly named novel of the Cold War era, Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). Bradbury’s provocative McCarthyesque plotline deals with ideas around censorship, intimidation and repression in a futuristic America. Even those who would not be fully acquainted with the reference to the earlier novel, or the repressive time period,
could use Moore’s work as a point of reference with which to examine Bush’s intimidating hawkish programmes. Moore’s film makes it obvious that there was a fundamental flaw in the war on terror argument. His work highlights the point that America’s need to counter terrorism should not curtail inherent freedoms or entitle the administration to greater control over American citizens. Fahrenheit 9/11 points out that, the search for weapons of mass destruction should not be used to justify the invasion or takeover of other independent regions. These filmmakers and others reached back to a time, still within living memory, when Americans felt intimidated by a self-generated sense of terror which had been cynically designed to create an atmosphere of apprehension. Unfortunately, much of the anxiety emanated from within their existing political structure.

**Theoretical Relationship between Politics and Literature**

The inclusion of a lengthy chronology of this sort in order to introduce a study, the specified purpose of which is to examine some of the novels produced after 9/11, may seem a bit disproportionate to the reach of the stated analysis. The intention though is to emphasise the point that in the United States, political writing along with its reflective image, political fiction, has developed perceptually from the birth of the nation to the end of the twentieth century. The chronology’s purpose therefore, is to stress that the political fiction genre is considered both popular and serious within the United States, and has in the past, been successfully used in that society to bring about political and social reform. The many approaches taken by writers in order to highlight social and political conflict and failure indicate that as the U.S. culture has progressed the genre has become increasingly more complex. Twentieth century political novels have tended to intertwine political, social, and historical
elements in the structure of their plots in order to engage the imagination of the reader and demonstrate how power evolves, and, if left to its own devises, can effectively corrode democratic government. As this account records, political fiction has previously asked controversial questions in order to alert the reader and thus bring about constructive discussion, if not out-and-out political change.

In his relatively recent examination of American political fiction, *Writing the Republic* (2007), Anthony Hutchison began by looking backward and incorporating the nineteenth century ideological thought of Alexis De Tocqueville and American Exceptionalism. De Tocqueville, when analysing the “Literary Characteristics of Democratic Times” (1838), recognised that the leading writers in the newly formed United States were journalists. This is not entirely surprising when the work of Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin are taken as prototypes for success in the literature of post-revolutionary United States. While De Tocqueville viewed this type of writing as failing in any attempt to develop into “great literature,” and he believed it to bear little relationship to the artistic accomplishments of Europe, he did allow that it afforded the American people a voice (471). He conceded that while the writers appeared to have little knowledge of great art, these early American commentators spoke “their country’s language and [made] themselves heard” (De Tocqueville 471). Whether artistic or not, it was a style that would endure even after more sophisticated work by American writers of quality, like Henry James, were to make the reflections of De Tocqueville appear out-dated. As has been highlighted earlier with regard to the work of Sinclair and Steinbeck, both journalistic writers whose style is not always considered artistic, the voices they spoke with had a distinct impact on the literature and the social conditions of the twentieth century American world. As the previous chronological catalogue of American political
writing will attest, like *The Jungle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, many narratives that have entered into the American canon enjoyed these socio-political proclivities. Tendencies such as these have proved popular with the general public, and perceptive readers of American fiction have developed an appetite for this approach to political argument. Terry Eagleton has recently observed that, “[m]ost novelists… do not produce work that is dramatically subversive of the status quo” (*Why Marx Was Right* 114). While this is patently true, it is also evident that when credible American writers have defied convention and provided their readers with an honest appraisal of an unjust system, they have been known to generate change in political policy. And, as Eagleton further observes, this is how “Tom Paine came to write one of the best-selling books of all time” (114).

Eagleton’s point that writers lean towards the *status quo* is currently easy to concede. When considering the many published novels from the 9/11 era which address only the traumatic elements of the attacks or fail to stress the changes in America’s freedoms that have followed in their wake, it becomes obvious that these types of “cultural narratives have been integral not just in consolidating the idea of post-traumatic subjectivity, but have actively helped to form” this type of bias (Luckhurst *The Trauma Question* 15). Rather than challenge the *status quo*, as authors have done formerly, post-9/11 writers tended to sanctify the event by emphasising its traumatic impact along with the implied assumption that the average American, everyman, was so shocked by terrorism that they were unable to fully comprehend the multifaceted political intricacies of this tragedy. This prescriptive understanding allows the drama of the atrocities to take precedence and does not allow for objective insight into the historic or political implications. Previous culturally explicit American novels, like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or *The Jungle*, have
conveyed trauma for the express purpose of highlighting variant political ideologies and social conditions while still endeavouring to draw an empathetic response and examine the circumstances that exacerbated the current problem. While contemporary 9/11 narratives clearly convey trauma through their plots and characters, they do not evidence this type of political or social engagement. As a result any tacit political message inherent in the texts largely goes unresolved. Although, as Luckhurst affirms, “statements were expected, and delivered by the heavyweights” of contemporary American fiction, the approach they chose remained tentative. He further points out that as they appear, [e]ach new novel that addresses 9/11 is tested against whether it has approached making a definitive statement…we already have a clear idea of a certain canon of texts that enable familiar debates about the ethics and aesthetics of the representation of the catastrophe (“In War Times” 713). Regrettably, within the shadow of this trauma, a more determined literary argument appears to remain elusive. While these benchmarks are obvious for the most part, the continuing problem for Luckhurst seems to be that no absolute political statement is yet to be heard within the 9/11 genre. To varying degrees, the existing cohort of American writers have usefully conveyed the impact that the shocking or traumatic aspects of the attacks had on both the general population and minority groups within the United States. But, to varying degrees they have generally neglected the period’s complex political complications. There is no evidence in their work of a clearly demonstrated, unbarred political voice, either conservative or liberal. The Harriet Beecher Stowe, Upton Sinclair, or John Steinbeck of the 9/11 era has failed to emerge. No writer has unequivocally moved past the dominant topic, trauma, to effectively speak out about what is clearly an emotive and multi-sided political issue. By reconfiguring “the traumatised US body politic as an absolute
victim,” the lone casualty of the atrocity, they indirectly consigned the examination of their novels to the field of trauma studies without allowing for any other purposeful analysis (Gibbs 243). Even Updike, whose stated goal in Terrorist was to reflect an alternate view, refrains from offering any mitigating historic or political rational or from advancing the concept that the perpetrator might also be comprehended in the field of trauma studies. By so doing, he and other writers within this genre, albeit perhaps unintentionally, reinforce the ideology of the dubious and biased political system which governed the United States at the time of 9/11. To refer back to Eagleton’s argument here, the “culture, law and politics of [a] class-society … bound up with the interests of the dominant social classes” seemed to impact on these writers and in some way inhibit their previous candour (Why Marx Was Right 114-5). Eagleton echoes Marx when he maintains that today “'[t]he class that is the ruling material force of society is at the same time the ruling intellectual force.’” (115). As a consequence of this dominant approach, it was primarily a subjective perspective that emerged in the work of novelists writing in the decade that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Writing of realist American literature a decade before the 9/11 attacks Mark Shechner appeared to regret America’s “lack of great heart-breaking themes that the world’s more tragic histories afforded” (30). Ten years later this aspiration appeared to be fulfilled in the form of terrorist attacks which have been largely acknowledged as the new century’s great American tragedy. However, the realist approach Shechner advocated in the 90s, and attributed to contemporary writers of the calibre of Roth and Updike, seems to have not been fully realised when they came to write their post-9/11 texts. While trauma may well be a realistic and immediate response to an attack such as 9/11, it should not be allowed to obscure the fundamental issues at
play. It is self-evident that these incidents were shocking and had a direct bearing on social and cultural development in the early years of the twenty-first century. However trauma, if allowed to become the overriding intellectual response, cannot adequately provide a bridge to understanding. What this study seeks to examine is how these events have been grasped, digested, and assimilated in the fiction of four prominent American authors during the years governed by the political policies of the Bush administration. While, to a certain extent, the four novels that are examined here explore the effect of traumatic incident on their lead protagonists, this is not the only focus of their respective works. This study will consider whether all of these texts might not also contain a political message. It will argue that each novel offers a faint political voice. However, the political tone that emerges, like the many dissenting factual utterances that followed the 9/11 attacks, has been more or less obscured in favour of the drama associated with the date. By consigning these texts primarily to the domain of trauma studies alone, reviewers and critics, and perhaps readers as well, have neglected the novels’ veiled political message, and thereby missed key elements of the stories. Though it is a concern that novelists who have previously demonstrated the talent to be innovative, or spoken out forcibly in earlier work, should chose to veil these elements in their narratives, this is not entirely surprising in light of the dominant politics of the time-period they were written. Rather than a frank and open fictional exposé of the historic political choices made by successive governments, or the retrograde contemporary political decisions that impacted on all elements of American society, these novelists elected, for the most part, to follow the status quo by reimagining the trauma and veiling the history. By accentuating this limited perspective they have neglected to provide a persuasive
alternative appraisal of the events, one which might have effectively brought about a useful discussion of the political elephant in the room.

**Changes in Approach**

There are writers of non-fiction who have traditionally engaged with similar concepts in their theoretical arguments and did not choose to conceal their political position. The previous chronology indicates that even when politically motivated writers found it necessary to re-evaluate their original ideas they have been able to do so without yielding entirely to the opinions of the status quo. In the early years of the current century Terry Eagleton became one of the first theorists to confront this retrospective change. In the preface to the 2002 edition of his core text, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, Eagleton acknowledged that although he had no way of knowing it in the mid-seventies, “an era of Political activism was about to slide into one of political reaction… within a few years of publication… the whole cultural climate from which the book took it original force had decisively altered” (vii-viii). Eagleton makes it clear that this does not mean that the approach he took in 1976 was no longer valid in 2002, any more than a political novel like Stowe’s, which engaged with former issues, can no longer retain its social impact simply because the politics it represents are no longer as controversial. For Eagleton, the issues that Marx addressed in the nineteenth century had changed by the time he published his twentieth century work, and by the twenty-first century political instability was further expanding the gap in the class-base structure. This forced Eagleton to rethink not only Marxism, but his own earlier critical approach. The actors in the twenty-first century political drama have changed in the post-Postmodern world and Eagleton makes this point well. As he sees it the current Marxist argument is no
longer spearheaded by the political and social issues of the twentieth century of Sinclair or Steinbeck or even Toni Morrison, this conflict has evolved and is now an engagement between distinctly divergent opponents. As Eagleton judges:

For the present, at least, the wretched of the earth have turned out to be Islamic fundamentalists rather than western proletarians, with all the dangers which that brings in its wake. But the general shape of Marx’s vision…has turned out to be far from outdated; and if Islamic fundamentalism is more a symptom of the ills of global capitalism than a solution to them, then the classical alternative – socialism – remains as urgent as ever. Indeed fundamentalism moved into the vacuum which the defeat of the left had created. If the left had been allowed to fulfil its pledge to tackle global depravations which breed such bigotry, it is conceivable that the World Trade Center might still be in one piece. (Marxism and Literary Criticism ix)

Eagleton acknowledges that during the last fifty years “Marxism has suffered the greatest defeat in its turbulent history” primarily because “the system it opposes…is more powerful and pervasive than ever” (x). Supported by media propaganda, as has been pointed out by Chomsky and many others, conservative political dogma dominated the United States cultural scene in the post-9/11 twenty-first century, and consequently, most alternate opinions were consistently marginalised.

Eagleton was not the only respected theorist to reassess his work in light of these twenty-first century confrontations. Dominic La Capra’s 2001 study Writing History, Writing Trauma was a defining text on trauma and how the experience impacts on the way historical events are viewed, both in factual accounts and figurative literature. However, the inclusion of the September 11 attacks in LaCapra’s examination was impossible as the writer’s analysis pre-dated the events,
but only by a few of months. As Eagleton had done before him LaCapra recognised that his forceful 2001 analysis needed further consideration in light of what had occurred in the United States shortly after he had originally published it. In 2001 LaCapra had clear-sightedly argued that “[t]rauma and its symptomatic aftermath posed particularly acute problems for historical representation and understanding.” but he presciently went on to argue further that traumatic events should not be allowed to “become a pretext for avoiding…political issues” (xxix). As we can now retrospectively deduce, this is what happened in post-9/11 America. In the 2014 version of the same text LaCapra found it necessary to reiterate this argument more vigorously. He targets Caruth’s earlier analysis when he reasons that problems occur when the:

study of trauma and its effects is made to exclude other problems, notably when it is conflated with ‘history,’ … or converted into a more or less disguised displacement of another approach, particularly a version of deconstruction that turns … to aporia and unreadability” (ix).

Aporia and unreadability seem to be the preferred approaches taken by the primary novelists examined in this study. While the use of an aporetic slant to create doubt or raise objections could be an effective means in deconstructing the events and their repercussions, unreadability would almost exclusively be useful only in dissuading the reader from engaging too closely with the content of a text. Regrettably, these novels, along with most other first-responder narratives from American writers, are inclined to utilise this retrograde, prescribed approach. Although novels from this era generally offer political insights they tend to accentuate the traumatic thrust of their plots without emphasising a more nuanced understanding of the attacks or their historical underpinnings. By concentrating
primarily on the collective or individual trauma experienced by Americans, these narratives cannot wholly serve as a means of intervention in the on-going geo-political consequences. In Contemporary American Trauma Narratives (2014) Alan Gibbs reads this “restrictive mode of representation” in literature as “damagingly formulaic” (242). This argument seems incontrovertible when applied to the slim number of novels which appeared in the first decade after the attacks and directly address the events of 9/11. As Gibbs points out, this is most obvious in the work of Jonathan Safran Foer, but it is also apparent in DeLillo’s novel. In Falling Man DeLillo allows, and presumably countenanced, that the clichéd representation of a traumatised New York couple should supersede a more intricate exploration of the underlying, intrinsic political theme. Gibbs’ argument places much of the blame for this somewhat mechanical fictional approach by novelists at the feet of theorists. He views theorists as having placed “stringent demands” on writers to “produce texts that are formally avant-garde,” and determines that what has been produced in the recent past is actually “only superficially experimental” (242). In Gibbs’ estimation this regressive tactic effectively “bars other forms of representation” (242), which is, admittedly, most obvious in Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close. Moreover, it could be argued that it also obstructs understanding of some of the American counterfactual narratives that Gibbs effectively examines in his study, such as Phillip Roth’s The Plot Against America (2004) or the conclusion of Ken Kalfus’s A Disorder Peculiar to the Country (2006). The need to address these “demands” (242) has impacted on the work of a number of influential contemporary American novels such as Paul Auster’s Man in Dark (2008), which similarly employs “a challenging narrative structure through which the characters’ numerous experiences of trauma are explored” (210) but notably, Gibbs argues, not in order to effect “a retreat from
the real world” but to depict “the attempt, and the inherent dangers, of just such a retreat” (214). The allegorical approach taken by Barbara Kingsolver in *The Lacuna*, though familiar, could also be interpreted as experimental. The text does add an inventive alternative to the rudimentary 9/11 formula. However, in light of these dictatorial mandates and without some knowledge of her personal backstory, the attempt she makes is rendered not entirely effective. While the four texts examined here are all innovative to some degree, they do, as Gibbs points out, merely “tick” the boxes laid down by those directly engaged in using trauma as a methodology (242). When novelists do address any political aspects raised in their plots they do so discreetly, from the sidelines. Therefore, the primary adherence to trauma as a theoretical approach may well have stymied any viable political argument which could have been constructively developed in their novels. This thesis will argue that a less experimental or less tentative method may well have allowed for a more nuanced fictional examination of the 9/11 experience. By deciding to use trauma as the driving force behind their plots the writers have boxed in their ideas. Thus these novels become, first and foremost, introspective studies that neglect to directly draw the reader’s attention toward any worthwhile political discussion. This type of open political dialogue is essential to the formation of meaningful ideas, and as Eagleton points out, “every important political battle is among other things a battle of ideas” (*Marxism and Literary Criticism* 2002). For those American readers whose democratic ideals were formulated on the political writing from the “Mayflower Compact” to *The Crucible*, not seeing political ideas clearly present in the novels of respected and previously prescient writers can seem baffling. As a result of framing their political thoughts in traumatic effect and/or allegorical representation, the mêlée which ensues from the pages of these novels tends to appear partisan and can
complicate the reading experience. By looking at the events of September 11, 2001 chiefly through the narrow lens of trauma, these writers have in fact lost the opportunity to credibly “get into history” which impacts on their audience as well (R. Gray “Open Doors” 147). By distorting or even “exclude[ing] other problems” which directly stem from the attacks, they marginalise all the possibility that was inherent to the genre (LaCapra ix).

Because this study is chiefly concerned with the politics contained in the texts it examines, a thorough investigation of trauma theory in these novels falls outside its remit. And, as Buelens and Durrant point out in their recent examination *The Future of Trauma Studies* (2014), there currently seems to be a “call” amongst scholars of that theoretical methodology to “nuance [their] notions of trauma by revealing their cultural and historical specificity” (7). If scholars primarily engaged with trauma theory are now beginning to encourage those interested in the field to redirect their attention toward a “second moment of theoretical re-elaboration,” (7) and to re-evaluate the tenets of the discipline, then perhaps it is time for authors also to take a second and more objective look at the issues which precipitated and followed on from the 9/11 attacks. It is the hope of this thesis that adding a political element to the study of these four novels will help to develop a more complex platform from which to view 9/11 and the fiction that addresses it.

**The Novels**

“Politics in a work of literature is like a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar, and yet a thing which it is not possible to refuse one’s attention” (Stendhal qtd. in Howe 15). Once such a pistol-shot has been fired Howe asks, “what happens to the music? Can the noise of the interruption ever become part
of the performance?” (15). Politics, within the four novels examined here, is part of the music of the texts, and part, but not central to the performance. Instead the direct aim is on the traumatic impact of the event, and this can become reductive if allowed to eclipse the reasoning behind the attacks. By neglecting the politics implicit in the atrocity and focusing primarily on the traumatic elements of the attacks, imaginative literature fails to fully facilitate in the working through process. While politics is surely the overriding issue that lies at the centre of the event, trauma launched a missile into the political theatre of 9/11 which has essentially become impossible to ignore. American author, Joyce Carol Oates, noticed this embedded phenomenon and wondered why:

no one speculates on the reasons for September 11, no one speculates on the (political, ethnic, national, religious) identities of the terrorists, no one speculates on the United States government’s response to September 11, or, indeed, indicates that there has been and will be a response. (Oates, “Dimming”)

If we follow Oates’ hypothesis, she appears to be suggesting that no one has written a politically motivated novel about what could primarily be viewed as a political event. Using the definition of an American political novel as represented in the earlier sections of this introduction as a template, this thesis will seek to discover if Oates’ observation remains valid. While there are a number of interesting alternative post-9/11 texts to consider within the 2001-2009 timeframe, as this study was not intended as a general overview of this fiction, some formidable narratives have been eliminated in favour of novels that seemed to offer a broader scope for review. To that end the study will examine three prominent 9/11 novels from the first decade of

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6 Philip Roth’s *Plot Against America* and *Exit Ghost* along with *Man in the Dark* by Paul Auster will be briefly discussed in the conclusion to this thesis.
the twenty-first century and try to distinguish if the writers were in fact, writing a trauma narrative or if their work has simply been misinterpreted through the more obvious lens of trauma studies. The examination will begin by looking at the first major American 9/11 novel to be published, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005). While Foer’s novel clearly engages with the traumatic impact of the 9/11 events, and this must be duly acknowledged in the analysis, this study will try to look beyond the trauma inherent in the text. Instead of accepting the obvious approach as the only approach, it will examine the narrative as Foer broadly invites us to do, as a political novel that seeks to emulate Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-5*. Moving on from Foer, the analysis will focus on both the pre- and post-9/11 work of Don DeLillo. As political messages have not been unexpected in much of DeLillo’s previous oeuvre, it is notable that his definitive 9/11 novel, *Falling Man* (2007), has regularly been seen to “fall into [the] posture of survival after 9/11 that [is] too familiar to invite much more than a gesture of recognition” within the genre (R. Gray *After the Fall* 27). *Falling Man* will be mirrored against the writer’s earlier outspoken opus and then closely examined for any candid political voice heard within its pages. The analysis will then turn to the “other” in the literature of 9/11 with an investigation of the terrorist character in the work of the quintessential American writer, John Updike. His primary post-9/11 novel, *Terrorist* (2006), will be examined alongside his other work from the 9/11 era. The study will consider why a writer of Updike’s calibre and level of expertise would choose to address a topic that appears to challenge him and in some ways falls outside the scope of his usual work. Although Updike presents an “othered” protagonist in his novel, unlike Stowe’s Uncle Tom, or Wright’s Bigger Thomas, the politics that effect Ahmad’s exclusion and isolation are not transparent. It will argue that
although this character is, in many ways, the architect of his own difficulties, melodrama and trauma recovery are allowed to negate the probable, leaving any plausible political corollaries woefully under-observed in the text. In the final chapter the study will direct its attention to a text that has not been included in many formal examinations of the 9/11 novel. This extensive and complex narrative, Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Lacuna*, has only really entered the genre through the testimony of the author herself. However, as she has categorically offered it as an allegorical interpretation of the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, one that is unambiguously intended to remind the reader of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* and the historic era that received that text, it will be examined here with the others, as a 9/11 novel. These four narratives will be scrutinised to see: Does this novel contain a political message, and if so, what is it saying and how does it elect to say it?
Chapter One: “What the…?”

“What the’…?,” is the expression of incredulity that opens Jonathan Safran Foer’s 2005 novel, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (1). Although this aborted enquiry is never explicitly asked within the text, nor attributed to any specific character in the story, when examined, it identifies a significant gap in literary responses to 9/11. This gap may well be there because we are unsure what to say, but it may also indicate that we are afraid to say what we intuitively do know. The phrase opens the narrative but, curiously, is not part of the dialogue. The immediate and obvious assumption is that the question is asked by the novel’s child protagonist, Oskar. However, it could equally be attributed to the author himself or the reader at large. It may well be a collective enquiry mirroring the response of the American people to the 9/11 attacks, and their need for palliative information from some dependable source. It also appears to be the response of the literary community when one of their neophyte colleagues became the first to address the complex subject of 9/11 in fiction. However the query is configured, and whoever the inquirer appears to be, the question itself stands as the vanguard to Foer’s plot and cannot be ignored. At its most poignant “What the…?” implies a call for information and clarification as an anodyne for the alleviation of the pain experienced (1). At its most pragmatic, the phrase asks the reader to question what happened on September 11, 2001, and consider why. By focusing attention on all the possible motives for this curious opening, this chapter will examine the many unspoken questions hidden within the voice of an anguished child and the actions of his mute protectors.

At its most recognisable, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is an attempt at working through the traumatic consequences of the 9/11 events. At its core,
however, Foer’s novel is an attempt to make sense of many aspects of what occurred that day and the resulting repercussions. The narrative speaks extremely loudly of trauma, and very softly of politics, but the political message it contains does remain in evidence, even though it is largely subsumed in the examination of trauma, and for this at least, Foer should be commended. Fellow writer Jay McInerney did not seem to hear Foer’s ancillary message when, following the publication of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, he entreated fiction writers for help to “[p]rocess the experience for us” (McInerney). Perhaps because of Foer’s avant-garde style McInerney and others did not recognise the younger writer’s unique contribution to the “broader public realm beyond the self in the fictive world [he] created” (Holloway 115).^7^ Although, the main focus of the novel does tend to read like an examination of the various routes from trauma to catharsis, in reality Foer’s text is a bit more extensive than it first appears. It raises some veiled but persuasive points which ask the reader to revaluate fixed contemporary political and social perspectives. Consequently, as McInerney’s analysis of the novel confirms, Foer’s “young narrator, Oskar Schell, often sounds more like a mouthpiece than an actual child” (McInerney), but he declares this without further questioning why that might be. McInerney does not examine the “What the…?” element in the text, the elliptical query that indicates this novel will both ask questions, and hopefully, provide answers (Foer 1). Although the ellipsis indicates an inability to formulate a cogent question, when looked at from a less subjective angle, it also implies that provision of such an answer is imperative. Hidden within the ambiguous style employed in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, lies a concealed motive. The entire story-line is a mystery quest across New York City in search of “what happened,” in an attempt

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^7^ Also see Versluys (99-119), Banita (41), and Gray (52).
to metaphorically fill in the gap left by the fallen towers. Though not emphatically stated by the author or immediately obvious on a first reading of the story, it was presumably strategic, in light of political policies like the “Patriot Act” (October 2001) and the disregard being paid to the tenets of the Geneva Convention (February 2002), for Foer to conceal any divergent opinions within a more politically amenable novel apparently addressing the acceptable subject of trauma recovery. Although it does so covertly, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* responds to McInerney’s appeal for writers to help explain what happened on 9/11. The novel, in fact, goes beyond its predictable remit of “working through” and begins to serve as a literary conduct to more than trauma recovery. Alongside the author’s veiled attempts at clarifying what happened on September 11th 2001 *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is a useful aid in recognising, as Oskar did, that: “We didn’t get it, I guess. Or we didn’t get that something bad could happen to us” (300).

In his previously lauded novel, *Everything is Illuminated*, Foer identified himself as a Jewish writer interested in issues surrounding the Holocaust. Therefore when addressing the more recent trauma of 9/11, the events of World War II become the obvious starting place for an author already established within this canon. His intention with *Everything is Illuminated* was clearly to provide a mirror image of the 1939-45 war and the trauma suffered by the survivors. B. A. Kaplan persuasively contends in *Landscapes of Holocaust Postmemory*, that these historic traumas are still carried forward into the second and third generation. By the time *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* was published parallels of this sort had become familiar in both academic and political discourse. Dori Laub reminds us that in an address to the Joint Session of Congress, President George W. Bush linked these two horrific events when he said of the 9/11 perpetrators, “They are the heirs of all the murderous
ideologies of the twentieth century. They fall in the path of Fascism, Nazism, and Totalitarianism” (qtd. in Greenberg 204). The President stressed these parallels less than a fortnight after the attacks, and by so doing, effectively introduced these ideas into the 9/11 discourse. By using these memories to reflect the 9/11 attacks Bush had surprised “the real in order to immobilize it, suspend[ed] the real in the expiration of its double” (Baudrillard, Simulacra 105). However, in Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close Foer chose to think past the obvious simulacrum contained in Bush’s analogy. He does not use the Holocaust, per se, as a point of reference. While the primary tragedy from that historical era is, of course, the Holocaust, in order to achieve a balanced perspective, Foer chose to use the Allied bombing of the German city of Dresden as a lens through which to examine the World Trade Centre attacks and their aftermath. As Matthew Mullins has pointed out, this “destablis[s]” America’s:

- sense of entitlement and victimisation for any single group based on trauma,
- not because the events of 9/11 fail to merit mourning, but because such sentiments can lead to dangerous attempts to solidify national identity through inflicting more trauma on others. (304)

By choosing Dresden Foer links the incredulity and trauma, evident within his own initial question, to the anguished cry of Oskar’s grandfather, “Why would anyone want to bomb Dresden?” (210), thereby forcing his reader into a process of “rememory” by comparing “our own,” that is to say, the allies, dubious use of excessive force to make a political point.

This is not the first time that a novelist had challenged the rationale behind the Allied bombing of Dresden. Unlike the media circus occasioned by the attacks on the World Trade Centre, the gratuitous aggression that rained down on Dresden shortly before the end of WWII could easily have been overlooked and absorbed
within the many horrors of that war, had it not been for a writer of fiction. The chaos in Europe occasioned by World War II, coupled with German atrocities perpetrated on the British during the six-year siege, perhaps, not surprisingly, clouded the logic which supported the bombing of Dresden in 1945. It could be argued that all atrocities recall the memory of earlier aggressive actions, and in light of all that had occurred in Europe between 1939 and 1945, it is not difficult to imagine how this incident, one more bombing mission, could be ignored in the nightmare of events that had occurred throughout Europe. The novel which originally brought the Dresden episode to contemporary public scrutiny was Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Published in 1969, Vonnegut’s narrative, like other politically outspoken novels that precede it, had a dramatic effect on literary critics and the reading public. Traumatic memory scholar Ann Rigney believes that with this text Vonnegut taught “a generation how to rewrite and reread American Culture” (“All this Happened More or less” 8). *Slaughterhouse-Five* forced Americans not only to rewrite and reread, but, also to re-examine their government’s then-current political policies with regard to aggressive actions during the Viet Nam War. The actual human horrors of many of the events in Viet Nam and Cambodia had been regularly concealed behind a blanket of patriotic rhetoric. *Slaughterhouse-Five* became a counter-narrative to the political grand-narrative being presented in the subjective partisan jargon of the 1960s. By writing about the firebombing of Dresden nearly twenty-five years after the event, Vonnegut was not intending merely to soothe the wounds of those impacted by that incident. Like Foer’s more recent work, it was not intended as merely a panacea for trauma, instead, it was a “strategy” that Ilka Saal has since termed “trauma transfer” (454). By drawing the awareness of readers of popular fiction to this historic episode, Vonnegut’s novel increased the volume of
anti-war discussion during the Viet-Nam War era. By so doing, it called into question the advisability of the active US bombing campaign on that country and Cambodia. Vonnegut’s narrative supplied a comparative analysis and placed it within an historical framework. By helping to deconstruct the bombing of Dresden and ameliorate how that event “has been remembered in Britain and the United States” (Rigney “All This Happened more or Less” 9), Slaughterhouse-Five reflected contemporaneous US military campaigns. Vonnegut’s petit récit negatively questioned the grand-narrative scripted by concomitant US government policies which ensured that many non-combatants in Viet-Nam and Cambodia would be slaughtered or traumatised in a manner which echoed the attacks experienced by the civilian victims of Dresden.

It is no coincidence that Foer chose that particular bombing mission to mirror his fictional response to the attacks on the World Trade Center as both these aggressive episodes primarily impacted civilian targets. Rigney claimed that, like the strike on the Twin Towers, the very name “Dresden” resonates in a similar manner to that of the term “9/11.” In her judgment, “‘Dresden’ tout court can now be used as an abstract noun for a heavily-burdened memory site [on a par with] Ground Zero” (ibid). It is with certainly an intuitive, if not a deliberate, understanding of this contention that Foer offered Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close. He may well have recognised that many American readers would indeed associate his argument with Vonnegut’s and use the earlier text as a point of reference when analysing his 9/11 tout court novel. Or, if not, he clearly saw the analogue himself, and used a technique similar to Vonnegut’s in order to both inform his readers and draw them in as the earlier author had done. In Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut had pointedly engaged his modern-day audience in the events of the earlier period by juxtaposing
historiography with science-fiction to analyse his own personal recollections of World War II. Foer used a similar historical framework. But instead of science-fiction he used the visual devices familiar to graphic novels, along with elements associated with magical realism, in order to re-shape the public’s “re-memory” of the universally remembered 9/11 attacks. Unlike Vonnegut’s earlier narrative, Forter contends that Foer’s text imparts knowledge of trauma rather than “transmit[ing] trauma itself” (282). Instead of further alarming the reader, the informed fictional voices in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* commendably endeavour to raise the volume on 9/11 literature. On first inspection *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* does not appear to be a politically motivated novel. Foer takes no patent side in Bush’s “war on terror” within the narrative. While the main focus of the text occurs during the subsequent two year period following Oskar’s euphemistic “worst day,” the political subtext Foer builds is easily and often overlooked. While reviewers are inclined to argue that it was Foer’s explicit intention to appear politically neutral, his allegorical use of the firebombing of Dresden places two politically motivated events side by side for consideration, thereby offering evidence of a comparable political position. Kristiaan Versluys points out that the novel, “launches a strong plea for tolerance… taking the side of victims, irrespective of their national origin or allegiance” (82). While this judgment is valid to a point, I would argue that the victims of the atrocities which occurred on 9/11, during the firebombing of Dresden, and the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are spoken of with great empathy within the narrative; by drawing attention to them, Foer is again reminding us that Americans had not been exclusively singled out to suffer on 9/11. He points out that there were historical precedents when America and its allies were the aggressors in,

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8 Foer’s traumatised character Oskar cannot bring himself to verbalise either 9/11 or September 11th 2001, so he refers to that date as the “worst day” (68).
rather than the victims of, unanticipated offensive actions. The comparison suggests that contemporary government policies merit further scrutiny.

Foer’s main protagonist, Oskar, takes a covert stand on all the events of 9/11, and most of them have affected him to varying degrees. While insisting that he is “not racist,” Oskar fears, among other things, moustaches, turbans, and Arab people (Foer 36). This declarative fear of “Arab people” effectively “others” Americans like Suheir Hammad, whose poetry in the aftermath of 9/11, highlighted both the unity and the diversity of the nation during the 2001 travail (36). Foer includes in Oskar’s list of post-9/11 fears a dread of “people with moustaches [and] turbans” (36). This is hardly a plea for tolerance, but instead, a trenchant characterisation intended to provoke the reader into a realisation of subliminal prejudices. The apprehension Oskar displays is one that had been propagated in the policies and the discourse of Bush’s political administration. His fears immediately conjure up the perpetrators of the atrocity by correlating eastern features with terrorist intent. Foer’s use of an innocent child narrator, whose discriminatory views could be strongly identified with by many Americans in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 events, and thus forgiven, both intentionally highlight and denounce, but ultimately, absolve this oblique prejudice. Oskar’s bias pushes us to examine and rationalise government jingoism and hawkish actions alongside the outdated and irrational feelings of apprehension that had been rekindled in the wake of the attacks. Oskar’s concerns offer a solution to our own discomfiture by legitimising the fear of foreigners who seemingly would readily hurt us. By using the candid voice of a child, Foer’s novel appears to be, as Versluys states, “[s]horn of much of its direct geopolitical significance, September 11 is imaged on the most intimate scale as a personal brokenness” (80). Versluys views Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close as a text that allows the reader to
empathise with those affected without having to condemn those responsible on either side of the political divide. However, if we read the novel as an allegory a different thought process emerges.

**Why the Question?**

The question mark and the title-line of the introductory chapter of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* emphasise an inability to understand and articulate what has happened, while the ellipsis indicates that there is a gap or aporia in the information that needs to be, but apparently cannot be, filled in. This puzzlement and lack of concrete evidence, which would answer Foer’s initial “What the?” question, are the most salient themes arising within most post-9/11 fiction. The sense of speechlessness is paradoxically coupled within many of the 9/11 narratives with an undeniable urge to answer the question and solve the conundrum. It appears we need to say something, but what? Cultural theorist and political commentator Jean Baudrillard, one of the first to find his voice in the aftermath of the attacks, analysed the aphasia which many people seemed to have experienced around 9/11, along with the difficulty of representing the episode for general public consumption. He acknowledged the inability of anyone to successfully fill the gap in the knowledge, when he pointed out that,

> There is an absolute difficulty in speaking about an absolute event…I don’t think there is any possible explanation of this event, either by intellectuals or by others – but its *analogon*… might be as unacceptable as the event… (The *Spirit of Terrorism* 37)

It would seem that for Baudrillard the gap cannot be filled as he continues to argue that a fictional analogy, or any imaginative image, would be inappropriate in the face
of these particular atrocities. He is not alone in suggesting that a restriction on artistic rhetoric and aesthetic representation of, or around, the events of 9/11 was, and may still remain, apposite. “Steven Spielberg declared a sort of pre-emptive moratorium on films about the attacks,” claimed Foer in an interview with Joel Whitney in 2005. This edict, by an artist of Spielberg’s standing, correlates to the political thought made more than a generation earlier by theorists and World War Two survivors, Primo Levi and Theodor Adorno. In Levi’s memoir and writings like Adorno’s, “No Poetry after Auschwitz” the atrocities that they witnessed are evident but almost impossible to place into words because of the inexplicable horror of the events. Foer’s previous area of interest as displayed in *Everything is Illuminated*, indicates a familiarity with this line of theoretical thought. Connecting the 9/11 events to previous “unspeakable” barbarities in this way acknowledges that the magnitude of the events exceeds both language and symbolism, and as a result, representing 9/11 aesthetically may well have been complex in the decade that followed the attacks. However, it also suggests that not countenancing candid discussion on the topic in artistic works infantilised Americans at a time when a more explicit critique may have proved more constructive.

If Baudrillard and Spielberg’s judgements were correct, then it follows that fear of denigrating the scale of the attacks by “symbolic imagination” (Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* 37) has contributed to the apparent “verbal impotence” of 9/11 writers diagnosed in 2011 by Richard Gray (*After the Fall* 2). It would certainly have inhibited those writers capable of realistically fictionalising the events from developing too authentic a plot. However, long before *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* was published in 2005, imaginative representations of 9/11 were already rife in the American psyche. Bush’s spectral weapons of mass destruction along with the
inspired concept of “unknown unknowns,” succinctly identified by his Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld in a press briefing in 2002, visibly displays this concept within the political rhetoric of the period (Seely 2). This form of creative jargon was apparently considered to be inoffensive to the victims of 9/11, their families, or the American people’s credulity. The language used to convey this type of “unknown” knowledge was deeply imbued with paranoia. When analysing this unidentified information from a Lacanian perspective, Jon Mills argued that, “The process of knowing itself is paranoiac because it horrifically confronts the real, namely, the unknown…paranoiac knowledge manifests itself as the desire not to know” (Mills 30). It appears plausible to argue that “the desire not to know” or the impulse not to inform, rather than the fear of being offensive, drove the overt aggression on the part of the Bush administration (ibid). Their rhetoric determinedly fanned the paranoia, labelling any move towards conciliation as unpatriotic, and using fear as a means of manipulating America and its allies towards an unjustifiable war. This paranoiac and ambiguous fear which seems to resonate from the ellipsis in Foer’s “What the…?” implies not only a gap in the information, but a hesitance in obtaining the knowledge, and a desire not to know the intricacies of what was happening on the world stage (Foer 1).

**Foer’s Vision**

The markedly anxious quality of the format along with the anxiety ridden theme, and the many eclectic visual aspects of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, supports the argument that, early on, American writers like Foer had an initial difficulty in addressing the 2001 attacks in a traditional manner. While Foer’s novel engages with 9/11 on more than one level, the inability of the three main protagonists to speak of
traumatic events that have negatively impacted on their lives is the most evident trope in the text. For the characters in this book not speaking develops into a pattern which adversely affects them all as they individually attempt to find a solution to their anxiety by refusing to discuss the very thing that has caused it. As it gradually appears evident that silence can never be a successful solution to their post-traumatic problems for any of the characters in the novel, it also becomes apparent that it is probably not a reliable answer for American society either. By giving his novel this shape Foer’s purpose is debatably threefold: he was consciously dealing with his own difficulty speaking about the atrocities, attempting to provide a voice for those traumatised by the event, and examining the muting of political alternatives to war. Because he recognised that there was a difficulty in speaking about 9/11, Foer ensured that the reader saw what he was saying by the use of visual devises. These images or diagrams are interspersed throughout the novel and include not only pictures but blacked out and blank pages and perplexing word configurations. By the final pages these graphics have become the unconventional but genuine voice of the text. The use of images to express the inexpressible links Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close intertextually with earlier similar narratives. Along with Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five (1969), Foer’s novel also shares similarities with W.G. Sebald’s Austerlitz (2001). It is clear from the many literary (and visual) devises used in Foer’s novel that the author believes that when discussing 9/11 “[t]he real can no longer appear directly or be expressed in a conventional realist mode” (Whitehead 84). Consequently, like Oskar’s aphasic grandfather, the author expresses himself with a visual voice. He illustrates for the reader precisely what he is saying. These graphic prompts, which have been frequently and often derisively dismissed by reviewers, provide both an intertextual link with previously lauded
novels and a visible tone to the text. In *Austerlitz*, Sebald employed a comparable idiosyncratic style for subject matter which follows along related lines to Foer’s area of interest. It would be difficult to imagine that Foer, or the more discerning critics who judged his writing, would have been unfamiliar with Sebald’s 2001 work. However, in a novel that addresses an inviolable subject from this older and more authoritative author, the “graphic embellishments” within the narrative are seen to “lend the text veracity” (Smith, *Guardian* 2001), while in Foer’s novel they are viewed as an “interruption” (Updike 3). The use of pictures in novels is hardly an innovative literary development, or one that Sebald or Foer has appropriated or developed solely for their own use. Graphics, in these contemporary incarnations follow on from the “German documentary-literature writers of the 1960s and 1970s” (Zilcosky 679). In this type of novel the image serves as an abstract, but distinctive, narrative voice. Since Foer’s narrative directly addresses voice, or more specifically, a lack of voice, the use of images in his novel becomes an obvious, if metaphorical, artistic stratagem. When writing of this style variation Mark M. Anderson reasons,

This turn toward the image – especially the photographic image – could be observed most closely in literary works that incorporated actual pictures into the typographic text, not as illustrations but as constructive, nonsupplementary parts of the whole. It could be seen in works that gave verbal descriptions of photographs without actually showing them and yet made issues of vision and visuality central to the story itself. (129)

In the aftermath of World War II which heralded “the age of the photograph and the cinema, the literary arts seemed to aspire to a ‘visual condition,’” reasoned Anderson (130). This was made particularly apparent in works coming from post-war German
writers and Anderson includes Sebald along with Alexander Kluge in his analysis. He goes on to argue that “German literature presents a special case because of the problematic status of the image after the Hitler period” (130). The easy manipulability of the photograph is stressed in any close examination of the Nazi propaganda which emanates from this era. While there is no attempt here to link Foer’s work to this duplicitous style of propaganda, his earlier exploration of the period, *Everything is Illuminated*, sees a character, also named Jonathan Safran Foer, search for closure to familial trauma armed only with a photograph. The Holocaust theme which dominates the plot of his debut novel, coupled with his sub-plot of Dresden in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, reveal a direct interest in this area of study. The research done by Foer, which is obvious from his novels, would suggest that he is familiar with photographic images from the Hitler era. While much of the pictorial commentary which illustrates *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is intended to offer a positive perspective, some of the novel’s graphics can be disturbing. Foer, however, maintains strict control of the content, and controversially, even manipulates some of the pictures in his text. Unlike some of those from the World War II period however, the manipulation is not done for reasons of political duplicity or cant. Instead, by the use of images, Foer attempts to reconstruct a visual text which accentuates the plot and does present an alternative and articulate visible position that Holloway has deemed to be “bold formal experiments” (115). This boldness and visibility adds to, rather than denigrates, the 9/11 discourse. The distinctive graphic tone of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, while admittedly “narcissistic,” supplies an accent to the 9/11 genre which is unlike

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9 Alexander Kluge is a German author and filmmaker of high repute. Born in 1932 he grew up during the Nazi era and much of his work deals with that period.
the factual based docu-narratives which crammed the bookshelves in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks (114).

**The Falling Man**

While the pages of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* are punctuated with photographs, colour, literary devices, and blank and blacked-out pages, the most controversial picture choice is, without a doubt, that of the “Falling Man” (327-51). The many versions of a man falling from the twin towers on September 11th 2001 were briefly used “within the mainstream media” and were inevitably an added burden on the families of those killed in the towers (Mauro 584). Consequently, these images were suppressed within the United States and bereaved Americans, like Oscar, can, as Mullins suggests, “only learn about what happened from other perspectives” (308). In the many documentaries and film depictions of the day however, the viewer is made innately aware of those who chose this avenue of escape. The bystander’s reaction is recorded, and the viewer can even hear the impact, but the living image as photographed by Richard Drew, and the one offered in Foer’s novel, have remained taboo and are in many ways regarded as voyeuristic. In fact, *Esquire* columnist Tom Junod claimed that “[i]n the United States people have taken pains to banish [these pictures] from the record of September 11, 2001” (2004). It seems that prior to the World Trade Centre attacks it was perfectly acceptable for the American public to witness disturbing photographic images. The picture of the naked nine-year-old Kim Phúc, scarred and traumatised due to one of the many U.S. napalm attacks during the Viet-Nam War, comes immediately to mind. It was also acceptable for the American public to view uncountable horrific contemporary photographs and film-clips of continuing atrocities in the name of
democracy in third-world countries as has been pointed out in a recent study at Brown University (Coelho). But following 9/11, the U.S. administration and media assumed the obligation to shield American citizens from the personal physical repercussions of their government’s actions abroad. Because of the bowdlerisation of some of these tragic images, most particularly those who jumped from the towers, Foer’s Oskar, along with much of mainstream America, had to browse foreign sites for information about the deaths of their fellow citizens. Simpson contends that depriving Americans of this reality denies them a:

place in the global community of suffering from which [they] have been for so many years blissfully exempted...there has been a visible taboo cast over the real or imagined representation of dead or dying people, one that is not fully explained by appealing to the feelings of the survivors or of the families and friends of the victims. (212-13)

Emphasising only the heroic symbolism of the day, and refusing to speak of or permit the most alarming actions of those personally impacted by the events to be viewed, sanitizes the incident. Without explicitly stating this in his novel Foer makes this position clear, and through the subsequent reaction of the text’s main characters it is made strikingly evident that repressing the shocking reality cannot delete or deny disturbing memories. The controversial dictate “not to show, not to look,” made evident by both Tom Junod and Foer’s Oskar, was imposed only in the United States: “All over the world people saw the human stream debouch from the top of the North Tower,” Junod claimed in his article (Esquire). As these facts were banned at home on the grounds of sensibility, Foer’s Oskar is forced to trawl the internet for the image he inserts into his personal scrapbook, Stuff That Happened to Me:
I found a bunch of videos on the Internet of bodies falling. They were on a Portuguese site, where there were all sorts of stuff they weren’t showing here, even though it happened here… It makes me incredibly angry that people all over the world can know things that I can’t, because it happened here, and happened to me, so shouldn’t it be mine? (Foer 256)

On a political level, attempting to marginalise those who were forced to take such drastic actions seems overly protective and disingenuous on the part of government and indicates complicity by the media. On a domestic level, Oskar’s emotive query questions political decisions made to filter information, and his voice echoes that of political activist Susan Sontag. In the aftermath of 9/11 Sontag argued that “decisions [that] are cast as judgements about ‘good taste’ – [are] always a repressive standard when invoked by institutions” (Regarding the Pain of Others 61). She also saw as puzzling “the novel insistence on good taste in a culture saturated with commercial incentives towards lower standards of taste” (61-2). Keeping these images sacrosanct does seem curious in a country where the execution of an enemy like Saddam Hussein can be widely and graphically covered via internet, television-news, and print.

Apart from concerns around acceptable socio-political standards, the child’s agonised question “shouldn’t it be mine?” problematises the rationale behind this type of editing in a country which (Foer 256), as Junod indicates, can appear to be devoted to the Fox News Factor. In a nation of voyeurs, the desire to face the most disturbing aspects of our most disturbing day was somehow ascribed to voyeurism, as though the jumpers’ experience instead of being central to the horror, was tangential to it, a sideshow best forgotten. (“The Man Who Invented 9/11”)
The choice whether to look or not, remember or not, speak about the events or not, is fundamental to Foer’s plot. The novel categorically points to duplicity in all these regards. It focalises on the fact that Americans had effectively been asked to avert their eyes, and to speak of and remember only the laudable or revenge-worthy elements of the day. But Foer’s narrative requires that the reader look at all aspects of the day, and with regard to those who had to make the execrable choice of jumping, vicariously consider, “would I jump or would I burn? (185). If we examine the proscribed photograph from the day through the lens of Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, then Foer’s provocative images can be seen as therapeutic. Whitehead summarises Barthes’ remarks on photography by explaining:

> The photograph itself represents a reconstruction: it shows us reality in a past state and at the same time evidences that what we see has indeed existed. By attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces in us a belief that it is alive; it uncannily suggests a return of the dead.

(Whitehead 130)

Oskar attempts to make Barthes’ uncanny suggestion a reality when he inserts into his scrapbook fifteen photographic frames of a falling man in reverse sequence. The affect he achieves is that the figure actually ascends. Oskar has artfully reconstructed the actuality of the day by offering an illusory reality. In the kineograph that makes up the final pages of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* the “vertigo of time [is] defeated” for the ingenuous character, Oskar (Barthes 97). However, on mature reflection we know this to be a child’s distraction. It is clear that for the United States there can be no resuscitation, no reconstruction, of the day. The ability to flip the pages and turn back the clock on the historic/political situation which created and
facilitated the 9/11 attacks is eliminated from the list of possible solutions and these events cannot be rescued from either history or memory.

The problematic reception which greeted *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, especially the reaction of those who, like John Updike, criticised Foer’s use of images and his “most curious of happy endings,” speaks to the trauma, perhaps subliminal, evoked by the use of the forbidden image of the falling man (*Mixed 1*). Not only its use, but Foer’s treatment of the picture, too, may have touched a nerve. Kratzer points out in his study of the images of that day, “[p]hotographs with disturbing or graphic content often spark debate about whether the images are appropriate for publication” (46). Kratzer goes on to explain that, presupposed, reader response was a determining factor when choosing which images to use and which to suppress in the aftermath of the attacks. Junod too, supports this position, as he recalls, in the aftermath “[m]ost newspapers refused to print” his falling man photograph. “Those who [included it in their images] on the day after the World Trade Center attacks, received hundreds of letters of complaint. The photograph was denounced as coldblooded, ghoulish and sadistic. Then it vanished” (*Esquire* 177-78). Previously published fiction, like Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*, while evoking many of the issues surrounding 9/11, did not deal, as Foer did, with the emotions of those directly involved on such a personal level. An imaginative allusion to those who fell may well have been considered especially intrusive, as many of the victims’ family members were resistant to the implication that their loved one may have opted to die in this manner. The Hernandez family, whose husband and father never returned from his job at Windows on the World after the attacks, refused to accept any suggestion that the jumper in any of these photographs might be their parent. 10 “As they saw it, he never would have jumped.

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10 *Windows on the World* was the name of the restaurant which occupied levels 106 and 107 of the North Tower (building one) World Trade Centre.
They looked at the decision to jump as a betrayal of love, and unconscionable suicide that went against everything the Catholic faith taught them” (Kroes 7). But, rather than a callous reminder, Laura Frost reasons that Foer’s novel is an attempt to “memorialise the people who jumped from the WTC,” not to exploit them (185). Foer’s reversal of the sequence in his flip-book ending, while it might appear banal, allows people to look without guilt. If this argument is correct, the image then does become, as Updike insinuates, a uniquely constructed happy ending. In circumstances so challenging that “[t]he real can no longer appear directly or be expressed in a conventional realist mode,” Foer’s visual panacea can appear effective and useful to both those who want to look and those who do not (Whitehead 84). It allows people to abreact without actually acknowledging the reality of the decision made by the victims, but still it subliminally insists on that reality and the impossibility of reversing time.

**Foer’s metaphor for America**

As a metaphor for the United States, Oskar can be viewed from a range of perspectives. Dan O’Brien argues in his on-line American Literary blog that Oskar’s peculiar “youth and innocence act as a reflection of the United States’ self-image of blameless victimhood following the September attacks” (3). As with the anxiety felt by the American people with regard to these violent strikes and subsequent actions, many of Oskar’s troubles stem, not only from his father’s death, but from lack of information about that death. Because he is unaware of how his father died, he cannot get the image of that death out of his mind. He expresses these concerns in a conversation with his therapist:
“There’s one [jumper] that could be him” “You want him to have jumped?”
“I want to stop inventing. If I could know how he died, exactly how he died, I wouldn’t have to invent him dying...there are so many ways to die, and I just want to know which is his.” (Foer 157)

Just as Bush’s elusive “weapons of mass destruction” shape post-9/11 rhetoric, Oskar’s “inventions” punctuate and obscure the novel. When a solution to any problem is not available from his own seemingly vast store of knowledge, the confused child invents an answer. While all the proposed inventions are unique, none are entirely satisfactory, and on mature consideration, can be seen through immediately. Consequently in the story, they appear as barriers to reality, and it is debatable whether a child like Oskar would be relieved of any perceived psychological burden through direct knowledge of the kind he is seeking. However, the American people are not frightened children, and should not be offered tall-tales and inventions in place of specifics. The level of benefit this type of information would be to a child like Oskar is arguable. If he was actually able to obtain the information he seeks it may well increase his anxiety and exacerbate his inability to express his emotions verbally. As Van der Kolk explains, as “they mature children shift from primary sensorimotor …to perceptual representations, to symbolic and linguistic modes of organising mental experience” (172). As mature adults Americans are capable of processing and coming to terms with the experience they faced during and after 9/11. Oskar, however, exhibits behaviour that indicates that he has not been able to evolve past the nine-year-old who could not bring himself to speak to his father on the phone. While clearly bright, he has become emotionally repressed since the death of his father, and can no longer use language to successfully articulate his difficulties. Instead he self-harms to express his frustration, anger, and pain:
...WHEN I WOKE UP, MOM WAS PULLING MY SHIRT OFF TO HELP ME GET INTO MY PJS, WHICH MEANS SHE MUST HAVE SEEN MY BRUISES. I COUNTED THEM LAST NIGHT IN THE MIRROR AND THERE WERE FORTY-ONE. SOME OF THEM HAVE GOTTEN BIG, BUT MOST OF THEM ARE SMALL. I DON’T PUT THEM THERE FOR HER, BUT STILL I WANT HER TO ASK ME HOW I GOT THEM (EVEN THOUGH SHE PROBABLY KNOWS), AND TO FEEL SORRY FOR ME (BECAUSE SHE SHOULD REALIZE HOW HARD THINGS ARE FOR ME), AND TO FEEL TERRIBLE (BECAUSE AT LEAST SOME OF IT IS HER FAULT), AND TO PROMISE ME THAT SHE WON’T DIE AND LEAVE ME ALONE. BUT SHE DIDN’T SAY ANYTHING. I COULDN’T EVEN SEE THE LOOK IN HER EYES WHEN SHE SAW THE BRUISES, BECAUSE MY SHIRT WAS OVER MY HEAD, COVERING MY FACE LIKE A POCKET OR A SKULL. (Foer 172-73)

Through bruising Oskar indicates the use of sensory awareness and perception to silently relate his pain because he cannot organise the experience on a “linguistic level” (172). Van der Kolk further explains that, “When people are exposed to trauma, that is, a frightening event outside of ordinary experience, they undergo a “speechless terror…this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organised on a somatosensory or iconic level” (172). The way the U.S. government treated their citizens in post-9/11 America indicates that it was felt that, like children, they would be unable to process the information on a mature level. The administration used the attacks as an opportunity to manipulate the population and pursue its own hawkish agenda. Rather than being informed about policy decisions which precipitated or followed the attacks, Americans were diverted away from the reality of the issues with tales “of the heroism and bravery of the victims and their saviors” (Kroes 4). The general public were treated as if they were too fragile to be exposed to the truth, and in place of reason, a childlike repressed reaction was the response expected and conceivably desired. Instead of discussing the problems with
the people and coming to a mature and guided solution, the administration explained and declared nothing, thus causing the nation, like Oskar, to self-harm in the rush to war. This approach supports the grandfather’s contention that “people with nothing to declare carry the most” (Foer 268).

**Nothing to Declare**

The inability or refusal to speak evident in the characters in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* must be analysed alongside the culture of fear and glossohobia which prevailed in the United States after the attacks, and which to some extent continues currently in that society. Lack of information, which causes such torment for Oskar in the narrative, is reflected in the many conspiracy theories that have materialised in the aftermath of the attacks. Like Oskar, when there were no obvious answers for society’s questions a need to invent some becomes evident in the text. This can be paralleled within the contemporary political dogma. As with President Bush’s manipulative and opportunistic use of the fabricated “weapons of mass destruction,” when no immediate motive for the events of the day could be admitted or accepted, invention and concealment became the answer. Both the puerile Oskar and the sophisticated Government could not face their own ill-conceived actions and instead indulged in subterfuge. David Simpson addresses this point when questioning the post-9/11 American media policy:

Is this the therapeutic state at work, protecting us from what it knows we cannot bear, or something more sinister, a purposeful repression of the physicality of death in order that a culture of undying energy can maintain itself and continue to avoid facing up to the deaths of those in other parts of
the world…the deaths which its own mighty resources might work to avoid rather than perpetuate? (214)

In *Writing the War on Terrorism* (2005), Richard Jackson suggested that the only way for the presidential administration of the day to construct a “new era of terrorism” was to disengage the 9/11 attacks from any terrorist act which preceded it (97). Thus they classified the strikes on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon as unprovoked assaults on civilians, the scale of which was unprecedented. However, as David Holloway has argued:

> [c]atastrophic though they were, the 9/11 attacks were just one incident in a much bigger, transnational Islamist insurgency…that was long in the making, and the pre-9/11 and post-9/11 worlds were broadly continuous not discontinuous (1-2)

As the introduction to this study indicates, a steady progression toward a strike of this magnitude was clearly in evidence before 9/11 occurred. Problems in East-West relations had been percolating ever since the end of the Second World War. However, by “severing all links” with this suspect past, Jackson asserts, the government rhetoric of the day deliberately decontextualized 9/11 and “constructed [it] without a pre-history; it stands alone as a defining act of cruelty and evil” (97). In the political climate which emerged from this ideology and rhetorical style, Foer’s politically-muted text not only constructs the small story of one family’s harrowing event, but reconstructs and re-establishes the pre-history and recreates a political past within the text. By identifying both Dresden and Hiroshima in his narrative, Foer makes the comparison simple, even for any readers who may have been previously unfamiliar with these historical events. However, he makes a more subtle observation as well. He reminds readers, those who remember the events, and those who in the
future will use fictional literature as a template, of the government discourse which informed and fostered the War on Terror. He skilfully points out that the philosophies of terrorist organisations are not the only perspectives to cause concern. The contemporary U.S. political ideology and their complicated historical background in East-West relations, while not addressed or confronted directly in the novel, is ever-present in the atmosphere of the plot. The philosophy and rhetoric of the Bush administration in the wake of 9/11 is seen to feed the fears the reader observes in Oskar:

   Even after a year, I still had an extremely difficult time doing certain things…There was a lot of stuff that made me panicky, like suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway (even though I’m not racist), Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops and other public places, scaffolding, sewers and subway grates, bags without owners, shoes, people with moustaches, smoke, knots, tall buildings, turbans. (Foer 36)

All of these fears and suspicions mentioned by Oskar early in the novel, and alluded to throughout the narrative, can be mirrored to the political oratory prevalent in the aftermath of the attacks and the beginning of the “War on Terror.” While President Bush and his administration are not directly criticised in Foer’s book, reservations such as Oskar’s draw attention to the rhetoric which was used in the war on terror discourse. This language added a new and powerful voice which was in no way subdued in the aftermath of the fall of the towers. This voice of conflict eclipsed and effectively silenced the more salutary tones which, if allowed to be heard, may have been able to raise the tenor of the dialogue and lower the vehemence of the retaliatory action.
It is essential that the emotional and emotive climate Oskar was created in is fully appreciated. Otherwise the novel’s purpose is reduced to simply that of a placebo against trauma. Richard Jackson’s thorough analysis of the political language used to propagate the war on terror states that much of the oratory of the period was “deliberately designed to essentialise, demonise and dehumanise the terrorist “other” for specific political purposes” (62). This is evident in the words of the then US Attorney, General John Ashcroft who, in his speech of September 24th 2001, cunningly designates and “us and them” philosophy. Ashcroft affirms:

> The attacks of September 11 drew a bright line of demarcation between the civil and the savage, and our nation will never be the same. On one side of this line are freedom’s enemies, murderers of innocents in the name of a barbarous cause” (qtd. in Jackson 62).

While I in no way support terrorism as a means to realise religious freedom or political advancement, I nonetheless totally deprecate the palpable demarcation between us and them” in the contemporary political rhetoric. I abhor the blanket approach taken by advocates of the Iraq War and the “US Patriot Act,” along with the irrational and aggressive reaction to those who demurred. These specious actions support DeLillo’s 2001 statement that “there is no logic in apocalypse” (“IRF” 2), and validate the concept that a “regeneration through violence [has become] the structuring metaphor of the American experience” (Slotkin 5). This is clearly evident and was intentionally perpetuated in the political discourse of the era.

Implicit in Foer’s novel is the aura of fear which existed in the United States during the early years of the twenty-first century. There was an immediate and understandable fear for personal safety which resonates from Oskar’s images of “dead kids” (243) or “people who had lost arms and legs” (240). Although these
pictures are included in his scrapbook, readers are mercifully not asked to view them. Vicarious fear for loved ones is also demonstrated in the unseen image of “a soldier getting his head cut off in Iraq” (42). Fear is palpable within the narrative, not only of terrorists and terrorism, but of one’s own proclivity to speak openly and spontaneously; essentially a perceptible fear of saying the wrong thing. In the weeks following the attacks, Jacques Derrida attempted to deconstruct the impact the terrorist strikes had on free speech in the United States:

I’ve been in New York for three weeks now. Not only is it impossible not to speak on this subject, but you feel or are made to feel that it is actually forbidden, that you do not have the right, to begin speaking of anything, without ceding to this obligation, without making an always somewhat blind reference to this date. I gave in regularly to this injunction…though trying always beyond the commotion and the most sincere compassion, to appeal to questions and to a ‘thought’ (among other things, a real political thought) of what, it seems has just taken place here on September 11… (qtd. in Borradori 87)

Derrida recognised that on a personal level it was almost impossible to evaluate the events surrounding 9/11 outside the metanarrative the government had created without being censured. However, by November 2001 the “us and them” of government policy was to become further defined. By then it was operating at a global level. In a joint news conference with French President Jacques Chirac in November 2001, President Bush challenged all other nations: “Over time it’s going to be important for nations to know they will be held accountable for inactivity…You are either with us or against us in the fight against terror” (CNN). Any voice it seems, personal, public or political, which spoke out of sync with the
U.S. status quo was open to condemnation and censure. This disapproval of any
voice of caution or conciliation was sensed throughout the world. As Holloway
indicates, those “who spoke publicly against the war ran into difficulties” and there
was no indication that writers of fiction would be pardoned (33).

However, Foer managed to diplomatically circumvent the inferred tacit
governmental dictate by introducing traumatised characters that live in fear of
speaking out. He uses this fictional family to point out how this fear negatively
impacted their lives. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* inconspicuously challenged
the politically purported impression that 9/11 was an unparalleled terror attack, and
cleverly probed the United States’ own level of accountability for those attacks
within the narrative. As has been previously argued here, the shadow of the towers
shaded subsequent violent attacks which have in the past been perpetrated in the
name of democracy. As Jackson has pointed out, “the dead civilians of Afghanistan
and Iraq are justified by reference to the dead civilians in New York and
Washington; the US could not be blamed because the responsibility rested solely on
those who had initiated war on September 11, 2001” (135). Rather than disregard any
potential political back-story, Foer’s traumatised child protagonist and his
grandparents drew attention to how world political events can negatively influence
individual lives and are, for the most part, beyond personal control. His novel closely
examined the larger issue in miniature. By presenting his story in this fashion, he
forced his readers to place the attacks in perspective, and view 9/11 circumspectly.

As a metaphor for the American people, Oskar Schell is the ideal prototype.
He is purpose built from Slotkin’s formula for the “mythology” that first served to
create and display a new and purely American identity (4). This twenty-first century
American Adam, Oscar, is intelligent and resourceful, but his naivety and youth
make him particularly vulnerable during this ordeal. While this “experience is unique to him…his trauma creates connections across identity boundaries” which allow him to empathise, but unfortunately cause him to be unable to discuss what actually happened (Mullins 314). His distress and silence during the subsequent two years after the death of his father in the towers is symbolic of the collective reaction of American society in the wake of the attacks and the run-up to war in Iraq in 2003. The discovery of a key and the ensuing fanatical search for its missing lock, which Oskar imagines will provide some degree of closure and meaning to his father’s death, can be juxtaposed with America’s obsessive search for the elusive weapons of mass destruction and their illusionary status. Oskar ultimately discovers that the key and lock had no connection to his father, and the American people eventually came to the conclusion that Bush’s iconography of Weapons of Mass Destruction played no part in the September 11th attacks. This contextualisation of events supports Derrida’s claim that “September 11’ is…part of the archaic theatre of violence aimed at striking the imagination” (qtd. in Borradori 101).

Although Foer’s ingenious literary message may appear cryptic it also strikes at the imagination. Foer made it clear in 2004, a year before publication of Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, that he believed that “…it’s no longer acceptable for the culturally progressive to be politically disengaged” (Schaffrick). This statement suggests that Foer intended his novel to be viewed politically on a world stage. He did not wish it to be regarded as simply a national or solipsistic analysis. When evaluating 9/11 and its aftermath, Americans, like Oskar, needed to be allowed to recognise that there was more than one way of looking at what happened, and at those realities that differed from the then current government rhetoric being superimposed on the consciousness of a traumatised population. It was essential that
it became apparent that the U.S. mainland was not being attacked “out of the blue,” but that the animosity and odium which occasioned these domestic strikes had been festering for decades in the geopolitical atmosphere from which the domestic United States was regularly shielded. But this political message in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* has been so often overlooked that the text is rarely examined for any political objective. In *Out of the Blue*, Versluys deems that the novel is “shorn of much of its direct geopolitical significance” (80). Richard Gray’s assessment in *After the Fall*, judged Foer’s text as experimental in form, while still “illustrat[ing] a deeply conventional …deeply traditional narrative…” (52-53). While the novel does contain some of the attributes of a *bildungsroman*, it is neither apolitical nor traditional. Oskar was not intended to be “a realistic character” as Foer claimed in an interview with Whitney in 2005. He was instead an evocation which suggests both the personal and the political sentiments of the period. The novel itself, while it confronts real aspects of the period and endeavours to engage with them, does not present itself as a realistic story, nor was it ever intended to appear as one. Apart from his obvious use of the textual structure to provide an historical framework through which to view and compare the 9/11 attacks, Foer has also employed this particular style of narrative with its singular characters and emotive illustrations to manifestly draw attention to the restrictive competing political ideologies that had been at work in the United States subsequent to the attacks.

**Competing Political Ideologies**

When *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is analysed in depth the complexity of the work becomes increasingly apparent. As the plot develops Foer’s narrative seems to follow Freud’s psychological framework of melancholia and mourning, while also
addressing his concept of “Nachträglichkeit... ‘afterward-ness’” which has been effectively demonstrated by Mitchum Huehls (79). Both of these Freudian theories concerning melancholia and “afterward-ness,” develop purposefully in Foer’s narrative as it becomes more and more obvious that all the primary characters live in a time-warp where traumatic past experiences have affected everything that followed in their lives. They simultaneously “act out” and vainly attempt to “work through” both the contemporary and historic traumas identified in the plot. Each character struggles to reach some conclusion and make sense of what has happened, which continuously harks back to the aporic original query “What the...?” that introduces the novel (Foer 1). By pointing out these emotive conflicts Foer attempts to elicit, what Dominick LaCapra deems to be, an “empathic response” (41). Eagleton maintains that a “distinction between sympathy and empathy is crucial when it comes to determining an ethical response to the suffering literary other. Sympathy can be equated to ‘feeling sorry for you,’ while empathy corresponds to ‘feeling your sorrow’” (Sweet Violence 156). The concerned reaction these fictional characters are able to provoke in readers mirrors the compassionate response 9/11 initially triggered world-wide. But this, in turn, gives rise to LaCapra’s more intricate concept, “empathic unsettlement” (41). Applying LaCapra’s theory to Oskar’s dilemma raises other, more complex, issues which, instead of being cathartic, “pose a barrier to closure in discourse and place in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we derive reassurance” (41-2). While Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close has certainly been read as saccharine and an intentionally reassuring 9/11 novel, there are deeper metaphorical conclusions that can be drawn from the characterisation. If we view Oskar as a metaphor for the American people, and then examine him through LaCapra’s lens, a different
conclusion can be drawn about the text. Instead of attempting to immediately and spontaneously answer Oskar’s initial question and strive for an instantaneous explanation of what happened on 9/11, Foer seems to suggest that there is a need to delay closure until all the relevant facts have been analysed. Applying LaCapra’s premise of empathic unsettlement to Oskar, and thus to American society, it appears that in order to be fully healed any artificial curative must be avoided. Oskar needs to “empathically expose [himself] to an unsettlement” and “come to terms with the wounds and scars of the past” in order to finally heal (42). He must first realise “empathic unsettlement” in order to transcend the traumatic and gain the ability to understand, work through, and eventually be able to profitably articulate his feelings of grief and loss (41).

In the symbolic world of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* the metaphorical Oskar is the character that appears to be the most deserving of help. However, he is also the most challenging, demanding and annoying figure in the text. As a person Oskar appears to be trapped within a time-warp of “afterward-ness” and his judgment is consequently skewed (Huehls 42). Although it is clear from Foer’s story-line that Oskar is nine when his father dies, he never seems to grow older with the passage of time, nor move past the “worst day” (68). So Oskar remains a perpetual nine-year-old throughout the narrative. This non-maturation of the allegorical figure coincides with Freud’s theory of *Nachträglichkeit* which theorises that the time of a traumatic event affects all future occurrences, including in this case, personal growth. Following Freud’s logic for both the micro and the macro scenario implies that the full impact of experiences such as 9/11, while recognised immediately as shocking, may not be wholly appreciated for many years, if ever. The “temporal continuum” or gradual yet anomalous passage of time that
Freud maintained is needed to resolve this type of traumatic impact, is represented within *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by Oskar’s obsession with timing things (Huehls 42). Oskar feels he urgently must know how long it is going to take a thing to happen, while his grandfather’s repeated stark question: “Do you know what time it is?” indicates the interminable passage of time (118/129). Oskar’s future-time, in keeping with his grandfather’s past-time, is rooted in a specific time-period, the euphemistic worst day which neither character is able to move beyond. The rupture of subjective space and time dominates the characters, the narrative and arguably post-9/11 American society.

Oskar’s main problem with time is that he cannot turn back the clock to answer the phone and talk to his father on “the Worst Day” (68). He intuitively realises that to have done so may have given both his father and himself some degree of comfort and closure. “He needed me, and I couldn’t pick up…I just couldn’t” Oskar laments when it is too late (301). By speaking to his father at “10:24” Oskar would have known his father’s location when the towers came down (302). He would not have to continue imagining the scene in many and varied incarnations, and could perhaps work through to some type of resolution. Oskar pleads from within the text: “If I could know how he died, exactly how he died, I wouldn’t have to invent him dying…” (257). He is seeking absolution for both dissociation – “not being able to pick up,” and speechlessness – “not being able to tell anyone” (302). In her study of traumatic reaction, *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth defines this type of response as “failed address” (102). She clarifies the term as “repeated failure to respond adequately” during a traumatic event. This is subsequently followed by unending guilt because the survivor no longer has the power to “truly or adequately respond” (11).

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11 Oskar’s interest in physics indicates an understanding of “Spacetime” where time is understood to be universal and consistent, unrelated to the time-frame of the observer. Oscar is interested in the hypothetical fourth dimension where the logic of time and space becomes disordered.
respond” (103). This “double failure” adds a further painful dimension to the anguish of the vicarious trauma sufferer (103). Foer uses Oskar’s repeated playing of his father, Thomas Schell’s, recorded final phone calls to illustrate this sense of interminable guilt. Oskar places both his lost father and himself in a linguistic limbo, continuously trying to make an impossible connection. Consequently Oskar, through the memory of his late father, continues to suffer “failed address” (102).

This issue of failed address is experienced to varying degrees by all of the characters in Foer’s novel. While it is not abnormal for a child to try to avoid accepting responsibility for his or her actions, the metaphoric Oskar’s dilemma is much more complex. His continued deceptiveness conceals more than merely a juvenile attempt at denial. As in most situations Oskar is an annoyingly loquacious child, this inability to speak seems uncharacteristic, however, it continues to haunt him into the future and cannot be hidden away in his closet with the voice-recorder containing his father’s pleas. His failure to speak to this much-loved father on the worst day clearly indicates both disbelief and powerlessness, thus he is unable to cope effectively. Instead of addressing what has happened directly, Oskar attempts to disassociate his normal and anticipated reality from the actuality of that day. Van der Kolk and Van der Hart’s views support this hypothesis when they assert that: “contemporary research has shown that dissociation of a traumatic experience occurs as the trauma is occurring” (168). This is what has automatically happened in Oskar’s case. He instinctively withdrew from the trauma by refusing to answer the phone and address what was real during his father’s ordeal. Although he almost immediately realised the implications of his actions it was already too late; he could not then reverse time, he could not speak, he could not remedy his mistake. The only
solution he could envision was to conceal his own actions, hide behind the horror of the day and then struggle to learn what happened after the phone “…cut off” (301).

*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* indicates clearly that the only way Oskar can grow and move towards a positive future is by remembering the past, recognising the passage of time and regaining his voice. His inability to “tell anyone” of the unanswered phone calls and his father’s messages make Oskar’s problems a closely guarded secret which interrupts and stunts his emotional growth (Foer 302). While it is all too natural that any child would be traumatised by the death of a parent in a terrorist attack, Thomas Schell’s abortive attempt to communicate with his son, along with the fact that his death was not immediate, haunts both this child and the narrative. One of the most unnerving tragedies of September 11th 2001 was that countless victims trapped in the World Trade Center or aboard some of the fatal flights had time to anticipate their own deaths. The repercussions of this meant that their friends and families had time to imagine the horror of their loved ones’ experience. Many of those trapped in the towers and on the planes took the opportunity, like Oscar’s father, to reach out and speak to their families by phone. This provides an additional dimension to both the traumatic events of 9/11 and to trauma studies as a discipline as William Watkin has verified in his examination of the day (227). However, the sheer volume of victims in some respects depersonalises the disaster and makes the tragedy universal as well as individual. Because 9/11 was not Oskar’s exclusive traumatic event, and did not happen to him alone, he must share his anguish with countless others. Even his most direct personal sorrow, his father’s death, must be shared with his mother and grandmother. As seems to be apparent in many victims of trauma, there is an element of narcissism in Oskar’s reaction to his ordeal. This is made evident
throughout the narrative, with particular reference to his all-important scrapbook, *Things That Happened to Me*. This volume contains images of things that clearly have happened, but not directly to Oskar. In his 2001 article “In the Ruins of the Future” Don DeLillo foresaw these type of “false memories” as a counter-narrative of “marginal stories” that would develop into the meta-narrative of the day (35). The most significant of Oskar’s hoarded memories is the image of the falling man, and the most poignant is the realisation that he must share this American tragedy with the rest of the world. Oskar believes that no one else could be as affected as he was on that day. His personal trauma is unique and others should not be able to appropriate it for their own use; that they do is offensive to him. His distinct and physical proof of failed address, the hidden tapes from the answering machine, makes Oskar’s loss, in his own estimation, greater than that of other people. The recorded evidence of his failure, which he continuously but privately replays, remains a constant physical reminder of his inability to pick up the phone and address his dying father. From his perspective other mourners who listened and thus did not fail their lost loved ones cannot be as affected as he is. They, he instinctively feels, can eventually work through their personal shock, while he is destined to forever hear the ringing phone.

Due to his obvious issues of failing to address the situation he faced on 9/11, the trauma Oskar suffered remains undiminished by time. In a late night conversation with his grandmother he delves into his deep sorrow, but again fails to verbally address the issue that haunts him. He “couldn’t explain to her that [he] missed him *more*, more than she or anyone else missed him, because [he] couldn’t tell her what happened with the phone. That secret was a hole in the middle of [him] that every happy thing fell into” (Foer 71). This corresponds with LaCapra’s contention that trauma “is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in
existence” (41). All the expected joy, anticipated by the metaphorical Oskar, has been lost in the lacuna which has become his place of existence. In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* Oskar’s augured happy life has been “disarticulate[d]” by his inability to speak of the secret event which intensifies his trauma (41). Thus this ancillary, but equally powerful, secret trauma has created that “hole…that every happy thing fell into” (Foer 71). Oskar is constantly aware of this hollow in his life and actively seeks to repair the damage. When *Hey Jude* by the Beatles randomly plays on the car radio he associates the sentiments of the lyrics to his own life. “It was true, I didn’t want to make it bad. I wanted to take a sad song and make it better. It’s just that I didn’t know how” he reflects (207). However, he fails to verbalise his fears and speak to his mother, who travels on a similar journey. Analogously, the chance breaking of a vase offered a possible solution, a way to “make it better.”

While searching through his father’s possessions Oskar discovered within a blue vase “a fat and short key, in a little envelope” (37), written on the envelope in his father’s handwriting is the word “Black” (41). Oskar believes that this might be the key which will help him resolve the narrative’s initial query: “What the…?” (1). Thus he begins the often frantic search to find “the lock” which conceals his “happiness” (207). The symbolic Oskar imagines that by following the flawed clues the word and the key offered, he could liberate the secret trauma that lies hidden, both in his closet and in his head.

Most of the characters that Oskar encounters during his eight-month treasure hunt have been traumatised in some way by past experiences. Many are attempting to deal with their trauma by applying solutions that correspond to the theoretical concepts posed by LaCapra and Caruth. Often they display elements of both these positions. The most challenged figure in the text, the only person who can see both,
what happened and how the issues are being dealt with, is the person whose support
Oskar needs most. However, she is also the least developed of all the major
characters in the novel. In many narratives, the wife of the victim of such a tragedy
would naturally become a focal point.\(^\text{12}\) However, this is not the place allotted to
Oscar’s mother by Foer. Instead, of the four family members left behind by Thomas
Schell Junior’s death, she is the least developed. She appears to respond typically to
trauma as outlined by Uytterschout and Versluys by endeavouring “to remember the
event and fit it into a coherent whole” (216). But she also struggles to cope with her
young son’s multi-faceted reaction to the event, his attempt to dissociate himself
from his actions, and his failure to address the issues with which he is confronted.

Consequently, she dissociates herself from her personal trauma, the horrific death of
her late husband Thomas, and instead focuses on the vicarious victim, her adolescent
son, Oskar. This self-sacrifice however, is not apparent to the immature and
traumatised child. Oskar can be forgiven for a lack of understanding toward his
mother, yet it is more difficult to appreciate either the vitriol or the apathy evident
towards her by the critics of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Oskar’s mother is
regularly and repeatedly dismissed as an unrealistically permissive parent, or entirely
disregarded by those writing about the novel.\(^\text{13}\) Even Uytterschout and Versluys have
neglected to analyse her in any depth. However, she is an essential character, as it is
her muted voice or lack of address which keeps the plot alive, although Oskar, along
with most critics, appear unaware of this. Had Oskar’s mother reacted as some
reviewers deemed appropriate, there would be no story to tell. Of necessity, she
remains a shadowy background character, who none the less plays a pivotal role in

\(^{12}\) See *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* by Ken Kalfus, Jay McInerney’s *The Good Life*, and Don
DeLillo’s *Falling Man*.

\(^{13}\) See Adams, McInerney, Updike, Kakutani for those whose reviews of the novel view the mother
negatively. Most critical reviews however, tend to ignore her as incidental within the text.
the narrative. Of those critics who are interested enough to acknowledge her at all, she is seen as neglectful, “apparently happy to let [Oskar] wander the city streets all day knocking on people’s doors” (Adams 2). Even reviewers as experienced as John Updike, regarded her as an “unusually permissive and remote working mother” (“Mixed Messages”). Although she is certainly a working woman, Oskar’s mother is deeply involved in his life. The readers and critics however, are forced to view her through the eyes of a traumatised and often unreasonable child. Therefore their opinions are clouded by a fallible and unreliable or perhaps uninformed narrator. Oskar, it would seem, agrees with the critical evaluation of his mother when he demands:

“Where were you?” “Where was I when?” “That day” “What day?” “The day!” “What do you mean?” “Where were you?” “I was at work.” “Why didn’t you pick me up from school like the other moms?” “Oskar, I came home as soon as I could.” …”But you should have been home when I got home.” “I wish I had been, but it wasn’t possible.” “You should have made it possible”… (169)

It is apparent that neither character is really addressing the subject that haunts the interchange. In order to help Oskar react appropriately, and to do so herself, Oskar’s mother needs to explain that she understands why her absence on the worst day merits this response from her son. The above conversation takes place more than a year after the event, yet the mother still does not acknowledge that she knows of her son’s failure to answer his father’s calls, nor can she deal with her own inadequacy or powerlessness to tackle Oskar’s problems head on. A perceptive reader will recognise that if she had been at home he would not have had the responsibility of deciding to not pick up. Consequently Oskar would never have had the additional trauma of choosing not to speak. If his mother had confided to Oskar earlier that she
had spoken to her husband via cell phone during her walk home, Oskar would know
to whom his father’s later calls home were directed, and that his mother was aware
of his failure to respond appropriately. In this, Oskar’s mother shows classic signs of
repressive behaviour. Both mother and son fail to communicate with each other and
consequently protract their own suffering because they refuse to speak about talking,
or about not talking.

**Unreliability or Miscommunication?**

Narrative representation for this novel requires that much of the dialogue unfolds via
the inner thought processes of Oskar. If the action in the text were seen from his
mother’s perspective she would undoubtedly emerge as a very different character.
The reader only sees and hears what Oskar sees and hears, and he, along with the
critics, wonders at his mother’s leniency:

“Mom?” “Yes?” “I’m going out.” “OK.” “I’ll be back later” “OK.” “I don’t
know when. It could be extremely late.” “OK.” Why didn’t she ask me more?

Why didn’t she try and stop me, or at least keep me safe? (288)

The answer to Oskar’s question should be obvious to an intuitive reader before it
became clear to him: “All of a sudden I understood why, when Mom asked where I
was going, and I said “Out,” she didn’t ask any more questions. She didn’t have to
because she knew” (291). When considering happiness after 9/11 in *Welcome to the
Desert of the Real* Slovoj Žižek views the type of revelation presented in Foer’s
novel as:

the enigma of knowledge: how it is possible that the whole psychic economy
of a situation changes radically not when the hero directly learns something
(some long repressed secret) but when he gets to know the other (whom he thought ignorant) also knew it all the time… (63)

In Foer’s novel Oskar, like the post-9/11 American public, has been kept in “protective innocence” (63). However, he is granted a well-timed epiphany and consequently achieves Žižek’s psychoanalytic concept which argues that not gaining the desired object can result in “happiness” (58). By not accepting William Black’s offer to come with him to the bank and uncover the mystery of the key, Oskar betrays his stated goal of hoping to achieve happiness by moving, “that much closer to the lock which was happiness” (207). Instead of resolving the mystery of the lock and achieving some illusion of happiness, Oskar seems to be moving on with his life. In this he finally achieves LaCapra’s objective of “empathic unsettlement” (41). He has avoided any falsely healing closure and chosen not to confuse what he then realised were separate and unrelated issues. By focusing his attention on what was real he finally achieved a level of personal happiness, not by discovering an answer to an “unknown,” but by recognising his support system was in place and that he had never really been “INCREDIJBLY ALONE” (172). He came to this realisation “all of a sudden, it made perfect sense…My search was a play that Mom had written, and she knew the ending when I was at the beginning” (191-92). It is easy to presume that the authoritative mother figure knows more than Oskar realises or than Foer chose to indicate in the text. When Oskar’s mother spoke with her husband on the morning of the attacks it is hard to imagine that they did not discuss the fact that Oskar was not answering the phone. With this logic in place it becomes obvious that she must have been aware of his issues, but for reasons that must be assumed, as Foer does not make them clear, she does not mention this to her son. While
undoubtedly disturbed with regard to Oskar’s anguish, his mother fails to address the subject directly and instead leaves both of them in a state of linguistic limbo.

There is evidence in the text however, that argues for an attempt to move on from this impasse and achieve closure for both of them. They each individually attend the same psychiatrist to help them deal with the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. However, neither the doctor nor the mother is seen to relay the information that Oskar’s actions on the worst day are known to anyone. Being honest with the child would surely have facilitated much desired closure for all the parties involved. From the disjointed conversation the mother had with the doctor it can be deduced that Mrs Schell’s main concerns were not for her own well-being but for her son’s. Unfortunately, Oskar’s attempt to eavesdrop on this exchange, rather than alleviating his fears and uniting him with his mother, increases his sense of isolation. For the outside observer however, it should be easier to piece together the words, discern what is being discussed, and who the mother’s priority is:

\[
\text{you doing?}
\]

\[
\text{I’m not the point.}
\]

\[
\text{Until you’re feeling to be impossible for Oskar to}
\]

\[
\text{But until he’s feeling it’s to feel Ok...}
\]

\[
\text{...I want to talk that’s not going to be easy}
\]

\[
\text{...good for children to be around going through the same process... (Foer 205)}
\]

From this fragmented conversation it is fairly discernible that Mrs Schell is also a vicarious victim. Unlike her son however, she was not afraid to answer the phone when her husband called her that morning. She spoke with him, recognised his danger and unwittingly relieved herself from some feelings of survivor’s guilt by a
failure to respond to the physical victim of the attacks. Her son is a different matter however. As she tells her psychiatrist: She “want[s] to talk [but] that’s not going to be easy” (205). Although she clearly empathises with her traumatised and dependent son, and gives him the tools to “work” through the trauma by allowing him the freedom to look for his own answers, she has failed to “talk” it through with him. Consequently, the silence that is central to the text is in danger of continuing into the third generation. She does not discuss his extremely loud messages, and appears to not hear what he is saying so incredibly close to her ear. By allowing Oskar the time and freedom to explore his own emotions she does not permit him the relief of realising that she knows his secret, understands his pain, and needs his understanding in order to relieve her own suffering. She gets this consolation instead through her relationship with Ron, a friend from group grief counselling whose presence in the household further alienates her son:


“How could you ask that?” “It’s just that you don’t act like you miss him very much… I hear you laughing… in the living room with Ron”… “I cry a lot too, you know.” “I don’t see you cry a lot.” “Maybe that’s because I don’t want you to see me cry a lot… I want us to move on…. Oskar does it ever occur to you that things might be more complicated than they seem.” (170)

While she obviously recognises the depth of his despair, by not openly grieving with him, the mother sends out mixed messages to her son. Uytterschott and Versluys believe that Thomas Schell’s wife’s has reacted “typically” to the death of her husband, but she has behaved less predictably with regard to Oskar (216). Although she has seen his bruises she does not react to, or question them. Although Oskar claims the he doesn’t: “PUT THEM THERE FOR HER” he “STILL WANT[S] HER
TO ASK…HOW [HE] GOT THEM (172-73). By not asking about the bruises or inquiring into his departures or whereabouts she implies a lack of concern for his welfare. Why didn’t she try and stop me, or at least keep me safe?” Oskar wonders (288). She remains strong for her son when what he needs to see is her vulnerability, so that he too can provide support, empathise, and realise that he is not “INCREDIBLY ALONE” in his despair (172).

**In Safe Company**

Oskar, like the Americans he is a metaphor for, was cosseted and well-protected, he seems to have been unaware that “something bad could happen” and as such, is new to the idea of personal trauma (300). This is not the case however, for his European-born grandparents. Grandmother and her husband, Thomas Schell Sr. are unfortunately well versed at surviving traumatic events. As victims of the Dresden Firebombing of 1945, they lost their entire families. Coupled with their individual losses they have a shared tragedy. The grandmother’s sister, Anna, was the grandfather’s first love, and but for the firebombing, she would have become the mother of his first child. On this tremulous platform, Mr and Mrs Schell Sr. attempt to rebuild their lives when they meet again and marry in New York in the aftermath of World War II. Although these physical and vicarious trauma sufferers, both witnessing victims and survivors, are fictional “living archives” they are unable to speak about the past and tell their stories (LaCapra 92). While both characters display fundamental psychiatric problems generally associated with trauma sufferers, each of them deal with their loss differently, but silently. Of all the traumatised characters in Foer’s text, Grandmother is possibly the most experienced at deciphering traumatic silence. She clearly draws her expertise in this area from her
marriage. However, her own relationship to silence forms the initial basis of her understanding. Her absent husband, Oskar’s grandfather, is the most easily identifiable trauma victim in the novel. He is observably disabled, having developed aphasia as a result of his experiences during and after the bombing of Dresden. As a consequence he does not speak at all. This loss of voice which is so plangent within Foer’s text is evident in much American fiction published in the aftermath of 9/11. Foer’s use of the grandfather’s aphasia is reflective of Gray’s analysis with regard to writer response to 9/11. Gray suggests that rather than speaking about the crisis of 9/11, authors instead began “speaking of silence” around the disaster in an attempt to “tell…a tale that cannot yet be told” (14). By using characters who ask questions such as “What the…?” (Foer 1), and offer answers like “Why I’m not where you are” (262), Foer’s novel articulates that silence. While it explores silence and the inability to speak it also poses the daunting question: Why did this happen?

In direct contrast to the males in her life Oskar’s Grandmother seems to be compelled to communicate. She wants people to understand the background to her trauma, and therefore offers the story of her life. While her husband is mute, she is talkative. But her loquaciousness is intrinsic to her character and is not entirely an effect of the traumatic experiences she has suffered. In her youth, before the Dresden bombing, she had already exhibited a need to communicate, to connect with her loved ones, to understand the world. In a letter to Oskar explaining her life, she tells him:

…I knew I would need more letters. As many as I could get. …I had a letter from everyone I knew. I laid them out on my bedroom floor, and organised

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14Falling Man, Terrorist, A Disorder Peculiar to the Country, The Reluctant Fundamentalist, and The Good Life all display elements of miscommunication or lack or voice.
them by what they shared. One hundred letters. I was always moving them
around, trying to make connections. I wanted to understand. (78-9)
The need to understand was clearly ingrained in Grandmother’s psyche even before
she is known to have experienced any serious trauma. However as Whitehead
interprets it, trauma is often associated with the, “collapse of understanding which is
situated” at its heart (Whitehead 5). For a young woman predisposed to probe the
reasons for people’s actions, the effects of this collapse would be compounded. But
as Whitehead further points out: “Trauma emerges as that which, at the very moment
of its reception, registers as non-experience, causing conventional epistemologies to
falter” (5). This analysis coincides with “constriction” which Judith Herman
described as, “the third cardinal symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder” (42). The
terrorised trauma victim experiences a state of “virtual disassociation” with the
events (43). The ability to disassociate herself from the trauma may be why
Grandmother gives the appearance of functioning better than her husband or Oskar
(although her flirtation with suicide belies this assumption). She has merely
separated herself from the events and suppressed the memory. The dissociative
behaviour and the repression of what actually happened on the night of the
firebombing impeded her ability to comprehend either the event or its repercussions.

According to Freud’s assessment, reconstruction and understanding is at the
nucleus of working through traumatic experience. Through the characterisation of
Grandmother, Foer suggests that without comprehension or some understanding of
the basic reasons behind any traumatic event, 9/11 included, assimilation back into a
normal life after the trauma is improbable. Whether or not a full grasp of what
happened was ever going to be possible for Grandmother is debatable, but in direct
opposition to Grandfather’s reaction, her compulsion was to communicate. Unlike
her husband the impulse to “understand” does not end with the firebombing of Dresden (79). Unfortunately though, the urge to communicate seems to persist beyond her ability to comprehend and as a result inhibits her attempts to restart her life in New York. In an effort to assimilate, to both understand and converse in her new world, Grandmother uses American magazines to adopt the jargon. She wanted to learn to be an American; to speak with an American voice:

I read newspapers and magazines all day long. I wanted to learn idioms. I wanted to become a real American. Chew the fat. Blow off some steam. Close but no cigar. Rings a bell. I must have sounded ridiculous. I only wanted to be natural. (Foer 79-80)

What Grandmother is doing by learning off and repeating these American colloquialisms is not a true effort to integrate into U.S. culture but an attempt to disassociate herself from her own past. She does not attempt the obvious; to converse with Americans in order to recognise the context of the learned expressions. In fact, she does not entirely understand what she is saying. The idioms she chose are not “natural” to her (80). Grandfather claims what she was trying to achieve was actually a form of acculturation: “She wanted to talk like she was born here, like she never came from anywhere else” (108). Trying to become an American through language is secondary to her real aim however. What she was essentially trying to do was to disguise her true voice; to not be the person who was so devastated by events that keep recurring in her dreams while elusively remaining impossible to remember.

Cathy Caruth maintains that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is “not so much a symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history. The traumatized we might say, carry an impossible history with them, or they become themselves a
symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 5). This is evident in Grandmother as memory and history have been conflated in her psyche and she cannot comprehend what happened to life as she had envisioned it. Even as a girl, she claims she was “always moving [things she was trying to understand] around, trying to make connections to see what they shared” (79). But the memories she tried to re-organise after the Dresden bombing, rather than allowing her to catalogue her family and share her re-memories, serve instead to only disconnect her from her further from her loved ones. Hayden White clarifies this pattern, explaining that traumatic memories resist categorisation and conventionality as they cannot be assigned meaning. As a consequence of their equivocal nature these memories are rendered traumatic (21). Susannah Radstone supports White’s analysis and goes on to explain further that: “experiences that elude sense-making and the assignment of meaning cannot be integrated into memory, but neither can they be forgotten” (“War of the Fathers” 117). Radstone’s explanation aligns with Grandmother’s portrayal of her life in her peculiarly wordless life-story. By writing incessantly on a ribbon-less typewriter Grandmother revealed the metanarrative that has been her life without having to truly examine it herself, or have her words scrutinised by others. Neither of these traumatised characters, grandmother nor grandfather, can step outside their memories long enough to begin the process of working through them. The grandmother maintains that she has told everything and is “all caught up with [her]self” in her manuscript entitled “My Life” (120), but even though her “eyes are crummy” she must know that the pages of her life remain blank (124). The mute grandfather can vocalise his devastating sense of failure in a letter to the son he abandoned, but cannot mention it to the one person who may hold the key to his life-long trauma, and offer him some knowledge of how
Anna died. In this, his craving for information mirrors his grieving grandson’s wish to know “how he died [so he] wouldn’t have to go on inventing” (157). Fear of knowledge is self-evident in grandfather’s mute status. He makes “no information” about the past a condition that restricts his life. “Your mother and I never talk about the past, that’s a rule” (108) he declares, though he seems to recognise that this lack of communication feeds their joint trauma. “When your mother found me in the bakery on Broadway, I wanted to tell her everything, maybe if I had been able to, we could have lived differently” he acknowledges, but still he cannot bring himself to speak the words aloud and permit himself the freedom to live (216).

Though Grandmother has a continuous voice in the text, the reader never hears of the traumatic events which shaped that voice. She speaks expressively of her childhood, her relationship with her relatives, and tells of her early days in New York. She describes the lure of suicide and her chance meeting with Thomas Sr. Yet, like her grandson she too keeps unspeakable secrets. Thomas Sr., who no longer speaks at all, writes eloquently of the night of the firebombing while his garrulous wife never mentions it. She has repressed a memory she cannot understand hoping to make it as Theodor Adorno suggested, “as good as if it never happened” (5), although “…the past [she] would like to evade is still very much alive” and replays nightly in her dreams (3). If Grandmother could begin the process of working through she could perhaps facilitate her husband’s progress and help him voice his fears:

Maybe if I’d said “I lost a baby” if I’d said, “I’m so afraid of losing something I love that I refuse to love anything,” maybe that would have made the impossible possible. Maybe, but I couldn’t do it, I had buried too much too deeply inside of me. And here I am instead of there. (216)
In order to live with some semblance of normality, the grandparents formulated a series of rules to live by. Without the first of these it may be supposed that grandfather would never have consented to their marriage. The first rule was, “No children” (85), the second was to “never talk about the past” (108). When Grandfather stipulated, and his wife agreed to comply with, these basic rules, they inhibited their combined ability to address their emotions and work through to a new life, with a past that can be remembered, but no longer must be inhabited.

Grandmother is the one character who might be able to mitigate grandfather’s pain of survivor guilt. She is the one living person who might know where Anna was and how she died, yet she either cannot or was not allowed to speak. Like Oskar, Grandfather is haunted by traumatic memories, both his own those of his loved one. His issues mirror his grandson’s distress around horror at what happened and refusing to speak when his father phoned from the towers. Akin to Oskar’s guilt for not speaking to his father, grandfather blames himself endlessly for not being with Anna on their worst day. He is constantly “sorry for everything. For having said goodbye to Anna when maybe [he] could have saved her and [their] idea, or at least have died with them” (Foer 132). Although logically there was nothing either the grandfather or Oskar could have done in the face of these catastrophic disasters, they still stand self-accused of failure to respond. While the grandfather clearly knows that the pages of Grandmother’s autobiography are blank he continues to push her to write, to elaborate in a search for some knowledge that might alleviate his own pain. He keeps “encouraging her, begging her, to write more, to shovel deeper” (Foer 130) to dig for what he had “buried …to deeply inside… [himself]” (216). He clearly wants her to remember and finish the story for him, to tell him how it ends. Yet he
knows the typewriter remains ribbonless, the story remains untold, and therefore both grandparents remain prisoners of history.

**Comparisons on a sensitive subject**

Jay McInerney stated that when he spoke with acerbic veteran writer, Norman Mailer, on the subject of 9/11, Mailer was sceptical and discouraged any rush to print. The experienced author proclaimed: “Wait ten years…It will take that long for you to make sense of it” (McInerney). This may have appeared to be good advice, which was largely adhered to by most older authors writing at the time in the United States, at least for the immediate five years following the attacks. One of the foremost twentieth-century socio-political novelists Thomas Pynchon observably obeyed the edict, not bringing out his offering to the genre, *Bleeding Edge*, until September of 2013. However, once the rookie American novelist Foer entered the arena, the work of the more experienced writers began to materialise in rapid succession, with McInerney and Updike in 2006, followed by DeLillo in 2007. While this could indicate that the most significant American writers of the day recognised the need to respond to the enormity of the events, it also suggests that once the subject was open to critical analysis writers felt the obligation to “weigh in,” as McInerney had advocated in *The Guardian* (2005). While the later writers may have been more experienced, the work they produced often appears basic and hurried. As these writers, particularly DeLillo and Updike, had previously proved themselves to be in-tune with the American psyche, it would appear that Mailer’s advice was perceptive, and that the rapid race to publish may have harmed and to some degree silenced the emergent genre.
Of the meaningful novels which clearly address the subject of 9/11, Foer’s was the initial text from a prominent US writer, and a developing one at that. As a consequence of being amongst the first to fictionalise the event, or offer a literary answer to the psychological effects of the atrocities, his novel was met with perhaps more censure than it would have attracted had he published after the then current icons of American fiction. While there are positive endorsements of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* from some contemporary critics and writers, most have been circumspect with regard to Foer’s 9/11 novel. Nevertheless, as it was among the first, it was extensively examined in the press with reactions from established novelists ranging from positive to ambivalent or dismissive. According to Jay McInerney, “some reviewers raised the issue of exploitation” and had concerns about the suitability of the subject matter of Foer’s text (5). McInerney suggested that they felt that the wound left by the 9/11 attacks was too raw to expose to interpretive literature. Foer countered this subjective criticism ably when he argued during an interview with Joel Whitney that: “…nobody called for a moratorium on journalists…nobody called for a moratorium for political commentators [or] politicians. Just artists. [Do we] trust [American news presenter] Tom Brokaw more than we trust [authors]?” he questioned in 2005 (Whitney). If McInerney’s assessment of Foer’s work seems somewhat one-sided, veteran writer John Updike’s analysis can be viewed as palliative, if, to some degree, condescending. However, any review in *The New Yorker* by John Updike was significant for writers, especially those new to the circuit. As a general rule Updike’s critiques of fellow writers’ work was normally fair and balanced. Nevertheless, reading his review of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* retrospectively, with the knowledge that he would publish his own offering to the genre, *Terrorist*, in 2006, it is easy to interpret Updike’s “Mixed
Messages” as somewhat slanted. While he does not attack the novel or the author on a personal level, he does criticise Foer’s peculiar style, and, with the article’s title, he accuses him of sending “mixed messages.” The graphic images and “mixed media” intrinsic to the text seem to have confused Updike. He is dismissive of the “picto-/typographical antics…and the interrupt[ion] of photographs” in the narrative (3). However, he does concede that the rising man flip-book in the final pages of the text is, “one of the most curious happy endings ever contrived, and unexpectedly moving” (4). Updike’s analysis is positive on the whole, although the extremely loud nature of the narrative style apparently overwhelmed the older writer. Offering a certain degree of mixed message himself, Updike acknowledges Foer’s “excellent empathy, imagination and good will” in his final assessment (6). Nevertheless, he does advocate for “a little more silence” (6). But a little more silence is not what Foer was attempting and not what the 9/11 fiction genre needed. Foer’s book is intended to be just what it says on the cover. When analysed, the book’s title should leave the reader under no illusions about what to expect from the contents. All the same, Updike, along with many of the novel’s critics, could only fail to receive the novel’s extremely loud message if they were looking for realism in the metaphor. Foer’s technique transmitted a postmodern political message concealed behind a trauma plot-line. In failing to recognise political overtures within the stylistic tropes inherent in Foer’s work, Updike ignored his own first rule for reviewers from *Picked Up Pieces*: “Try to understand what the author wished to do and do not blame him for not achieving what he did not attempt” (Updike xvi).

Unusual graphic interpretations of the 9/11 disaster were not as innovative as reviewers might have liked it to appear. A precedent had been set for Foer’s novel a year before *Extremely Loud & Incredible Close* was released. Another New York
writer was also working on an artistic representation of the attacks. However, the reception for Art Spiegelman’s work would not be as judgmental or contentious as the mixed response Foer’s novel received. Although both texts juxtapose events of World War II with 9/11, Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* was lauded for its content rather than criticised. In a review of this graphic novel David Hajdu observed:

> Spiegelman clearly sees Sept. 11 as his Holocaust (or the nearest thing his generation will have to personal experience with anything remotely correlative), and “In the Shadow of No Towers” makes explicit parallels between the events without diminishing the incomparable evil of the death camps. (Hajdu)

While Spiegelman and Foer are a generation apart in age and experience, Hajdu’s analysis of Spiegelman’s work could be equally applied to Foer’s oeuvre. Spiegelman’s previous graphic novel, *Maus* (1991), is a comic-book style interpretation of the Nazi internment of the author’s parents, which won for him the Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Foer’s well received first novel, *Everything is Illuminated*, earned him *The Guardian* First Book Award, and, like *Maus*, is a fictionalised account of his maternal grandfather’s experiences during the Second World War. In Foer’s maiden novel, the fictional protagonist is also named Jonathan Safran Foer, which draws another parallel between the two writers’ work. In Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers*, the narrator-character is a comic sketch of the author himself and his experiences. This historic, novelistic but personal documentation firmly establishes both Foer and Spiegelman as Jewish-American authors whose interests lie in the areas of traumatic memory, grief, and family. Both writers have used graphic images to help readers process their personal feelings around the attacks.
Spiegelman’s haunting black on black *New Yorker* cover for the September 24th 2001 edition, which had such a profound visual impact when other magazines were using more explicit images of the day, anticipates the blacked out and blank pages Foer used in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* to indicate that words are either not enough or too much. For the artist, Spiegelman, no picture could fill the emptiness. For the writer, Foer, in the face of such a disaster words were losing their meaning. However, their individual graphic styles and the supposed purpose of their narratives have been evaluated differently by readers and critics. While Foer’s images and peculiarities of style have been viewed as mixed messages, Spiegelman’s are seen to be innovative; this raises the issue of how a narrative text is viewed. Mieke Bal argues, in her most recent edition of *Narratology* (2009), that,

> Those who consider comic strips to be narrative texts interpret the concept of *text* broadly. In their view, a text does not have to be a linguistic text. In comic strips, another, non-linguistic, sign-system is employed, namely the visual image. Other individuals, sharing a more restricted interpretation of what constitutes a text, reserve the term for language texts only. (4)

This only serves to complicate Foer’s work further. The novel becomes difficult to categorise using this definition as it contains both language and interpretive signs. While the pictorial style of Spiegelman’s text, which is reminiscent of the funny-papers, falls under Bal’s definition of a piece of work that is broadly interpreted as a narrative text, Foer’s novel, which presents itself as a language text, must be viewed through the narrower lens. If, *In the Shadows of No Towers*, were examined through the narrower lens, it may well be deemed of a lesser quality or even disrespectful, while *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, if viewed through the broader lens might

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15 The image Spiegelman and his wife created for *The New Yorker* cover was re-imagined and represented on the cover of *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004).
be more fully appreciated. With Spiegelman’s work the reader knows what to expect. Comic books, as a genre, have been very familiar within the United States for decades. Although In the Shadow of No Towers might be viewed caustically by those “sharing a more restricted interpretation” of narrative form, it holds no surprises for fans of the graphic novel (Bal 4). Conversely, Foer’s novel is deceptive. Its initial appearance is conventional. However, as one becomes more involved with the narrative style employed in Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, reader reaction begins to mirror the initial question posed on the first page.

As Foer develops as a writer, and readers become more familiar with his technique, a novel by Foer may become associated with the use of graphic devices and, as with Spiegelman’s work, readers and critics may well come to view his work through the broader lens defined by Bal. But, during that turbulent post-9/11 period, his use of visual devices seemed disconcerting to some readers. In his article “The Age of Reason is Over…an Age of Fury is Dawning,” Robert Eaglestone asserts that: “[b]y focalising the novel through…Oskar…Foer avoids complex issues and reiterates a simplistic position” (21). This assessment, as has been shown, was widely supported by many reviewers. However, the very complexity of the text with the “graphic embellishment” referred to by Updike, challenges the reader to look more deeply at what is actually being said (“Mixed Messages”). The post-9/11 US political atmosphere gave rise to a strong right-wing ideology. As the “War on Terror,” with its identifying terms like, “the Axis of Evil,” and “graphic embellishments” on the scale of the “Falling Man” began, a new conservative value system was emerging within the United States. This assessment is generally attested to by many of the theorists of the period. Philosophers and scholars of the calibre of Judith Butler spoke with concern at the growing level of antipathy in ordinary society. She
asserted in *Frames of War* that: “Nationalism in the US has, of course, been heightened since the attacks of 9/11” (47). Even many of those who would previously have taken a non-interventionist stance were caught up in the jingoism and rhetoric. Jürgen Habermas notes this in an interview in September of 2001, attesting that “even leftist liberals for the moment seem to be in agreement with Bush’s politics” (qtd. in Borradori 30). Those who advocated caution were attacked as unpatriotic and subversive. People with a different perspective from the apparent status quo were harried and heckled, as is highlighted by writer Barbara Kingsolver in her October 14th 2001 article for the *L.A. Times*, “No Glory in Unjust War on the Weak.” She makes the public reaction to her anti-autocratic views very clear indeed in this and other articles she wrote during this period. As with Kingsolver’s *The Lacuna*, her acknowledged allegorical novel within the 9/11 genre, Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* should also be read as allegorical, inviting the reader to analyse the political along with the traumatic. At a time when writers like Kingsolver and Sontag were vilified for speaking their minds, Foer concealed the political behind a thick layer of trauma.

By December 2001 veteran writer, Don DeLillo, had found his voice. In his article for *Harper’s Magazine* “In the Ruins of The Future,” DeLillo’s tone reflects Derrida’s initial impressions, but he adds his own interpretation.

The Bush Administration was feeling nostalgia for the Cold War. This is now over. Many things are over. The narrative ends in the rubble, and it is left to us to create the counter-narrative. There are a hundred thousand stories (of 9/11) crisscrossing New York, Washington, and the world… (34)

These fictional representations, written as the dust of 9/11 settled, had become mainly tales of love or hope or trauma survived. They were primarily personal in
focus and not overtly critical of US government policy. Prior to the inauguration of Barak Obama in 2009, the politics of the period had been veiled in contemporary fiction; if at all critical, softly so. Foer’s imagination supplied one of these muted stories. Political opinion in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is loud enough to be heard if you hold your ear incredibly close. However, with this novel Foer did raise his voice when many other more established and well-known writers did not. In oblique, mixed and interrupted language, the first whisperings of a literary dissent can heard in the face of controversial and obstructive government policy. Foer’s novel begins building the counter-narrative to the political jargon of unknown unknowns.
Chapter Two: Faint Echoes of Don DeLillo – The Fiction of Politics

When the subjects being addressed are 9/11 and fiction, it would be strange indeed if the work of Don DeLillo were not fundamental to the discussion. He was dubbed the “man who invented 9/11” in Tom Junod’s article for *Esquire* in May of 2007, and even DeLillo himself does not seem to argue with this assessment. His successive novels are arguably stepping stones to the events of that day. As Vince Passaro determined in 1991, “[h]is works seemed privy to a flow of recent history that had been obscured from the rest of us…DeLillo had important information about the tenor of our national life, information that we had been feeling in our bones but that he had hardened into words” (“Dangerous Don DeLillo”). If, as Passaro suggests, DeLillo’s work appeared prophetic in 1991, by the time the towers fell ten years later, his representations seemed to have gained oracular status. DeLillo’s initial written reaction to the attacks, “In the Ruins of the Future,” maintains both his early vision and his later disquietude. His article also offers the insight and good counsel that were greatly needed in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. In consequence, the fact that his long-awaited novel on the actual subject, *Falling Man* (2007), offered little obvious political engagement within the text makes this narrative problematic for an analysis of his post-9/11 political œuvre. This novel, while beautifully descriptive, appears as more an exercise in introspection than the counter-narrative to U.S. political hegemony familiar to DeLillo’s admirers. This chapter will investigate the political voice in DeLillo’s earlier work and argue that, while the novel has an understated political message, the trauma of the event overtakes it within the narrative and it is not until his next text, *Point Omega*, that his previous political eloquence is heard again. Don DeLillo’s reputed ability to prognosticate began early
in his career and seems particularly germane in the introductory chapter of his 1977 novel, *Players*. This text’s plot begins disturbingly in the cabin of an airliner as the in-flight movie, a violent terrorist film, is about to begin. In the film “the terrorists are trying to isolate their victims singly or in twos” while on board the plane “the stewardess serves mixed drinks” casually in the first-class cabin (8). This introduction of film violence being viewed in relative safety reflects the vision of horror experienced by viewers, nearly a quarter of a century later, as they watched planes filled with passengers similar to those in DeLillo’s fictional aircraft collide with the towers of the World Trade Centre. The fact that DeLillo placed an illusionary terrorist attack inside the cabin of an airliner alerted readers to passenger vulnerability. While this mid-seventies scene was undoubtedly intended to reflect the contemporaneous series of air-hijackings, what appears as in-flight entertainment gives the impression of prescience to a twenty-first century audience. Diane Johnson documented the broadness of DeLillo’s view of the world shortly after *Players*’ publication and pointed out that DeLillo’s approach to writing was more expansive than many other contemporary writers:

Not that novels are obliged to look grandly at the whole state of things, but it is significant how few of them try. It is a measure of DeLillo’s bravura that he tries, and a measure of his art, for all his deceptive simplicity, even plainness, [that] he succeeds. (106)

Her assessment indicates that early in his career DeLillo was already viewed as an outspoken writer who was liable to raise issues that may not always rest comfortably with American consciousness.

American sensibility and perception becomes a pervasive trope in DeLillo’s 1982 novel, *The Names*. This text not only introduces readers to what Linda
Kauffman would later analyse as the “disconnect between America’s self-image and its image in the eyes of the world,” it also introduces DeLillo’s interest in how America and Americans are viewed overseas (“The Wake of Terror” 353). The narrative examines how many U.S. citizens who live abroad inadvertently gain pertinent alternate perspectives on their government’s political policies. These perceptions may not always be as obvious to those who remain solely within the borders of the United States. When reviewing *The Names* for *The New York Times* in 1982, Robert R. Harris offered some background. He supported DeLillo’s level of authenticity in the text by explaining that the author chose to live in Greece and travel in the Middle East and India during the construction of the narrative. He goes on to argue that this expatriate background allowed DeLillo to introduce into the text first-hand knowledge and a direct understanding of how America and its citizens were, and it could be argued still are, perceived on the world stage. DeLillo analysed the experience of living abroad as one that makes a person more conscious of their own nationality. In an interview with Harris, DeLillo claimed that:

> The thing that’s interesting about living in another country is that it’s difficult to forget you’re American. The actions of the American Government won’t let you. They make you self-conscious, make you aware of yourself as an American. You find yourself mixed up in world politics in more subtle ways than you are accustomed to. On the one hand you are aware of America’s blundering in country after country. And on the other hand, you’re aware of the way in which the people in other countries have created the myth of America, of the way in which they use America to relieve their own fears and guilt by blaming America automatically for everything that goes wrong. (18)
In *The Names*, however, DeLillo does more than offer an introspective vision of an American persona. He contrasts the theme of the “othered” American with that of their nemesis, the terrorist, by arguing that Americans, as a category, contain a “certain mythical quality that terrorists find attractive” and as such, they “provide what people need” (135). DeLillo conflates the two issues, basically pointing out that the primary function of America and Americans, for both terrorists and other countries, is their ability and apparent willingness to stand as scapegoats for much that is perceived as wrong in world affairs. Both terrorists and “[p]eople expect [Americans] to absorb the impact of their grievances” (135).

While much of DeLillo’s work centres on politics it also frequently engages directly with how the U.S. tone of voice or tenor impacts on current geo-political discourse. Matthew Mutter has argued that the primary focus in *The Names* was to bring language “out of the laboratory and to examine its consequences in social and political life” (505). Although not set in the United States, America, its use of language, and its politics are the paramount themes of *The Names*. In the novel DeLillo displays both the blundering of late twentieth century U.S. foreign stratagem and the automatic culpability which America’s often arrogant refusal to negotiate policy or even to accept minor social or cultural differences has engendered. The narrator, James Axton, alleges that this perceived invasive attitude leaves America and Americans as both stereotypes and recognised as fair targets for dissidents worldwide. In line with DeLillo’s own opinion, as stated in the Harris interview, a character in *The Names* views America as:

the world’s living myth. There is no sense of wrong when you kill an American or blame America for some local disaster. This is our function, to be character types, to embody recurring themes that people can use to comfort
themselves, justify themselves…We’re here to accommodate. Whatever people need, we provide. A myth is a useful thing. (135)

If this hypothesis is correct, by the 1980s the American voice had become a fabricated yet tangible political nemesis for many nations. Accordingly much of DeLillo’s early work revolves around the political use of language in the U.S. and how it can be manipulated, by both friends and enemies, to connect with and/or control world events. There is a sense, too, in *The Names* that DeLillo, like John Winthrop before him, considered America to be on show. The tenor of the text implies that the “eyes of all people are upon us” (Winthrop 20). A character in the novel senses this paranoia and rationally ponders that, “[y]ou have to ask yourself if there is anything more important than the fact that we’re constantly on film, constantly watching ourselves…Spy satellites, microscopic scanners, pictures of the uterus, embryos, sex, war, assassinations, everything” (*TN* 200). This level of pragmatism about perceived infiltration into American lives moved Johnson to determine that at even this relatively early point in his career, much of DeLillo’s work was not given the attention it deserved. She judged this was because his narrative voice “deal[t] with the deeply shocking things about America that people would rather not face” (qtd in DePietro 18). DeLillo subscribes to this argument, and claims:

I do try to confront reality but people would rather read about their own marriages and separations … there is an entire school of fiction out there that might be called around-the-house-and-in-the-yard and I think people like to read this kind of thing because it adds a kind of lustre or significance to their lives. (18)
If we accept DeLillo’s assessment of reader’s preference, then it stands to reason, that mundane topics rather than challenging themes would be the popular choice. The subject of a novel like *The Names*, which forces the reader to look at the world they live in through a political lens is, it seems, preferably listened to as “White Noise”

To listen to the tone of DeLillo’s landmark novel *White Noise* and hear a resounding political voice is almost inevitable. From the opening scene to the closing line political rhetoric disrupts his 1985 novel of contemporary American culture. In Mark Osteen’s assessment, rather than dilute the surrounding din, *White Noise* “amplifies the noises around us and permits us to hear again how these sounds shape our own voices and beliefs” (DeLillo xii). The novel examines America’s absorption with television, advertising and the media and it highlights how these vehicles invasively influence the way Americans think and insidiously manipulate what Americans actually hear. But more interesting for this assessment of DeLillo’s prescience is the way those mediums were used in *White Noise* to provoke the population to near mass hysteria, particularly during Part Two of the text, “The Airborne Toxic Event” (107). Here once again, DeLillo’s powers of prophesy are tested. In a retrospective post-9/11 reading of the narrative, the fictional “Airborne Toxic Event” mirrors the actual “Anthrax Scare,” which was a prolonged incident that occurred in the latter months of 2001 (WN 107). It was presented in the media like “State Orchestrated Terror” however, as Charatan points out “information overload might be a more appropriate description of the coverage” (942). The lexis DeLillo used to describe the “Event” in *White Noise* can be applied similarly to the actual post-9/11 anthrax episode (WN 161). Like the “Event,” the “Anthrax Scare” was a “horrifying thing. Our fear was enormous. Even if there hasn’t been great loss of life, don’t we deserve some attention for our suffering, our human worry, our
terror? Isn’t fear news?” (162). Fear in the news galvanised America following 9/11 and in the lead-up to the Second Gulf War. The language and terminology of the government rhetoric resonated with people’s anxiety and echoed those questions asked by DeLillo in this novel. The language used in Bush’s post-9/11 speeches “invoked ‘clear evidence of peril’” without presenting any actual facts (M.C. Miller 100). The discourse “impl[ied] that his claims alone were evidence” (100). Saddam’s “weapons of mass destruction” along with his “chemical and biological agents” were, as Jackson maintained “spoken of almost daily to create a sufficient level of public anxiety, and hence, support for a war against Iraq” (22). While no war occurs in White Noise, what terrifies some of the characters is that it is not clear if the authorities have “thought it through completely” (161). The individuals in DeLillo’s text, like many people in twenty-first century America, felt “a vague foreboding” that the government and the media were “working on the superstitious part of [our] nature” that “every advance is worse than the one before because it makes [people] more scared…of the sky, the earth” (161). Consequently, DeLillo’s twentieth-century novel resonates with the “unknown unknowns” of the new millennium (Seely 2).16

Moving from macro society issues to the micro-world of the individual in American cultural terms, DeLillo’s White Noise exposes an evolving “Stepford” phenomenon within the United States. Like the “Stepford Wives” of Ira Levin’s 1972 novel, residents of DeLillo’s fictional locations of Blacksmith and Iron City gradually become emotionally and intellectually engineered. Not by family members, as Levin’s wives were, but by media-supported government rhetoric introduced freely into their homes through the instrumentality of their personal television sets.

16 The existential conundrum was offered by Donald Rumsfeld during a Department of Defence news briefing on February 12th 2002.
As the plot unfolds, the characters in the novel no longer need to examine political and social issues, or indeed, even think for themselves. Instead all they have to do is turn on the T.V. to have their opinions formed. To make sense of world events the characters in *White Noise* have come to depend on advertising and appearance, on what they are told and what they are shown, rather than what they investigate and deduce for themselves. Again this mirrors national reaction to reports of the 9/11 attacks. Instead of examining political decisions which likely led to foreign anger and facilitated the event, Americans were presented with the horror of the spectacle and fallacious information which had no firm foundation. In order to divert attention from political issues, President Bush encouraged the American people to get back to the customary commercialised way of life. As Justin Fox of *Time Magazine* saw it, Bush “called for shopping” to help us deal with our fear and grief. “Get down to Disney World in Florida…Take your families and enjoy life” he advised in Chicago as early as September 27th 2001. Bush, like DeLillo’s character Jack Gladney, seemed to accept that “this was the key… Everything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip” (170).

The novel from DeLillo’s oeuvre that seems to radiate U.S. political past though has to be *Libra* (1988). For many of DeLillo’s contemporaries this narrative spotlights the traumatic event that galvanised their lives and shaped late twentieth-century American politics. The narrative concerns itself with a fictionalised account of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dealey Plaza, Dallas, Texas in 1963. Joseph Dewey claims that DeLillo views this episode in American history as a “cultural trauma, a national epiphany that would leave his generation suspended between outrage and fear” (92). Yet John Carlos Rowe has interestingly observed that “DeLillo makes it clear that it was Lee Harvey Oswald’s life, not John F.
Kennedy’s death, that changed America” (121). There is no doubt that both Oswald’s life and the death of an idealized leader certainly altered the nation’s future and caused an awakening in the minds of many Americans. In their sociological study of “Generational Collective Memory,” Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott maintain that Kennedy’s assassination is seen by people in DeLillo’s age band as a pivotal moment in national history. Americans in that study indicate that the “assassination led to negative changes in the United States” and signified a great “political loss” for the nation (375). The study also points to the “dramatic impact” television had on the event (367). This introduction of modern technologies to people’s perception of events became a theme that would run through much of DeLillo’s late twentieth-century writing. In view of these indicators it can be argued that the ill-timed death of President Kennedy advanced Americans from what has arguably been considered a more innocent time towards postmodernity. It marked, as Rowe indicates, the “street-birth of the media age – specifically, of television news and the rush to bring catastrophe into living rooms” (93). Jeremy Green furthers that argument stating that:

The media treatment of these moments, foregrounded in DeLillo’s treatment, heralds the era of traumatized public consciousness, of a public consciousness created by trauma, that he will address in Mao II and Underworld. But it is in Libra that the ruinous nature of this moment of history, DeLillo’s moment and ours, emerges in all its most vivid and alarming detail. (107)

With Libra DeLillo allowed his plot to play with historic memory by engaging instead with how the events are remembered. Phillip Wegner has argued that Libra, along with Underworld, follows Georg Lukács’s criteria for historical fiction. Lukács enjoined novelists writing within this genre to ensure that their work does not simply narrate the past, but instead “create[s] images of participants, to
show us what social and personal motives prompted people to think, feel and act as they did in a certain [historical] period” (45). Whether knowingly or not DeLillo has followed this dictum. *Libra* does not just “recount [an] important historic event” it “create[s] images of participants,” and represents real contemporary reactions to the historical event (Lukács 161-2). DeLillo’s novel remembers Kennedy’s assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, his life, and his own subsequent assassination from a provocative perspective. By offering a depiction of Oswald which neither demonises the man, nor views him sympathetically, he makes his character appear very human. DeLillo then takes periodization one step further by stimulating readers to re-remember and re-analyse an allegedly innocent time from a more experienced world-view. The Kennedy assassination, and the period which followed it, gave birth to much of the contemporary fascination with conspiracy theories, and the pressing need to place the blame for any domestic calamity at the altar of the current national bogeyman. Oswald’s factual reputed links to Communist Russia, America’s Cold War rival, made this man both a super-villain and an easy victim of propaganda. In DeLillo’s novel Oswald’s mental instability leaves him vulnerable to the handlings of two unethical CIA agents. These fictional government representatives groom “Oswald as a man that people will remember later. Someone involved in suspicious business” (*L* 354). The obsessive wish to uncover intrigue where there may have been none was, as Green contends, “compounded by the confusion of motive and agency that the Warren Report at once documented and tried to contain” (95). By addressing the death of JFK in his fiction and questioning the motives of those involved with the thirty-fifth President, DeLillo entered the sphere of political and cultural criticism through a specifically historical lens. Furthermore the intrigue surrounding the

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17 “The Warren Report,” or “Warren Commission,” was set up by President Johnson to investigate the Kennedy Assassination. Their findings have been controversial and disputed ever since.
President’s death and the report that examined it corresponds in parallel to the events of September 11 2001 and the establishment of “National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States” also referred to as “The 9/11 Commission Report” (2004). Like the earlier investigation into Kennedy’s assassination it, too, provides Americans with an historic frame of reference. In a manner that mirrors the earlier document Dower maintains that, “[u]nsurprisingly, the Commission’s investigation was impeded by the secrecy game. Bureaucratic ‘stonewalling’ by the White House and others blocked access to critical resources” (39). Once again, as DeLillo’s points out in Libra’s “Author’s Note,” an American event was being “constrained by half-facts” (L 458).

The inclusion of this “Author’s Note” in early editions of Libra, and its subsequent omission in later versions is noteworthy. Although the objective seems to have been to make it clear to readers that this is a work of fiction, and should be read as such, it seems to have served to create, rather than allay, suspicion about the reasoning behind why an author might choose to amend their text. Its appearance and subsequent removal has been queried by a number of academic critics. Robert McMinn notes that DeLillo originally offered this supplementary information in the final paragraph of the Viking hardcover version of his text (1988):

But because this book makes no claim to literal truth, because it is only itself, apart and complete, readers may find refuge here – a way of thinking about the assassination without being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities, by the tide of speculation that widens with the years. (L 458)

DeLillo quite clearly did not want his novel to add to the speculation surrounding the assassination. He plainly states that the text is a “work of imagination” however, the removal of this proviso in later editions only gives rise to further conjecture. Robert
F. Wilson and John Johnson both have concerns about the note’s unexplained absence, and McMinn speculated in 1999 as to whether “the note was removed by an author who became uncomfortable with it...or because too much was made of it” and wondered whether some readers were still viewing the fictional plot as factual (Events and Local Gods, Kindle edition).\(^\text{18}\) For whatever reason, DeLillo did decide to withdraw his clarifying words, leaving, it seems, an ever widening “tide of speculation” (458). Whether DeLillo felt pressured or not to remove the note, as McMinn implies, is unknown. But its absence does help support an argument that the novel is political, as the text no longer directly denies a connection to “literal truth” (458).

The historical stages of the period Wegner terms the “Long Nineties” are addressed in some depth in DeLillo’s Mao II.\(^\text{19}\) The mental images this text provokes are reminiscent of issues raised previously in The Names and White Noise. However, the politics of the era are evoked here, not only by the words, but by the uncharacteristic inclusion of pictures and photographs which are dispersed throughout the novel. These images offer an unmistakable sense of the period in which they were produced. The text’s distinctly political flavour is initially suggested by the reproduction of Andy Warhol’s Chairman Mao on the cover. But the representations and images of crowds at Tiananmen Square, Yankee Stadium, the Hillsborough Disaster and the funeral of the Ayatollah Khomeini that populate the narrative can leave little doubt of the political aura endemic to the plot. In her 2003 text The Aesthetics and Politics of the Crowd in American Literature, Mary Esteve

\(^{18}\) This mix of fact and fiction can appear authoritative as is evidenced in Oliver Stone’s film JFK (1991). This production, though not ostensibly based on the novel, reconstructs much of DeLillo’s argument and represents the historical characters in a similar manner to the text. Fellow writer, James Ellroy, also named Libra as the inspiration for his 1995 narrative, American Tabloid (Capen n.pg).

\(^{19}\) The “long nineties” is a term highlighted in Phillip Wegner’s Life between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties and intended to denote the period between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001.
draws attention to the fact that throughout “Western history, crowd representations have been fraught with political meaning” (2). She points out through her traced “genealogy” of crowds in American fiction that, in the American canon from Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne to the present day, when crowds assemble in a work of literature their purpose is often “to register a fundamental incompatibility with the prevailing political practices” (3). While the crowds featured in Esteve’s study are fictional and she argues that the aesthetics of some of these crowds “drive home the point that everything need or should not [always] be political,” in the case of DeLillo’s crowds in Mao II, politics is paramount (18). These are factual crowds and are used to inform the fiction that employs them. They conform to the twenty-first century aesthetic that he coined and bring to life his dictum: “The future belongs to crowds” (DeLillo, MII 16).

There are many parallels within the plot of Mao II which are unquestionably aligned with contemporary current events of the period it depicts. The most obvious one involves the central character, reclusive writer, Bill Gray. Gray comes out of his self-imposed exile to champion the cause of a radical poet whose abduction and imprisonment by a terrorist organisation has triggered worldwide concern, recalling the “Rushdie Affair.” The effect of the novel’s plot appears even more farsighted as it moves beyond current events towards prophesying the future. Mike Dell’Aquila has recently argued that:

The second half of Mao II is difficult to read without inserting the realities of the last decade into the conversation…the novel appears to be eerily prescient in the roles that terrorists play in modern life and in its valuation of the Twin

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20 In 1988 a fatwa was ordered by Ayatollah Khomeini against the life of the author Salman Rushdie. The Ayatollah deemed Rushdie’s novel, The Satanic Verses, to be blasphemy, which demeaned the Prophet Mohammad.
Towers as a symbol of what terrorists and novelist oppose. (“Don DeLillo’s Mao II”)

It is not only the second half of the book that is anticipatory however. When we first meet DeLillo’s protagonist, Bill Gray, he speaks with a voice that resonates with accuracy:

“There is a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. In the West we become famous effigies as our books lose the power to shape and influence. Do you ask your writers how they feel about this? Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated. (41)

This brief declaration is really at the crux of this study. DeLillo’s protagonist, the writer Bill Gray, realises that novelists have become celebrities rather than harbingers: for Gray they are now merely effigies and images of what they have written, they no longer have the power that Stowe, Sinclair and Steinbeck had, to influence social change. Gray feels that the “state should want to kill all writers. Every government every group that holds power should feel so threatened by writers that they hunt them down” but this role has now been usurped by terrorists (97). We no longer “need the novel…we don’t even need catastrophes, necessarily. We only need reports and predictions and warnings” the media and terror have taken over and writers have become incorporated, merged together, and they now speak in the corporate voice of the status quo (72).

Although Gray might feel that writers “belong on the far margin, doing dangerous things” he recognises that he has not achieved this objective. He considers that his life may well be a “kind of simulation” (97). While on the other hand, the
often anonymous terrorist is undoubtedly free, he is not constrained by the
overseeing eye of government policy or the censorious voice of media rhetoric.
Because they work outside these conventional forms of regulation, people are forced
to pay close attention to terrorists and DeLillo can be observed to attend diligently to
them. In the final paragraphs of Mao II, when the photographer, Brita, “stopped”
chronicling the lives of writers and began a project which records the images of
terrorists instead, DeLillo seems once again prescient (230). Brita’s final interview is
with the terrorist leader who has been holding the poet hostage. This meeting marks
the standardised construction of the contemporary terrorist image in 1992, which has
unfortunately become increasingly recognisable. Her interpreter reveals the reason
why, though Brita is allowed both to photograph and to view Rashid, those close to
him must remain hooded,

“[t]he boys who work near Abu Rashid have no face or speech. Their features
are identical. They are his features. They don’t need their own features or
voices. They are surrendering these things to something powerful and great”
[they] “take away their faces and voices, [and] give them, guns and bombs”
(234).

For DeLillo the terrorist’s ability to retain his autonomy was beginning to evolve in a
manner similar to that of the novelist. Media involvement was starting to obstruct
their previous ability to stay outside globalised capitalism. Their image was
becoming homogenised in his 1991 narrative, absorbed into a form of corporate
terrorism which would become chillingly apparent in 2001 and remains compellingly
evocative in 2015.

Not satisfied with only using Mao II as a vehicle to expose the interference of
media corporations into the everyday lives of Americans or to complain about a lack
of authorial force in post-modern literature, DeLillo also took the opportunity to
delve deeply into readers’ psyches and project a sense of terror in the ordinary. Brita,
as a representative of western capitalist society, recognises that:

there is no moment on certain days when I’m not thinking terror. They have
us in their power. In boarding areas I never sit near windows in case of flying
glass. I carry a Swedish passport…I use code in my address book for names
and addresses of writers because how can you tell if the name of a certain
writer is dangerous to carry, some dissident, some Jew or blasphemer. I’m
careful about reading matter. Nothing religious comes with me, no books
with religious symbols…no pictures of guns or sexy women. (40-1)

It was clear long before 9/11 that air travel, and the risks of violent and sudden death
from a terrorist attack, were synonymous. DeLillo recognised and used this
symmetry in his fiction to highlight both the possibility, and the anxiety that the
prospect caused in ordinary people. However, only when the spectacle of the assault
on the World Trade Centre hit the screens was the reality of the dangers DeLillo
highlighted brought home to the vast majority of Americans. Only then were Brita’s
precautions incorporated into the average person’s twenty-first century lifestyle and
travel plans. DeLillo addresses these threatening anxieties of early '90s in *Mao II.*

Yet, the perceptual framework of a consciousness of fear has condensed over the
years until the term 9/11 has become a byword to describe extreme terrorism. Shortly
after the first terrorist attack on the World Trade Center’s North Tower in 1993,
DeLillo acknowledged to interviewer Maria Nadotti the vision he was deliberately
trying to transmit in this novel. The argument he presented then reflects elements of
the ideas he would project eight years later in his analysis of the 9/11 events, “In the
Ruins of the Future”:
My book in a way, is asking who is speaking to these people. Is it the writer who traditionally thought he could influence the imagination of his contemporaries or is it the totalitarian leader, the military man, the terrorist, those who are twisted by power and who seem capable of imposing their vision on the world reducing the earth to a place of danger and anger? Things have changed a lot in recent years. One doesn’t step onto an airplane in the same spirit as one did ten years ago: it’s all different and this change has insinuated itself into our consciousness… (Nadotti 110)

These words have become even more pertinent as the incidents of 9/11 are consigned to history. But they solidly establish the DeLillo of the 1990s as a logical and politically astute writer who recognised the problems facing both individual Americans and their Government. They also indicate that he is a man who, when he identifies an issue, is prepared to let his opinion be heard through his work.

That DeLillo’s political view was documented and that his novels appeared prescient did not only come to light in the aftermath of the terror attacks of 9/11. His distinct prophetic voice also resonates from other genres. It made up much of the commentary in the mockumentary-style *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, the 1997 work of Belgian film director, Johan Grimonprez. This unsettling docu-drama examined late twentieth century terrorists, political rhetoric and the merging of these tropes into media performance. Roberta Smith recognised the film as being “exceptional for its juice; its jazzy, compelling fusion of social and aesthetic issues, and its stomach-churning power” (“Art in Review”). In its critique of the history of hijacking, *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* includes most modern “dissident” ideologies, and as Smith points out, the film “suggests a world not of competing good guys and bad guys, but of inept characters all around” (Grimonprez). Whether inept or not, “Political power
ha[d] largely taken over the spectacle of terrorism,” claimed Grimonprez in an
interview with Pierre Bal-Blanc and Mathieu Marguerin in 1998. He used already
scripted lines from both *White Noise* and *Mao II* to support this hypothesis and they
are ironically appropriate in this provocative picture. Sections of dialogue from the
novels enhanced the spectacle in *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* and the satirical voice in these
narratives became obvious when juxtaposed with the archival film footage of
historical terrorist attacks. In Eben Wood’s view the images and the dialogue are
“confirmed not simply as a rhetorical negative…but as what Gayatri Chakravorty
Spivak calls ‘allegorical irony’ or ‘parabasis’ that is ‘the activism of speaking
otherwise’” (115). In Wood’s opinion *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* merged with *White Noise*
and *Mao II* to force the listener or viewer “to move against the current of the prose,
to hear the charge that pushes it away” (115). Grimonprez used both voice and image
not only to capture the transience of both the past and current period, but, like
DeLillo’s powerful words, to foreshadow events not fully imagined at the time.

“The Power of Images”

Power is a trope that recurs regularly in the work of Don DeLillo. DeLillo recognised
early in his career that few things can evoke power as forcefully as a commanding
image. In a 1982 interview with Tom LeClair, DeLillo discussed the “power of
images,” the attraction of both the “strong image [and] the short ambiguous scene”
(25). The Twin Towers were the image that dominated Don DeLillo’s home city of
New York in the late twentieth century. They loomed over the metropolis creating a
conspicuously forceful yet materialistic atmosphere. Their “straight-edge enormity”
seemed to indicate that here was the home of global capitalism (“IRF” 38). Don
DeLillo was one of the first to hear their voice, recognise their precarious power and
introduce it into his fiction. His work appears even more prophetic in a post-9/11 world given that the skeletons of these controversial New York City structures entered his narratives at the earliest possible stage. In *Americana* (1971), DeLillo’s first published novel, he inadvertently began the construction of the image he was to become markedly associated with by the twenty-first century. Within *Americana* DeLillo erected a distinctive, but unequivocal image that would come to resonate strongly thirty years later:

> I looked out the window. Men in yellow helmets were working on a building that was going up across the street. They weaved in and out of its hollow bones shooting acetylene, and catwalked over shaky planks. Strangely they did not seem to move with any special caution. Perhaps they had come to terms with the fear of falling. They had probably seen others fall and despised those deaths for the relief that followed the shock, a relief that must have risen with the wind, floor to floor up the raw spindling shanks of the building…At one level two men squatted, riveting, and another, a level above, jumped from plank to plank, his arms held out slightly, hands at hip length. In mid-jump, at a certain angle against the open side of the building, he had the sky behind him, a rich and early blue, and they framed the girders, man and sky, for what seemed an impossible second. I could see the riveters and the man jumping but they could not see each other…Then another man appeared…he stood motionless for a moment…he seemed to be looking at us. Then he lifted his hand above his head and began to wave. He was looking right at me, waving…I felt he had to be acknowledged. I didn’t know why but I felt it had to be done. It was absolutely imperative a sign had to be given.

*(AM 16)*
Although DeLillo does not directly name The World Trade Centre as the building overlooked by advertising executive, David Bell, in the novel, these are almost certainly the buildings being depicted. Not only were the structures of The World Trade Centre controversial during the build, they remained in the background or were incorporated into the texts of much later twentieth century literature until their ultimate destruction on 9/11. Consequently, they are the ones most logically associated with the emerging Manhattan skyline of the 1970s. “Denounced,” as Roger Cohen has argued “as a supreme example of self-glorifying monumentalism,” their consequent inclusion was perhaps inevitable in a novel that ostensibly critiques the corporate world of late twentieth-century America (1). Nevertheless, the manner in which DeLillo depicted them unavoidably links their inception with the spectacle of their demise. The images evoked, the jumping men and the waving figure, in this early novel would resonate eerily on 9/11, as other workers “had to come to terms with the fear of falling” while other New Yorkers watched in horror from windows (AM 16).

The image of these structures is really the thread that winds through DeLillo’s work. The Towers remain a motif that looms over his narratives while 9/11 slowly becomes the ghost that prematurely haunts his texts. By 1977 DeLillo’s skeletal buildings of Americana were occupied by the suggestively termed “Grief Management Council” in Players. This concern’s function is to serve “the community in its efforts to understand and assimilate grief” (P18). For the novel’s character, Pammy, however, the “World Trade Center was an unlikely headquarters for an outfit such as this” (18). However, as she contemplates both the buildings and her business, she alters her opinion, and on second thought, finds the location suitable, anticipating that, “people would one day crave the means to codify their
emotions.” (18-19). The vast size of the Twin Towers affords ample room for the storage of America’s gargantuan sized grief following the 9/11 attacks, and somehow DeLillo’s early novel seems to perceive this future requirement. DeLillo also seemed to recognise that these towering structures would be short-lived, and his narration suggests this. For his character, Pammy, “the towers didn’t seem permanent. They remained concepts, no less transient for all their bulk than some routine distortion of light” (P19). Brita, a photographer and thus a preserver of images, in Mao II also found the towers alien. Corporate America was demolishing what was unique about her city: the familiar was “being flattened and hauled away so they [could] build their towers” (39). But for Brita the structures would never become the voice of New York because the ordinary people of the city don’t “know what they are saying” (40). Rather than representative of the ordinary citizens, the towers were in a dialogue with corporate America, the money men, while the streets of the city were full of “people with nowhere to live and there are bigger and bigger towers all the time, fantastic buildings with miles of rentable space. All the space [however] is inside” (40). The inside space had also troubled Pammy as she reflected on its impermanence. Spaces in her building were “[c]onstantly being reapportioned. Workmen sealed off some areas with partitions, opened up others, moved out filing cabinets, wheeled in chairs and desks. It was as though they’d been instructed to adjust the amount of furniture to the levels of the national grief” (19). The “national grief” that Pammy, and by association DeLillo, is concerned with here is not categorically defined, but it reveals further foreshadowing within these early texts (19).

The “power of images” that DeLillo had discussed with LeClair in 1982, and issues that are evoked by that power, resonated from the bookstore shelves in 1997
when DeLillo offered us *Underworld*. The events of 9/11 retrospectively provide an eerie atmosphere to the photograph created by Andre Kertesz and selected subsequently for the novel’s cover. DeLillo’s choice to use an image, shot at the virtual birth of the towers, seems with hindsight to be divinatory, although, once chosen to exemplify his lengthy project, DeLillo had second thoughts about using the picture. He decided to reject it “for being too religious” in appearance (Coyle 38). A photo researcher was then employed to read the text and find a representative image for the cover. Interestingly, he, too, chose Kertesz’s now iconic photograph of the Twin Towers (38). It would appear that destiny had intervened in the selection. The voice of the novel inadvertently evoked the image of the World Trade Centre for both the writer and the researcher which suggests a tone in the narrative that the novel itself explains:

…certain events have a quality of unconscious fear. I believe in my heart that people sensed some catastrophe in the air…Some awful force that would obliterate the whole thing …a threat [that] was hanging in the air…people sense things that are invisible. But when something is staring you in the face, that’s when you miss it completely. (171-3)

The ethereal image created by *Underworld* emanates from the Kertesz photograph but is not imprisoned on the dust-jacket. Beneath the cover image Don DeLillo’s strident political voice is evident from the introduction of “the nation’s number one G-man” J. Edgar Hoover (*U* 17). By placing the late director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Ebbet’s Field, Brooklyn on the day the Soviet Union “exploded a bomb…a red bomb that spouts a great white cloud,” DeLillo directly engages with politics (23). The wide-ranging scope of the narrative moves backward and forward through the latter part of the twentieth century, from the birth of the superpowers in
the 1950s to the equivocal post-cold war 1990s. “The novel,” claimed DeLillo in 1997, “exists to give us a form that is fully equal to the sweeping realities of a given period” (DePietro 124). In *Underworld* these realities are underpinned by the technologies which impacted on twentieth-century political expansion. From the exploded bomb in Kazakhstan in the opening pages, to the “final scenes…a series of hydrogen bomb explosions on a special Web site” (124), *Underworld* “remarks the end of an era and the beginning of something so different only a vision such as this might suffice to augur it” (126). Along with the political tone of the text DeLillo also acknowledged that “there is a religious aspect to this…a false faith… [t]he worship of technology [which] ends in the paranoid spaces of the computer net” (DePietro 124). Consequently, when analysing the premise of *Underworld* one doesn’t have to work very hard to establish this sort of thematic consistency. His “theme[s] will insist on [their] own development” and that development is politically motivated (125).

The leitmotif that began in *Americana*, is depicted in *Players*, and analysed in *Mao II*, punctuated DeLillo’s masterwork, *Underworld*. The ephemeral towers that adorn the cover and reverberate into the future, provide further evidence of DeLillo’s prophetic powers:

He imagined he was watching the construction of the Great Pyramid at Giza – only this was twenty-five times bigger, with tanker trucks spraying perfumed water on the approach roads. He found the sight inspiring. All this ingenuity and labor, this delicate effort to fit maximum waste into diminishing space. The towers of the World Trade Center were visible in the distance and he sensed a poetic balance between that idea and this one. (DeLillo, *U* 184)
The link that connects the landfill site depicted here, “Fresh Kills” on Staten Island, with the World Trade Centre makes DeLillo’s writing appear unnervingly farsighted. John Coyle’s informative research reveals that the disturbingly appropriately named “Fresh Kills,” “[c]losed in the spring of 2001…but reopened on the 13th September that year to receive the debris from Ground Zero” (38). It can be directly allied to the “long series of vehicles [which would] move slowly west on Canal Street” five years later “into the cloud of sand and ash” in “In the Ruins of the Future” (40). While DeLillo’s introduction of “Fresh Kills” to Underworld in 1997 seems to foreshadow the aftermath of the fallen towers and thus appears prescient, the 9/11 aura which resonates eerily from the final pages seems remarkably discerning. The death of DeLillo’s character, Sister Alma Edgar, the Bride of Christ, in a linked explosion between the hydrogen bomb which ushered in the Cold War, and the futuristic feeling, World Wide Web, resonates strongly with DeLillo-style prophecy:

She sees the flash, the thermal pulse. She hears the rumble building, the great gathering force rolling off the soundboard. She stands in the flash and feels the power. She sees the spray plume. She sees the fireball climbing, the superheated sphere of burning gas that can blind a person with its beauty, its dripping christblood colors, solar golds and reds. She sees the shockwave and hears the high winds and feels the power of false faith, the faith of paranoia, and then the mushroom cloud spreads around her, the pulverised mass of radioactive debris, eight miles high, ten mile, twenty, with skirted stem and smoking platinum cap. The jewels roll out of her eyes and she sees God. No wait, sorry. It is a Soviet bomb she sees… (U 825-26)
As Vince Passaro points out the “profoundly political” voice which has reverberated in DeLillo’s work since *Americana* “presents no clear agenda” yet it resonates from the final pages of *Underworld* and continues disconcertingly into the new millennium as “terrifying evidence of the real power of art” (“Dangerous Don DeLillo”).

“A Grief Observed”

Apart from the fact that the character Rey Robles returns to New York in order to commit suicide, there is little to link DeLillo’s 2001 novella, *The Body Artist*, to New York City, and even less to the World Trade Centre. However, this does not limit DeLillo’s perceived oracular ability or the talent he had shown since the 1970s to place his prophetic finger on the pulse of the nation. In this brief text DeLillo addresses the theme of death and bereavement, but not simply loss of a loved one: instead he examines sudden, untimely or unexpected death, its effect on those left behind, and a mourner’s ability to accept, understand and conceivably work through grief. From the beginning words of the narrative – “Time seemed to pass. The world happens, unrolling into moments…” (7) – to the final disclosure – “She didn’t know why she did this. Then she knew. She wanted to feel…the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was” (124) – *The Body Artist* resonates with sadness and mourning. Although grief is paramount in the text, as Alan Gibbs points out there is no “neat closure provided” for either the character or the reader (35). The novella’s theme, while it suggests an “awareness of debates in the field” of trauma studies and a “willingness to engage with the critique,” does not indicate that DeLillo was intending to present a template for working through traumatic incidents (35). Unlike

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21This title is taken from C.S. Lewis’s work of the same name.
Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *The Body Artist*’s ending is left deliberately ambiguous.

The novel’s central character, Lauren Hartke, must deal with the abrupt and bewildering death of her husband, along with the changes his absence makes to her life, but there is little sense of closure in the narrative. Cornel Bonca rationalises Lauren’s reaction by saying “[t]he shock of death, the loss of love, throws off the rhythms of ontic everydayness which grounded the revelations of Being on which her consciousness previously thrived” (63). DeLillo’s short novel suggests that expectations one has had, the vision of how one’s life will unfold, has to be actively reconstructed in situations such as Lauren finds herself. Rather than a model for working through, DeLillo undertakes to offer a template for reassembling life after the death of one who was intrinsic to it. As Tim Adams notes, this profound novel is “a distilled meditation on perception and loss” (“The Library in the Body”). It seems particularly portentous that DeLillo’s literary observation of grief was among the New Releases in bookshops at the time many Americans would find themselves suffering a trauma similar to the one this work depicts. DeLillo could not in any way have actually predicted America’s need for grief counselling, but here again his work anticipates a future challenge to be faced by the American people. As Laura Di Prete reads it, “Lauren reels from the shock of having survived her husband’s death, and she is haunted by the incomprehensibility of an event that she feels compelled to rehearse to begin to apprehend” (494). This analysis of DeLillo’s character’s reaction and grief compares closely with the anguish of many who listened to the final voices of their loved ones. It also reflects the despair of those left behind whose lives and expectations had to be reconstructed in the aftermath of 9/11.
Ten years before the 9/11 attacks DeLillo had told Vince Passaro that it was in his “nature to keep quiet about most things,” and true to his word, he remained quiet in the days following the attacks (“Dangerous Don DeLillo”). However, on the twenty-second of December his voice was no longer subdued. Clearly, logically, and passionately, in a short article entitled appropriately “In the Ruins of the Future,” DeLillo analysed some of the events leading up to the strikes. His 2001 essay resurrects many of the subjects and issues which he first gave voice to in his previous work. He begins “In the Ruins of the Future” by describing the multinational corporate society the United States had become during the Cold War. He also envisages the financial nucleus suggested by the image of the World Trade Centre, which he sees as having transmogrified into the epicentre of much perpetrator anger and American grief. As he had foretold in his fiction for nearly two decades: “It was America that drew their fury” (33). DeLillo reasoned again in this essay, as he had earlier argued in *Mao II*, “Today, again, the world narrative belongs to the terrorists” (33). These terrorists, he contended, responded in the only voice they were willing to employ. The danger emanating from the political terror organisations was “only now becoming inescapable…we are living in a place of danger and rage…” he cautioned. “The terrorists of September 11 want to bring back the past,” he warned, and return the world to anarchy and repression (33-4). A return to the past within the United States, however, meant recreating the bitterness of the “Us and Them” society which had prevailed fifty years earlier during the McCarthy era and throughout the Cold War (34). This attempted twenty-first century reconstruction, DeLillo claimed, was caused by the Bush Administration’s nostalgic quest for the power America embodied in the past. But all these cravings were “over now… [and] it has been left to us to create the counter-narrative” (34).
While DeLillo raised the issue of the counter-narrative equivocally in “The Ruins of the Future” his voice was not the primary one of the period. The opposing dialogue to the master-narrative created by the terrorists was already being put forward by politicians, the media, and academics alike. The sheltered world Americans had known had clearly “crumbled” from its position of privilege and merged with the anguished world familiar for many people on the “other” side of the globe (DeLillo 33). Unlike the “ruins” of DeLillo’s nightmarish vision, Žižek sees 9/11 as an American fantasy, “the plane that hit the WTC tower… [as] the ultimate Hitchcockian blot, anamorphic stain which denaturalized the idyllic well-known New York landscape.” As Žižek saw it “America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise” (15-16). In DeLillo’s “In the Ruins of the Future” he clearly toys with the reflecting visions of history and the future, but for political scientists like Noam Chomsky, both the future and historic value of the event was not due to its “catastrophic” scale, “or the nature of the atrocity” as it seems to have been for DeLillo (“IRF” 33). Instead its primary importance rested in “who the victims were” (Chomsky Power and Terror 13). The sense of “disarticulation… in the term ‘Us and Them’” voiced by DeLillo (“IRF” 34), becomes a “useful principle [that] trumps virtually any argument” in the mind of Chomsky (9/11 152). DeLillo’s initial argument in “In the Ruins of the Future,” that America was attacked because of “the high gloss of our modernity…the thrust of our technology or America’s perceived godlessness” (33), is directly confuted in Chomsky’s reasoning. He believes that assumptions like these are:

extremely convenient belief[s] for Western intellectuals. It absolves them of responsibility for the actions that do lie behind the choice of the World Trade Center…[it] is a comforting picture, and a general stance [that] is not
unfamiliar in intellectual history...[however] it happens to be at variance with everything we know, but has all the merit of self-adulation and uncritical support for power. And it has the flaw that adopting it contributes significantly to the likelihood of further atrocities, including atrocities directed at us, perhaps even more horrendous ones than those of 9/11 (Chomsky, 9/11 62-3).

There are some points however, on which both these men can find common ground, but for differing reasons and that is in the “blunt force of [U.S.] foreign policy” and the “nostalgic” feelings of the Bush administration (“IRF” 33). While the tone of DeLillo’s article indicates that its foreign policy is a thing that defines America as a nation, Chomsky believes that there is little awareness among Americans of the “cause and effect” of the U.S. government’s program (9/11 64). Holloway points out that while the “Bush Administration... argued that 9/11 changed everything...Chomsky [among others] reminded Americans...that 9/11 was the product of historical resentments accumulated over time by traditions of ‘imperialist’ foreign policy and national security strategy” (22). While the rhetoric of the Bush era implied that a “way of life had really ended in September 2001” and DeLillo’s article envisions the future in ruins, neither assessment seems in hindsight to have been the case (22). It seems clear that in order to develop a meaningful fictional 9/11 dialogue, any novel which directly addresses the attacks, rather than focusing primarily on their traumatic impact, would have to also reveal that “September 2001 existed in a continuum with the events that came before” (22). To do that effectively it would inevitably move past the trauma of the day and extend the counter-narrative into the area of the political and address those issues in the prevailing American ideology.
Although, in “In the Ruins of the Future” DeLillo seemed to recognise the necessity to counter the then current government narrative of accusation and reprisal, as Gibbs points out “the article is unconvincing” (122). The brief fictional analysis contained in DeLillo’s essay views the day through the lives of characters “Karen” and “Marc” (36). Although their chronicle is more a précis than a short story, and is subjective and personal, it does not suggest the seed of a true counter-narrative, nor does his concluding image of a young Muslim woman praying publically on the New York sidewalk. Here DeLillo offers a vision of a cherished American ideal. His analysis of the scene implies that, New York particularly, is all-inclusive and will “accommodate every language, ritual, belief, and opinion,” but this vignette does not stretch the picture far enough to be a convincing counter-narrative (40). While “In the Ruins of the Future” indicates that on 9/11 Americans experienced both personal and collective trauma, it makes it clear that the events of the day “can be understood” on both these levels. However, it is revealing that DeLillo, along with most American fiction writers, chose to examine the bearing the event had on the individual, rather than the impact this challenge to American identity had on U.S. society En mass (Baelo-Allué 63). Perhaps because, as Linda Kauffman has argued, “[t]he counter-narrative’s provenance is the realm of the unspeakable, the unfathomable” and does the work of mourning, it is only reasonable that the personal view would have been easier to address than the collective (354). But as DeLillo had written so much that appeared culturally perceptive between 1971 and 2001, and had directly raised the suggestion that a counter-narrative was needed, it was not unreasonable to expect that he would be the writer who would wish to address the more challenging aspect of the topic.
Margaret Scanlan views the 9/11 canon thus far as “a genre we might characterise as the 9/11 novel of manners, in which the World Trade Centre emerges only at the margins of a narrative about relationships, love affairs and rivalries of affluent New Yorkers” (143). Although she regards DeLillo’s *Falling Man* as a novel that “comes closer than most” in attempting to depict the actual events of the period in fiction “even DeLillo focuses almost exclusively on the survivor’s numbness and evasions” rather than the emphatic political precision which has been highlighted here in *Underworld* and other of his previous novels (142). As Richard Gray indicates the style DeLillo employs offers the “verbal equivalent to immobility” and the “insistent repetition never gets beyond the obvious” (*After the Fall* 28).

Consequently, the more controversial elements of the 9/11 terrorist attacks remain under-developed in his fiction. So far, American writers have failed to convincingly counter either the dominant ideology present in the U.S. at the time, or the contrasting philosophy made evident by the attacks. Rather than forming a “new species of political fiction” that might help to change either an American or a global worldview, DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, joins the “subset of national trauma writing” a genre still focused on the ruins, failing to distinguish between the rubble and the future (Irr 12).

**Falling Man**

Though *Falling Man* has been reviewed by critics as notionally the best of a rather bad lot, it has also been received with a palpable degree of disappointment. In his interview with Mark Binelli, shortly after publishing the novel Don DeLillo categorically stated, “I didn’t want to write a novel in which the attacks occur over the character’s right shoulder and affect a few lives in a distant sort of way. I wanted
to be in the towers and in the planes” (Binelli). *Falling Man’s* central character, Keith Neudecker, is clearly in the towers. The antagonist, Hammad, unquestionably makes the crowning decisions of his life aboard one of the planes as it wings its way towards the World Trade Centre. However, the “right shoulder” view is certainly the central focus of DeLillo’s novel (Binelli). In his assessment of the narrative “Don Delillo’s *Falling Man* and the Age of Terror” Joseph Conte argues that the “readers recognise DeLillo’s deliberative analysis of transnational politics in the figures of a traumatized survivor…and a jihadist recruit” (560). But this assessment is only partially correct as the real view of political issues is hidden in the purview of the minor players in DeLillo’s drama. Although the two characters Conte refers to, Keith and Hammad, effectively depict separate political ideologies, only Hammad suggests some degree of resolution or political agency, however flawed. Keith, as a character, becomes only a reflective and introverted study of the aftermath of trauma, which at times verges on American narcissism while paying some “lip service” to other perspectives (Irr 12). Because the central character does not offer an articulate political voice, the tone of *Falling Man* does not resonate contextually in the way DeLillo’s previous fictional voices did. On this occasion the political tone that is heard through the opinions expressed by the principal American characters is only faintly audible. In order to hear a decidedly political voice in this novel it is necessary to look away from the traumatised Keith and his ineffectual wife, Leanne. These characters remain, to the end of the text, isolated and introverted by their individual distress and unable to make any real or decisive political statement. As a study of trauma, similar to that of Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredible Close*, the Neudecker account might prove invaluable. But, as the counter-narrative to either the position held by the perpetrators of 9/11, or the dominant
ideological stand taken at the time by the U.S. Government, their story falls far short of the mark. Don DeLillo’s 9/11 novel is not without redemption however. The political overtures within *Falling Man*, rather than following the central protagonists, are heard in the words of the secondary characters, and he uses these minor voices with masterly acuity. DeLillo’s novel is broken up into three sections which are each subtitled and represented by a man’s name. The choice of these names is significant as each signifies a character that proffers a specific political voice, and consequently they can each be analysed individually within a political context.

**Bill Lawton – the enemy**

The use of the subtitle “Bill Lawton” to introduce part one of *Falling Man* suggests that the identity of the enemy and the intentions of the attacks were vacuously misconstrued in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Using a similar tactic to Foer’s novel, DeLillo’s first approach to the 9/11 terrorist mind-set comes through the perception of the children in the narrative and their ostensibly innocent misunderstanding. The Neudecker’s son, Justin, and his friends, collectively known as “the Siblings,” mishear the name Bin Laden in the news broadcasts and mistakenly rename him “Bill Lawton” (*FM* 37). Like Foer’s paradigm, these children too, can be viewed allegorically, as a representation of an America unfamiliar with and frightened by foreign concepts, ideologies and names. But here the comparison veers away from the traumatised child victimised by a harrowing ordeal. Instead, what DeLillo focuses on is not what has been viewed, but rather on how that viewed image was being envisioned in the first decade of the twenty-first century. As DeLillo had done before in *Libra*, the very name of the offender carries with it an aura of reverence and horror. At the time of the incongruously connected funerals of
both JFK and his apparent assassin, two unidentified boys near the grave whisper the name of the alleged murderer and soviet agent, Lee Harvey Oswald, “saying it like a secret they’d keep forever” (456). These children in Falling Man, too, seem to need to keep the erroneous name of the architect of 9/11, Bill Lawton, hidden. Clearly the name Lee Harvey Oswald was no secret in 1963, and Osama Bin Laden would hardly fall into the area of classified nearly forty years later. It is the horror connected to, and the sensation of political intrigue surrounding, these names which make them appear clandestine, inducing the characters that utter them to do so in whispers.

DeLillo’s 2007 child characters are both secretive and overt when addressing a name they link to this most traumatic of national tragedies. The children’s reluctance to discuss “this man” in Falling Man emphasises America’s dual difficulty with both the need for reticence and any acceptance of diverse opinion (17). These “kids with their goddamn twisted powers of imagination” (72) had been diffident as they “search[ed] the skies” (73) and discussed the incident furtively in a “sort of code” (17). Their powers of invention create not a man, but a godlike character with “a long beard [and] a long robe” (74). Fascinating as the subject is for them, they “totally don’t want to discuss the matter,” states the Siblings’ mother, claiming that the older, more dominant child, Katie “enforces the thing. She inspires fear in her brother” (17). These children’s reaction mirrors the response of many Americans at the time. They, too, were uncomfortable openly discussing the foreign “reservoir of bitterness and anger over U.S. policies” in order to analyse the incident and clarify the facts (Chomsky 45). Consequently, like these children, they ultimately misinterpreted the partisan reasoning behind the attacks. Rather than an attack on innocence the terrorists struck “a blow to this county’s dominance... [an
incursion aimed at a] power that interferes and occupies” (46). Instead of being allowed to reason logically, in the manner of Falling Man’s European character, Martin, Americans were persuaded by the more pedantic elements in their society that any deviation from the status quo would be viewed as suspect. Again, like the children in DeLillo’s narrative, a “protective distance” was placed between the American people and the facts surrounding the attacks (74). Rather than an informed discussion, a long list of alien attributes was fabricated and offered to Americans to help mitigate their pain and shelter them from reality. “The public language of the American administration [was] used to construct a whole new world for its citizens,” claimed Richard Jackson (1). Through a carefully constructed discourse, officials “created a new social reality where terrorism threatens to destroy everything that ordinary people hold dear” (1). This political voice, Jackson argues, was “a deliberately and meticulously composed set of words, assumptions, metaphors, grammatical forms, myths and forms of knowledge – that [was] a carefully constructed discourse – that [was] designed to achieve a number of key political goals” (2). The “myths and metaphors” described by Jackson, which were used to depict the abstruse character Osama bin Laden in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, rather than clarifying, created a climate of ambiguity around the perpetrators of the attacks. The obfuscation surrounding this man, which appears to have been perpetuated by the government, led to the children’s confusion and the adults’ perplexity, causing Justin’s mother to ask, “What Man?,” and the Siblings’ parent to respond, “Exactly” (FM 17). By misconstruing each other’s meaning and disregarding their children’s misinterpretation, the women’s conversation highlights issues that, at the time, were causing confliction in the minds of many Americans.
These women’s conversation mouthed the confusion present in after-shock of the attacks.

It is significant that the obvious Anglicisation of the terrorist’s name in *Falling Man* obscured the character’s identity, blurring his image, within semantics. The use of this confusion in the text emphasises how an inability to assimilate new words and names comfortably into the common dialectal invited ambiguity, and is in effect a type of evasion. This practice is examined and highlighted by Margaret Scanlan who suggests “that Islam and even Arabic names are threatening to many Europeans and Americans” (142). An Americanised nomenclature for a very real and menacing Muslim-fundamentalist character underscores the vast philosophical and moral differences that separate the two societies and creates a synecdoche for “Terrorist” within the novel. It also stresses the focus of contemporary bigotry without altering the impact of the events, or their influence on then current American ideology. By indicating that the Neudecker’s son, Justin, and his friends “the Siblings” were “hearing Bill Lawton” while the reports were “saying bin Laden” DeLillo poses the idea that all that was known was not being broadcast coherently to the general public (*FM* 73). By stating that the eldest and more dominant child Katie, had to “know the real name, “she’s way too smart,” DeLillo suggests that the identity of the terrorists and the purpose of the attacks were deliberately hidden and misrepresented by the prevailing political figures in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 (74). This is supported in an historical reading of the period, such as that of Wright or Dower. However, as *Falling Man* progresses and President Bush’s “discourse of danger…the harbinger of a new age of terror” is starting to appear less probable (Jackson 103), Katie’s fascination with “search[ing] the skies [for] the man whose name… we all know even if some of us are not supposed to know” is challenged
“Maybe it’s time for him to disappear…Maybe just maybe it’s time to stop searching the skies, time to stop talking about…the mythical figure who’d said the planes were coming back” suggests Leanne (152-3). Through this engagement between the parental figure and the harrying child, whose “sly connivance” perpetuates the Bill Lawton myth, DeLillo points out how domineering political pressure could manipulate society in keeping with an aggressive political agenda (152).

**Ernst Hechinger – the European Perspective**

Ernst Hechinger is the subtitle of part two of this relatively short novel with three significantly titled segments. It is also the pseudonym of the European character in the text, Martin Ridnour. Consequently, it is most intriguing for analytical thought because it is through Ridnour, and the terrorist character, Hammad, that Americans are offered a view of themselves via the gaze of the “other.” These non-American characters should, as Edward Said advocated, “compel [our] attention” (*Covering Islam* 24). Although they appear only on the perimeters of the text they both “are connected not only with western conceptions and treatments of the Other,” but also with the reverse view (24), allowing us “to see ourselves as others see us” (Burns 109). Both of these characters, Hammad and Ridnour, are reminiscent of the author’s previous characterisations and advance a DeLillo style “counter-history” which acutely demands to be recognised (DeLillo *PoH* 5). It is eventually through these U.S. non-nationals that DeLillo “engineer[ed] a swerve that [bound] a figure in history to that which has been reported, rumoured, confirmed or solemnly chanted…” (4). Through them DeLillo “constructs a language that will be the book’s life-giving force” (5). It is in their voices that we begin to faintly hear the tenor of the
counter-narrative pledged in “In the Ruins of the Future.” It is not in the overly contrived main plot of *Falling Man*, amidst the domestic, introspective world of Leanne and Keith that the counter-narratives develop. Instead, it is in the easily overlooked subplots of identity politics and destructive U.S. foreign policy as represented by Hammad and Ridnour. It is actually here that DeLillo quietly intrudes the reality of “what this day has done to us” (“IRF” 39), within “the world of nations” (Said, *Covering Islam* 25).

Art-dealer Martin Ridnour appears circumspect when he is first introduced in *Falling Man*. Arriving in New York “on one of the first transatlantic flights as schedules resumed,” the European character is sympathetic and supportive (41). Europeans, he explains, are “being kind to Americans” (45). However, when pressed for an opinion on the attacks Martin takes a “strongly opposing position” to the solipsistic one of the New Yorkers in the narrative (47). Whether he entirely agrees with it or not, Martin recognises the existence of other ways of thinking, and there seems to be a modicum of blame attached to the U.S., even at this early point, when he announces “all of us are targets now” (47). Echoing DeLillo’s words in “In the Ruins of the Future,” he counters that the terrorists “strike a blow to [U.S.] dominance…to show how a great power can be vulnerable” (46). But during the recuperative autumn of 2001 DeLillo makes it clear in *Falling Man* that explanatory sentiments like these could not be tolerated. Martin’s long-time American partner Nina’s anger at his pragmatic assessment of events becomes a “hard tight fury in [her] face” (47). Although even at this sensitive time people like Martin possibly “had more to say… this was not the moment, not now, too soon” (48). DeLillo insinuates by the structure of this scene that, although it may have been “too soon” during the immediate days and weeks following the attacks to discuss the subject
objectively, some level of U.S. culpability would need to be addressed eventually (48). As Falling Man unfolds DeLillo uses the European to explore the image of America as it presents itself to the rest of the Western world. As John Updike’s American character Dan Kellogg also realised in the short story “Varieties of Religious Experience,” United States hubris is at the forefront of foreign perception of America, even by their allies. Echoing Žižek’s “Hitchcockian blot” (15), DeLillo deliberates through Martin:

But that’s why you built the towers isn’t it? Weren’t the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it come down. The provocation is obvious. What other reason would there be to go so high and then to double it, do it twice? It’s a fantasy, so why not do it twice? You are saying, here it is, bring it down. (116)

Martin’s view of the World Trade Centre as a symbolic and provocative target, echo once again, DeLillo’s earlier opinion in “In the Ruins of the Future.” But they are really “Self-indulgent fantasies” that are indulged in “at considerable risk to ourselves” (Chomsky, 9/11 64).

Susan Faludi’s opinion of this national nightmare, as she envisions it in The Terror Dream, states that, “[b]y September 12, our culture was already reworking a national tragedy into a national fantasy of virtuous might and triumph” (289). However, the image of U.S. potency and resilience, which DeLillo investigates from the perspective of an empathetic but cogent foreigner, implies that, while American arrogance was obvious to most other nations, it was not acknowledged at home. Or worse, it was recognised by Americans and celebrated. “We like to think America invented the future” (39), mused DeLillo in “In the Ruins of the Future,” but by the
time “three years had past, since that day in September” Europeans had become (FM 182), as Martin claims, “…sick of America and Americans, the subject nauseates us, the day is coming when nobody has to think about America except for the danger it brings” (191). Isolated from the text Martin’s voice and opinions appear emphatic, but these short snippets of narration hidden within what Versluys describes as an “endless re-enactment of trauma…[which] allows for no accommodation or resolution” are, as a result, easily missed (20). Richard Gray argues that Falling Man is “another form of emotional numbness…the insistent repetition never gets us beyond the obvious…offering a verbal equivalent of immobility” (After the Fall 28). While it is audibly true that the voice in Falling Man is dulled, it is not as immobile as Gray suggests. It could be argued that in Falling Man DeLillo employs “Hemingway’s trick of not saying something, thus hinting that much is going on underneath the words” (Pritchard 669).

Through Martin Ridnour in Falling Man DeLillo reaches back to a thought-provoking subject which noticeably interested him in the aftermath of 9/11. In 2002 DeLillo published a short story in The New Yorker entitled “Baader-Meinhof,” which is partially set at the Gerhard Richter exhibition which was then running at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The exhibit included fifteen black-and-white paintings entitled “October 18, 1977,” which are based on press photographs of the Baader-Meinhof gang. These paintings are the result of the artist’s interest in the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group, also known as the Red Army Faction, Germany’s most prominent post-World War Two left-wing militant organisation. The ultimate use of terrorist tactics by this faction to protest against “nuclear proliferation, authoritarian regimes” and combat governments implicated in the Viet Nam War offers a tacit Western perspective on the Jihad perpetrated by the terrorists of 9/11.
(Kauffman 357). DeLillo’s 2002 characters debate the origins of the pictures, trying to decide whether the members of the Baader-Meinhof “committed suicide. Or the state killed them” (“Baader-Meinhof” 106). The female character attempts to empathise from the position of these Western terrorists: “I don’t know what happened.’ She said. ‘I’m only telling you what people believe. It was twenty-five years ago. I don’t know what it was like then, in Germany, with bombings and kidnappings.’ But her companion deduces, “They were terrorists, weren’t they? When they’re not killing other people, they are killing themselves” (ibid). With the photographs of the perpetrators and their recent activities on 9/11 a very fresh memory, it is reasonably certain that many readers of DeLillo’s story would draw a connection between the two events. Consequently, the reflective thought of the woman in the museum as she views these images, imagining “an element of forgiveness in the picture, that the two men and the woman, [though] terrorists…were not beyond forgiveness” was a strong statement to make at this time (109). By inconspicuously linking his ambiguous art dealer Martin, in Falling Man, to the Baader-Meinhof gang, DeLillo reminds his audience that they too might not “know what it was like” in Muslim countries to be the inadvertent subject or potential target of U.S. interference and invasion (106). Under the pseudonym Ernst Hechinger, this “smart… gracious…generous” man, now known as Martin Ridnour (45), had been “involved in the times [was active in] all that turmoil” (144).

Ridnour’s past experience, DeLillo suggests, allowed him to empathise: he “thinks these people, these jihadists… have something in common with the radicals of the sixties and seventies. [He believes] they’re all part of the same classical pattern. They have their theorists. They have their visions of world brotherhood” (147). DeLillo’s conciliatory political voice is sparse and easily missed within the introverted personal
trauma of Keith and Leanne that emanates deafeningly from the text. But if one listens closely to the narrative this European character, Martin, is shouting.

**David Janiak – The Muted Spectacle**

The third and final section of *Falling Man* initially focuses directly on politics. By moving the plotline forward three years to August 29th 2004 DeLillo redirects the gaze from the 2001 attacks to questionable U.S. foreign policy decisions that ensued as a result. He opens this section at the rallies held in New York by the “United for Peace and Justice” coalition, who mobilised first in 2002 prior to the invasion of Iraq. The day chosen by DeLillo to move his narrative forward precedes the 2004 Republican convention and George W. Bush’s second nomination and subsequent re-election. The opening paragraph sees the character Leanne and her son Justin walking “with five hundred thousand others…march[ing] against the war, the president, the policies” (181). The vast crowd of various ethnicities depicted in this scenario adds to the many spectacles that are dispersed fragmentally throughout the narrative both beginning and ending with the most traumatic, “that day in September [when] all life had become public” (182). Justin, who was introduced three years earlier, is ten years old by this time, and dealing with issues regarding ethnicity and prejudice surrounding the attacks on a more mature level than he did in the “Bill Lawton” days. In this vignette he is trying to comprehend what in 2004 might have been considered a less patriotic point of view. While attending a political protest he is attempting to read and grasp the information handed to him about Islam. Unfortunately, as he tries to decipher the conflicting information contained in the leaflets he can’t entirely “match what [he] read[s] and what he see[s]” because they “don’t necessarily match” (183). The presence of Justin at the march implies that
Leanne, who had previously attacked her Middle-Eastern neighbour for playing ethnic music, has to some extent come to terms with her personal intolerance (119-20). Although she had been “content in the small guarded scheme [of life] she’d…constructed” since the attacks (182), her attendance at this protest with her child indicates a new level of personal progress. Yet, as her son goes through the plethora of leaflets he has been handed during the rally she begins to regress. Leanne, who, though coping is still dealing with the fallout from three years ago, is made “uneasy” as her American son recites a “line in Arabic” taken from one of the pamphlets (184). Although she is able to recognise logically that this sense of anxiety betrays her “white person’s thoughts, the processing of white panic data…she [still] needed to flee [the] crowd” (185). In this depiction of Leanne, DeLillo points a censorious political finger at government policy but he has also offered a justification for bias.

The name “David Janiak” that was chosen for the final section of *Falling Man* is the alias of the character who also represents the title of the novel. But DeLillo forces us to question whether this performing artist “Falling Man [is a] Heartless Exhibitionist or [a] brave new Chronicler of the Age of Terror” (220). So the veiled question asked by DeLillo is whether the United States will become a collapsing hubristic nation or the harbinger of a powerful new ideology. Leanne, the only character in the narrative who engages with Janiak’s actions on an intellectual level, recognises that he represents both hubris and new ways of thinking, however much the man himself seems to have “eluded her” (224). Elusive or not, the “Falling Man” image does supply a vision within the lexis of the phrase. “It could be the name of a trump card in a tarot deck, Falling Man, name in gothic type, the figure twisting down on a stormy night,” muses Leanne as she reads on-line of Janiak’s
death (221). While exploring this notion Marie-Christina Leps calls to mind two tarot cards, “The Tower” and “The Hanged Man.” Leps reminds us that:

> [b]oth cards indicate punishment reigning down, but the Hanged Man can also mark the possibility of wisdom, as intimated by the peaceful demeanour of the face, the aura surrounding it, and the apparent calmness of the pose. The [...] cards can also signify an ‘in between’ state, before a new understanding or direction is taken. (196)

By using the performing artist David Janiak to represent this final section of **Falling Man** DeLillo signposts all these possibilities for the future of the United States. Punishment for American exhibitionism has visibly rained down from the sky. But as the “Hanged Man” card suggests, wisdom and composure are what is needed before a new awareness can be reached and a different approach taken. This analysis offers a speculative political voice surrounding the character of “Falling Man” but it is deeply veiled within DeLillo’s novel.

### Hammad – the three Positions of the “Other”

“The world changes first in the mind of the man who wants to change it. The time is coming, our truth, our shame, and each man becomes the other, and the other still another, and then there is no separation” (80). Thus begins the indoctrination of **Falling Man**’s Muslim antagonist, Hammad. Rather than representing his terrorist character as a one-dimensional adversary, as Martin Amis did in his short story “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta,” DeLillo paints a portrait of a multi-faceted character, both haunted and aroused by his culture and comrades. Hammad is the progeny of some of DeLillo’s earlier characters. He reflects elements of **Libra’s**

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22 DeLillo gives Hammad a brief voice in three of the sections of the text: “On Marienstrasse,” “In Nokomis,” and “in the Hudson Corridor.”
Oswald, Mao II’s Lebanese terrorists, and even Sister Alma Edgar from Underworld. Along with them Hammad’s actions become, as Rowe has argued, “grand symbolic act[s] directed against the prominence of U.S. state power” (122). Like these other characters, indoctrination makes Hammad inseparable from his Muslim zealot comrades and, like the “Baader-Meinhof” group, he too, accepts violence as a way of achieving change. In contrast to John Updike in Terrorist, DeLillo’s attempt to identify with the “other” is a more subtle depiction. While Hammad is allied to Islamic fundamentalists and is undoubtedly seen to be a terrorist, initially there is no obvious attempt at vilification or vindication for his actions. DeLillo simply imagines how and why his character’s ideology, and that of the perpetrators of 9/11, might have evolved. Rather than trying to rationalise terrorist ideology as Updike attempted when creating his character, Ahmad, DeLillo conceived Hammad’s indoctrination logically and succinctly. However, apportioning the blame fairly without attracting a hostile reaction had become problematic in the years following the 9/11 attacks.

“On Marienstrasse”

In order to perceptively write the Muslim “other” from an American perspective DeLillo adopted a resourceful approach. Rather than give his chosen Islamic antagonist a separate subtitled section in the novel, as he did “Bill Lawton,” “Ernst Hechinger,” and “David Janiak,” and thus drawing undue attention to doctrinal paradigms in the text, DeLillo reveals the development of his Islamic character, Hammad, in accordance with regional rather than cultural pseudonyms. A perfunctory glance at the novel offers no insight into when the scrutiny of the terrorists will begin. Hammad is not objectified in the same manner as Updike’s terrorist, Ahmad. Instead of a defined section which would offer an analysis of the
man and his ideals, the presence of the jihadist intersperses the narrative and can be seen to evolve indirectly. While the caption “On Marienstrasse” would naturally draw the mind to the supposed German character of Martin, it actually depicts the proselytisation of Hammad (77). Instead of portraying hostility, the initial lesson to be observed in this chapter is the futility of war and its ineffectuality. Initially the newly recruited Hammad is in agreement with another soldier who rationalises that “[e]ven if they were the enemy, Iranians, Shiites, heretics, this was not for him” (FM 78). But as Hammad’s inculcation progresses so, too, does his zeal. Although he must leave his home in order to travel west to Hamburg to “pursue [a] technical education,” the idea begins to develop in his mind that the West is “corrupt of mind and body, determined to shiver Islam down to crumbs for birds” (79). As he did with Oswald in Libra, DeLillo relates the plot to reality in a very specific way. In the text he portrays the jihadist, Mohamed Atta, as a character. “The world changes first in the mind of the man who wants to change it,” alleges DeLillo’s Atta, but it is in his mind rather than Hammad’s that the kernel of 9/11 has been planted (80). DeLillo’s narration implies that in his zealous attempt to attack the West, Atta has also gravely injured his own people. By presenting Hammad as a young man whose mind has been filled with the image of an Islam that is being “crowded out by other cultures, other futures, the all-enfolding will of capital markets and foreign policies” some justification for Islamic reaction to western dogma can be sensed, but not for the extremist spectacle that was enacted (80). Atta is pictured as a fundamentalist agent who reacts instinctively, while Hammad’s voice is used to suggest that in order to do what they did the perpetrators of the 9/11 attack “had to fight against the need to be normal…had to struggle against themselves…and…against the struggle that haunted their lives” (83). Almost imperceptibly DeLillo suggests the radicalisation of average
young Muslim men who are being taught to “sound […] the cry of history” (78). If analysed from Hammad’s perspective, the attacks on the World Trade Centre occurred because these men felt “that Islam was under attack” (*FM 83*).

“*In Nokomis*”

It is nearly one hundred pages later that DeLillo reintroduces Hammad. When he does so the character appears no longer as a confused young man. Fully radicalised now, Hammad is “ready to close the distance with God” (172). Through these culturally marginalised characters, DeLillo demonstrates how easy it was for them to infiltrate the United States. Clean shaven, dressed in nondescript clothes, these jihadists become “nobody from nowhere… [they] go unseen” in the Florida town of Nokomis where they attended flight school (172). Along with his mentor, Atta, and others from the movement, Hammad no longer questions the senselessness of war or his commitment to Jihad as he did earlier in Marienstrasse: “they are beyond that now, in full and determined preparation … pledged to accept their duty…to kill Americans” (171-2). Although Hammad “liked to imagine himself … a videotaped figure walking through the gate-like detector on his way to the plane,” he, like most Americans, believed that it “would [n]ever get that far” (173).

“In the Hudson Corridor”

In the Hudson corridor it becomes clear that Hammad and his associates do “get that far” (173). The climax of *Falling Man*’s plot comes in the final pages of the novel when DeLillo finally connects Hammad to the Western characters in the book. In a single sentence, without changing the central point of his paragraph topic, he unites Keith Neudecker with his terrorist antithesis, Hammad. Finally, in an ending
reminiscent of that of *Underworld*, DeLillo once again “hyperlink[s]” his characters; in one meaningful linguistic unit both Hammad and Keith are joined together in a “world without end, amen” (*U* 825):

A bottle fell off the counter in the galley, on the other side of the aisle, and [Hammad] watched it roll this way and that, a water bottle, empty, making an arc one way and rolling back the other, and he watched it spin more quickly and then skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall. (239)

This is the point where DeLillo finally does what he claimed was his intention all along. He stops looking over his shoulder at the events of 9/11 and only in the last nine pages of this narrative does he place his protagonist and his antagonist “in the towers and in the planes” (Binelli). Finally *Falling Man*’s central characters have arrived at the intersection between the world and eternity, at the point where the two cultures collide rather than cross-over. For DeLillo “it’s not religion, it’s not politics and it’s not history. It’s a kind of blood bond with other men… which narrows the worlds … and makes it possible for men to operate without a sense of the innocent victims they plan to destroy” (Binelli).

The strongest image that emerges from the wreckage in *Falling Man* is, without doubt, that of the traumatised victims. And these are the primary targets of most discussions on the text. Richard Gray views the novel’s style as “another form of emotional numbness. And the trouble is that the prose is similarly, symptomatically numb” (28). Versluys, meanwhile, concludes that *Falling Man* describes “pure melancholia without the possibility of mourning. The endless reenactment of trauma presented in *Falling Man* allows for no accommodation or
resolution” (20). Banita provides a thorough analysis of many aspects of DeLillo’s novel and claims it “points to media narrative of trauma and survival” (64). However, she concludes by determining that “DeLillo sinks the reader into a ‘cultural atmospheric’ that leaves us exasperated…and then cuts against received notions of how we regard the pain of others” (74). Although, as Margaret Scanlan suggests, *Falling Man* might come “closer than most,” to a true analysis of the events that it portrays, its message remains ambiguous (142). While DeLillo told Binelli that with *Falling Man* he was not intending to write a novel “that had a great deal of political sweep” he did not mention that he intended the narrative to mitigate readers pain either (Binelli). The evidence of DeLillo’s oeuvre indicates that politics are a strong force in DeLillo’s work, whether they are to the fore in the plot or not, they tend to linger in his milieu. The culmination of *Falling Man* suggests that DeLillo may well have been writing politically after all. By concluding the narrative with both protagonists “in the building and on the plane” DeLillo draws attention to the possible consequences of neglecting the political (Binelli). Although this text may not be DeLillo’s most inspired work, it offers a political message that has been commandeered by the trauma industry, which has redirected the gaze toward domestic trauma.

**Point Omega**

Great political change had occurred in the United States by the time Don DeLillo addressed the nation again in *Point Omega* (2010). With many of Bush’s policies and hypotheticals discredited and the rise of a Democrat to the presidency, U.S. tensions appeared somewhat lessened. Barack “Obama played to our hopes and dreams [while the Republicans] played to our fears” a senior strategist told the *New York*
Daily News in 2008 … “Bush and Cheney lost this election as much and maybe more than Barack Obama won it” seemed to be the feelings of many contemporary political commentators (DeFrank). At the beginning of his first term in office the President elect was standing on a platform of optimism and change, offering new hope to Americans who were weighed down by the previous eight years of suspicion and fear:

If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer…Change has come to America. A new dawn of American leadership is at hand. (Obama, qtd. in DeFrank)

It was into this new dawn of governmental change and political rhetoric that DeLillo, a writer who had previously “seem[ed] to anticipate…cultural trends and tendencies” chose to take a backward glance at the politics of the previous decade (Duvall 1).

Knowledge of DeLillo’s strong Roman Catholic background and his mid-1950s university degree from Fordham, a traditional Jesuit university, would assist a reader to understand the significance of his 2010 title, Point Omega. The reversed term “Omega Point” emanates from the philosophy of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who argued in his text The Future of Man (1950) that “our species does occupy a special place within the spiritual universe and that it is evolving toward an Omega Point as the end-goal of humankind on this planet” (Birx). Teilhard’s thesis argues that “the human layer of consciousness …will [eventually] detach itself from this planet…be immersed in God-Omega; the end-goal of evolution [as] a final creative synthesis of humankind with the universal God-Omega” (Birx). DeLillo’s engagement with religion in his work had been building since the 1980s. John A.
McClure has argued that many of DeLillo’s novels, “including Players, The Names, White Noise, Mao II, and Underworld, climax in dramatic episodes of worshipful communion that recall the religious ‘mysteries’” (166). The final pages of Underworld, particularly, seem to resonate with a Teilhard style of fusion. Although its ending is less dramatic than those mentioned by McClure, The Body Artist should also be incorporated into this spiritual oeuvre. While the conclusion of this novella is not as spectacular, atonement and sacrifice are palpable within those pages, but it is in this text that the obvious religious matrix seems to end. In Falling Man DeLillo seems to have neglected the ‘mysteries’ of his previous work in favour of a more empathic and introverted response to the problems facing the country in 2007, and in Point Omega this religious affiliation, though visible in the title, remains there. Although it would be easy to conclude on first sight of the book that with Point Omega DeLillo had returned to covert religious themes, and that the title of this slim volume might have a significant influence on the narrative voice inside, in reality this is not the case. There is little of religious significance beyond the title in Point Omega. While, as McClure has indicated, much of DeLillo’s work has offered pointed religious conceptions, this most recent book with the obvious religiously motivated title has, when examined, very few religious associations. What DeLillo does do however, is use a religious thesis from the Cold War era to support a political argument in the post-9/11 period. The seventy-three year old political protagonist, Richard Elster, (the same age as the author)

…[s]tudied the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin…He said human thought was alive, it circulates. And the sphere of collective human thought … is approaching the final term the last flare…we’re the last billionth of a second in the evolution of matter. (50-1)
DeLillo uses Elster’s voice to inform not a religious argument but one which is frankly critical of government policy. Through Elster’s assessment of Teilhard de Chardin, DeLillo offers decisive political discourse which inveighs against the political manoeuvrings of the previous decade. His usual perceptive voice, which appears subdued in *Falling Man*, comes stridently to the fore in *Point Omega*. As Alessandra De Marco points out, his “reading of Teilhard de Chardin allows him to further disavow extinction understood as death produced by the conflict in Iraq” (21). Therefore, while there is atonement in this novel, it is political expiation rather than religious penitence that emanates from within the narrative.

*Point Omega* is only slightly more than one hundred pages long and is framed by a prologue and an epilogue entitled respectively, “Anonymity” and “Anonymity 2.” This short, ambiguous introduction and conclusion revolve around the showing of *Psycho – 24 Hours* which was, in fact, presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2006. The narrator of the novel, nascent movie director Jim Finley, describes the production as “[n]ot a movie but a conceptual art piece” (47). In this modern artistic production Hitchcock’s film *Psycho* (1960) is projected so slowly that is takes twenty-four hours to view in its entirety, rather than the original one hundred and nine minutes. This unsurprisingly offers a very different and intense perception of the classic film. As a consequence of the excruciatingly protracted delivery the film becomes strictly nuanced and all the minutiae, which are understandably bypassed by most viewers at the normal projection speed, seem to gain unforeseen meaning. “The nature of the film permitted total concentration and also depended on it,” “Anonymity,” asserts, however, “[t]he less there was to see, the harder he looked, the more he saw” (5). This slow-motion film can be juxtaposed with the main body of the novel in which the central character’s “life
happened…when he sat staring at a blank wall” (17). The concept also reaches back to DeLillo’s 2001 pre-9/11 novel The Body Artist, in which the plot moves so slowly that it forces a high level of concentration to allow for a thorough grasp of what is actually happening in the text. “It takes close attention to see what is happening in front of you,” Point Omega explains, “It takes work, pious effort, to see what you are looking at…things so easy to miss in the shallow habit of seeing” (13).

The purpose of Point Omega appears to be to allow Don DeLillo’s voice to be heard on the subject of the first ten years of twenty-first-century U.S. foreign policy. The contention within the novel seems to advise the reader to look deeper, and to make a sincere effort to actually recognise and engage with what has happened, and is happening, in the world. Or, as the hypothesis of this thesis advocates, listen closely to what is being said in the text. Through the novel DeLillo voices an opinion on the righteousness of the U.S. “response to certain forms of violence inflicted at the same time that violence suffered by the US [was] either loudly mourned (the iconography of the dead from 9/11) or considered inassimilable” (Butler Frames of War 24). These views of Judith Butler are observable in Point Omega through the central protagonist Richard Elster, a fictional political scholar and analyst who, the plot indicates, was engaged by the Pentagon to supply credibility and justification for the invasion of Iraq. For “more than two years [he lived] with the tight minds that made the war…the metaphysicians in the intelligence agencies, the fanatics in the Pentagon” (18-19). The author further informs his audience on Elster’s background in an interview with Steve Inskeep in 2010. In that discussion DeLillo maintained that Elster “was part of a series of closed meetings in conference rooms. And what he intended to contribute was a kind of overarching view – not of specific troop movements, but to give a deeper idea of
how to wage this particular kind of war” (Inskeep 2010). The dialogue in *Point Omega* engages unambiguously with the previous decade’s “War on Terror” and at times becomes impassioned and pointed. The fictitious film that Finley is hoping to make is intended to record the septuagenarian political advisor’s opinions on government policy: “the blat and stammer of Iraq” (*PO* 21). Finley intends that Elster “would in fact be the only participant” in the production (21). He wants “to use the academic as a talking head in a documentary about the war” DeLillo claims in the Inskeep interview (Inskeep 2010). Only “[h]is face, his words…” would be used to record the epoch (*PO* 21). As Inskeep declares in his introduction to the interview with Don DeLillo: “Nothing much happens in *Point Omega*: the premise of the novel is conversation, our attempts to communicate with the intention of moving another person” (Inskeep 2010).

In *Point Omega* DeLillo creates a textual dialogue between the reader and himself which goes some way towards re-establishing his previous political propensity after the uneven political discussion in *Falling Man*. The main plot of *Point Omega*, without the political discourse, would be ineffectual unless it was developed in much greater detail. However, the critical voice within this text, following directly on from his restrained attempt at addressing 9/11, implies that the writer did not just form these strong pejorative opinions in the three years between 2007, *Falling Man*, and 2010, *Point Omega*. It is not surprising that an astute political observer, such as DeLillo had proven himself to be in his previous work, would pick up on the controversial ethical debates that were to the fore at that time. It is really in the novel *Point Omega* rather than in the more obvious *Falling Man* that the opinions first aired in “In the Ruins of the Future” reach some degree of “response-ability” as Marco Abel terms it (1236). This acceptance of “response-
ability” in DeLillo’s 2001 article is echoed in Elster’s voice in 2010 declaring the “power of the false rather than the regime of truth” (1236). *Point Omega* rather than *Falling Man* is DeLillo’s response to “Terror” which had occupied his mind and he had been “developing over the years” (“IRF” 33). It is in this novel that DeLillo points out that “what an event means is always already shot through with how it appears” (Abel 1236). However, it is only when the momentum is slowed down, as it is in *Psycho – 24 Hours*, that, what has happened can truly be looked at “and [you] know you are looking, [you] feel time passing, [and are] alive to what is happening…” (*PO* 6).

DeLillo adroitly weaves discussion of actual people and events into the fictional conversations of his characters in *Point Omega*. As a result he is able to capture the tenor of the era and remind the reader of events which occurred in the recent past. Before his true invective begins in earnest he draws attention to one of the many unpopular figures of the Bush administration, Paul Wolfowitz. Wolfowitz, who was the Deputy Secretary of Defence under Donald Rumsfeld, is regarded by Elster as having been removed from that position and given an appointment as president of the World Bank in 2005 as an implied relegation of duties. Elster has withdrawn to the Californian desert as a “retreat… [from] conflict” after his time in “the war room… [as] a privileged outsider” (23). However, he does not view himself as having been removed from his position there. He has left because “it’s healthier to reject certain cautions than fall in line” (23). However, he views Wolfowitz’s removal from the Department of Defence to the World Bank as an “exile” (23). By mentioning this, DeLillo reminds readers of events that led up to that departure:

Joseph Stiglitz, the former chief economist of the World Bank and one of the world's most influential economic thinkers… launched a savage attack on US
plans to appoint Paul Wolfowitz as the World Bank's new president. In an exclusive interview, the American Nobel laureate said: ‘The World Bank will once again become a hate figure. This could bring street protests and violence across the developing world.’ He described President Bush's determination to appoint his deputy defence secretary to the important post as ‘either an act of provocation or an act so insensitive as to look like provocation.’ Wolfowitz is widely regarded as the creator of the policy that led to the US war in Iraq.

(Preston)

But DeLillo does not leave unpopular policies of the Bush administration simply to be supported from what can be easily remembered from the period, rather, he begins a subliminal conversation by imagining what a “defence intellectual, without the usual credentials” like Elster, might have to “tell us about these last years, [informing us about] what [he] knows that no one knows” about Bush’s policies, but it is clear that the author of such words must surmise (27-8).

Joseph Dewey has argued in his study of DeLillo’s work that, far from using words to comfort readers, “DeLillo has suspected language, distrusted it as a mediating strategy, an often inadequate vehicle for containing the evident chaos of experience within the too tidy logic of its too clean designs” (73). This assessment is easily supported within the hypothesis presented in *Point Omega*, for it is in the language and the narrative voice rather than the plot that the real heart of the novel emerges. At first the argument created might be interpreted as a form of justification.

War creates a closed world and not only for those in combat but for the plotters, the strategists. Except their war is acronyms, projections, contingencies, methodologies…They become paralyzed by the systems at
their disposal. Their war is abstract. They think they are sending an army into a place on the map. (28)

However, it becomes clear that the hypothetical “intellectual” at the theoretical political table during the Bush administration, eventually came “to understand that he was occupying an empty seat [and] no map existed to match the reality [they] were trying to create” (28). Perhaps in vindication for his personal credulity, and through him America’s own perceived gullibility in face of the now recognisable deceit, Elster muses on state-sponsored “created realities.” He reasons that, “Lying is necessary. The State has to lie. There is no lie in war or preparation for war that can’t be defended” (28). However, there is a line that should not be crossed, where integrity and reality should remain sacrosanct. “We went beyond this” Elster admits, “We tried to create new realities overnight, careful sets of words that resemble advertising slogans in memorability and repeatability. These were words that would yield pictures eventually and then become three-dimensional” (28-9). Suspected language in Elster’s estimation was being used as a “mediating strategy, and a vehicle for containing the evident chaos” of a corrupt war within the “too tidy logic” of the rhetoric’s “too clean designs” (Dewey 73).

The argument in Point Omega does, however, examine realities at a well-remembered and realistic level. DeLillo’s political criticism converges on the practices performed during Bush’s War on Terror under the umbrella term “extraordinary rendition.” In his capacity as an academic, Elster wrote an essay entitled “Renditions” which “stir[red] criticism from the left” (32). The first sentence in this fictitious essay was: “A government is a criminal enterprise” which is, of course, a very strong statement to make in light of the emotive topic DeLillo is addressing (33). But it is in the final sentence of this fictional paper that the real soul
of DeLillo’s novel dwells. The prescient voice of his earlier work becomes retrospective when it speaks loudly of some of the most shrouded events of the previous decade with its “Ghost Prisoners” as Leila N. Sadat characterises them.

Elster’s mythical essay is said to ask the:

reader to consider a walled enclosure in an unnamed country and a method of questioning, using what he called enhanced interrogation techniques, that was meant to induce a surrender (one of the meanings of rendition – a giving up or giving back) in the person being interrogated. (33)

The duped intellectual, Elster, looks back at events that were coming to light between 2004 and 2006. They resonate loudly of a period which feels so recent that DeLillo’s voice loses the proleptic tenor of his previous work. “In future years,” professes Elster, men and women:

will be listening to secret tapes of the administration’s crimes while others study electronic records on computer screens and still others look at salvaged videotapes of caged men being subjected to severe physical pain and finally others, still others, behind closed doors, ask pointed questions of flesh and blood individuals. (33)

Point Omega allows the reader to process information that was current and readily available before the publication of Falling Man but was not addressed in that narrative. These words evoke images, the shocking quality of which caused a massive anti-American backlash in 2004 with the U.S.’s greatest European friend, Great Britain, condemning their ally in the strongest possible terms:

LONDON, March 25 -- The United States has committed ‘grave violations of human rights’ against prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, Afghanistan and Iraq, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the British Parliament said in a report on
Friday. ‘We recommend that the government make it clear to the United States administration, both in public and private, that such treatment of detainees is unacceptable,’ the committee wrote in its influential annual report on human rights. (‘British Report Accuses U.S. of Human Rights Violations’)

These reported incidents and images brought on a full scale investigation by the “International Red Cross,” who did not finally gain access to documents pertaining to individual detainees until 2006 (Summers and Swan 236). These cases of alleged torture appear not to have been recognised as “important” enough to report to Congress or the President by the then – Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld (Shanker and Schmittt 1). He acknowledged the projected serious implications only after the pictures went viral, warning Americans that “It’s going to get still more terrible” (1).

As early as 2002 President Bush had declined to apply the terms of the Geneva Convention to certain prisoners of the War on Terror. “A diplomatic and legal furore ensued, particularly after the transfer of prisoners from Afghanistan to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where bound prisoners were initially held in out-door cages and were denied any right to challenge the status of their detention or treatment” (Sadat 311). Rather than focus on the issues which were at the centre of the 2005 controversy, Elster’s/DeLillo’s hypothetical essay engages with the language elements that Joseph Dewey claims the author distrusted and suspected (73). Elster’s essay “concentrated on the word itself [and] the renderers, [in a] revenge play that reflects the mass will and interprets the shadowy need of an entire nation, ours” (PO 33-4). Thus the rhetoric of the historical period too, as the words in Point Omega suggest, “conceal[s] (...) the shameful subject it embraced” (35).
By using Point Omega to analyse twenty-first century American political policies, and viewing them critically through the lens of the theories of Teilhard de Chardin, DeLillo questions the logic which underpinned the new imperialist-style tactics the United States engaged in under President George W. Bush. “Iraq” Elster argues “is a whisper…These nuclear flirtations we’ve been having with this or that government. Little whispers…Time to close it all down. This is what drives us now” (PO 50). Therefore, as Alessandra De Marco argues: “the DeLillian point omega may be read as a metaphor for a terminal stage within the evolution of a particular historical…cycle under the aegis of US hegemony” (25).

“The Fall: DeLillo’s Post-9/11 opus”

Beyond Grief and Nothing, Joseph Dewey’s in depth study of DeLillo’s oeuvre from Americana (1971) to Cosmopolis (2003), is divided into three linear phases entitled “The Street,” “The Word,” and “The Soul.” These “three strategies for restoring the self to authenticity that DeLillo has tested …are strikingly traditional but appear provocative largely because they have been asserted in an era” claims Dewey (8). Dewey effectively argues that DeLillo’s “embracing schema could (and did) account for nearly every traumatic news event, in which there was no surprise, only the disquieting certainty of cultivated suspicion, the enticing spell of manageable intricacy, the perfect rendering into plot of all the free-floating post-Hiroshima anxieties” (7). In 2001 DeLillo entered a new juncture in his work which resists Dewey’s form of categorisation beyond the term perhaps – The Fall: post-9/11 anxieties. The development of this portion of DeLillo’s work, however, is not linear in its approach and it does not account for many of the vastly traumatic news events to be introduced during the first decade of the twenty-first century. In most of his
previous novels, many of which have been highlighted in this chapter, DeLillo exposes an American culture beginning “its disturbing addiction to spectacle violence” in chronologically straight detail (8). However, in this new historical period, though it is highly provocative in terms of political development and spectacle violence, DeLillo’s voice and his argument in “In the Ruins of the Future,” *Cosmopolis, Falling Man* and *Point Omega* appear to deviate from both a clear sequential course and an unadulterated line of reasoning.

Although those DeLillo narratives that directly engage with issues surrounding the 9/11 attacks or their aftermath sometimes appear circumspect, the evidence of *Cosmopolis* makes it clear that he had not entirely lost his power of prophesy. Although this novel falls into the era of the writer’s 9/11 series of texts, its outline is outside that remit. DeLillo had nearly finished drafting *Cosmopolis* on September 11th 2001, thus the novel does not directly engage with the attacks. Nor does 9/11 seem to affect the text in any way, but in terms of the author’s prophetic ability, *Cosmopolis* is of significance to the events of that day. While *Cosmopolis* was drafted before 9/11, in between revision and publication, DeLillo concentrated his ability on addressing the attacks with “In the Ruins of the Future.” This article makes it abundantly clear what was uppermost in his mind at the time of revising his then current novel *Cosmopolis*. As Conte points out, “reviews of *Cosmopolis* suggest that the novelist’s imagination may have been taken over by events” (Duvall 179). Delillo pointed to this in his interview with Binelli saying, “on September 11th I just stopped dead for some time, and decided to work on the essay instead” (Binelli).

Although the plot of *Cosmopolis* predates the 9/11 events, and does not in any way directly address them, it presents as a pertinent observation of the type of American hubris so criticised by Chomsky and other political observers. As has been
highlighted earlier, many of these intellectuals have argued that this was one of the elements that ultimately provoked the attacks. The story-line follows financial magnate Eric Parker’s fictional limousine ride across New York City in the frivolous search of a haircut and underpins the perception many third world countries hold of the United States. *Cosmopolis’s* protagonist’s obvious narcissism makes it clear exactly how self-involved many Americans can appear to be to others. DeLillo makes Parker’s arrogance entirely evident by offering his reader an insight into the character’s view of himself. Rather than recognising his personal fallibility the “noise in [Parker’s] head informs him that “[w]hen he died he would not end. The world would end” (*C* 6).

Even though U.S. brashness and conceit appears to be the cornerstone of *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo’s prescient style is uppermost in this text. In addition he used this narrative strength to forewarn Americans of the financial collapse that, along with 9/11, was at the nucleus of the first decade of the twenty-first century in the United States. Eric Parker’s “brutal avariciousness” and eventual downfall are symbolic of the inevitable collapse of the financial markets during the first decade of the twenty-first century (*Conte* 181). Although the unavoidable economic downturn did not become immediately apparent until 2007, the possibility of such a recession, the suddenness of its appearance and the utter financial destruction that it could cause, are made patently obvious during the course of DeLillo’s novel. While the brief snapshot in *Cosmopolis*, which depicts recent American cupidity, is captured during one twenty-four hour period in April 2000, the picture resonates retrospectively and suggests that DeLillo, perhaps more than any other writer, understood the evolution of American culture of the latter twentieth and early twenty-first century.
If, as I have argued, DeLillo had remained prescient in his initial post-9/11 novel, *Cosmopolis* his noticeable perceptive abilities became less apparent in the middle of the decade. The most politically profound and devastatingly provocative recorded spectacle in American history, the fall of the World Trade Centre, was approached by “the dominant, even defining novelist of fin de millennium America” primarily as a study of trauma and emotional shock (Dewey 1). DeLillo’s specified 9/11 novel, *Falling Man*, rather than the analytical political discussion observed in many of his previous texts became an introspective study of the result of trauma. While there was clearly both a demand and a justification for examining the events of 9/11 in this way, there is adequate evidence that there was a sufficiency of writers capable of probing the traumatised individual at this less provocative level. There were few however, of the calibre and the background to address the political issues involved in a true fictional interpretation of this new and challenging epoch in American history. In 2003 Dewey argued that since the early 1970s DeLillo “has tracked the American experience… [and listened] with a perfect pitch ear” (152). However, when it came to speaking out unequivocally during the Bush administration, the “era’s defining novelist” seemed slightly off-key (153). In this eagerly awaited narrative, in which he intended to “go directly into the middle of the event,” DeLillo, uncharacteristically, takes a circuitous route (Binelli). This brings this analysis of DeLillo’s work to a close, and ushers in an “other” perspective from another American literary icon, John Updike.
As the working conduit of twentieth-century American life, John Updike would certainly have been deemed a suitable commentator when he found himself in a position to write one of the preliminary first-hand accounts of 9/11. From his earliest days in the public arena Updike had proved himself a writer of great ability, with an awareness of the American male psyche which was considered accurate, and had resonated realistically with readers for decades. From his first “major success,” *Rabbit Run* in 1960, Updike’s work had been avidly followed by U.S. readers (Begley114). Many Americans loved his creations, while others reacted vehemently against them. By 1983, his “reputation as a writer had reached a pinnacle, after scooping up all three major literary awards for *Rabbit is Rich*” (Begley 1). By the turn of the twenty-first century his success was more than well established, with titles such as *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) familiar to readers across the globe. Now, in the new millennium, Updike’s experience did not leave him voiceless. His first contribution to the 9/11 genre, identifying him as a primary source observer of the events as they occurred, was published in *The New Yorker* September 24th 2001. “Suddenly summoned to witness something great and horrendous, we keep fighting not to reduce it to our own smallness” he wrote that month in “The Talk of the Town.” Rather than being reductive, for any writer a personal experience such as this offers a monumental opportunity to “get into history,” as Richard Gray would later advocate in his 2009 article “Open Doors: Closed Minds” (147). For an author as experienced as Updike the literary potential afforded by the tragedy was limitless,

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23 His opus was so popular that Updike had been allowed to store his original manuscripts at the Harvard library. After the author’s death the University “bought his archive from his estate for three million dollars” (Begley xiii).
and in a beautifully worded article, Updike’s initial response understandably sounds like a man still in shock:

[I]t fell straight down like an elevator, with a tinkling shiver and a groan of concussion distinct across the mile of air. We knew we had just witnessed thousands of deaths; we clung to each other as if we ourselves were falling.

Amid the glittering impassivity of the many buildings across the East River, an empty spot has appeared, as if by electronic command, beneath the sky that, but for the sulfurous cloud streaming south toward the ocean, was pure blue, rendered uncannily pristine by the absence of jet trails…on television [the] imploding tower was played and replayed, much rehearsed moments from a nightmare ballet. (“Tuesday and After”)

But as Updike emerged from the nightmare, he tried to rationalise what he had witnessed and help his readers process the experience. His short piece however, does not call for punishment or reprisal as did much of the political discourse of the period. Rather Updike presents an awe-filled plea for readers to remember that freedom, a “panacea” which is visible through American diversity, is “mankind’s elixir” (ibid).

Updike reasoned that curtailing this freedom would pander to those who seek to restrict the nation’s liberty, and he advocated against any such restraints. Abstractions and speculations were, at this period of his first reflection, the domain of unidentified “determined men” from the “other side.” Americans, he advised toward the end of his piece, must put aside theories and generalisations, safeguard themselves, and “go on living” (ibid). E. Ann Kaplan would later, inadvertently, restructure Updike’s elegant words in a more academic style. With hindsight that could clearly only become available retrospectively, she viewed America’s pre-9/11 “open society” as having been instrumental in allowing the terrorists to humiliate and take “advantage of the
United States” (Kaplan 15). But she also felt it opened the door to “theories” that
looked past the natural trauma of the occasion by scholars like Žižek, who theorised
that the nation was “descending into the abyss of ‘Real’” (16). While recognising the
“democratic state of emergency” the West had been placed in on September 11 2001,
coupled with their need to move on and consign the events to history (154), for Žižek,
the “true ethical test” for the United States would be in avoiding a “ruthless
dedication to annihilating those who made them victims” (68).

Updike would attempt to reassess his initial response by picking up the pieces
of the New Yorker article and committing his personal story to the realm of fiction in
the short story “Varieties of Religious Experience.” This work, presented to readers
of The Atlantic Monthly in November of 2002, places him among authors who
attempted to mediate current events through their writing. Although it is a
contemporary tale, this story clearly has retrospective overtones, for, with its
evocative title, Updike reached back into the past for support by referencing the most
influential American psychologist and philosopher of the nineteenth-twentieth
century, William James. James, brother of American novelist Henry James, studied
and taught at Updike’s own alma mater, Harvard. In 1902, markedly one hundred
years prior to the publication of Updike’s short story, William James issued his
“Gifford Lectures” under the title Varieties of Religious Experience. It is from the
hypothesis James explored in this text that Updike develops the premise of his short
story. Using the newly forming psychological discourse, James argued that personal
encounters with religion fortified religious conviction far more significantly than the
categorising of any specific creed or doctrine.24 Written a century before the 9/11

24 Approaching religious experience as a subject of scientific study, William James used the methods
he gained as a physiologist, psychologist and philosopher. Rather than basing the work on
anthropological data he used personal documents of individuals who had recorded their own
experiences. “The work is neither a theological treatise nor a history of religion, but rather a
attack, William James’s treatise pragmatically articulates the emotional mind-set of
the perpetrators who shaped the 2001 atrocities by offering an exposition of the
religious perspective which suggests that politics and religion frequently go hand-in-
hand:

…crusades have been preached and massacres instigated for no other reason
than to remove a fancied slight upon the God. Theologies representing the
gods as mindful of their glory, and churches with imperialistic policies, have
conspired to fan this temper to a glow, so that intolerance and persecution
have come to be vices associated by some of us inseparably with the saintly
mind…Politics come in in all such cases; but piety finds the partnership not
quite unnatural. So, when “freethinkers” tell us that religion and fanaticism
are twins, we cannot make an unqualified denial of the charge. (James 273-
74)

Updike took James’ concept as his template and provided a modern analogy to
James’ thesis. As a result Updike’s version of “Varieties of Religious Experience”
offers four different perceptions of the events of 9/11 from diverse and sometimes
opposing social and religious perspectives. These varieties of religious experiences,
which are life-changing for all the characters in Updike’s narrative, may be useful in
helping to rationalise post-9/11 events as contemporary American society absorbed
and responded to the attacks.

In brief, the plot-line of “Varieties of Religious Experience” begins and ends
with the character Dan, whose experiences, for those who read Updike’s earlier
article in The New Yorker, bear a striking resemblance to those of the author. He then

descriptive survey” of general tendencies shared among his subjects (Deak 8). Moreover, the study is
not limited to a systematic explanation of the causes of individual religious experience, but focuses
equally on the result of such experiences and the impact upon the person’s life.
introduces three other characters whose lives were cut short by the events of 9/11:
Firstly, a young husband and father who is on the phone to his wife as the attacks begin, describing what occurred that day inside the upper floors of the World Trade Centre; secondly, an elderly woman who was on Flight Ninety-Three as those passengers made the decision to fight back; and thirdly, the most provocative character, a potential hijacker who waits in a Florida bar for his personal jihad to begin. But the point with which Updike concludes his 2002 version of “Varieties of Religious Experience” possibly provides the truest glimpse of the author’s position. Dan’s five-year-old granddaughter Vicky, like many Americans of the period, wants things to return to normal as life in the United States was before the attacks. She wants to rebuild the towers “exactly the way they were” (12). Dan observes, however, that this would not be “very sensible… [or] very American.” He advocates that “we move on… as a nation…try to learn from our mistakes” (12). Then he observes that when you look at some things from another perspective, from a different religious experience, then perhaps: “[t]he Arabs were right – [the towers] were a boast” (12). This short story suggests that Updike initially viewed the events and their consequences with an open mind and, like Chomsky, he recognised that these attacks had their roots in “anger, fear, and desperation.” He too, hoped to stem any “violent U.S. reaction” by emphasising America’s disengagement from policy issues that have negatively impacted on other parts of the world (9/11 58-9). With his 2002 title Updike mirrors his fiction to philosophical concepts espoused by his predecessor, and draws a conclusion which resembles the earlier polemic. But opinions of this type, which seemingly ran contrary to the then current conservative status quo, frequently proved unpopular in the aftermath of 9/11. As Judie Newman has pointed out, following 9/11 “[f]undamentalist religion, a mixture of apocalyptic
myth and utopian hope, emerged as a major force in world politics,” and as a result “utopian thinking came to shape foreign policy in America, but as a utopianism of the right” (104).

In the midst of this political restructuring Updike had wanted to disentangle what exactly, in their experience of America, could have caused the September Terrorists to kill themselves along with so many innocent people. As William James’s earlier historic title suggests, Updike had brought religion into the equation and used it as a platform for his voice of mollification rather than retribution. In her analysis of narrative empathy, Suzanne Keen “posit[s] that ‘fictional worlds provide safe zones for readers’ feeling empathy without experiencing a resultant demand on real-world actions” (Empathy and the Novel 4). If she is correct, by bringing James’ philosophy into his narrative, Updike created a calm environment for readers to empathetically consider and evaluate the 9/11 events and look at the subject objectively. He enabled a basic level of understanding or insight into how varying religious philosophies could have factored into the issues which preceded and surrounded the attacks. And indeed, his American characters do appear familiar; they contain the same DNA as Updike’s earlier creations. However, the alterity of his radical Muslim suicide pilot is far less familiar. This is evident in the epigrammatic portrayal of “a stocky young Muslim, called, like millions of his co-religionists around the world, Mohamed” (“VRE”4). While Mohamed’s skewed thinking and actions clearly deserve condemnation, profiling of this type coming from a white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant named John, is nevertheless paradoxical as the name Mohamed is an obvious religious referent, which in this instance, appears derisive. But Updike counters this one-sided, ostensibly prejudicial, view by also identifying domestic proselytization within the text when Dan observes, “Heartland religiosity,
through its fundamentalism and puritanism had often made him wince; [had been] something [he] was comfortable with; now it seemed barbaric” (“VRE” 4). The bias and strict orthodoxy recognisable in both groups is evident from Dan’s observation, indicating that the shared partisan philosophies of both religions are mutually damaging. Dan’s discomfiture is supported and justified by Newman’s clarifying statement that “Christianity and Islam are both monotheistic, militant faiths with a mission to convert humankind, and the millennial and prophetic content of their political rhetoric has common roots” (104). This statement echoes both Updike’s brief narrative, and James’ earlier treatise, effectively arguing that there is no difficulty with any specific religion. Rather, it is the strict unquestioning adherence to any theological doctrine which should be feared.

Updike had engaged with these concerns long before the 9/11 events. Terrorists and airplanes, while not viewed with the prescience evident in DeLillo’s texts, had become tropes that recur occasionally in Updike’s oeuvre between 1989 and 2001. The effect that the Lockerbie bombings had on the public perception of in-flight terrorism is introduced through the mind-set of his all-American character, Harry Angstrom, in Rabbit at Rest (1989) as he watches the news-event concerning the “Pan Am plane” with his grand-daughter (78). Racial profiling and the issue of “othering,” that Updike would return to in both “Varieties of Religious Experience” and Terrorist, initially appeared, pre-9/11, in “Icarus,” a poem he released in Americana and Other Poems (May 2001). The image he conjures in his “cities and aeroplanes” section of the text creates Keen’s “safe zone” for Updike’s counterparts.

25 The Lockerbie bombings were an air-terrorism incident that occurred in December of 1988 aboard Pan-Am Flight 103 from Germany to the United States. It was alleged, and later confirmed, to have been the work of Libyan extremists. Two hundred and seventy people, both on board the plane and on the ground lost their lives in the episode.
(Empathy and the Novel 4). The poem forces recognition of even subliminal prejudice:

O.K., you are sitting in an airplane and
the person in the seat next to you is a sweaty, swarthy
gentleman of Middle Eastern origin
whose carry-on luggage consists of a bulky black brief-case he stashes,
in compliance with airline regulations,
underneath the seat ahead.
He keeps looking at his watch and closing his eyes in
prayer,
resting his profusely dank forehead against the seatback
ahead of him,
just above the black briefcase,
which if you listen through the droning of the engines
seems to be ticking, ticking
softly, softer than your heartbeat in your ears. (A 14)

In the post-9/11 era Updike’s words remind us that pre-9/11 Americans were not oblivious to the very real threat, nor were they unmindful of the fact that their fear could turn to bias.

Updike’s “Varieties of Religious Experience” was not without detractors, although, interestingly, much of the criticism concerns the version of the text which appeared when the 2002 short story was reproduced in 2009’s anthology, My
Father’s Tears and Other Stories (Updike 82). The most damning critique of
“Varieties” came from fellow writer and early co-entrant into the field of post-9/11 literature, Martin Amis.26 When Amis reviewed the story for the Guardian newspaper in 2009, he found the work to display a “loss of any sense of propriety.” Amis decreed that “Varieties of Religious Experience” and the ideology it espoused were “fatally premature and fatally unearned. Death…is treated here without decorum and without taste” (“The Master’s Voice”). Amis’s point seems both malicious and ambiguous, especially since his own provocative book of post-9/11 essays, The Second Plane, would appear later that year. Taking its title from a short story Amis initially presented one week after the attacks, this collective text seems to “invite against himself the same censure,” and was viewed by Terry Eagleton as unpalatable. Tim Adams, in his review of the work, granted that while the text was “essential reading” for Eagleton “there is an undeniable hubris at the heart of it.” Unlike Updike’s observant and conciliatory tone in Varieties “[t]here is an unhesitating ‘us’ and ‘them’ in Amis’s characterisation…” (Guardian 13/01/08). The title short story, like Varieties, offers a fictional interpretation of the hours leading up to the events, as such, a critique similar to the one Amis afforded to Updike would need to be applied, as, if anything, Amis’ publication is more indecorous and distasteful. Tellingly, Amis censured Updike for addressing 9/11 both inappropriately and precipitately, but did not touch on the sentiments ultimately advocated in the older writer’s original narrative. Amis did not register the nuanced change that had rendered the narrative’s philosophy less provocative in the 2009 edition that he was critiquing. The slight but significant alteration in Updike’s ultimate argument, however, indicates that for some reason between 2002 and 2009

26 Amis was actively writing on the subject beginning a week after the attacks in The Guardian. He continued to include the topic in his essays and wrote two short stories, “In the Palace of the End” and “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta.” He culminated this work with The Second Plane: September 11: 2001-2007.
Updike chose to amend his formerly firm stance by muting his alternative voices. In fact, the 2002 text from The Atlantic Monthly and the version of “Varieties of Religious Experience” published in My Father’s Tears and Other Stories (2009) warrant careful scrutiny, for the change is easily missed. But, for whatever reason, Updike did change the tone. Speculation about the alteration is sparse, and few reviewers seem to have noticed the minor modification that profoundly alters the sentiment of the piece. As noted above, The Atlantic Monthly edition of the story depicts the character Dan observing to his daughter and grandchild that “[t]he Arabs were right – [the towers] were a boast” (12). In his final volume of short-stories My Father’s Tears (2009), Updike revises Dan’s position perceptibly. The story-line and dialogue in this second edition remain fundamentally the same, but the sentiment changes along with the sentence structure at the salient point. In the later version: “Dan tactfully answer[s]…The Arabs weren’t wrong to feel them as a boast” (112).

In his original 2002 response, Updike suggests that the arrogance of the United States contributed to the attacks, and that the nation shared in responsibility through its egotism and condescension. But by slightly shifting the emphasis to what Arabs felt, as opposed to endorsing their view Updike dilutes the power of Dan’s statement, indicating instead that the attackers were perhaps confused and mistaken by a globalised economy, rather than enflamed by American arrogance and their seeming global disconnect. The result is a watered-down ending to a story which had originally provided a sizeable degree of “projective fusing” and conciliatory astuteness (Keen“A Theory of Narrative Empathy” 213).

While “Varieties of Religious Experience” allows a glimpse of the author’s secular political ideology, publically pointing out perceivable American fault and arrogance at a time when, Noam Chomsky claims, the prior emotive actions of the
U.S. Government had been “completely removed from history,” was a brave and conciliatory stance to take (9/11 10). Mohan Ramanan has signalled Updike’s boldness when he pointed out that at the time, “[t]alking about terrorists [was] risky and Updike has had to overcome both fear and revulsion in tackling the subject” (130). But the writer seemed to conquer these problems early on by initially taking a strongly worded stand in the short story. Stating, only one year after the event that an American symbol, where so many innocent U.S. citizens had been killed, was a boast, and publishing this accusation of American insouciance and hubris in the mainstream media was a formidable declaration from a writer as popular and influential as Updike. Updike’s position as an American literary icon made his words significant to a great number of his class-contemporaries. His status directly determined his ability to influence his core audience. In fact Varieties makes a strong appeal for rethinking contemporary government policies of ill-considered retribution. With the fact in mind that the month Updike’s “Varieties” appeared in print President Bush signed the “Homeland Security Act of 2002,” the sentiments contained in Updike’s story seem ill-advised. With that Act, which Bush determined contained “essential reform” and had been “carefully considered by Congress and enacted with strong bipartisan majorities” (Bush 209) “the White House and the pentagon drove an agenda” forward that was not in keeping with the perspective Updike displayed in “Varieties” (Holloway 41). By juxtaposing Updike’s story with contemporaneous popular right-wing rhetoric the political power of the writer’s stance becomes even more forceful.

In order to fully examine how Updike’s voice altered during the first decade of the twenty-first century it becomes necessary to take a close look at his 2006 novel Terrorist. If there is a decided change in the political tone projected in the later
narrative, the reason for the subtle adjustment in the second version of “Varieties” may become more apparent. By 2006, the year of publication for Updike’s main 9/11 novel, the advocates of the “War on Terrorism” were in full flow and had been mounting a serious military operation beginning with the invasion of Afghanistan on the seventh of October 2001. The voice of the Bush administration was strident in its condemnation, not only of those deemed responsible for the attacks, but also of those American citizens who, like Updike in his initial short story, espoused understanding or appeasement. Meanwhile, the strike on the World Trade Centre had not only been viewed as a tragic assault committed by religious extremists, it was also regarded as a military confrontation. As such it was deemed to be, as Edward Said claimed, a “defeat for the United States… or a victory of dark over light” (Covering Islam 7). In the weeks following the attacks Said, like Chomsky, was characteristically vocal. He claimed:

…that the terrible events of 11 September inaugurate a rather new stage in world history…a new reality therefore seems to proceed from that day…the least likely argument to be listened to in the United States in the public domain is one that suggests that there are historical reasons why America, as a major world actor, has drawn such animosity to itself by virtue of what it has done…this is considered simply to be an attempt to justify the…actions…in any case, such talk is and will not be tolerated in mainstream discourse for the time being, especially not on the mainstream media or in what the government says. There is a feeling being manufactured by the media and the government that a collective “we” exists and that “we” all act and feel together…There is plenty of unrecorded or unregistered

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27 War Against Terrorism is a term first coined during the Reagan administration in 1984. It became a twenty-first century catch-phrase that, when uttered, could not be contradicted.
scepticism, even outspoken dissent, but it seems hidden by overt patriotism.

(Said, “Suicidal Ignorance”)

It is this vociferous, patriotic, political tone that muted less militant voices like Updike’s in “Varieties of Religious Experience.” Correspondingly, political analyst Richard Jackson points out, “officials [had] constructed a particular reading or interpretation which serve[ed] a purposeful political agenda while [they] simultaneously closed off other possible readings” (57). Although America’s radical voice proliferated throughout the various media it was not entirely supported by many whose palliating tones were being successfully muffled. Noam Chomsky’s September 2001 statement that “[e]ven the New York Times conceded […] that attitudes in New York are quite unlike those they [had] been conveying” confirmed this argument (9/11 29). But, Chomsky goes on to clarify that “it is entirely typical for the major media…to line up in support of power at a time of crisis and try to mobilize the population for the same cause” (9/11 29). In support of this contention, and during that same period, The Wall Street Journal “called on Bush to take advantage of the ‘unique political climate’ to ‘assist his leadership not just on security and foreign policy but across the board’” (qtd. in Parenti 2). Chomsky would later point out that in any political debate of the period the arguments that “WE are good, and THEY are evil” remained a “useful principle [that] trump[ed] any argument” (9/11 152).

In order to enter the popular debate without fear of retaliation, post-9/11 fiction writers tended to prove their patriotic fervour by either writing in accord with the contemporaneous political dialogue and choosing to use their art as a means to alleviate either actual or virtual trauma, or by remaining silent, too shocked to address the subject. Taking an overt political stand in opposition to government
policy has, in the past, meant professional suicide for many American writers and artists as the 1950s black-list demonstrates. While prominent post-9/11 media forums, for example, *Newsweek*, saw alternatives to the war on terror philosophy as, repeatedly breaching the “line between explaining terrorism and rationalising it” it remained impolitic to address the topic other than through a post-traumatic lens (Alter). Writers like Susan Sontag and Barbara Kingsolver were castigated early on, and the patriotic fervour that prevailed in the media continued to insidiously mute artists as the twenty-first century advanced. This censure is most prominently highlighted by referencing the treatment meted out to the country music group, the Dixie Chicks. This group’s lead singer, Natalie Maines, “ignited a firestorm when she declared from a London stage: ‘Just so you know, we’re ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas’” (Towner 294). Although Maines was under the illusion that “one of the privileges of being an American is that you are free to voice your own point of view” (Towner 293), she and the other members of the group where “whipped… with words” in order to silence their free voice (Faludi 32). Two days after Maines’ statement the *Associated Press* reported that radio stations had begun dropping the Dixie Chicks from their playlists and engaging in such publicity stunts as providing trash cans outside the radio stations for people to throw their Dixie Chick CDs away…Within two weeks they had dropped from the charts entirely” (Rossman 62). While this professional intimidation must have seemed unimaginable, the personal fears were more frightening; “[t]hey had returned home to death threats and warnings of violence against their families” (Holloway 33). Although the Dixie Chicks have since regained some of their mass appeal “they were unsuccessful in reconnecting with their traditional … fan base which still largely ignore[s] their music…” (Towner 294). Author Arundhati Roy was also placed in the
post-9/11 firing line “for pointing out pertinent historical facts about America’s role…and for suggesting that ‘it will be a pity if, instead of using this as an opportunity to try and understand…Americans use it as an opportunity to usurp the whole world’s sorrow to mourn and avenge only their own’” (Faludi 31). Updike’s initial mediating stand, which seems to reflect the spirit of Roy’s statement, was becoming more problematical as public perception and conservative political rhetoric merged.

Four days before Updike’s first 9/11 article for “Talk of the Town” was published, President George W. Bush faced the nation and the world to offer an impromptu “State of the Union” address in which the effect of various oratorical and prose formulations were becoming apparent. Integral to his delivery is the rhetorical device of verbal repetition, linked by urgency and allied with anguish. In a measured conversational voice the President asked the questions many Americans were searching to answer themselves. The tone of his message contained the “What the?” which characterised Jonathan Safran Foer’s 9/11 novel (1). Bush employed pathos, referring directly to the personal tragedies suffered by families who had lost loved ones, and going on to mention heroic individuals by name. However, unlike Foer, President Bush also provides the answers. As the tenor of his words becomes more evangelical he directs listeners to the key: a military solution that, political advisor with ties to OPEC, Falah Aljibury, felt was being broached before the 9/11 attacks occurred (Palast). Bush’s speech was anaphoric and is, as such, reminiscent of one of the most memorable orations of the twentieth century. Initially he used the personal pronoun “we” in a way that may unconsciously remind listeners of Churchill’s “We shall fight on the beaches” speech of 1940 which had moved a nation and its allies to
victory. Bush reminds his listeners, who at the time needed very little reminding, that life as they understood it had changed:

In the normal course of events, presidents come to this chamber to report on the state of the Union. Tonight no such report is needed. It has already been delivered to the American people

We have seen it in the courage of the passengers…

We have seen the state of our union in the endurance of rescuers…

We have seen the unfurling of flags

We have seen the decency of …people… (Bush 11)

The President and the populace are both privy to these positive images but interestingly, and unlike Churchill, he does not include his people in his call to the nation to fight back. While he allowed them the right to suffer, admire and grieve, he clearly made this fight his personal Armageddon. Although “We” would work equally as well in the subsequent lines, and perhaps serve to unite the nation behind his position, he reserved the right to defend the United States against these enemies to his personal dominion.

Bush states:

*I will not forget the wound to our country and those who inflected it.*

*I will not yield,*

*I will not rest,*

*I will not relent in waging this struggle for freedom and security for the American people.* (Bush 17)

This juxtaposition of “We” and “I” in the discourse suggests that this fight is a personal battle rather than a united stand against the 9/11 perpetrators. In this speech
President Bush becomes the saviour. He will defend his citizens rather than stand shoulder to shoulder with them in “this struggle for freedom and security” (17). The traumatic nature of the events seemed momentarily to stun a frequently critical press into supporting a presidential address which would have been easy to critique. *New York Times* correspondent David Rosenbaum’s headline stated that “Congress Joins in support of the President,” and columnist Frank Bruni’s predicted “For the President, a mission and a Role in History.” Expectations such as these filled the papers that September (Rosenbaum). However, three days after the speech Susan Sontag assessed the discourse and her evaluation is in line with that of Chomsky and Said. Sontag indicated that not everyone was impressed, and maintained in the same issue of *The New Yorker* that was home to Updike’s first 9/11 article, that:

> The disconnect between last Tuesday’s monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators is startling, depressing…We have a robotic President who assures us that America stands tall…Let’s by all means grieve together. But let’s not be stupid together. A few shreds of historical awareness may help us to understand what has just happened… (9)

Updike’s 2002 character Dan from “Varieties of Religious Experience” also recalls the period with a degree of scepticism: “the President clumsily grasped the rhetoric of war, got used to it, and then got good at it” (4). Whether it appears clumsy or polished, Bush’s oratory is intentionally deceptive. It rationalised the fallacy that it was imperative to act immediately, before all the facts regarding the attacks could be properly amassed, and also legitimised his arguably preconceived objective to invade Afghanistan and then oil rich Iraq. But what it does not do is encourage democratic discussion or debate. Noam Chomsky also would argue in 2002, that this is how:
a well-functioning propaganda system works. People can believe that when we use force… we really observe the principle that illegal occupation and human rights abuses should be met by force. They don’t see what it would mean if those principles were applied to U.S. behaviour. That’s a success of propaganda of quite a spectacular type. (Media Control 53)

The similarity between what Chomsky is espousing and Updike is portraying is clearly obvious, and the insidious rhetoric was becoming more and more difficult to combat.

In 2002 Updike continued to place himself “at the centre of American literary and cultural affairs,” and as Catherine Morley attests, he remained “fascinated by the stuff of the temporality and socially evolving United States” (“How Do We Write About This?” 189). Morley affirms that, at the time, Updike “occupied a space in current United States literature which no living writer [had] come near” (190). Nevertheless, encouraging Americans to look inward for answers was not the prevailing political trend in the first decade of the new millennium. But it does seem to be the original stance John Updike wished to take when he first addressed 9/11. His biographer, Adam Begley, maintains that the writer wanted “to cast a jaundiced eye on American materialism [and] to give Muslim rage a voice” (468). By allowing his Muslim voice this opportunity to address the reader, Updike conforms to Suzanne Keen’s hypothesis and uses “empathic projection [in an] attempt to persuade readers to feel [Muslim ire] on [this] politically charged subject” (“The Theory of Narrative Empathy” 223). However, as has been indicated here, one way or another, Updike muffled his more broad-minded opinion in “Varieties of Religious Experience” by altering his words and thus his original sentiments. Regrettably, there is no evidence to specify when exactly this alteration occurred, or even if the writer was aware of
the change. John Updike died on January 27th of 2009 and *My Father’s Tears* was published posthumously in June of that year, so it remains unclear whether Updike’s word change was his own idea or if the line was altered to suit a more conservative publisher. But the amendment allows us to see that changes occurred in the period between the two publications, 2002-2009, and this is the timeframe during which Begley indicates he was working on his primary novel of the period, *Terrorist* (467).

*Terrorist* (2006)

*Terrorist* was among the first novels by an American writer to be considered as part of the 9/11 genre. In ways it follows the traditional format of a bildungsroman; a young man, of mixed ethnicity, Irish-Egyptian-American, becomes disillusioned with the Western globalised world and American consumer society. As a consequence he becomes fanatical about Muslim religious ideology, and is thus able to be seduced by an array of conflicting conspirators who manipulate him towards their own ends. The main character, eighteen-year-old Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, is about to graduate from high school when he is introduced. Since the age of three Ahmad has been raised solely by an Irish-American mother, his Egyptian father having “decamped” (Updike *T* 35). At eleven Ahmad converts to Islam and is instructed in the Qur’an by a local imam. This teacher becomes one of a mix of manipulative mentors. Another of the boy’s would-be life-coaches is his jaded Jewish guidance counsellor, Jack Levy. The obvious paralleling of the Arab-Israeli conflict however seems to become difficult for Updike to sustain long-term. Ahmad’s final advisor, his Lebanese-American boss, Charlie, completes the triangle, and for motives that only become obvious as the novel reaches its conclusion, this guide too, tempts the fledgling radical toward terrorism.
Appearing in 2006 *Terrorist* was met with much fanfare and varying reviews. Mohan Ramanan judged that Updike had “struck a fine and difficult balance in his treatment of the theme” (129). The author explained the complexities of why he wrote the novel and his intentions for it in an interview with Lila Azam Zanganeh.²⁸ He told the interviewer that he:

thought [he] was in a position to understand, or at least imagine the other side. To see through the eyes of a devout, young, somewhat naïve Muslim. To see through his eyes, America, as it must look as an impure, not to say obscene and disgusting morass of overeating and oversexness and, well, everything, everything (6).

He claims he had planned to

write a sympathetic novel about a terrorist, a home-grown terrorist who is seduced, it’s true, by others into contemplating favourably an act of mass murder…I’m not writing about an *evil* terrorist or really writing against terrorism. I’m trying to see it from a terrorist’s point of view. (6, my emphasis)

Updike’s statement implies that he feels the necessity to justify his reason for examining an alternative point of view. However, his rationalisation is somewhat problematic as “evil” would become an adjective that would help to qualify a terrorist character within the framework of most western novels concerned with the subject of 9/11. By entitling the novel *Terrorist*, the character’s “evil” intentions are not entirely unexpected (Zanganeh 6). As with Doris Lessing’s 1985 attempt to comprehend this radical mind-set with the more defined title *The Good Terrorist*, in Updike’s *Terrorist*, the naiveté, confusion or even the protagonist’s implied victim

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²⁸ This phone interview between Zanganeh in New York and Updike in Massachusetts occurred in 2006 but was not published until 2010.
status, cannot negate the malevolence of his aggressive intentions. Terry Eagleton has pointed out that “the suicide bomber transcends his destiny by freely submitting to it, thus becoming victor and victim together. Suicide is the last word in passive aggression” and this is consistent with the actions of this fictional character. The deluded “victor and victim” contradiction, evoked by the passive aggressiveness of Ahmad, is clearly identified in John Strawson’s examination of Updike’s text (Holy Terror 90). Strawson classifies the dichotomy of victor and victim or good and evil in Terrorist as a “banal form of constructing the good or the bad Muslim” (4). It would appear in Anna Hartnell’s estimation, too, that in Updike’s novel “the initial search for the ‘good Muslim’ inevitably gives way to the discovery of the ‘bad’” (492). However, Updike himself seems untroubled by the distribution of these attributes in the character. Clearly, within the text the American part of Ahmad is intended to be viewed as ‘good’ while the Muslim qualities are mainly implied to be ‘bad.’ Updike himself pointed this out. In an interview for public radio with Steve Inskeep the author alleged: “Apart from Islam, Ahmad is a nice boy” (Inskeep 2012). This would indicate that if Ahmad had not been indoctrinated away from a solid American identity, by what Updike seems to imply is a subversive and controlling religion, he would have remained in all aspects a patriotic American citizen.

Patriotism however, can prove to be problematical depending on perspective. Some scholars, Edward Said among them, have argued that many of those now viewed as patriots were terrorists during their campaign towards freedom from persecution. The degree of goodness any patriotic name can evoke is directly related to the level of nationalistic fervour which that name suggests. This argument is echoed in Terrorist by Ahmad’s mentor, Charlie, when he imagines George
Washington’s contribution in the American Revolution from a different angle for his acolyte Ahmad:

He was the Ho Chi Minh of his day. We were Hamas. We were Al-Qaida. He showed – and this is where Vietnam and Iraq come in – that in a war between an imperialist occupier and the people who actually live there, the people will eventually prevail. (Updike, T 181)

In his assessment of modern terrorism, John Gray also reflects that “al Qaeda’s closest precursors are the revolutionary anarchists of late nineteenth century Europe” (2). A thin political line distinguishes the patriot from the terrorist and in this sense the definition becomes ambiguous. In his analysis of terrorism, Charles Townshend judges that:

[b]oth political and academic efforts to get to grips with terrorism have repeatedly been hung up on the issue of definition, of distinguishing terrorism from criminal violence or military action…‘terrorist’ is a description that has almost never been voluntarily adopted by any individual or group. (3)

It appears from these accounts that “terrorist” and “patriot” are terms which can only be defined by the subjectivity of the observer combined with their knowledge of the political issues involved. Updike’s stated discomfort with his subject matter and attempt to disassociate himself from the topic by claiming he was “not really writing against terrorism” would seem to indicate a wish to not have his novel scrutinised too closely for either its political implications or its empathetic involvement (3). 

*Terrorist* is not this harbinger of twentieth-century American culture’s best work. But having said that, it also has to be noted that during a period when many American writers were extremely tentative in what and how they wrote, Updike at least attempted to exercise strongly his freedom of speech. Updike’s novel advocates
for the right to discuss the topic outside the conservative core remit of the contemporary political discourse.

Considering his oracle status for many American readers Updike’s somewhat conciliatory stand in *Terrorist* must be considered brave. He could have ignored any enticement to write further on the topic of 9/11 and remain, as many of his fellow writers did, uncommitted in the political discussions any novel on this subject would naturally elicit. It could be argued on the evidence of the reception received by Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, and highlighted in a previous chapter, that a plot on the lines of Updike’s *Terrorist* may not have been positively received if a relative newcomer had undertaken the task. Updike’s established position may well have afforded his narratives immunity to the criticism which targeted the work of less formidable writers like Barbara Kingsolver. And although this topic is atypical of Updike, he does not move entirely away from his usual signifying themes of religion and sex. Indeed these preoccupations of his earlier work are the Western modifiers which offer the greatest offence to the “other” community of his protagonist, Ahmad, and which Updike professed he wished to propitiate. In his early post-9/11 *Talk of the Town* article Updike struggled to come to terms, not only with why the attacks happened, but in gaining some sense of how the United States had been viewed by the terrorists. He wished to focalise attention on what in the American psyche and/or in American society gave these men licence to commit such atrocities. “Determined men,” Updike initially called them, “who have transposed their lives to a martyr’s afterlife”: their determination and unsound reasoning left neither side the victor (Updike “Tuesday and After”). While obviously empathising with those who had both died and those who had been shocked from
their apathy by the events, he had searched early on for reasons, and analysed the perpetrators’ motives.

A Florida neighbour of one of the suspects, remembers him saying he didn’t like the United States: “He said it was too lax. He said ‘I can go anywhere I want to, and they can’t stop me’” It is a weird complaint, a begging perhaps to be stopped. (“Tuesday and After.”)

It is evident from this early reaction that when the dust of the Trade Centre was still settling, the all-American writer Updike was attempting to understand what offence the Americans he had so ably portrayed for the past fifty years could have committed to warrant such a response. This question seems to have predominated in post-9/11 America and can be seen reflected in much of the writing from the era. Both the question itself and the difficulty in answering it has been succinctly summed-up by Terry Eagleton when he points out that, “[t]he fact that the United States is one of the last nations on earth to understand why it is currently under attack is closely related to the fact that it is” (Holy Terror 104).

**Terrorist vs. Terrorist**

During the on-going war on terrorism Updike began his twenty-first century research into Islam and its culture. By 2006 he felt himself to be in a position to add his voice to the 9/11 literary enclave of novelists who chose to write on the subject of 9/11 during the Bush administration. In the wake of Foer’s Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close and Ian McEwan’s Saturday, and with the acknowledged help in terms of Muslim identity from postgraduate student Shadi Nasser, Updike constructed his All-American Muslim character Ahmad (Asmawy) Mulloy, or Madman (Deyab 7).

Ahmad’s nickname, Madman, is telling in its negativity, as it cannot but label the
character within both his cultural identities, indicating that neither community could broadly condone his actions. By creating his main protagonist within both an established American community, that of Irish-American, and the less historically established American ethnic group of Islam, Updike allows for a stronger connection between Ahmad and the author’s customary reader-base. This type of profiling may well allow a reader to empathise, or create a less biased reader response. Keen points out that in situations such as this, readers:

may experience narrative empathy in ways not anticipated by the author.

When those readers articulate their differences with a text’s or an author’s apparent claims, they call upon their own empathetic responses as a sort of witness to the alternative perspective. (“A Theory of Narrative Empathy” 223)

Reviewers like Banita dismiss Updike’s alternative character. They acknowledge the novel glibly, as merely a “walk-on part” in the overall 9/11 discussion (49). Others, as might be expected, question the writer’s ability, and perhaps his sense of entitlement, to create a truly empathic “other” character for readers. Updike’s Western status has been argued to have allowed the contemporary debate to be devised with “less verve and ambition” than writers whose background permits for a more thorough understanding of the culture under scrutiny (Holloway 84). As with other fictional Muslim characterisations produced by Westerners, most of which Akbar Ahmed has claimed, are informed by media images (226), Updike’s Madman comes complete with his skewed religious philosophy, and is portrayed, like many others of his creed, as prepared to “– fight for God against America” (Updike T 248).29 While being told that “he had no business imagining the interior life of a

29 For relevant Muslim characterisations, see, for example, Don DeLillo’s Falling Man, Martin Amis’ The Last Plane, Ian McEwan’s Saturday, Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist and latterly
Muslim teenager was particularly galling” for Updike, various religious mêlées were not a new construct within his work (Begley 468). There is a long association with religion and its concerns in much of his twentieth century work. In his 2009 interview with Simon Worrall, Updike claimed that he found practicing Christianity comforting and orienting. Religion was an area where he believed he was “valued,” he explained (Worrall). As Thomas Dicken makes clear in his 2004 article, “God and Pigment,” “[b]y his own reckoning Updike has a deep and long-term interest in basic theological issues,” but unlike his approach in *Terrorist*, this interest is normally founded on “Christian categories” (69). Begley has maintained that this Christian paradigm was the one the author had originally envisioned for *Terrorist*, and considering his background, this may have educated a more realistic hypothesis. But faced with the conflicting spheres of both Islam and Judaism his former perception became less acute.

Although Updike’s name may be synonymous with Protestant values and with middle-class American life this was not the first time he ventured away from the security of his literary home-ground. In his 1997 analysis, *Covering Islam*, Edward Said claimed that “[f]urther back in the public’s subliminal cultural consciousness, there was a longstanding attitude toward Islam, the Arabs, and the Orient in general” (6). He, and most post-colonial scholars, notably refer to this preconceived ideology as Orientalism, a nineteenth-century term, reinterpreted by Said in 1978, and used to indicate the customary denigrating attitude held by western societies regarding eastern culture. In *Covering Islam*, Said critiques a number of western novels that represent Muslim characters through a western consciousness. Included among those texts Said classifies as Orientalist in nature is Updike’s 1978 novel, *The Coup*. Said

Amy Waldman’s *The Submission*. Regarding Ahmed’s claim, it is therefore ironic that his *Islam Today*, published in 1999, is the text that Deyab claims informed Updike’s novel on the background to Islam.
identifies the novel as one in which the iconography of Islam was “uniformly ubiquitous” (6). He argued that Updike’s novel, along with many others, have historically spoken of and portrayed Islam in an unsympathetic and poorly informed light. *The Coup* is the novel within Updike’s opus which is most readily comparable with *Terrorist*. The earlier text also establishes a strong argument against those who view Updike’s concern with Islam, and the post-9/11 canon, as solely a “self-serving exercise in the idiopathic imagination” (Versluys 170). *The Coup* foregrounds the author’s interest in this area of study more than twenty years before the 9/11 attacks occurred. But *The Coup* and *Terrorist* also make it obvious that he is not at all on home-ground as a writer in this field of study. Neither narrative is Updike’s best work nor is this an area in which the novelist appears entirely comfortable. As with the characterisation of Ahmad, the primary “other” character in *The Coup*, Colonel Ellellou, has been viewed as a bogus representation of an African. Although some scholars, such as Jay Prosser, view *The Coup* and Updike’s attempt to write through an African consciousness as “a move more daring than that of any other American or British novelist” at that time (82), they tend to be sceptical of the depiction of the Muslim character. Prosser acknowledges that the “Arabic qualities are stereotyped” in *The Coup* (82). This typecasting played an integral part when analysing the novel’s credibility.

It has to be conceded that, in attempting to portray Islam at any time, particularly post 9/11, a writer such as Updike would be on shaky ground. Edward Said points out that even those academics whose speciality is Islam:

> have generally treated the religion and its various cultures within an invented or culturally determined ideological framework filled with passion, defensive prejudice, sometimes even revulsion; because of this framework an
understanding of Islam has been a very difficult thing to achieve. (Covering Islam 6-7)

If in the past this has been true of those familiar with the subject, it should not so be surprising that Updike’s subsequent attempt at portrayal would be an even more arduous exercise. Versluys suggests that “[r]eviewers accuse [Updike] of substituting sociological research for the depiction of lived experience,” creating instead the “portrait of a terrorist manqué” (171-72). The evidence from his biography and his various interviews illustrates that Updike was fully aware of the creative challenge that Ahmad would be to his imagination. And Updike seemed to accept as inevitable his growing inability to relate effectively with a postmodern American culture, let alone one so foreign to his nature as Islam. He explained to interviewer Simon Worrall that “[e]verything has changed so much. You find yourself inhibited in a way you didn’t use to be. I mean, how can I write about a twelve year old when I don’t know much about computer games? The turn of the cultural wheel removes you” (Worrall). These self-confessed misgivings raise the question of how Updike could attempt to write about a Muslim youth when he knew so little about Islam.

The basis for Terrorist, its author, and its central character contain elements of W.E.B. DuBois’ term, Double Consciousness, Ahmad can never feel at home or be fully understood in either western culture where he originated, or the eastern ideology that he represents, and that is because his duality is not wholly understood by his creator. Updike’s use of Ahmad to portray the Islamic faith in Terrorist is equally as flawed as his previous representation of that religion in The Coup. As in his earlier fictional attempt at an African consciousness, in Terrorist, Updike again had difficulty achieving accuracy within an Islamic-Arabic frame of mind as well. To further muddy the waters, his familiar mainstays of sex and middle-class suburbia
only serve to complicate matters rather than making the plot more decipherable or familiar. In fact, they tend to get in the way of a realistic portrayal of the “home-grown” American-Muslim character. While these motifs may help to make the author and his western readers more comfortable with the topic, the perpetrator’s perspective which Updike claimed in his interview with Zanganeh to have been trying to create, has become lost in translation.

In the conclusion to his article, “Open Doors, Closed Minds,” Richard Gray argues that following 9/11 the American public “[found] themselves caught between the conflicting interests and the voices that constitute the national debate” (147). Gray suggests that this apparent instability allowed writers to construe, and perhaps misconstrue, the various arguments. Gray goes on to contend that it also offered an unparalleled opportunity to get “‘into’ history, to participate in its processes and, in a perspectival sense at least, of getting out of it too” (147). However, he assesses Updike’s attempt to become enmeshed in the literary history of the day through *Terrorist* as devoid of “imaginative involvement” (136). Although Updike had authentically envisaged the crux of American identity in previous work, in this novel, neither the depiction of the “melting pot nation” nor the unique American citizen fused within that society seem believable. As Gray maintains, Updike’s 9/11 novel “never really fits together as a meaningful story” (136). Although Updike was a significant writer, who was socially concerned and who endeavoured to conscientiously depict the consciousness of the “other,” the image he actually portrays in *Terrorist* is essentially an oversimplified, standardised reflection, which offers a mainly one-sided ethical view. Updike claimed that his novels were “moral debates with the reader” (O’Connell xi). On the evidence of his short story “Varieties of Religious Experience” this is certainly credible. However contrary the writer’s
claims may be, *Terrorist*, his major work on the topic of 9/11, does not explicitly offer more than one moral perspective, as the only moral code analysed and condemned within the narrative is the one that is intrinsically foreign to Updike’s base readership. The only logical opinion of Islam which can be drawn from the novel is, unfortunately, essentially a negative one. Ahmad’s intransigent views, rather than substituting a rational alternate viewpoint for consideration, make it increasingly difficult to empathise with the character or the ethos of his adopted religion. Unfortunately, in this instance, “[n]arrative empathy intersects with identities in a problematic way” and it does not appear to enable Updike’s niche audience to cross that “boundar[y] of difference” (Keen “A Theory of Narrative Empathy” 223). In *Terrorist* the contemporary American political perspective develops through the voice of Hermione, a poorly developed character, whose foolish devotion to the Secretary for Homeland Security becomes increasingly difficult to accept or cogently engage with as the story progresses. While these two minor characters make the intensity of the situation that existed in the aftermath of the attacks clear, the actual political decisions which predate but inform the ideology around the attacks, are not identified or even broached. In consequence, no logical alternative perspective is proposed for consideration, exploration or analysis. The actual U.S. position presented in the text is heavily weighted on the side of the then-current political status quo: instead of inducing an empathetic reaction the novel projects a troublesome “other.” While the author offers two definitive points-of-view, the narrative realises almost no genuine alternative assessment which would allow for “changed attitudes” within Updike’s core audience (Keen “A Theory of Narrative Empathy” 208).
The Troublesome “Other”

“Devils, Ahmad thinks. These devils seek to take away my God” (3). These words introduce John Updike’s Islamic character in Terrorist. The voice Updike urges his readers to listen to is defiant, challenges western philosophies, and does not contain the familiar resonances of the disaffected American male normally associated with this writer’s work. The masculine voice is an “other” voice, a voice evocative of those caught on the voice recorder as the planes flew into the twin towers. Unlike DeLillo, who at the end of his novel seems to euphemistically fuse his character Keith Neudecker with the terrorist that flies the plane into his building, Updike’s merging of ethnicities was, the writer insisted, intended to be obvious, however stereotypically recognisable. Even Anna Hartnell, whose reading of Terrorist is generally favourable, accepts that “Islam’ does ultimately emerge as Other in Updike’s novel” (479). Yet whatever your final estimation of the text and its main protagonist may be, it does at first present an alternate position to the then-contemporary status quo. However prosaic, the plotline does suggest some muted form of justification and conciliation, and thus it dares the reader to examine a different political position. Whether the character appears true or false, by permitting the reader to examine another point of view Updike has highlighted, albeit not entirely successfully, that there may well be another way to examine 9/11 than to simply see the events from the popular perspective of the status quo. In Terrorist, Updike was perhaps taking on too much as he attempted to be heard within the 9/11 genre, not as the familiar “Rabbit,” but as alien “Madman.” Due to the large amount of characters from varied ethnicities that animate this text, the novel can prove a challenge. Although, in his interview with Worrall, Updike acknowledged a certain reticence around representing unfamiliar cultures in a changing world, he often defies
credulity in the portrayal of his ethnic characters in *Terrorist*. His attempt to represent, not only Islamic traditions from varying perspectives, both traditional and home-grown, but to also include Black Baptist, Jewish-American, Irish-lapsed-Catholic, along with his own customary background of Protestant-Lutheran, makes the argument appear unwieldy, even in the hands of such an accomplished author. Because there is so little depth to these different perspectives, their inclusion merely tends to confuse rather than define the perpetrator perspective he claimed he was trying to create. These multi-cultural perceptions are a smoke-screen which signals that Updike was viewing events from all possible vantage points barely camouflaging however, that the text primarily promotes a single negative western ideology. As it is really the Muslim and Jewish characters that dominate in the novel, they are, in fact, the characters who warrant serious analysis. Unlike DeLillo in *Falling Man*, Updike does not conceal his main political message within the minor characterisations, he displays it up-front. Unfortunately, as neither of these socio-religious traditions, Muslim nor Jewish, was natural to the writer, in consequence both representations seem in many ways askew, when viewed through the lens of Christianity. The obstructive and artificial alien voice used in the text, makes it difficult for this novel, its protagonists, or its author, to achieve any strong level of approval from either the East or the West.

Ahmad, the character Updike professed to be attempting to rationalise, is introduced succinctly as his worldview is clearly defined in the opening lines of the novel:

…girls sway and sneer and expose their soft bodies…*What else is there to see?* Boys strut and saunter…indicating with edgy killer gestures…that this world is all there is…teachers, weak Christians and non-observant Jews make
Ahmad’s subjective analysis of modern, profane, consumer values is easily grasped and identified from this beginning of the narrative. Although, as has been pointed out previously, Chomsky judges that economic globalisation of this sort had little to do with what happened on September 11th (9/11 34), and claims instead, that the objective was to draw attention to “the contrasting U.S. policies toward Iraq and Israel’s military operation…though [he goes on to argue] Westerners prefer a different story” (64). That “different story” is the one implied by Updike’s novel, that capitalist ideology and Western freedom and privilege are offensive to cultural-religious precepts like those of Ahmad and his co-religionists. This, it seems, is easier to reconcile, while absolving the west “of responsibility for the actions that actually do lie behind the choice of the World Trade Center” as a target (9/11 64). However, while the political motive that lay behind the attacks is debatable many individuals from varying ethnicities and creeds may well agree with Ahmad, and take issue with the irreligious consumerism which seems to emanate worldwide from the United States. This initial introduction can be easily identified with and a favourable comparison could be drawn by many Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Consequently Ahmad’s moral values, and by inference Muslim moral values in general, would appear from this initial assessment similar to those of many mainstream religious doctrines within the United States. In Chomsky’s view the U.S. is “one of the most extreme religious fundamentalist cultures in the world, not the state, but the popular culture” (9/11 52). His argument is one that can be traced back in that society to the original seventeenth-century settlers. It can be especially linked to those
fundamentalist religions Updike distanced his 2002 character Dan from in “Varieties of Religious Experience,” although, Updike does not make this obvious analogy in *Terrorist*. While the introduction to Ahmad is reassuring on some basic levels, and supportive of a particular shared fundamentalist methodology, it is difficult to remain empathic and sustain objectivity as the plot progresses. Anna Hartnell has argued that “once jihad pervades the social realm its significations become increasingly ominous to western spectators,” and it is no different within the fictional social realm of this novel (488).

As *Terrorist* develops it becomes progressively harder to envision the “portrait” painted of Ahmad as a “sympathetic” one, or as a genuine representation of an American-born Muslim (Begley 467). This is particularly problematic if this narrative was, as Updike claimed, an actual attempt to hear the voice of the “other” and to help Americans empathise with it. It is necessary to remember that Ahmad is not represented as a Muslim in exile, he is actually an American, and by definition, that status should imply no specific religion. By creating him as a U.S. Citizen, Updike “invites” his core readers to “feel” a connection with the character (Keen “A Theory of Narrative Empathy” 213). But if Updike intended to foster empathy, Ahmad needs to “disarm readers of some of the protective layers of cautious reasoning that may inhibit empathy in the real world” (213). While it is arguable that, as he originally conceived the title terrorist character as a “Christian,” Updike was attempting to examine religious fundamentalism in whatever guise, however, the formulaic depiction he ultimately did create lends itself to western bias rather than tolerance (Begley 467). Geoffrey Nash highlights this concern in his text, *Writing Muslim Identity*, when he argues that Anglo-American “authors (and hence their protagonists)” display an ignorance of cultures that fall outside their Western
perspective (94). This narrow lens inhibits their ability “to do justice to the magnitude of [this] topic” and it is unfortunate that this is the understanding most in evidence in Updike’s *Terrorist.*” (94).

Updike’s Ahmad is a city boy who has lived his entire life in New Jersey. From infancy until he was eleven, he was seemingly the product of his mother’s beliefs and the US inner-city educational system, but both of these life-models have apparently failed him. Keen’s analysis indicates that readers “tend to experience empathy most readily and accurately for those who seem like” them, so, in order to make Ahmad a more relatable character, some aspects to his personality should cohere with those of Updike’s largely middle-class core-readership (“A Theory of Narrative Empathy” 214). Considering his self-proclaimed intention to arbitrate public opinion, it is disappointing that Updike created Ahmad so one-dimensionally, displaying no evident diversity, simply his Islamic roots. Rather than being conflicted by his opposing cultural inheritance and the American melting-pot society in which he lives, the character, recognises no multiple allegiances. His alienation from his western origin is complete when the novel opens. Nash argues further that “incomprehension” with regard to cultural differences has caused some writers to create “terrorists who are fetishized in terms of rituals of fanaticism and violence, explicable to the rational mind only as disorder/disease and a mutant incivility” (94). Therefore when Ahmad is offered his great “opportunity,” to sacrifice not only himself, but to murder thousands of supposed infidels in the name of Islam, he is portrayed as not at all conflicted (*T* 231). His ardent fundamentalism allows him to be easily manipulated by predatory activists from both sides of the divide, whose clear wish is in no way “blend[ed] with human reason” (7).
Because Updike has developed only a limited version of a Muslim identity in the character of Ahmad, his creation suffers in terms of credibility. As Ramanan indicates, this suggests “that the trauma of 9/11 affected [even] a major writer like Updike and compelled him to write a book which leaves one with unanswered ethical questions” surrounding both religion and ethnicity (130). The rudimentary understanding of a Muslim identity evident in the novel discredits Updike’s stated intention of arbitrating between the East and the West. Ahmad’s personal supports are partisan and complete, for the “only guidance [he needs] is the guidance of Allah” (T 18). Yet Ahmad does seem to sense the necessity for a more accessible advisor than God when he acknowledges his wish to “talk [with his father] as two Muslim men would talk” (36). Although Ahmad is seen to have no reliable memory of this Egyptian father, who is merely a “warm, dark shadow in his thoughts,” Updike seems to indicate that simply because of his ethnicity, Ahmad’s father would hold the radical overview of Islam that was then current in the American consciousness (36). On one level it would be easy to argue that through the loss of his father, Ahmad suffered a personal trauma and that by adopting the religion of his father, the abandoned son is struggling to reconcile with an even more powerful role model. His declared intention to change his name from Mulloy to Ashmawy supports this contention, and can be understood as an attempt to further remove him from the allegedly tainted American society which the boy overtly views as failing him (37). However, there is no observable proof in the narrative that his father would have approved of this judgement, and rather than the stated objective of introducing readers to a rational interpretation of Islam, Updike instead reinforced stereotypes through this form of characterisation. As represented, Ahmad’s chosen religion is one whose only attributes are censorious, and whose basic tenets seem entirely
foreign to mainstream American thought. Its adherents in the text view the American way of life as full of “corrupting influences – bad philosophy and bad literature” (T 38). We learn that the American-born and educated boy has been indoctrinated with little difficulty. While in a quantitative study of those who have converted to Islam since the attacks might prove this to be true, if Updike was actually trying to educate a “sympathetic portrait” this character does not contain what is required (Begley 467). Abandoned by his shadowy father, he has been programmed by his fanatical Imam to believe that “western culture is Godless…the American way is the way of infidels. [and it]... is headed for a terrible doom” (T 38-39). Initially the imam, Shaikh Rashid, is Ahmad’s only identifiable male exemplar, but as the student becomes more astute, he recognises that “the world has weakened” his master (7). Rather than uniting himself with God through a personal jihad, Rashid has become a catalyst for extremism, grooming the American-born Madman for terrorism.

Though Ahmad imagines himself to be a strong and devoted Muslim, he seems easily seduced by any religious iconography. Here Updike’s personal religious affiliations come into play, and like his fictional predecessor, Rabbit, Ahmad seems to be just another lost young man who is begging for any strong guidance from whatever source.30 Updike’s biographer, Adam Begley, acknowledges that when planning Terrorist the author first envisioned his terrorist character as “a young Christian, a seminarian” (468). This is telling in terms of the character he ultimately did create. The confusion apparent within the characterisation of Ahmad links him subliminally with his aborted Christian antecedent, who also was “convinced” that he was being “rob[bed] of his faith” (467). The reading also guardedly warns that if the traditional American Churches do not support the youth in the secular society the

30 In Rabbit Run Harry Angstrom seeks personal guidance from various religious and secular male characters to help him deal with a changing twentieth century America.
United States has become, coming generations are in jeopardy of being corrupted by dangerous subversive organisations, both within and outside the traditional American religious purview. Updike’s perspective is covertly provocative if read this way. He constructed his youthful protagonist as credulous, even gullible, as his mother inadvertently avows: “[e]ven as a baby you were so trusting and easy. Everything I suggested, you thought was a good idea. It worried me, even, you seemed so easily led, I was afraid you’d be influenced by the wrong people as you grew older” (T 241). In a gesture to the common origins of Islam and Christianity, Updike permits Ahmad to visit the church of the “kuffārs” in order to hear his school friend, Joryleen, sing (53). Once there he “finds himself excited along with the rest of the congregation” and moved to empathise with the Baptist flock (59). Although “their links with Western colonialism… make them unbelievers,” in Ahmad’s experience they are somewhat familiar (Ahmed 226). “Abraham, Noah: these names are not totally strange…These people around him are too in their fashion People of the Book” (Updike T 62). While this could be construed as an authorial gesture toward the commonality of Islam and Christianity, in this paradoxical plot Ahmad “feel[s] himself a trespasser” within the Christian Church (63). He feels an intrinsic connection to these people, and especially the little black girl “who has snuggled into his side without his noticing” (66). The early positive link with this child is important to an understanding of the character Updike was attempting to create. This scene, the joining through prayer of the supposedly ingenuous Muslim youth with the Baptist congregation, foreshadows his decision to refrain from activating the device which would murder different children as they jointly travel through the Lincoln Tunnel.

Attending this traditional and decidedly American church service can be linked to his

31 The phrase “people of the book” and the ideology which is incorporated in this scene, come directly from Islam Today, the text Deyab identified as the one Updike used to inform his research into Islam.
“sacrifice” of not committing the final act of devastation, and with his implied return to the world of Christian values (T 308).

However tangible the religious comparisons made in the text might appear, as Hartnell pointed out,

_Terrorist_ in fact veers between a number of those [empathetic] positions and thus reveals the ironic scenario in which realism itself becomes a risky aesthetic…Updike’s decision to narrate _Terrorist_ via the appropriation of realist conceits exposes his work to much more direct scrutiny. (483)

Adopting realist thought in the conception of the characters and the situation they are confronted with creates subjectivity within the text. There are no actual circumstances where Ahmad’s intentions could appear to be rationally condoned. The very fact that the boy has agreed to take that journey makes it difficult for Updike’s voice to remain one of mere mediation. It would be extremely inflammatory to try to defend Ahmad’s ambition to annihilate thousands of innocent commuters in the Lincoln tunnel, and as a consequence, by its conclusion Updike’s realist novel has regressed into a narrative which is no longer a believable portrayal of people or of events as they might factually occur. In order to maintain the alleged voice of arbitration, Updike’s would-be terrorist character, complete with “four tons of explosives” (T 289), appears by the conclusion of the plot to have “committed no crime” (308). Instead he is “a victim – a fall guy” (309), in an America that is seen as an “ideal” Christian society willing to “turn the other cheek” (Ahmed 230). Rather than an intervention, _Terrorist_ gradually becomes a tool of the reactionary propaganda propounded by the media and the government rhetoric of the period.
A Questionable Jewish Persona

While Updike took an alternate stand to his personal credo in the characterisation of Ahmad he became even more provocative in the portrayal of Jack Levy. As an American author whose Lutheran origins helped to define him, it is interesting that Updike chose to represent the alternative to this American-Muslim “other” from a Jewish-American perspective. In doing so Updike’s novel could be viewed as not merely content with issues of bias, anomie, and extremism within the United States, but also reflexively attempting to arbitrate in the Arab-Israeli conflict in the micro. Before Updike created Jack for Terrorist, his American character considered to be furthest “from himself” was Henry from the Bech Trilogy (Pinsker 92). The reason that Updike may have chosen to focus again on a Jewish character at this juncture is a matter of conjecture, but nonetheless thought-provoking as Jack transcends Updike’s previous Jewish creations. In this his final manifestation, the Jewish character is both a religious and political antithesis to the title protagonist, Madman. The concept brings the work of Phillip Roth to mind. Although there is no mention of the attacks in Roth’s post-9/11 novel, The Plot Against America (2004), the mere title, like Updike’s Terrorist, suggests parallels between the text and the period in which it was presented. The fictional alternative government in Roth’s text mirrors some of the more problematic policies of the Bush administration. These were so apparent from the narrative that The Daily Telegraph’s culture columnist, Sarah Sands, credits Bush with having “inspired some outstanding artistic works such as Philip Roth’s Plot Against America” (Sands).

But perhaps the more pertinent text to come from a Jewish-American writer is Hugh Nissenson’s Days of Awe (2008). This novel serves as a more realistic representation of 9/11 from that religious-political ethos, although it is often lightly
regarded or ignored within compendiums of the genre. Georgina Banita, who includes it in her assessment, felt that Nissenson’s narrative “offers a religious reading of the terrorist attacks from the perspective of aging, judgmental characters hypocritically advocating restraint in judgment” (7). However, in this text there is a level of authenticity of voice accompanying the plotline that affords it a degree of verisimilitude. Conversely, in Terrorist, Updike struggled with credibility when he took it upon himself to mediate between the Arab “other” and the Israeli “self” with the result that makes the author appear as the “quintessential Outsider” (Pinsker 92) of the piece. The voice Updike chose in this instance speaks with the gratuitous accent of contemporary politics rather than the tone of sincere mediation.

Updike’s first sojourn into the realm of the Jewish-American experience was the 1970 novel, Bech: A Book. In this narrative he developed the irascible, opinionated, Jewish writer, Henry Bech, who bore an uncanny and ironic resemblance to Updike himself. This text began a series of three novels which imagines the Jewish-American experience from an oddly familiar, yet unorthodox perspective. As Sanford Pinsker has pointed out, “With Bech, Updike tries to imagine (perhaps impersonate is a better term) a character as far from himself…as possible” (92). The disguise he cloaks himself in, however, is fairly transparent. The fictional Bech conspires in his own uncloaking when, in conversation with his creator, he speculates that, “there is something about the fictional Bech ‘something Waspish, theological, scared, and insulatingly irical that derives, my wild surmise is, from you’” (93). If, between 1970 and 1998, Updike was, as Pinsker has declared, “cross-dressing in Jewish-American drag” in his Bech novels, then it should be noted that he came-out in full regalia with Jack Levy (95). While Pinsker imagines that pre-9/11, neither Bech nor Updike wished to “get tangled up in the brouhaha of politics”
and would not intentionally get involved in “the mystery of Jerusalem [because] the material is too volatile, too ‘crazy’ for even the wackiest postmodernist experimentation,” it would appear that the attacks on the World Trade Centre changed all that (99). They seemed to have resuscitated the ghost of “poor Henry Bech… [and Updike is again] prancing around the pages in Jewish-American drag” in *Terrorist* (104).

For an author whose home-ground plainly rested within the American-Protestant ethos, to seek to depict the Arab-Israeli conflict in miniature indicates an attempt to enter into the contemporaneous political debate. Through the imagined conversations between his, good and bad, characters in *Terrorist*, he attempts to mediate the religious-political conflict in a rational way. When the Jewish-American guidance councillor, Jack, reasons with his Arab-American student on a spiritual level, the reader too becomes involved in the debate. The “lapsed Jew” concedes “…religion…reconcile[s] people to their problems” (*T* 294-95), while Ahmad counters conciliatorily:

> It is good for us to seek agreement. Before Israel, Muslims and Jews were brothers – they belonged to the margins of the Christian world, the comic others in their funny clothes, entertainment for the Christians in their wealth, in their paper-white skins. Even with the oil, they despised us, cheating the Saudi princes of their people’s birthright. (295)

For Updike’s reader this conversation between opposing faiths stresses that the conflict in the Middle East is not one of religious philosophies, but instead one of political and financial aggrandisement. It champions the idea that those that have suffered for either cause are rarely those who benefit from the proceeds of the globalised world and Western expansion. By forcing these opposing cultures together
in the van as it travels to its final explosive terminus, Updike implies that both the Jews and the Muslims are victims of the failure of the American Dream. Both the disillusioned Jew and the disaffected Muslim recognise that “Once you run out of steam, America doesn’t give you much” (304). However, the dream that is America remains tantalizingly close in the narrative: “All around them…the great city crawls with people…all reduced by the towering structures around them…but…intent in the milky morning sun upon some plan or scheme or hope…their reason for living another day” (310). Although both characters seem to recognise that true democracy has not been achieved in the America they inhabit, the narrative implies that the ideological principles the United States espouses remain the best any political ideology has to offer. The story suggests these principles are challenged by the diversity that has formed American society, while it recognises that the United States consists of “Contending energies –…what the Constitution allows for. That’s what we get” (182). This philosophy is persuasively articulated by the covert CIA agent, Charlie. Dialogue like this suggests that Updike is weighing both sides and trying to take a coherent stand for both points of view. Had Updike persisted in this train of political thought Terrorist may have intervened more significantly in 9/11 discourse. Instead of following his professed plotline of analysing an extremist attack “from a terrorist’s point of view,” Updike however, reverted to his accustomed leitmotif of sex and the male ego (Zanganeh). As Francis Blesington points out, the world Updike creates in Terrorist “is that of [his] other novels seen through the eyes of Islamic anger and judgment” (123). Updike had allowed these minor facades to interfere with or deflect from a more complex political examination of the decade.

However significant his own primary source witnessing of the fall of the Twin Towers may have been for the author, his usual signifiers seem to outweigh his
political convictions in \textit{Terrorist}. Here he has used his well-known clichés as a smokescreen to conceal and mute political principles. While Updike may have been comfortable introducing sex to any narrative, in \textit{Terrorist} the focus on sexuality deflects from the political critique. Although there is a logical argument for the emergent relationship between the young Muslim, Ahmad, and the black Baptist teenager, Joryleen, there is little purpose behind the contrived liaison between Jack Levy and Teresa Mulloy. In fact, this involvement serves more to make the climax of the novel implausible than to cultivate an understanding between cultural opposites.

Early in the novel Updike tells us that Ahmad believes that a woman’s “virginity and purity are central to her value” and that women should “turn their eyes away from temptation and…preserve their chastity” (70-71). Jack Levy is all too aware of Ahmad’s views. He knows that his “faith – is important to [him, and that] God – Allah – is very real to him” (42). He also is only too well aware that Ahmad believes that what he is about to do in the Lincoln tunnel “would be a glorious victory for Islam” (292). Therefore the inclusion of the capricious sex confession averts attention from the serious issues Updike insists were central to his plot. It serves only to make the character more “unconvincing, even as they both ride towards destruction” (Blesington 123). Although on a personal level Jack is depressed at the time and possibly suicidal, he is still able to “feign insouciance” (\textit{T} 301) as they “maneuver the transition from 80 East to 95 South” and face the entrance to the tunnel (292). But he is not entirely disinterested in his own fate or unaware of the need to pacify his radical companion in order to save others. Jack “cower[s] beneath images in his imagination” (301) and senses “that he has not assumed the right tone” with his volatile companion (308). However alarmed his character may be, Updike cannot resist the temptation to shock or provoke the reader. He set a precedent for
this type of writing in his provocative novel *Couples* (1968) where “sex is the emergent religion…the only thing left” (Olster 5). At this juncture in *Terrorist* though, the emergent religion is not sex, and to introduce the subject cavalierly, with no obvious need during a politically and emotionally charged discussion, strains the plot’s credibility and the writer’s stated conciliatory objective. Any use the text might be in a serious literary discussion about the political aspects of the post-9/11 era becomes acutely compromised by the irrationality of the exchange. In any case, it is this unnecessary conversation at the climax of the narrative that stifles the political voices, making it easy to challenge the novel’s credibility.

**Enter the Woman**

In a plot where strong female characters seem necessary, the opportunity to use the assumed issues around Islamic misogyny had to be tantalising for an author whose depiction of women has been problematic for feminists for decades. Although Updike’s opinions are usually expressed through the consciousness of the middle-class American male, this new voice, articulated in the tones of a Muslim man, invited Updike to submerge his plot in a cacophony of misogyny. As Clausen contends, “Updike’s misogyny is hardly news” (52). However, in *Terrorist*, female characters’ voices are almost entirely subdued. They have become props in an unrealistic drama which misuses its women and gratuitously misreads the Islamic position of women. As Karine Ancellin maintains, “because the terrorists were men, 9/11 was generally seen as a masculine event; nevertheless, it has refurbished the stigma of Muslim women as abused” (12). Many writers, Martin Amis among them, became enthusiasts of this type of *fait accompli* analysis. Amis’s estimation of women’s position in Islam offers no room for argument, query or logic, with their
second-class role simply stated as a known fact. In 2002 his unsupported assessment avowed that, “[t]he champions of militant Islam are, of course, misogynists, women-haters” (*The Second Plane* 19). Updike’s attempt to represent a Muslim psyche upholds and perpetuates this diegesis. Described earlier in his career by prominent literary feminist Nina Baym as “a male author notoriously unsympathetic to women” Updike’s stereotypical depiction of Islam as misogynistic makes it easy for this plot to follow his familiar hypothesis that “women are no more than their bodies” (Baym 165). Although in her analysis Baym is discussing Updike’s previous work, her remarks are equally valid when attributed to this novel. Updike’s *Terrorist* “neither leaves women alone nor allows them to participate,” Judith Fetterley says of the American canon’s masculine consciousness (xii). Through the sentience of his Muslim characters, Updike can easily justify venting his previously thinly-concealed denigration of women which has been frequently identified in feminist analysis. Updike’s standard bias towards women is here deflected from the Christian tradition and rebounds instead on the Muslim man. The same style of “obsessive, joyless, pornography” attributed to his earlier narratives serves only to make *Terrorist* appear not only tiresome and uninformed, but at times, even laughable (Baym 165).

Although there are two women in the narrative who Ahmad could or perhaps should have some level of affection for, the black teenager, Joryleen, and his American-Irish mother, Teresa Mulloy, in neither case does he display any discernible love or even respect for them. Updike further distances this protagonist from many of his readers by proclaiming that Ahmad believes “Women are animals easily led,” a Western stereotypical and often perpetuated belief attributed to Muslim men and directly refuted by Updike’s source, Akbar Ahmed(*T* 10). For Ahmed, women in Muslim society are, “very much respected and they are treated as a special sacred type of
people” (Ahmed 159). But Updike’s Ahmad views his mother as decadent, while the teenage Joryleen he believes to be “heading straight for hell” (T 73). Although his parents “were married well before [he] was born” Ahmad sees and speaks of his mother as, “trashy and immoral” (35). He equates her behaviour with the “little whores” in his school, who will be “mothers…someday soon” (17). In Ahmad’s world women, girls, and mothers are inferior, only worthy of respect if they “cover their ornaments [and] draw their veils over their bosoms” (71). They must adhere to the rules laid down by God and “revealed by the Prophet” (70). “God’s Prophet” but, like Updike, undoubtedly a man (240).

Although contempt for one’s mother is not a position particularly associated with any specific religion, Ahmad’s disregard for Theresa is evident. She has been his sole support since his father left, yet he never speaks of “the embarrassing mother he tries to hide” with any level of respect (94). Although she made sacrifices for her son, relinquishing much of her personal-life, and “multi-task[ing], so that Ahmad can have his privacy in his room,” she meets with no appreciation (81). The tenets of Muslim ideology that call on believers to honour their wives and mothers are not identified within the novel by either the character or his creator (Nash 50). Qazi Hussein Ahmed, the leader of the Jamatt-i-Islami, stresses that, “in [Muslim] society, women are very much respected and they are treated as a special sacred type of people” (Ahmed 159). The devout Ahmad, however, displays no knowledge of this edict and offers his women little respect. He believes that he has “never been essential to [his mother] though [he does] admit [she] stuck with her assignment once [he] was unfortunately born” (Updike T 293). Even if Ahmad was intended to appear to be suffering from typical Western teenage angst, and is thus for the moment alienated from his mother, there is no sense of their shared history in the narrative.
The intuitive understanding of the American familial experience, which Updike has evoked in earlier texts, is oddly absent from this twenty-first century family.\(^\text{32}\) The black and white estrangement within the Ashmawy-Mulloy relationship is plainly evident. Updike oversimplifies the male-female, mother-son relationship and what follows is the style of stereotyped casting described by Said as “the kind no one who has anything seriously to do with Islam would recognise except as near-nonsense” (*Covering Islam* 32). The manner in which Ahmad dismisses his mother implies that this type of nullification of a human being is comparable with the concepts of the Muslim tradition. It also indicates that much of what this religion has to offer is “more oppression of women” (*T* 258). This is noticeably evident when Ahmad, now rechristened Madman, is making the arrangements for the financial compensation to be earned from his suicide mission. While Akbar S. Ahmed states emphatically that in Islamic tradition “[t]he husband, or the son, or father or brother…are responsible for all the needs of the women” (159), the devout Ahmad overlooks both the doctrine and his mother’s obvious penurious state, claiming “she has always supported herself” (235). Consequently, he names Joryleen as his beneficiary. Although he now unequivocally knows Joryleen to be a whore, and she is identified in the opinion of his religious guide Shaikh Rashid as a “*sharmoota* [harlot] whom he value[s] above his mother” Ahmad still views her as more deserving than Teresa of his largesse (238). Neither during his life, nor when anticipating his death, does Ahmad view his mother as worthy of his respect, his compassion, or his empathy.

Viewing women with this type of contempt is regarded by many feminist critics as the prototypical reaction to women in much American literature, and not necessarily as an essentially Muslim response. “America is female,” claimed Judith

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\(^{32}\) Updike’s “Rabbit Series” often deals realistically with Harry Angstrom’s growing family issues.
Fetterley. “[T]o be American is male; and the quintessential American experience is betrayal by women” (xiii). The modern American mother in the literature of men is often transmogrified from virtuous to promiscuous, and then blamed for betraying the male-oriented, decadent America that is depicted in their novels. Updike had done this effectively since the commencement of his career. He began with the depiction of Harry’s women in *Rabbit, Run*: his unfortunate wife, Janice, his concurrent girlfriend, the former prostitute, Ruth Leonard, and his minister’s discontented wife, Lucy Eccles. All these women appear to betray the American male in some respect. Updike’s black, white, Muslim, and hybrid women of the twenty-first century are not much different. The “buxom, brown girls…the little whores” in the New Jersey high school will grow up to become the same as Ahmad’s mother, Updike’s narrative seems to suggest (17). In accordance with the presumed Islamic abjection of women, the one thing the devout Muslim Ahmad “wanted for his graduation was for his mother not to look like a whore” (116). However, as Teresa explains this reason for her hijab to Jack, the Jewish guidance councillor is “stir[ed by] her headscarf that speaks of submission” (117). No matter how she is dressed, female characters like Teresa affect a physical reaction within the male gaze. Therefore Ahmad’s Islamic belief that “the true veil is in the eyes of the men” is incompatible in Updike’s estimation with an American-male consciousness (Ahmed 160).³³ Contrary to any honourable understanding Arab men might adopt, in Updike’s/Jack’s Western estimation, it appears it is the woman, regardless of her dress, who creates the allure. Opposing east-west male attitudes notwithstanding, it is a demurely dressed Terry who is blamed by her son for causing the errant situation. Ahmad states that he believes his mother “sleeps with people easily” and although he

³³ This maxim, according to Akbar Ahmed, comes directly from the Prophet.
is not “thrilled to think of” it, his resentment is directed at his mother rather than the American male seducer who is seated by his side (T 301).

As a doyen of American experience, Updike appears to justify the young Muslim’s reaction towards his mother by implying that Teresa’s version of motherhood is primarily defined by her own self-interest and indifference. When she shows an interest in her son it “intensifies the suspicion” that she wants to begin a sexual encounter with his teacher rather than sincere maternal concern (118). In the one instance in the narrative when the son attempts to validate what the mother has done for him by acknowledging that “all those years you were taking care of me” the mother’s reply appears flippant: “Cava sans dire” she retorts, “it goes without saying” (241). From the evidence of his previous work it also goes without saying that it would have been nearly impossible for Updike to analyse an American relationship without including a sexual aspect. Although the story would work better without the intrusion of the distracting carnality of Terry and Jack which allows the plot to veer away from its alleged purpose, it appears Updike needed to include his familiar long-time trope in what was ostensibly a political novel. However, the sexual liaison between the dejected Jewish teacher and the vitiated mother figure is not consistent and does little for the plot but allow the writer to daydream. When discussing Terrorist with New York Times critic Charles McGrath, Updike identified this vacillation in his narrative, and indicated that it is only in the Jack/Teresa relationship that he felt his true voice really emerged. In their relationship Updike was, he claimed: “happy – because there was so much shaky ground in the novel – when Jack began to hit on Terry Mulloy… I felt I was in a scene I could handle. That little scene was very real – to me, at least” (McGrath). Its inclusion, comforting as it may have been for the author, mutes the socio-political or religious content, and
diminishes any pervasive conciliatory argument the text might have been able to generate.

Ahmad’s repressed sexual connection to the character Joryleen Grant, however, is more complex and more useful for analysis. It is this character, rather than his mother or Jack Levy, who really problematises Ahmad’s personal relationship with his God. The initial introduction to Joryleen indicates who we are dealing with:

She is short and round... there is an endearing self-confidence in how compactly her cocoa-brown roundness fills her clothes...patched and sequenced jeans, worn pale where she sits, and a ...shorty top both lower and higher than it should be, glistening hair... [and] her right ear holds along its crimp a row of little silver rings. (8)

This well-defined description mirrors Ahmad’s negative introductory thoughts:
“...girls sway...and expose their soft bodies and alluring hair. Their bare bellies adorned with shining navel studs and low down purple tattoos, ask, What else is there to see?” (3). The similar evaluation within these two images makes it apparent that this is a girl that Ahmad would instinctively disapprove of, “yet he is pleased that she notices him” (8). This boy/girl relationship enables Updike’s reader to empathise with Ahmad, as it is here the character displays recognisable compassion and human feeling. While the irreverent girl obviously attracts the Muslim boy, as “just hearing the word ‘tit’ from her lips stirs him indecently” (71), she also repels him by the “lazy way [she] think[s] [which makes her] a slave to the unholy, meaningless opinions of others” (73). In Ahmad’s mind Joryleen is predestined “for hell” (73). In the female characters of Joryleen and Terry, Updike has merely recreated a paradoxical trinity which is familiar to literature: virgin, mother, and
whore. Both these women have an emotional impact on the young man which lures him away from “[his] God,” and as such they are “Devils” (3). While his mother, formerly a lapsed Catholic and now an atheist, offers no defining religious support, Joryleen tempts him into the church of her infidel religion and he believes himself to have “risked Hellfire to accept her invitation.” He “only has eyes” for her as she attempts to “carry all her sins to God in prayer” (62-3). Unfortunately, beneath the virtuous long “blue robe…were the same sort of clothes she wears to school” (67), and by the time she completes her transformation, and at a cost to his mentor Charlie, attempts to “devirginate…” him, Joryleen is earning her living by the illicit means predicted in the early pages of the text (217).

The Schizophrenic “Other”

Kristaan Versluys argues that for “Ahmad, Joryleen is the ultimate Other: female versus male, Christian versus Muslim, voluptuous versus prim, proper, and suppressed” (176). But Versluys does not make the obvious opposing racial distinction in his analysis that is noticeably there in the narrative; the alternative “other” within the individual. Although the text makes it plain that Ahmad is not white, it makes it equally evident that neither is he black. This hybrid character is clearly not at ease inside his skin any more than Updike was comfortable there with him. He is “othered” from his creation by his ethnicity, his religion, and perhaps most disturbingly, by his simulated persona. Ahmad is more a virtual character than a flesh and blood depiction of a multi-racial identity. It is no wonder that Updike felt on “shaky ground” in this novel, when that unstable quality seeps through in the voices of his characters (McGrath). Ahmad’s contrived personality which alienates the character from both his author and his own fictional early upbringing, also serves

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to make him anomalous in a community where his adopted religion is not apparently uncommon. Although the Mosque where Ahmad studies the Qur’an, is “the humblest of the several” in the city, and is situated unassumingly “above a nail salon and a check-cashing facility” (99), the only Mosque long-time resident Jack is aware of, is a “huge one that the Black Muslims put up” (37). Although Ahmad’s religion has multiple Mosques and many followers in his city, the one this particular youth chooses only excludes him further. Here Updike makes a guarded political distinction between an Islam of the East with fundamentalist elements and the domestic “Black Muslims” of the West (37). Black Muslims are not “disrespected” by the students in Central High (16). African-Americans like Malcolm X and Mohammed Ali had raised the profile of Islam in America and “became symbols of Muslim pride” (Ahmed 175). Those same classmates, however, see little of value in Ahmad’s variety of Islam. In their estimation, because he is “not black, [he is] not anything” (16). It would appear from Updike’s assessment in Terrorist that the Black Muslims associated with the cause of the “sixties riots” have become an integral part of the fabric of American multiculturalism (37). The argument then becomes that the new, more aggressive stream of this religion is not only alien to the mainstream US majority, but also to their co-religionists who were once, but are no longer, viewed as radical. Scholars such as Mohammad Deyab have argued that Updike’s Terrorist is written entirely from a Neo-Orientalist perspective, and perpetuates the “evil” Islamic fundamentalist/terrorist character that has been demonising the Muslim community for decades. While acknowledging that Updike may have originally been “motivated by a genuine desire to understand,” Deyab considers Terrorist to have transcended its stated objective of viewing a terrorist act through the perception of an American/Fundamentalist character. Instead of accomplishing his specified aim, in
Deyab’s opinion Updike has “construct[ed] and sustain[ed] conceptions of the Orient which aim to support and authorise American actions in Islamic and Middle Eastern countries” (Deyab). This contention supports Chomsky’s analysis of United States foreign policy post-911 which indicates that “there are hawkish elements who want to use the occasion to strike out at their enemies…no matter how many people suffer” (9/11 34). Unfortunately Updike’s objective to arbitrate through this narrative has apparently failed both communities, as the underlying message within the text supports the rationale of the hawkish element within U.S. society. To be entirely fair, though, neither the Muslim-American nor the traditional American perspective is patently understood in the novel. They are both equally suspect and “best summed up by Ayatollah Khomeini’s dictum na sharq na gharb, neither East nor West” (Ahmed 227).

_Terrorist_ was not the first novel in which Updike had been perceived as speaking in favour of government action and viewing political matters from a conservative perspective. In the wake of the 1960s race riots, _Rabbit Redux_ (1971) allowed Updike to raise his political voice regarding issues of ethnicity and the American consciousness. Rabbit, the Updike creation most closely associated with the author, supported the then-current but unpopular war in Vietnam, and in the estimation of Jay Prosser views blacks, as “almost a different species” (77). During the gas wars a decade later, Rabbit, “himself an allegory for America” (Prosser 77), would query, “Who needs Afghanistan?” (A Rabbit Omnibus 465). The reader is asked to consider this question and answer it for Rabbit at a time when many Americans may not have been sure where to find Afghanistan on a globe, let alone engage in pertinent political debate on the subject of oil rights. In _Rabbit is Rich_ Rabbit also feared that “something has gone wrong with America” (80), which
echoes Foer’s question by raising the obvious response, “What?” (1). These topics, broached by Updike in the Rabbit series, raise points that, more often than not, foster debate as to whether his protagonist’s convictions are the right or wrong platform from which to view society and contemporary issues. Rabbit was the American fictional character of the later twentieth century which Pinsker claimed “readers love[d] to hate” (91). Opinions professed by Rabbit were automatically disputed by many of Updike’s most ardent admirers. Pinsker’s assertion, however, suggests that although his readers admired him as a writer, they did not always agree with the sentiments voiced by Rabbit. But readers were familiar with Rabbit biased opinions and could, more importantly, recognise the traits of this character in those around them. It could be supposed that through the consciousness of the character Ahmad/Madman Updike’s intention in Terrorist is to ferment a similar controversy. It is feasible that by making his character an American as well as a Muslim the author was attempting to make Islam more accessible to the average American reader. Unfortunately, as Keen points out, readers’ experiences of “empathetic inaccuracy may contribute to a … outraged sense that the author’s perspective is simply wrong” and unlike the complex personality of Rabbit, Ahmad’s inconsistent persona makes it difficult for readers to identify with the problems he faces (“A Theory of” 215). Thus the biased viewpoint projected, combined with the unbending attitude espoused through the characterisation, fails to elicit sympathy. Instead it denotes an unsupported and fabricated unwillingness on the part of Muslims to adapt and assimilate in a democratic society. It also indicates that in the intervening four years since he first introduced the topic of alternative viewpoints in his short story “Varieties of Religious Experience,” Updike’s ideas had unmistakably abated,
leaving the characterisations offered in *Terrorist* appear manipulative and partisan, rather than impartial or conciliatory.

Richard Gray has asserted that writers struggling with the subject of 9/11 should not only “get into history,” but that “in a perspectival sense at least, [they should] begin… to get out of it too” (“Open Doors” 147). Updike’s 9/11 corpus was challenging as he tried to negotiate his way out of the political and social quagmire his personal attempt to “get into history” had produced. His early 9/11 work indicates that initially he wanted to challenge and critique the current government ideology, but he seems to have become constrained by the conservative position contemporary American society had assumed. Had he stuck with his original plan to create his bomber as “young Christian, a seminarian convinced that he was surrounded by devils trying to rob him of his faith,” he would have been able to remain on home-ground and he possibly could have created a persuasive alternative perspective from which to view fundamentalist activities from any faith (Begley 467). Unfortunately, he had begun his work on this topic by taking a stand which proved, from the evidence of other authors’ experiences, to be perceived as repugnant and antithetical to both government policy and popular public opinion. In the original version of “Varieties of Religious Experience” (2002) Updike made a decided point, which invited the reader to examine how previous U.S. involvement in the middle-east had had a negative impact which ultimately led to the attacks. It is implied by the title of this short narrative, “Varieties of Religious Experience” that Updike’s immediate literary response was intended to adjudicate in the manner advised in James’s original hypothesis. Updike’s point was emphatic and clearly stated in this early story but, by the time it is included in *My Father’s Tears*, his opinion along with the emphases has been homogenised. At a politically sensitive time, when the events at
Abu Ghraib were in the headlines, Updike offered the novel *Terrorist*, the plot of which read like an apology for the original inflammatory ending to “Varieties of Religious Experience.” This is a disappointment from a celebrated writer who had the opportunity, as Amis advocated, to stand in “eternal opposition to the voice of the lonely crowd” (*The Second Plane*). By the end of Updike’s novel his initial brave tone had been hushed to barely audible and rather than opposing the crowd, it conforms to it. Whenever something radical appears in this text Updike offsets it by adopting the voice of the *status quo*. Whenever he seeks to be politically outspoken or ethnically courageous, he is revealed as a misogynist who cannot move beyond the hackneyed motifs of his earlier literature. In contrast to that original provocative ending in “Varieties of Religious Experience” he concludes *Terrorist* with the implausible idea that the “Department of Homeland Security” will be understanding and helpful to America’s home-grown fanatic. It is implied that, for Ahmad, the “American Dream” can yet become a reality if he only acknowledges his mistake, continues in school, and gains a law degree. With this fairy-tale conclusion Updike has amended and modified his earlier challenging position with regard to the attacks, and his previous accomplishment as the literary herald for America. A more realistic and courageous novel might have been expected of so celebrated a writer. Perhaps silence on the subject would have been preferable than a novel whose political voice is so severely compromised that it would end the author’s long career on a false note.
To reiterate the core hypothesis of this thesis, the September eleventh attacks and Bush’s “War on Terrorism,” afforded contemporary writers a monumental creative opportunity. No author, I would argue, seemed to take up Richard Gray’s challenge of “getting into history” and enter the 9/11 literary debate more effectively than Barbara Kingsolver, and yet she has, for the most part, been overlooked by reviewers of the genre (“Open Doors” 19). Through clever allegory, Kingsolver makes a pertinent political statement in her novel *The Lacuna*. This chapter will outline the back-story to that narrative and consider why, although the writer has categorically stated the nature of her intentions when writing this work, the novel is noticeably absent from the post-9/11 literary discourse.

If, as Markku Lehtimaki has correctly pointed out, Barbara Kingsolver is a popular writer whose work typically “focuses on ecological issues [that] draw attention to human culture and technology, which threaten to dominate, pollute, and destroy the world” (122), this chapter argues that *The Lacuna* is about political issues that threaten to destroy the US as she recognises it. Her work has appeared on the bookshelves at regular intervals during the 1990s, culminating with the great success she achieved with *The Poisonwood Bible* in 1998. Her essays and op-ed articles were also enthusiastically received by newspapers and magazines and were subsequently collected and re-presented as edited volumes *High Tide in Tucson* in 1995, and followed by *Small Wonder* in 2003. Reviewer Margaret Randall enthused that “Kingsolver had become a writer whose next book would always be eagerly awaited” (26). Mixed in amongst interesting and appealing tales of travel and family life, Kingsolver also presented strongly worded and thought-provoking political
analysis in these compilations. All of the essays presented had previously appeared in popular US newspapers and magazines. As her work as a rule orbits within this socio-political milieu, it was not beyond the realm of expectation to anyone conversant with her entire oeuvre, that she would be one of the first responders to recommend restraint when the American war drums began to beat in the autumn of 2001. Regrettably, the reaction that she received to her particular expression of patriotism was not one she could have anticipated, nor one that her commentaries had been met with previously. Columnist Kate Holmquist affirmed in the course of her 2010 interview with Kingsolver that “[b]ecoming a scapegoat for the American right-wing came as a ‘complete surprise’” to this well-regarded writer (11). As a result of falling prey to the right-wing media, Kingsolver, in line with the silent writers of the period, “decided to stop writing entirely” (11). Rather than silencing her though, this muted time seemed simply to have given her food for thought. *The Lacuna*, the result of that unvoiced interval, links her dark encounter with the “US conservative media” to one of the most reprehensible eras in modern American history (11). Kingsolver clarified for Holmquist how this novel used “the McCarthy era to explore why it is…that a large part of America is uncomfortable with challenging the status quo” (11). However, when *The Lacuna* first appeared in 2009, and later won the Orange Prize for fiction, it was celebrated briefly for its historical value and the beauty of its prose, but not investigated in any depth for its declared connection to the political scare-mongering that developed in the United States subsequent to the 9/11 attacks. Although the author has made her reasoning for *The Lacuna* perfectly clear, it has largely gone unheard or been disregarded within the literary community. The narrative has been primarily received as an erudite and noteworthy historical novel, that engages intellectually with McCarthyism and Cold
War politics, but the allegorical elements of the text, which link that time to our own, have generally gone unheard. While Kingsolver has ring-fenced The Lacuna as her response to the aftermath of 9/11, the novel has not normally been included in the typical lists of literature from that era. Nor has it been analysed in the recent studies that have covered such texts, such as Richard Gray’s After the Fall or Georgiana Banita’s Plotting Justice. Unlike Arthur Miller’s play, The Crucible (1953), which courageously equated McCarthyism to the Salem Witch Trials, Kingsolver’s attempt at contrasting the post-9/11 period with the McCarthy era has gone mainly unremarked. In order to fully appreciate the author’s allegorical exploration of these issues it is first necessary to examine the backdrop to Kingsolver’s 2009 plotline.

September 2001

With the benefit of hindsight, it appears clear that the jingoistic rhetoric of much post-9/11 U.S. newspaper and television coverage was a knee-jerk reaction to the horrific events of that day. It seems to be generally accepted now that the mass media used 9/11 as a vehicle for propaganda, presenting it as the “loss of American innocence or impregnability, as a turning point in American history and as a fundamental reconfiguring of what it meant to be a citizen of the United States” (Holloway 61). The attacks had “violently opened a new chapter in US history and the history of American nationalism,” but not without dissent (Lyons 378). Although “pervasive patriotic displays” (378) were immediately to the fore, and their proponents were the most vocal, other voices, advocating other sentiments, were, initially, making themselves heard. Nevertheless the mainstream media, along with the many adherents to the status quo, appeared to take their cue from their elected

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34 During the early 1950s Senator Joe McCarthy was strongly connected to the activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee which interrogated and condemned American citizens for “anti-American activities” with little or no supporting evidence.
leaders and became increasingly disinclined to allow dissenting voices a forum.

Regrettably, the official response in 2001 gave rise to an emotive, cynical and self-serving voice, rather than an analytical or judicious one. It would seem that “national ideology was hard at work shaping how the traumatic event was to be perceived.” (Kaplan 13). As a result of this emerging form of twenty-first century American identity, patriotism in the United States was becoming synonymous with war. In 2013 Kingsolver recalled the turmoil of the period: “For a few months after the 9/11 attacks, many people in the US were very frightened and the public discourse took on a cast of hyper-patriotism and willingness to sacrifice freedom of speech in favour of perceived safety” (see Appendix A). Kingsolver’s political opinion should not have surprised an audience familiar with her work as this was by no means the first time that she had candidly voiced her views on controversial political issues. Words equally strongly critical of America’s involvement in the First Gulf War are to be found within High Tide in Tucson. It is evident from this small book of essays that the attacks of 2001, while devastating, could not have come as a complete surprise to Kingsolver any more than they had to Don DeLillo. It is blatantly evident from these articles that the sentiments that she expressed in the aftermath of 9/11 did not appear out of the blue, but had been emphatically formed and stated in her previous work. Those for whom her political voice came as a revelation were those who viewed her as polite writer, who civilly addressed issues which concern a more nuanced society. In her 1991 article, “Paradise Lost,” included in High Tide but written at the height of the First Gulf War, Kingsolver claimed she had become first “hopeless [and] then voiceless” (109). She argues that Americans who offer a “prayer of godspeed to the killers, allow no possibility that the vanquished might also be human” (109).

Reviewers at that time did not initially tend to listen for Kingsolver’s political voice.
Paul Trachtman of the *Smithsonian Magazine* read *High Tide in Tucson* as “both personal and political; yet, with a novelist’s eye for the complexity of things, she avoids the traps of self-indulgence and polemics” (Trachtman). His is an evasive observation which avoids true engagement with the thesis of the text when one considers the polemical and unmistakably opinionated remarks Kingsolver has offered in this compilation.

“Jabberwocky,” probably the most passionate of all Kingsolver’s political articles from either the first or second Gulf War period also comes from this collection (222). The name itself, “Jabberwocky,” inevitably recalls Lewis Carroll’s nonsense poem from *Through the Looking Glass*. The lexis of this verse “relies on a distortion of sense, allowing the reader to infer meaning” in order to appreciate the significance of the writer’s words (Lucas 503). By using this title to frame the U.S. government’s engagement with the American people, Kingsolver foregrounded a criticism of the language being used by that government in order to consolidate allegiance and silence dissension at home during the Gulf conflict. For Kingsolver the rhetoric used to promote the 1991 war mirrored the language of Carroll’s poem. The fustian jargon employed to support that war appeared to her as the language of the poem sounded to Carroll’s Alice. In the story, Alice says it was:

“… rather hard to understand!” (You see she didn't like to confess, even to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all.) “Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don’t exactly know what they are! However, somebody killed something: that's clear, at any rate.” (Carroll 64-5)

In her version of “Jabberwocky” Kingsolver argues that much of the government’s phraseology of the period was ruthlessly opaque. She asserts that the “very term ‘right to free expression’ and how it was being applied in a nation at war” was
“driving [her] crazy” \( (HTT 223) \). “Our leaders told us it was a \textit{surgical} war. Very \textit{clean}.” The language of the event, she argues, “was a perfect construct of nonmeaning. ‘Delivering the ordnance’ they called it on the nightly news… however, ‘deliver the ordnance,’” as Kingsolver translates it, was simply a euphemism for, “Drop the bomb” \( (223) \). In the body of her essay, “Jabberwocky,” Kingsolver offered an in-depth assessment of the carnage perpetrated in Iraq during the nineties in the name of the American people. As Jonathan Safran Foer would also do in his post-9/11 novel, Kingsolver pointed out that the evidence of this earlier mayhem was “common knowledge […] everywhere in the world but in the United States” \( (HTT 224) \). She goes on to remind her readers that the Commission of Inquiry for the International War Crimes Tribunal was at that time still compiling a list of the public services destroyed by the US during the conflict. She goes on to give an account of the number of civilians killed during what had been deemed “our surgical war” \( (HTT 224) \). By including a statistical analysis which focuses on damages caused by America’s intervention in the region, Kingsolver leaves her reader in no doubt of her position in any Gulf War debate, and places her argument in “Jabberwocky” audibly in the realm of polemical political discourse.

Although the dozen or so pages that make up “Jabberwocky” draw attention to the duplicity of much of the governmental rhetoric from the early 1990s, Kingsolver does not confine her criticism to the formal U.S. political structure. She includes a censure of the intelligent citizen whom, she suspected, chose to not hear what was being said. Their propensity to accept what she called “placebo news” as an “empty salve for [their] patriotic ego” came under Kingsolver’s scrutiny \( (227) \). She unequivocally stated that she was “offended by the presumption that [her] honor as a citizen will crumble unless [she] is protected from the knowledge of her
country’s mistakes” (227). She asks: “What kind of love is patriotism, if it evaporates in the face of uncomfortable truths?” (227). These words would re-resonate disconcertingly in the twenty-first century. During what Phillip Wegner refers to as the long nineties, Kingsolver ably used her voice to embolden people and urge them to have the courage of their own convictions. In a prescient answer to the appeal that would be made a decade later by writers like Jay McInerney and Martin Amis, she acknowledged that “[a]rtists are as guilty as anyone in the conspiracy of self-censorship, if they succumb to the lure of producing only what’s going to sell” (227). However, she cautioned her readers that the “silence” of American authors in the face of any political upheaval “can be taken as a sign of imminent danger” (227-8). The focus of this article would reverberate in her work more than a decade later. It introduced ideas that would simmer in her consciousness until she gave them free rein in The Lacuna. She indicates that, unlike other countries, the introduction of a political discussion into any artistic endeavour in America is made to appear as a pollutant to the art. “In the U.S. artists of all types ‘cultural workers’, ” as Kingsolver termed them, “are prone to be bound and gagged by a dread of being called ‘political’” (HTT 229). The introduction of “[t]hat word” to the discourse means that the art is “not pure…” (229), while, “most of the rest of the world considers social criticism to be…the most legitimate domain of art” (229). As the chronology found in the introduction to this study will attest, social criticism had previously made up much of the American canon. De Tocqueville observed, that the earliest literary work from the emerging United States does not “exhibit the order, regularity, skill, and art characteristic of aristocratic literature” however, within those seemingly plebeian narratives there were “numerous connections between the social and political condition of a people” and De Tocqueville acknowledges their worthiness (474). It
remains obvious that political thought greatly impacted on the earliest of American artistic literary endeavours. And, like Stendhal’s “pistol shot” in a concert analogy, it is difficult to disregard. Placing political thought into a work of literature, though it may appear “loud and vulgar,” and may in some way seem to contaminate artistic expression, imbues the text with potential debate, compelling the perceptive reader to assess a given situation from a specific perspective (Howe 15). The work of many writers, some of the calibre of Sinclair, Steinbeck and Miller, can stand as testament to this analogy.

Kingsolver recognises the complex connection between the political and the aesthetic, and as she told Maya Jaggi, believes it is difficult to segregate politics from art. For her it seems, “any good art [cannot] fail to be political” (Jaggi). In her judgement the “artist’s maverick responsibility is sometimes to sugarcoat the bitter pill and slip it down our gullet, telling us what we didn’t think we wanted to know” (HTT 228). Nevertheless, she feels that at some point during the twentieth century Americans began to reject the bitter pill of political discussion in literature. They developed a “kind of superstition about mixing art with conscience” and this has impacted on contemporary writers (HTT 229). Her claim is supported when one examines the preponderance of political writers that make up the list of Nobel laureates and reflects on why, when the U.S. can dominate in Nobel science categories, they no longer excel in the area of literature. Kingsolver offered McCarthyism as a logical answer to this conundrum, and reached back through the decades to both support her argument and answer her own query. “It’s not for lack of great writers, but perhaps because we have learned to limit our own access to serious content.” She reasoned that “the fear of being perceived as ideologues runs so deep in writers of [her] generation it undoubtedly steers us away from certain subjects…”
Though whenever a writer does attempt to push back the existing status quo, Kingsolver felt that commercial U.S.A. got involved in an insidious form of muzzling. Soon after the First Gulf War bombing ended she reminded the reader that:

Ramsey Clark wrote a book called *The Fire This Time*, a meticulously researched account of the many ways the U.S. violated the Geneva Convention and perpetrated crimes against civilians in the Persian Gulf War. Clark, as the former U.S. Attorney General, had once been appointed trustee of the nation’s conscience. Now, he asked us to reckon with some awful responsibilities. But he encountered a truly American form of censorship free enterprise in the hands of a monkey called ‘See No Evil.’ His manuscript was rejected by eleven publishers – every major New York house. The editors did not turn it down for lack of merit, they said, but on the grounds that it would not be popular. No such luck for the memoirs of generals. (225)

Kingsolver’s own writing from the period of the First Gulf War did say something controversial even if *The Smithsonian Magazine* failed to hear it. Despite her outspoken view of government action, the *New York Times* heard only her “ruminations on travel, identity and accommodation,” though that publication did admit that her words are “replete with good sense” (King). Those who could appreciate her candour recognised that the “best pieces” in *High Tide in Tucson* “are those in which she speaks out forcefully against the Gulf War, the continuing expenditures on the American war machine, and [the] censorship and violence in the media” and they applauded her forthrightness (Brussat). Instead of vilification for speaking out strongly on government policy, in 1996 Kingsolver was deemed a national treasure by those few who chose to review this work seriously.
Unfortunately by 2001 her national value, for both critics and admirers of her fiction, was to plummet along with the Twin Towers. When Kingsolver was critical of US government policy in Iraq, or wrote in support of those suffering under the duel burden of Saddam’s regime and US reaction to it, her public at home either ignored her admonition or lauded her integrity. She remained the same writer in 2001, expounded similar sentiments post-9/11, and cautioned against the impulse to “wreak death in the wake of death” (SW 236), but both the critical and the public reaction to her conciliatory words were conspicuously different in most important respects once America had been attacked at home.

**Now versus Then**

Perhaps because of the level of thought and analysis Kingsolver had put into both American and foreign reaction to Operation Desert Storm (a code-name for the First Gulf War), the 9/11 attacks were not as wholly unforeseen by her as they may have been to other writers. Her essays on the First Gulf War suggest that although the September planes came out of the blue, their arrival, or some other attack of the kind, was not entirely unexpected by those who had been previously cognisant of the post-modern East-West clash. In consequence of her apparent foresight Kingsolver was immediately ready to speak out loud and clear when many previously perceptive writers remained shocked and voiceless. At the height of the reigning chaos, and less than a fortnight after the attacks, the *Los Angeles Times* printed a short article by Kingsolver plaintively titled: “A Pure, High Note of Anguish.” Reading her words more than a decade later they resonate with concern for what had just happened and her fears for the aftermath. But in the abrupt aftershock of America’s Golgotha, this pivotal event that changed America’s sense of security at home, Kingsolver’s
dissonant sentiments were only heard as discordant tones in a cacophony of rhetoric. Politicians, newsmen, and ordinary citizens were more interested in “trails of evidence and whom to stamp out, [or] even the size and shape of the cage we might put ourselves in to stay safe, [rather] than mention that the United States is not universally beloved” (Kingsolver qtd. in Hawthorne and Winter 106). Such was Kingsolver’s assessment during the immediate aftermath of the attacks, but, at a time when a shocked and grief-stricken nation was gearing up for war many people were unable to countenance her brand of critique.

For example, Gregg Easterbrook, journalist and senior editor of The New Republic, took up the assault on Kingsolver in his own piece for The Wall Street Journal “Free Speech Doesn’t Come without Cost.” Easterbrook malignly misinterpreted both Kingsolver’s words and her meaning in her piece for the San Francisco Chronicle “And Our Flag Was Still There.” Here Kingsolver had maintained that some Americans that she termed “vigilante patriots,” were bullying less radical citizens and causing the flag of the United States to stand for “intimidation, censorship, violence, bigotry, sexism, homophobia, and shoving the Constitution through a paper shredder” (SW 238). When Easterbrook analysed the article though, he interpreted her words as a literal denigration of the American values as embodied in Old Glory. His misconception of her words was replicated in various articles and led to a torrent of contempt channelled through many reputable publications “It became the most quoted thing I ever said…and I didn’t say it” an exasperated Kingsolver subsequently told Susan Faludi (31). Numerous examples of this type of public harassment were aimed in Kingsolver’s direction, but perhaps the most perplexing was her inclusion on the hit list of Fox News Political commentator, Bernard Goldberg. Ironically, in his 2005 chronological assessment, 100 People who
Screwing up America, she appears higher on the countdown than either of the other two novelists therein. If it should seem curious that there were only three writers of fiction who were in a position to receive this dubious award, perhaps it is because so many had remained silent. The first author present in the annals was Jane Smiley, a frequent reviewer of Kingsolver’s novels. She was attacked by Goldberg for bigotry against conservative Americans. But the most renowned author to fall under the banner of “Screwing Up America,” and perhaps the one most easy to predict as likely to make that particular cut, was Norman Mailer. Mailer’s problematic stand on prisoners’ rights is what provoked Goldberg’s wrath, but with Kingsolver it was simply a differing perspective on patriotism in the aftermath of 9/11. It is unlikely that Mailer and Kingsolver’s names would be closely associated prior to 9/11, but, in this study of people who challenge or oppose the twenty-first century status quo they come in virtually neck and neck, with Kingsolver slightly ahead. While he singled out “And our Flag was still there” for censorious critique, Goldberg markedly neglects to delve into Kingsolver’s particular grasp of the events. Nor did he seem comprehend the slide in public consciousness that was beginning to become apparent in the wake of the, then recent, Guantanamo exposé. Presumably, Goldberg did not need to look further at her work in order to gain perspective on her position, he studiously neglected to broadcast any alternative position but his own. By limiting his analysis to that one piece, he doggedly heard only what he wanted to hear and blatantly skewed her words. What Kingsolver actually said was that the “brand of patriotism” being purported by:

these hoodlum-Americans [was] asking [her] to believe that their flag stood for intimidation, censorship, violence, bigotry, sexism, homophobia, and shoving the Constitution through a paper shredder. Well, our flag does not
and I’m determined that it never will. Outsiders can destroy airplanes and buildings, but only we the people have the power to demolish our own ideals.

(SW 238)

However, Bernard Goldberg foregrounds his critique with his own statement, “here is Barbara Kingsolver in her own words,”

Patriotism threatens free speech with death…It despises people of foreign birth…In other words, the American flag stands for intimidation, censorship, violence, bigotry, sexism, homophobia and shoving the Constitution through a paper shredder? Who are we calling terrorists here? (Goldberg 107)

It is clear from the ideological approach taken in his chronology, and by the tone of Goldberg’s appraisal, that he did not merely misread this one article. Goldberg’s spurious criticism takes Kingsolver’s words out of any logical context and condemns her version of patriotism, defining the term subjectively, and only within the scope of his limited ethical concerns. There is no contextualisation of the article or any considered analysis of her 9/11 oeuvre to help the reader to place Kingsolver’s argument within a cohesive ideological framework. By not including any further information or even a meagre understanding of the background to her views, he expressly and flagrantly attempts to unravel the thread she was weaving. As a result of this misleading and biased style of direct censure, Kingsolver’s voice, rather than his own subjective opinion, is the one that appears intentionally deceptive. Rather than defining the “real enemy of [America] as patriotism,” as Goldberg stated she had done (107), Kingsolver had irrefutably condemned the perpetrators, the attacks, and the ideology from which they stemmed, while still offering her reader a viable alternative to the Government’s dominant position. “Some nights” a more reflective Kingsolver had told her readers, “I’ve lain awake wondering how to keep on living
while someone, somewhere, despises me and wishes so many of us dead because of our faith and nationality, assigning to us transgressions I can scarcely grasp” (SW 18). Unfortunately, unwarranted misinterpretations such as those offered by Goldberg, led to Kingsolver being despised not only by foreign ideologies that she could not comprehend, but by many of her fellow citizens, not for her faith or nationality, but for opinions which had been misstated, misrepresented and dissembled.

The series of articles Barbara Kingsolver’s wrote in the autumn of 2001 were intended to decelerate the rush toward war. Reiterating her fervid words of the previous conflict, she once again urged restraint and conciliation. However, readers predisposed to the government line or those who were to rely primarily on the work of antithetical reviewers, were left designedly oblivious to the actual substance of Kingsolver’s remarks (see Appendix A). That she recognised and valued the freedom afforded to her in the United States, and realised that were she “forced to submit to the order of such men” as those who attacked her nation on 9/11, she would “surely [be] stoned to death,” was misread deliberately, and intentionally went unacknowledged (SW 7). Although her detractors would fail to agree, the on-going internecine battle, that is evident in the response to Kingsolver, only created further conflict in a rapidly dividing United States. The elusive enemy could pause while conflict raged between the nation’s differing ideological factions. Kingsolver reasoned in her 2001 articles that these terrorists:

would count themselves victorious to see us reduced to panic under their specter, to fall into factions of difference and censor or attack our own minorities, to weaken and let go of the ideals of equality and kindness that first brought our country onto the map of the world. (SW 7)
Although her words were intended to confront right-wing patriotism and any attempt by a partisan government to prematurely judge their alleged enemies, they also reflect and support the long-established, and often repeated, democratic ideals of her homeland. Kingsolver balanced her response and reminded her readers that the “new enemy is not a person or a place, it isn’t a country…its widespread anger…and [w]e who live in this moment are not its cause – instead a thousand historic hungers blended to create it – but we are its chosen target” (7-8). The same First Amendment right that Kingsolver invoked to make her point however, sanctioned that she must also submit to a verbal stoning from those averse to any constructive counter-narrative. Although Kingsolver heard the censure and condemnation she was not prepared to mute her voice, she could not “bear silent witness” (SW 18). Facing an unwarranted bitterness from a public who had in earlier times only applauded her, was “bitterly painful” (18):

[T]o be cast sometimes as a traitor to the homeland I love, simply because I raise questions. I find myself in a strange niche, reviled by some compatriots because I can’t praise war as the best answer, and reviled everywhere else because my nation does. (18)

Kingsolver had fallen foul of the US Government’s challenge to determine where the actual root of the 9/11 attacks materialised. This was a stand she felt compelled to take, and in order to do so effectively, she once again refined her fictional landscape and transformed herself from inoffensive ecological novelist and took on the role of “public historian” (Pitcaithley 11). This term, coined by D. T. Pitcaithley, denotes a person who “commit[s] history in public…They often have a point of view or belief that differs from that of the historic presentation” and is helpful for recognising how Kingsolver plainly attempted to implant her perception of events into the historical
arena (11). By so doing she made her voice transmit historically. The U.S. government and the predominant public media’s interpretation were, from her perspective:

devoid of any historical context…without nearly enough public mention of our government’s previous involvement…[even though] [t]he men in charge of our wars are well aware of these complex histories [while] they speak to us in terms of simplistic threats without shades of consequences, exactly as if we were children. (SW 254)

Instead of aggression, false patriotism, or braggadocio, Kingsolver’s words resonate with affection for her homeland and America’s often idealistic sounding founding principles. “But like anyone else” Kingsolver reasoned:

I am liable to be misunderstood…or scolded…for ventur[ing] outside the approved current of opinion du jour to get a better view of the complex struggle to reconcile cultural, national, and moral imperatives…The historical mode of attack on writers (which continues into the present) is to avoid discussion of our actual ideas and instead declare us un-American for fabricated reasons. (249)

Kingsolver was in no way the only voice of resistance in September of 2001. Decidedly the person to take the most valiant stance at that time was Congresswoman Barbara Lee, the only member of either house to vote against Public Law No: 107–40 “Authorization for Use of Military Force against Terrorists.” In an attempt to seek a negotiated solution rather than one that would conceivably “spawn further acts of terror … not address the sources of hatred … and not increase … security” Lee took what was certainly a courageous position (“Why I Opposed the
Resolution to Authorize Force”). As the representative for her constituency she saw it as her obligation not to sanction a:

blank check to the president to attack anyone involved in the Sept. 11 events - anywhere, in any country, without regard to our nation's long-term foreign policy, economic and national security interests, and without time limit. In granting these overly broad powers, the Congress failed its responsibility to understand the dimensions of its declaration.

“I could not support such a grant of war-making authority to the president; I believe it would put more innocent lives at risk” (ibid), Lee claimed after her solitary voice of opposition was announced. Kingsolver, though a private citizen, was similarly moved. For Kingsolver, words “never seem to wane” and her thoughts on what had just happened had been readily articulated, even if possible solutions were not (qtd. in Hawthorne and Winter 35). She accepted that her words could not provide “a cure” and that the only answers she was in a position to offer were to “questions that nobody is asking” (35). By raising these questions however, she instituted the process of a rational inquiry. Her decision to put pen to paper when so many others remained silent suggests that these ideas were already formulated in Kingsolver’s consciousness and integral to her understanding of a democracy. But her failure to see that her very laudable desire of “want[ing] to do something to help right now” might be open to the ugliest of misinterpretations and condemnations proved to be a serious misjudgement of the prevailing popular mood (35).

Kingsolver’s initial thoughts were also echoed and substantiated within the liberal academic arena, both in the United States and abroad. Noam Chomsky, noted in an interview on September 19th 2001, that although the level of violent reaction committed during the 9/11 events placed the “likely perpetrators [in] a category of
their own…uncontroversially, they draw their support from a reservoir of bitterness and anger over U.S. policies in the region” (9/11 44-5). This objective reasoning, patently clear to anyone familiar with recent twentieth-century history of the middle-east, and being cautiously voiced by intellectuals and academics, implies that a more sophisticated contemporary understanding of U.S. foreign policy existed within the country than actually did. On this evidence it would be logical to believe that Kingsolver’s argument would appear as an appropriate alternative voice during a “time that ask[ed for] the best citizenship... [the country] ever mustered” (qtd. in Hawthorne and Winter 35). However, instead of the tacit endorsement that met her earlier argument, her twenty-first century voice attracted an aggressive and extreme response. She was personally caught-up in what retrospectively seems an inevitable backlash:

Because I published a number of op-ed pieces during that time that argued for a more nuanced sense of national purpose, I became a scapegoat…I endured certain kinds of public scorn, and a few serious threats, for about one year after that September. Some of it persisted, in certain kinds of media, but only because of a lack of imagination in those quarters…The people who sent me hate mail did so entirely on hearsay -- Rush Limbaugh, for instance, had apprised them of my bad character.35 (see Appendix A)

On a personal level this initial manipulation of her ideas took its toll. “Kingsolver’s family received threatening mail; a trustee at [her] alma mater sought to revoke her honorary degree, invitations, both social and professional were retracted and readers shipped back copies of her books” (Faludi 31). Particularly disturbing in light of the allegorical novel she was later to write, was a letter the proprietor of a collection

35 Rush Limbaugh is a conservative American talk-show host whose opinions have been criticised for right-wing political bias.
agency sent to the Los Angeles Times. In addition to many derisive comments he promised to “subject Kingsolver to ‘the most massive personal and business investigation ever conducted on an individual’ [and to send the results to the FBI, because] ‘this little horror of a human being’ needed to be ‘surveilled’” (30). Her traitor status had become abundantly apparent even if her point was deliberately obscured.

Kingsolver reproduced and perhaps exorcised this distressing time through the life of her fictional alter ego, Harrison Shepherd, in The Lacuna. Harrison too, was maligned in the press as no reporter, then or now, who was “worth his buttons will let the facts intrude on a good story” (TL 376). He had also written something which when taken out of context, by the Republic Digest, became the “Words from the Nation’s Most Dangerous” and caused the “unexpected” to happen (622):

Harrison Shepherd fires the shot heard ’round the world. That quote has gone everywhere, even overseas to the armed services, they’ve run it in Stars and Stripes. Here’s what one spineless fellow thinks back home, and you can bet Harrison Shepherd did not serve active duty: Our leader is an empty sack, lets knock him over, put some horns on a stick and follow that. Most of us never choose to believe in our country, we just come up short on better ideas... The most widely printed words ever written by Harrison Shepherd. (621-22)

But Kingsolver was not without her supporters. Her perspective, along with her freedom to speak, was upheld in print and vigorously highlighted in Bob Somerby’s blog, “The Daily Howler.”36 This site and its spokesperson were vociferous in their defence of Kingsolver and her point of view. Somerby’s web-log effectively

36 The slogan of “The Daily Howler: musings on the mainstream ‘press corps’ and the American discourse” reads “‘Caveat lector’ – let the reader beware.” It suggests that the media often promote an agreed perspective with little consideration for the realities which oppose the status quo.
challenged those who tried to shout her down. On September 25th 2001, two days after Barbara Lee’s dissenting congressional vote and the publication of Kingsolver’s “A Pure, High Note of Anguish,” Somerby affirmed in “The Howler” that U.S. “domestic jihadists are now out in force, seeking domestic voices to silence” (4). Somerby’s argument, only a fortnight after the attacks, supports the contention that the aggressive attitude of the pro-war media experts, sought to challenge and even silence opposing views. As a consequence, it is possible that the aggressive braying of these right-wing analysts caused the more prudent among writers to turn down the volume of their voices to the point that it was easy for what Kingsolver calls the “howlers” of the media to drown them out (TL 3). Throughout that autumn Somerby’s blog took on a variety of critics who had maliciously misrepresented the words of those whose opinions differed from that of the status quo. On September fifteenth 2001 he began this style of opposing critique, claiming that the American “Press corps… is completely detached from the world’s real concerns” (Somerby). In a subsequent commentary “The Daily Howler” goes on to defend ABC anchor-man Peter Jennings, Rep. Barbara Lee, political commentator Bill Maher, political activists Tom Hayden and Susan Sontag, and middle-east correspondent Robert Fisk, along with many others. Probably the most unreasonable and fanatically righteous critique of any writer was the attack on the previously unknown high-school student, Patrick Rizzo, who was denigrated by conservative blogger Michelle Malkin when he dared to present a differing point of view in his local paper Alameda Times-Star on 25 September 2001. Somerby rose constructively to Rizzo’s defence, but the need to do so merely emphasise the vicious and reactionary conservatism of many commentators.
By the end of the year, Barbara Kingsolver, perhaps a more obvious opponent, had written most of her 9/11 commentary, which had been read and digested within the media. She had been added to the register of “pseudo-literati who just can’t stomach America’s response to the September Massacre” (Douthat 1). It is however, Noemie Emery’s roll-call of the “Crybaby left” that drew Somerby’s fire in Kingsolver’s defence. To paraphrase “The Daily Howler’s” assessment of Emery’s selective analysis in the *Weekly Standard* of 22 December 2001, Somerby argues that Emery takes the words of those she purports to evaluate, in this case Kingsolver, and dissembles them for the purpose of misleading readers and wooing them to her own point of view. An incredulous Somerby, who had tracked down Kingsolver’s original article in the *Chattanooga Times*, took on *The Weekly Standard* along with their writer:

No, Noemie – Barbara Kingsolver didn’t assert that patriotism and the flag stand for bad things. She said that people who behave in the ways she described act as if they do. And she said that people who behave in those ways ‘have the power to demolish ideals – someone who slanders, lies, dissembles, and misleads…By the way why on earth does the *Weekly Standard* keep putting their bald-faced dissembler in print? Do they get some kind of cheap thrill every time that they mislead subscribers? (Somerby)

In the depths of Kingsolver’s “dark winter,” reading supporting words of this calibre must have appeared like the first sign of spring (Holmquist 11).

Somerby’s on-going censure of Kingsolver’s dissembling critic, Noemie Emery, links the period effectively to the political witch-hunts of the 1950s. Kingsolver admits that she “personally find[s] that period quite fascinating, and think[s] it has had lasting effects on art” (see Appendix A). Kingsolver was
publically connected to the era for the first time in “The Daily Howler’s” synopsis entitled, “We need domestic witches to hunt: in the Standard Noemie Emery started lying” (November 7, 2001). Here Somerby begins to link the palpable anxiety in post-9/11 U.S. society, with the type of moral panic which, though built upon little concrete evidence, incites a form of societal mass hysteria. Somerby argues that journalists who engage in this type of scurrilous reportage take it on themselves to warn readers “about our domestic witches…We needed domestic witches to hunt…[and] at a time of great national challenge, Emery was calling [them] out of their dens” (07/11/01). Although the comparison between the two eras is not directly made in Somerby’s piece, one can extrapolate that connection. “Virtually every American is familiar with Salem as a popular metaphor for ‘persecution’” (24) claims Gretchen in her article on those early American persecutions, and the seventeenth-century image remains vivid in popular U.S. culture. As previously discussed, this era has been immortalised in Arthur Miller’s 1953 play, The Crucible. Through the use of allegory Miller highlights the correlation between the Salem Village persecutions and McCarthyism, and his play has made these eras synonymous. Kingsolver’s obvious inclusion in the ranks of twenty-first century domestic witches highlights her recognition of the congruence, and her own distressing experience explains her use of the episode to continue the tradition and allegorise the twenty-first-century ordeal against the memorable, mid-twentieth century episode. She used her considerable abilities to produce a parallel allegorisation in the rich literary tradition of her predecessors. Kingsolver’s The Lacuna, like Miller’s The Crucible, rehearses a shameful past in order to analyse a malevolent present.
The Gap

By the end of *The Lacuna*, Harrison’s misinterpreted observations, like Kingsolver’s misconstrued remarks, have gone viral. The intentionally garbled words have made it to the *Republic Digest* as, “‘Words from the Nation’s most dangerous’ Harrison Shepherd has gone to the top of their list, above Alger Hiss and the Hollywood Ten [sic]” (622). The reaction triggered by the “most widely printed words” (623) of Harrison Shepherd have caused his personal assistant, friend, and pseudo-family, Violet Brown, to have never been “so frightened” (622). In direct contrast to Brown, a more positive Kingsolver admitted that being included on the aforementioned list of *100 People who are Screwing Up America*:

> gave a certain pizzazz to my days, I thought as I went about [my work]…writing a novel or essay or whatever, knowing full well that kind of thing only leads to trouble…My friends watched me, openly expressing doubts about my actual dangerousness, [but] when you’re number seventy-three, you try harder. (AVM 235)

Her facetious reference to “dangerousness” notwithstanding (235), it is notable that in the aftermath of 9/11 Kingsolver published only her previously written essays, *Small Wonders* (2002), and, along with her husband and daughter, co-authored an introspective study of her family’s attempt to exist only on locally produced goods, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (2007). Unusually she produced no novel between *Prodigal Summer* (2000) and *The Lacuna* (2009). This nine year hiatus seems an anomaly when one considers the regular appearance of new fiction.

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37 “The Hollywood Ten” consisted of ten Hollywood directors, producers and screenwriters who were jailed in 1950 for refusing to co-operate with the commission. They were subsequently blacklisted, and barred from working in their professions. Although Kingsolver’s text directly refers to only these ten the list of those persecuted at the time reaches well into the hundreds. In 1948 Alger Hiss, American lawyer, civil servant, government official, and author, was accused before the House Un-American Activities committee of being a Soviet spy and convicted of perjury in connection with this charge in 1950. He served three and a half years in prison and maintained his innocence until his death in 1996.
That being said, the obviously painstaking research work necessary to produce a narrative of the calibre of The Lacuna might account for this delay. But as Kingsolver herself has been at pains to point out, the text is intended as an allegory that mirrors her own experiences to those of her character Harrison Shepherd, and Shepherd had some difficulty with his publishing house. After his erroneous connection to Communism was revealed in the press this fictional company was, it seems, “uncertain about publishing the [next] book” (602).

Look, I know you’re not a Communist. Everybody here knows that. We know you’re loyal to the U.S… What you are is controversial. The fellows running the show here are not very keen on controversial, because it stirs people up. For most readers out there, controversial means exactly the same thing as anti-American. (603)

Although the research for The Lacuna is clearly extensive, and the background an area of great interest to the author as she “devoted seven years to researching that history, and writing about it” (Appendix A), it is easy to imagine another purpose for this fictional correspondence, even if it remains unknown if the problems Harrison has with his editor reflect issues that impacted on Kingsolver also.

Along with the allegorical content contrasting the post-9/11 era with McCarthyism, The Lacuna is also, in fact, a braid-history. It is a meticulously crafted and painstakingly researched story which intertwines factual events from the twentieth century with a fictional response that mirrors the author’s twenty-first-century experience of persecution. Kingsolver maintains that her purpose was to “provide a glimpse into many different kinds of historical moments -- revolutionary

Mexico, bohemian, artistic Mexico, the cheerful patriotism of the US during World War II, and so on” (see Appendix A). But subsumed in the positive objectives that Kingsolver has related, she has also woven a story that examines America’s more dubious historical moments. In *The Lacuna* she has admittedly mirrored uncomfortable events from the past with unpleasant contemporary images, but she does so surreptitiously in the text. While, as Alan Gibbs points out, “American writers have typically used techniques such as procrastination, distraction and displaced subjectivity in order to avoid the subject of trauma” (202), it could equally be argued that Kingsolver employed allegory to avoid any traumatic fallout triggered by Bush’s political agenda. While Gibbs views the counterfactual history form as, at times “marking a retreat in its sometimes wistful contemplation of alternative scenarios” the use of allegory to make a political point, as Kingsolver employs it, allows us to advance a contemporary scenario in terms of a realistic alternative present (202-3). By taking this approach the author intimates that, along with other writers of her generation, she holds onto the traumatising memory of the McCarthy years and does not wish to see a return of that type of direct persecution. Placing ways of circumventing trauma and persecution aside, it can also be reasoned, as Gibbs has argued, that American writers have used “disparaged” tactics in an attempt to evade direct engagement with contentious public opinion, while at the same time giving voice to their dissenting positions (202). Dissent is palpable in Kingsolver’s narrative, and whether intentionally evasive or not, it was surely politic for Kingsolver to withhold or delay publication of her allegorical narrative until a more politically prudent moment appeared. Instead of circulating a novel that she intended as censorious of the Bush administration’s policy she allowed this gap to remain in
the discourse until a new, less condemnatory, political voice assumed the reins of power, and then she once again spoke out in *The Lacuna*.

The genesis of *The Lacuna* is discernible in the obviously political voice of “Reflections On ‘Wartime.’” This post-9/11 Kingsolver article was first published in *The Washington Post* on November 23rd 2001, two weeks after Somerby affirmed the pursuit of domestic witches in *The Howler*. In it, it is clear that Kingsolver no longer expected that the not-so-silent majority were necessarily on her side. On the contrary, the interceding weeks since the attacks had seen her subjected to much of the persecution described earlier. Yet rather than bowing to the harrying of her antagonists and quelling her political voice, she chose to express her viewpoint even more stridently in “Reflections on Wartime.” In her short analysis Kingsolver first began the twining of mid-twentieth-century historical events with more current affairs. By analysing the various connotations of the word “Wartime” Kingsolver reached back to the “cheerful patriotism” highlighted for me in her correspondence. Instead of adversity the word was used to denote a time when Americans “conquer[ed] fear by giving up comforts so everyone on earth might eventually have better days” (“Reflections on Wartime”). She also wondered in this essay “where we have mislaid our sense of global honor” and delineated this for her readers by examining the speeches of the two “Wartime” presidents, Franklin D. Roosevelt and George W. Bush. In her argument she reminds Americans of Roosevelt’s concept of the “four freedoms,” which are emphasised by evoking cherished images created by the iconic American artist, Norman Rockwell. Rockwell’s deeply American imagery depicts the four freedoms inherent in the nation’s ideals, and laid down by the founding fathers in “Declaration of Independence” the “U.S. Constitution” and further supported by the authors of *The Federalist Papers*. Freedom of Speech,
Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want, and Freedom from Fear were embodied in both the image and the ideology of an earlier wartime president. Kingsolver recalled for her readers Roosevelt’s version of patriotism and his cautionary warning as the United States became involved in the Second World War. In his “State of the Union Address” of 1941, more generally known as Kingsolver references it, “The Four Freedoms Speech,” that wartime president quantified the appropriate patriotic response for Americans by pointing out that it was both “immature and untrue to ‘brag that America…can hold off the whole world’” (“Reflections on Wartime”). His speech goes on to adversely contrast his regretful and conciliatory bygone tone with the contemporaneous “new wartime motto: ‘We’ll show our enemies we’re more powerful than they are’” (Roosevelt). Rather than seeming hubristic, Roosevelt’s words build on those of the earlier statesman, Benjamin Franklin, when he reminded his twentieth-century listeners that, “[t]hose who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety” (qtd. in “Pennsylvania Assembly”). Kingsolver pointed out that unlike that previous “era of living simply, that others can simply live,” Americans in this new millennium seem to be in a “rush to squash the essential liberties of others and purchase a little temporary safety for ourselves.” As is self-evident from her own experience, “[a]ny spoken suggestions about alternatives to violent retaliation were likely to be called an affront against our country…free speech is un-American… [as emphasised by] our president’s statement ‘Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists’,“ Kingsolver tellingly reminded her readers in “Reflections on Wartime”. She goes on to further reason that “[i]f FDR’s words were published anonymously today… [Roosevelt] would get hate mail” (“Reflections on Wartime”). In The Lacuna she would again hark back to this either/or choice when she points out that a few short
years after Roosevelt’s assuaging words, during the witch-hunting season, his successor Harry Truman would trumpet, “‘Every nation must decide.’ You are standing on one side of that curtain my friend, or else you are on the other” (TL 491). The chain that links Kingsolver’s thoughts from the early years of the century to The Lacuna is visible in “Reflections,” which is Kingsolver’s most powerful newspaper article of 2001, and ably contrasted past glory with future culpability.

**The Lacuna**

The word “lacuna,” from the Latin, means a gap, a chasm or a missing part. It can also signify a mislaid or omitted piece of a manuscript, or a loophole, hiatus or illogicality in what is otherwise a cogent argument. In the Yucatán Peninsula, where Harrison is to meet his eventual fate, it is used also to refer to “a cenote” (524). These “deep hole[s] with limestone cliffs for sides and blue water at the bottom” were used in the Mayan culture as places of sacrifice (524). Each of these meanings, for a lacuna or a cenote, can be applied to all the watershed moments that occur to the central character, Harrison Shepherd, in the narrative. However, his fate is not sealed by the lacuna, as it contains “no devil back there but a place to come up on the other side, a passage [to] the world where you belong” (53). For Kingsolver herself however, a lacuna may not be primarily a passage, but instead infer the gap created by the silence that surrounded the post-9/11 discourse. Kingsolver narratives that precede The Lacuna had displayed a penchant for in-depth explorations of the cracks and fractures within human societies. For example, *The Poisonwood Bible* considers a point previously discussed with regard to Don DeLillo’s novel *The Names* (1982). That text came at the topic of “otherness” from a different perspective, but it too

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39 The curtain referred to is the “Iron Curtain” a term that symbolises the ideological divide between the Eastern and Western sections of Europe.
examined how many Americans living abroad view the “other” and how they in turn are often viewed by those outside their homeland. In *The Lacuna* Kingsolver alters the perspective and the material gap being examined becomes internecine. *The Lacuna* adeptly observes how Americans have been known to regard each other, their contemporaries, and other Americans who hold opinions which differ from the *status quo*. It also looks into the lacunas which can appear within one multifaceted culture like the United States, especially when one hegemonic position is allowed to dominate the whole of a society. Kingsolver contends on her website that the novel “is about all the important things you don’t know – the other side of the story, the piece of history that’s been erased,” the novel is an attempt to fill the hole in the discourse (web).

The piece of history that has been erased is fundamental to any analysis of *The Lacuna*. Kingsolver’s personal back-story is the missing piece or key to the allegorical content of the narrative. Without knowledge of this, the text becomes “very frankly about historical events, culminating in the political witch-hunts that happened in the U.S. in the late 1940s” (see Appendix A). As has been made clear, in her brief article “Jabberwocky” Kingsolver had initially raised the effect right-wing political ideology had had on artists who remember McCarthyism, and she further stressed in interview that “the US lost something in that era that we haven’t gotten back...we’re still dealing with the damage” (Cochrane). According to Kingsolver the political witch hunts of the mid-twentieth century “changed the nature of how we define literature. The rules became ‘write about simple matters of the human heart and avoid matters of state’,” with the result that the “fear of being perceived as ideologues runs so deep in writers of my generation it undoubtedly steers us away from certain subjects” (*High Tide in Tucson* 230). So, though alarmed when the 9/11
political witch-hunters looked in her direction, she could also recognise what was happening and was properly equipped to respond historically through her writing. “It Could Happen Here,” it could happen again, Kingsolver appears to be implying in The Lacuna (Gibbs 201). Placing what Phillip Wegner has termed “neorealist” historical novels within specific political contexts had become a familiar concept during the long nineties (46). As discussed in the Chapter Two analysis, this hypothesis can be seen in Don DeLillo’s Underworld, and this preference is also evidenced and could well have stemmed from the positive public reaction to issues raised in Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987). Similar contemporary social commentary continued to be explored through the historical novels of Thomas Pynchon, Mason & Dixon (1997), and Kingsolver’s earlier text, The Poisonwood Bible (1998), as has been demonstrated succinctly by Wegner (44). In keeping with The Poisonwood Bible’s format, the plot of Kingsolver’s The Lacuna follows the basic schema for historical contextualisation as laid out by George Lukács. Lukács maintained that: “It is the task of the historical novel, not to recount important historical events, but to create images of participants, to show us what social and personal motives prompted people to think, feel and act as they did in a certain period” (Lukács 161-2). Since Kingsolver had previously determined that “fear of being perceived as ideologues” still had an effect on twenty-first-century American writers (HTT 230), the analogous mirroring of Harrison’s experiences in the ’40s and early ’50s with her own encounter with persecution five decades later, was a logical framework for her to contextualise her post-9/11 political argument. In The Lacuna we are met with not only how the fictional writer thought, felt, and acted, but how the actual author felt as well.
Kingsolver’s decision to write *The Lacuna* as an allegorical conception of her experience after 9/11 was something of a professional departure for this writer. In order to determine Kingsolver’s motivation to use the technique it is necessary to examine briefly the roots of allegory itself. Angus Fletcher’s benchmark text *Allegory: the theory of a symbolic mode*, defines the approach as “saying one thing in order to mean something beyond that one thing” (4). An example of this comes clearly to the surface in earlier English allegories like Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Spenser’s *Faerie Queen*, and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, and, in the twentieth century, William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. The figurative and symbolic elements in narratives such as these, while clear to more informed interpreters of both their own epochs and ours, could easily be missed by readers, both then and now. As Fletcher points out:

The whole point of allegory is that it does not need to be read exegetically; it often has a literal level that makes good enough sense by itself. But somehow the literal surface suggests a peculiar doubleness of intention, and while it can, as it were, get along without interpretation, it becomes much richer and more interesting if given that interpretation. (7)

Within the complex allegorical construction of Kingsolver’s novel the protagonist, Harrison Shepherd, stumbles, like the eponymous protagonist in Winston Groom’s 1986 novel *Forrest Gump*, through much of the early to mid-twentieth-century North American history, striking many recognisable landmarks along the way. Kingsolver explains on her website that, because of the nature of the plot, the protagonist “would be singled out because of his suspect past, so I had to give him a past” (kingsolver.com). The background she created for Harrison would not only link him perilously with the Communist Party, but it would also involve him on a personal
level with the exiled Leon Trotsky. In this way she reminded perceptive readers that the twenty-first century was not the only era in which the U.S. involved itself in the concerns of other nations to its own detriment. While readers and reviewers like Maureen Corrigan would not find Harrison “engaging” nevertheless, he is a fully developed and multifaceted character who represents more than one allegorical position in the narrative (Corrigan). Kingsolver sees him as:

a closeted gay man, a child unloved by his mother, a young man who suffers post-traumatic stress after seeing the murder of someone he loves, a very shy person who endures terrible invasions of his life because of fame, and finally, a man whose career and life are destroyed by false accusations. (see Appendix A)

While there are obvious personal allegorical connections to Kingsolver herself in this description, Harrison is also emblematic of the political situation that the American people were confronted with during the post-9/11 period. In order to advance this contention it is necessary to briefly recount some of The Lacuna’s plotline in order to fully discuss the major allegorical aspects of the text.

Given the breadth of the historical detail and the depth of the allegorical contextualisation, recognising all the allegoric concepts in The Lacuna is demanding. But there are a significant number of parallels to be drawn. Although McCarthyism and the 1950s witch-hunts are the most relevant analogies used by Kingsolver to mirror more current persecution, she also included less recognisable episodes from the twentieth century in order to highlight mendacious media exposure. By drawing attention to what could be viewed as terrorist associations which long predate any U.S. concern with Al Qaeda she allows the reader to draw the conclusion that 9/11 was not an isolated terrorist incident regardless of its magnitude. While much of the
history The Lacuna engages with is normally incorporated into the basic U.S. school curriculum, the novel also reminds the reader of some historic events that are outside the conventional American purview, and as such could be in danger of going astray. The story unfolds in 1929 when twelve-year-old Harrison’s life is in turmoil. The product of a marriage between a remote American father and a narcissistic, Mexican mother, he is about to be removed from his familiar world. Having found a more affluent lover, Harrison’s mother, Salomé Huerta (or Sally Shepherd, during her American incarnation), relocates her son to her own homeland, Mexico. “It should have been like a storybook” the reader learns, “[b]ut the storybook [became] The Prisoner of Zenda” (Kingsolver TL 3-4). Troubled and frightened, Harrison realised that he “had better write all this in [his] notebook…so when nothing is left of [them] but bones, someone will know where [they] went” (4). Harrison’s notebooks are pivotal to the plot of The Lacuna. Without them and the evidence they contain, much of the history survived by Harrison would be lost. The loss of one journal, “[t]he notebook that burned” leaves one of the gaps in the story which are implied in the novel’s title (146). “People who make a study of old documents have a name for this very kind of thing, a missing piece. A lacuna it’s called. The hole in the story, and this one is truly missing still” (146). The void in Harrison’s personal history occurred during his adolescent American interlude. By the first of January 1932, the teenage Harrison Shepherd is on the “wrong track, [so his] Mother has found a different set of rails and packed him off on them. Lock, Stock, and barrel, she said with a raised glass” (109). As a consequence, the next few years of his life are spent at boarding-school in Washington D.C. under the limited supervision of his estranged father.

Part Two of The Lacuna serves two distinct purposes. The text foregrounds both political/media reaction to dissenting voices while reminding modern readers of
the horrors suffered by both civilians and former U.S. soldiers during the Great Depression. As the story develops Harrison witnesses the Bonus Marchers protest and the shameful Hoovervilles that the protesters and their families had been reduced to living in due to the economic disaster of the 1930s and the government’s reaction to it. The American Government and the U.S. media’s flagrant disregard for the veterans and their families, along with the uncompromising military approach taken at the time, come reliably to the fore in the novel’s dialogue. As the future author and recorder, Shepherd, saw it, MacArthur’s routing of the Bonus Army families “was shameful to read in [the] newspapers” (142):

The president observed from the White House windows an unusual glow in the eastern sky, and conceded MacArthur was right to proceed with the routing. In his opinion the Bonus Army consist[ed] of Communists and persons with criminal records. The editorial writer applauded MacArthur for sparing the public treasury: the nation was being bleed dry by persons like these who offend public decency…The paper says whatever they want. (143)

Both the media’s and the government’s opinions are aligned in these lines and the sentiment of the piece plainly indicates that these channels have unrestricted right to air their opinions, however disingenuous, or uncompromising they might be. This news report, in a novel that is replete with both actual and fictional accounts such as this, corroborates the contention that Kingsolver’s novel uncovers some shameful American episodes that are not often brought to light, but can in some way be mirrored to modern events. The Bonus Army conflict was a disgraceful historical clash which occasioned armed U.S. military action against America’s own former

40 The Bonus Marchers protest took place in Washington in the spring of 1932. The protestors were ex-servicemen who were due payments by the Government, however, the government managed to delay the expense until 1945 (See: Glass). Hoovervilles were makeshift sites that served as shelters for the dispossessed during the depression. They were named facetiously after President Herbert Hoover.

41 See Kingsolver’s “Note on Historical References” in The Lacuna (v).
WWI soldiers. According to Harrison’s friend, Bull’s Eye, “two million Americans [were] on the road” at the time, asking only for fair treatment from the Government they had previously fought for (130). But that government publicised the protest as an “Unexampled Raid on the Public Treasury” (TL 130) and the privileged class of the depression era questioned why they should be expected to pay a “cash gratuity for the discharge of a public duty” (Padelford 923). By introducing the incident to the narrative Kingsolver invites the reader to examine the correlation between the veterans of that period and those of more current wars.42

It is at this stage in the narrative that the reader is presented with the first of the primary lacunas to appear in the text. A major gap emerges in Harrison’s history through the loss of that journal from 1933. This diary described his final year at “Potomac Academy” when he was approximately seventeen (145). “He didn’t want that little book to reach the public view… Evidently the notebook had something in it to disturb him... It was a slim book of lined paper and cotton-duck binding” (145), which would answer the questions of why Harrison was sent back to Mexico and what “disagreements” occurred that would occasion his removal from his mother’s home, but Harrison has it burned (147). The deliberate loss of the notebook suggests that it contained a secret history of secondary importance to the allegorical content in the story, but which brings to light the severe consequences faced by gay men in mid-twentieth-century United States. The lacuna in question here, the gap that could have been filled by the journal from his seventeenth year, is Harrison’s first realisation of his own homosexuality. As Cuordileone explains the matter, “an excessive preoccupation with – and anxiety about – masculinity [existed] in early Cold War American politics” (516). Consequently the political rhetoric of the period

42 The treatment of veterans is the subject of a number of recent novels, most notably Toni Morrison’s study of a Korean War veteran in Home (2013), and Joyce Carol Oates’ Carthage (2014), an examination of the effect the on-going war in Iraq has had on servicemen and those close to them.
“also reveals a growing concern about the masculinity of American men” (Cuordileone 522), as a result “[l]urking beneath the crisis in masculinity was often the spectre of an expansionist homosexuality” (529). This is the United States that greeted the young Harrison in the 1930s and he saw the writing on the wall by 1946. So before Undersecretary of State, John Puerifoy, could reveal “that most of the ninety-one employees recently dismissed from the State Department were homosexuals” Harrison it seems, took steps to burn his words and remove any written evidence (532). It had been “long rumoured” that “sexual perverts [had] infiltrated our Government” through the diplomatic corps, and that they were “perhaps as dangerous as the actual Communists” (532). So Harrison’s tenuous links to both perfidious realities needed to be permanently silenced. His fears were confirmed early on in that witch-hunting season within the ranks of the Government.

“McCarthy, for one understood all too well the unity of the homosexuality issue, hence his ‘Communist and queer’ epithets” (533), but when, in 1948, the “Kinsey Report” became one of the howlers which woke “up all the others” (TL 544), by calling for “more rigorous efforts to detect and remove homosexuality in government” Harrison knew he had to take a drastic step and remove a significant portion of himself from his personal history (Cuordileone 533). This was a serious and necessary step as the religious and right-wing rhetoric of the era encouraged fellow Americans to not only search for reds under the beds but to remove them from the closets as well. The Rev. Billy Graham “‘praised the patriots who were exposing the pink, the lavenders, and the reds who have sought refuge beneath the wings of the American Eagle,’ Liberals, homosexuals, and Communists had been linked by virtue

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of their common moral weakness” and Harrison, who displayed all three of this perversities, needed to conceal his past or relinquish his present (TL 533).

Another lacuna had also formed around how America and Americans influenced the younger Harrison. The early sections of the text primarily concentrate on his troubling relationship with his mother and his introduction to the people that would have the greatest impact on his life, the Riveras and Leon Trotsky. As Kingsolver pointed out to me, Harrison was unloved by his mother and as a consequence of this neglect much of his time was spent among the servants at the Mexican hacienda of his mother’s paramour, or in a small “[a]partment above a bakery shop” paid for by Salomé’s next lover, “Mr Produce the Cash” (63-4).

Lacking any positive American role models, the Mexican people and culture strongly influence much of Harrison’s character and development. He learns to cook, to swim, and to write, all invaluable skills which will serve him well in later life. As the character matures through childhood and adolescence, the fictional plot becomes populated with the aforementioned historical figures that appear as characters in the text. Frieda Kahlo is first viewed shopping in the “Melchor market,” while her husband, Diego Rivera, paints a mural in the National Palace (TL 85). Using the abilities he learned in the kitchen Harrison becomes invaluable to the artist, Rivera, as a plaster-mixer to support his famed frescoes. Ultimately, Leon Trotsky (Lev) joins the ménage at the Rivera’s Blue House, and it is at this point Shepherd’s journal writing talents come into play. As secretary to Trotsky, an exiled but highly controversial political figure in the 1930s, Harrison is made familiar with much of the ex-Soviet’s political writing along with the intrigues of his personal life. In fact, much of Leon Trotsky’s later life in Mexico is actually drip-fed to the reader through the observations of Harrison Shepherd. Trotsky’s arrival in Mexico City, the Dewey
Commission’s scrutiny of his activities in February of 1937 and initial vindication of his conduct, and Trotsky’s affair with Kahlo, which caused an inevitable break with Rivera, are all included in the text for the reader’s consideration. The first section of the novel ultimately culminates with the assassination of the Bolshevik leader by Stalinists. This murder occurred in Lev’s own home in the Coyoacán area of Mexico City on August 21st 1940, the house where Harrison had also been residing. This far-reaching and complex historical setting cements the extensive background for Kingsolver’s politically charged narrative, and Trotsky is central to the allegory.

In order to write an allegorical novel of this calibre the plot had to contain a convincing protagonist to interact effectively with the authentic historical characters. Maya Jaggi confronted Kingsolver about her portrayal of Leon Trotsky, claiming that some critics view her depiction as “airbrushed” (Jaggi). Kingsolver appears to accept this point recognising that Trotsky was “ruthless in his teens… [and he helped to] over [throw] a monarchy” (ibid). However, she further explained that in The Lacuna she was not providing Trotsky’s biography, but rather developing a backstory for Harrison Shepherd. The sympathetic depiction of Trotsky presented in the novel by this fictional narrator conforms to the research Kingsolver did and “is an honest portrait” of the older Lev as he appeared in the Mexico of the 1930s (ibid). In the novel this former leader of the Red Army is Harrison’s deeply loved friend, and appears in the text as a father figure to the young man. His violent death was the cause of Shepherd’s Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which in turn brings on his later reclusive behaviour. His friend Violet Brown recalls that:

He was the most bashful person I ever did meet, very pained to speak forthrightly of his feelings…The murder unsettled and wrenched something in him badly…he never wanted to talk about that time in his life…He was shy
of the sight of blood, and a loud sound unexpected would set his hand to
trembling. A knife dropped on the floor could put such a haint over him, you
would look all about for what ghost he’d seen. In the summer months
especially, he took spells of hardly leaving his room…we all endured, saying
“Poor Mr. Shepherd has taken the grippe again.” But we knew very well it
was no germ that had brought it on him…it could be anything or nothing, or
just Reg Borden standing in the door with his raincoat on. There appeared no
rhyme or reason. (TL 347-355)

Harrison’s reaction to the vicious and fatal attack on his friend is a “Double Wound”
and thus conforms to portrayals of actual trauma victims as laid down by Cathy
Caruth (Unclaimed Experience 3). For Caruth trauma is an invisible injury,
inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. …trauma is not locatable in
the simple violent or original event…but rather in the way that its very
unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance
– returns to haunt the survivor later on. (3-4)

Kingsolver’s Harrison appears haunted by traumatic events from his past, especially
the violent death of the person that had stood in loco parentis to him. The author has
stated that Harrison is intended to be “a young man who suffers [from] post-
traumatic stress” so it is not difficult to construe that in an intended allegory that
depicts the after effects of the tragedy of 9/11, Trotsky’s death could be seen to
embody the fall of the towers and Harrison to symbolise the reaction of the American
people to that event (see Appendix A). However, a second, less obvious, trauma
impacts on Kingsolver’s American character. During the police investigation of
Trotsky’s murder Harrison discovers the “trunk and boxes under the bed,
gone…every one of the notebooks from the very beginning” gone (TL 331). The loss
of these journals, while less violently dramatic than Trotsky’s death, has a powerful impact on Harrison’s identity. As the backstory moves past Trotsky’s assassination and addresses this additional loss, it seems that Harrison’s “past [has been] entirely stolen,” and here too, we can imagine a correlation (340). For the character, his past has now been eliminated so that “with his pockets full of ash” he reluctantly becomes an “emancipated traveller” (341). However, his recorded history artfully journeys along with him “skulk[ing] in the corners like ghosts” (TL 340-1). This was also true for the post-9/11 United States. Their back-story too, was felt to be legitimately eliminated by the power of such and atrocity. The 9/11 attacks appeared to free the nation of responsibility for past transgressions in the middle-east, but those previous encroachments still “shift like chimeras. Careful words of warning reverse themselves like truth in newspaper stories, becoming their own opposites” (340).

Dower reminds us that “collective trauma was nowhere more protracted than among Americans: partisan politics and media frenzy feasted on fear for year after excruciating year” (291). The possibility of an atrocity such as 9/11 had been mooted as early as 1944 when the Jefferies Report had anticipated “some of the apocalyptic prospects later associated with the war on terror,” just as the threat to Trotsky was apparent to many of the people close to or familiar with the background of the Russian radical (289). The possibility that he would be attacked certainly was not unanticipated by the various governments involved with his exile. However the young American-born, Harrison, like his post-9/11 counterpart, was naïve to any imminent danger. Thus, the strike’s “unassimilated nature” added additional trauma to both terror of the events, and the loss of historical memories (Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 4).

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44 The Jefferies Report is Associated with the “Manhattan Project” which is “A lengthy ‘Prospectus on Nucleonics’ finalized in 1944…endorsed continued U.S. domination in nuclear energy…” (Dower 229).
But the allegorical connections are not limited to merely the mirroring of Harrison with Americans in general. By delineating actual events that occurred between the two prospective leaders of Russia, Stalin and Trotsky, Kingsolver provided herself with another political platform from which to address the reader. Although *The Lacuna* is not intended to be an historical study of twentieth-century Russian politics some brief background material may be helpful with following Kingsolver’s allegory. Following the death of Vladimir Lenin in 1924, both Trotsky and Stalin were prospective leaders of the Communist Party in Russia. Shortly before he died Lenin had made it clear that he felt Stalin was not the man to replace him as leader of the party. He dictated a letter which he hoped would serve as his last will and testament. This document emphatically voiced his reservations with this political colleague. According to Isaac Deutscher, a specialist in Soviet affairs of this era, it was assumed within the Russian Communist party that Trotsky would therefore replace Lenin as leader. In *The Lacuna*, Harrison asks Leon Trotsky why this did not happen: “You were his second in command, with the people’s support. You would have led the revolution to a democratic Soviet Republic... why did Stalin come to power instead of you?” (*TL* 318). Trotsky’s answer to the question is succinct in Kingsolver’s narration. Upon receiving a telegram from Stalin informing him of Lenin’s death on January 21st 1924, Trotsky was led to believe by Stalin that there would be a private funeral the next day and a State ceremony at a later date. As Trotsky was too far away from Moscow he could not return in the allotted time of one day. Consequently, he was not present at what was, in actuality, a large State funeral that was not held the following day, but some days later, and Trotsky would have had time to return. Lev’s fatal “mistake was to believe” Stalin (*TL* 320). “Stalin had lied...and [he] instead of [Trotsky] had spoken at the funeral” (319). Stalin’s
recorded misrepresentation of the facts can be mirrored to some of the fabricated twenty-first century concepts like Weapons of Mass Destruction, and the Soviet leader’s suspect rise to power echoes the dubious 2004 presidential election that saw George W. Bush returned to office. The Bush/Kerry Presidential election could be viewed as “[a]n accident of history that could have gone either way” (318), but perhaps like the Stalin/Trotsky fight for power in the 1920s, “The mistake was to believe him…it was no accident” (320-1).

Like the post-9/11 media frenzy that regularly only presented one perspective, Stalin, too, used the newspapers to further his own ends. Kingsolver draws attention to this and points out how “these howlers” can be used politically to discredit a person’s reputation (376). Harrison’s indignation is apparent when he stresses that “[t]hese newspaper men had never met Lev, yet confidently they discuss his innermost feelings and motives” (156). Those familiar with Kingsolver’s own history can imagine her indignation and feel it resonate within the narrative. Through this fictional simulation she linked her post-9/11 persecution to early twentieth-century Russian politics. Trotsky tells Harrison that:

The newspapers said I refused to come, declining to be disturbed from my vacation. [Stalin] told that story openly... [he spoke reassuringly of] how he accepted the mantle of the people’s trust, when others had shirked it...everyone knew of whom he spoke... [The people] were so afraid. In that moment their keenest desire was to lean on someone who seemed unfailingly

45 American foreign policy dominated the debates during the 2004 presidential election in the U.S. There was much controversy surrounding Bush’s conduct post-9/11, America’s involvement in the war in Iraq and the fallacious search for Weapons of Mass Destruction. Concerns were raised about various aspects of the voting process, particularly concerning absentee ballots (many of which would have been the votes of servicemen and women) and the voting process, especially in Florida where Bush’s brother was governor. It was a concern that these issues might have affected the reported outcome.
They want to believe in heroes...and villains. Especially when very frightened. It’s less taxing than the truth. (TL320-1)

Trotsky had been groomed for power. However, with the help of the media he was tricked, discredited and side-lined by Stalin, and then finally condemned at home in Russia. But while in exile he still had some potent support. In reality, the acknowledged Communist, Leon Trotsky, had obtained a great deal of backing from American liberals. As a direct result of Trotsky’s ostracism, the Dewey Commission was established in the U.S. in March of 1937. It consisted of many well respected intellectuals and scholars, headed up by and named for philosopher and pragmatist, John Dewey:

The group was determined that Trotsky be given a hearing before world opinion in order to defend himself against Stalinist charges that he and his son...had conspired against the lives of Joseph Stalin and other Soviet leaders, had worked with foreign powers against the Soviet government and had organized acts of sabotage in Soviet industries. (Kirker and Wilkins 516)

The 1936 Moscow Trials, and the subsequent Dewey Commission investigation, found the Soviet trials guilty of “deliberate, systematic persecution and falsification. In their final report the Commission came to this conclusion: “We…find the Moscow trials to be frame-ups. We…find Trotsky and Sedov not guilty” (524). Kirker and Wilkins go on to point out that the:

Commission denounced the trial procedures at Moscow, found that the confessions accepted there as evidence were inherently improbable, and declared that Prosecutor Vyshinsky had “fantastically falsified Trotsky's role before, during, and after the October Revolution.” (524)
The Dewey Commission’s verdict was not unanimous however. One of the members, Charlton Beals, resigned from the inquiry stating in the Saturday Evening Post that the Commission itself was “biased” in favour of Trotsky (524). Trotsky’s guilt was again examined after his death, during the post-WWII Nuremberg Trials. So his guilt or innocence remains, in fact, ambiguous and subject to the political imperatives of the different eras during which it was examined. The template used by both authorities however, remains easily comparable to the Communist witch-hunts of the 1950s McCarthy period which directly followed the Nuremberg Trials. It also can be seen to mirror other cover-ups that reach into the latter part of the twentieth century. The similarities finally culminate in the first decade of the twenty-first century with the search for weapons of mass destruction, a particular witch-hunt that Gibbs refers to as “the chimera that spuriously motivated the American war on Iraq” (201), and consequently led to the contentious and controversial trial and execution of Saddam Hussein.


The Lacuna finally arrives at “something you never knew” the political “heart of the story” in “Part 4” (431). In some respects the narrative is presented as two complete and discrete novels fused together which comprise two separate allegorical stories. One is Kingsolver’s own personal recollections of the terrorist attacks and their aftermath, and the other, a mirrored account of the reactive approach to the atrocities taken by the different socio-political factions within the United States. In order to effectively create this narrative exposition the first three sections of the book

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46 Subsequent problems arose which would link the late Trotsky to Rudolf Hess, a point which George Orwell wished to be brought to the attention of those conducting the Nuremberg Trials in 1946. The year Harrison was to come under political scrutiny.

47 Consider the assassinations of the 1960s and the questions that surround them/Watergate in the 1970s/ Reagan and the Iran-contra affair in the 1980s to name but a few.
encompass the early biographical history of Kingsolver’s protagonist, Harrison Shepherd. Initially Kingsolver paints a discerning picture of her protagonist’s unavoidable introduction to, and his minimal involvement with, Communism. Without this back-story the impact of the second segment, beginning at “Part 4,” and the key to the allegory, would have had to have been significantly diminished (343). It is at this point in the text that what happens to Harrison begins to suggest what transpired when Kingsolver “argued for a more nuanced sense of national purpose” (see Appendix A). The method Kingsolver chose was primarily the same historical modus operandi which had been so successful for her in The Poisonwood Bible. But she widened her former approach and as a result there are some conspicuous differences which both further complicate and augment the plot. The author remembers the influence this new stylistic had on her work:

I tried out some new techniques in this novel that I had not seen in fiction, ever before, specifically the construction of a narrative in the form of journal entries that never use the first person pronoun (until the last 2/3 of the novel, after the protagonist has located his identity as a writer. (see Appendix A) This new technique, the occurrence of the first person pronoun, the “I” which appears in the last two thirds of the novel is revealing, as it only occurs in the portion of the text where the allegorical content directly linking Harrison Shepherd to his creator, Barbara Kingsolver, is most in evidence (TL 374). The mirroring is subtle but recognisable if Kingsolver’s personal history has been foregrounded. The people that surround and impact on both the fictional and the actual author are:

in the mood these days for soaring hearts and the clash of battle. Here […] in this country, I watch carefully [and] I square up the corners of my desires and work at the pounding keys until my fingers are stiff […] someone here may
want what I can give. See how the pronoun now stands in the lines I write, tall and square-shouldered. I strive for the stout American declarative, so entirely unaccustomed: I am. (374)

Through the character of Harrison Shepherd, Kingsolver intended to make a powerful declarative and pertinent statement, which would allow for the examination of contemporary American politics and how party-political bias may have influenced the post-9/11 U.S. social structure. But as she was “so entirely unaccustomed” to the use of allegory as a rhetorical devise in order to make a “declarative statement,” both the writer and the reader must “watch carefully” in order to truly see what she is saying (374).

On the receipt of a letter from J. Edgar Hoover unceremoniously dismissing Harrison from the minor government position he had held during the war, and a write-up in *The Associated Press* accusing him of “un-Americanism” (592), the formerly respected author ponders his exposé in a discussion with Violet Brown:

They seem so thrilled to pounce, these press men. Not before when I was nobody of consequence, only now. Mrs Brown says envy plays into it. “There are some who’d hardly lift a finger for kindness, but they would haul up a load of rock to dump on some soul they think’s been too lucky. They take it as duty, to equal out life’s misery.” “They think I’ve been too *lucky*?” She sighed. “Mr Shepherd, it’s what you said a hundred times, they don’t know a person’s whole story. They think you sit in your little room making up tales and getting bags of money for it…they’re put out with you for having an easier life.” “Mrs Brown, who in this world has an easier life?” “I wonder that too.” (592-3)
It is not a great leap to liken this diary insert from December 18th 1948 with the many harsh remarks made about Kingsolver and discussed earlier in this chapter. She too had had to face her own personal “Trial by Headline” (627) and attempt to out-shout the “Universal declaration of rights of the howlers” or silence her recalcitrant voice as Harrison ultimately decided to do (TL 633). Consequently, in this instance it is not difficult to argue that the pronouns used, “I” or “you,” are in fact anaphoric, but rather than referring back to the fictional writer, Harrison Shepherd, they instead refer back within the allegorical framework to The Lacuna’s author herself, Barbara Kingsolver (592-3).

Although Kingsolver’s use of allegory requires some foregrounding in order to make the reader entirely aware of the symbolic quality of The Lacuna, it has to be admitted that on a personal level the use of the device has helped Kingsolver to make sense of her 9/11 experiences. Northrop Frye denoted a writer as “being allegorical whenever it is clear that he is saying, ‘by this I also (allos) mean that’” (90). On this basis once you are made conscious of its use there is no mistaking the allegorical richness of The Lacuna. Although Kingsolver made the symbolic connection between Harrison Shepherd and herself abundantly clear in many of her personal interviews following publication, the comparison seems to have been largely overlooked in the critical reception of the text. Perhaps, as Frye points out, allegory can over-complicate the reading experience for reviewers. He goes on to explain this in greater depth. He reasoned that “[t]he commenting critic is often prejudiced against allegory without knowing the real reason, which is that continuous allegory prescribes the direction of his commentary, and so restricts its freedom” (Frye 90). It could be argued that, in order to be free of any engagement with the text on a political level reviewers of The Lacuna regularly failed to note the allegorical content
even with Kingsolver’s explicit indication that “the relationship of [her] images to examples and precepts …indicated how a commentary on [her text] should proceed” (90). Liesl Schillinger of the “Sunday Book Review” for the *New York Times* seemed to be somewhat aware of the back-story that fed into the plot of *The Lacuna*, but he failed to fully pass on that knowledge to his readers. After ten paragraphs which review much of the plotline, Schillinger’s conclusion alludes to Kingsolver’s novel’s alternative purpose:

*The Lacuna* can be enjoyed sheerly for the music of its passages…or for its portraits of real and invented people; or for its harmonious choir of voices. But the fuller value of Kingsolver’s novel lies in its call to conscience and connection…it is a *tableau vivant* whose story resonates in the present day, albeit with different players. Through Shepherd’s resurrected notebooks Kingsolver gives voice to truths whose teller could express them only in silence. (3)

Schillinger’s review makes it seem that some discretion was needed around the allegorical subtext of *The Lacuna*. After all, at a time when even the “the 9/11 Commission’s investigation itself was impeded by the secrecy game” caution with regard to a frankly stated political allegory was probably politic (Dower 39). Unfortunately, this caused a lacuna in the critiques of the novel. Although, as Harrison would argue “the most important part of any story is the missing piece,” if the piece missing happens to be knowledge of an allegorical plotline this only complicates the reading experience (*TL* 364). Consequently, Kingsolver’s expository approach becomes opaque if her intention or op-ed articles and essays have not been foregrounded. Previously regarded as “something new: a political novelist who is careful not to step on anyone’s toes” all considered, she does not continue to tread
lightly in *The Lacuna* (Siegel10). Paradoxically there is a lacuna right there between the reader, the text, and the writer, as the narrative can be and has been read, even by experienced critics, without seeming to recognise the symbolic significance within the plot. A further reviewer, Maureen Corrigan, admitted to being “mystified” (Corrigan) by the novel. She argued that “when masters of post-modern historical fiction…shake up received narratives about the past, it is with the intention of making readers see something fresh, something larger – even mythic – in familiar events. Kingsolver falls short of this ambition…” (Corrigan). Understood or not, Kingsolver’s intention was to make her readers “see something fresh” in the correlation between these historical and contemporary events. She remains adamant that her objective was to hide nothing and that her personal opinion is “not ‘smuggled,’ it’s very obvious” (see Appendix A). Kingsolver set out to write a novel that would perceptibly “examine the modern American political psyche… about…infamy and privacy, the role of the media in shaping public opinion, and its penchant for passing on gossip as news” (Kingsolver website). Just as Harrison affirms that both he and Frida Kahlo knew the power “these [media] howlers” had, Kingsolver too, was aware of their ability to quell dissenting voices, no matter how opaquely they were introduced (*TL* 376). The power of the press along with other symptoms of government control had become personally familiar to this writer during the post-9/11 era and she makes no mystery of her wish to expose it when she discusses *The Lacuna*.

It is noticeable from the reviews it received that *The Lacuna* has been viewed literally and that the allegorical content, the “doubleness” as Fletcher called it, has for some reason eluded most present day readers (7). This should not be entirely unexpected considering Kingsolver’s in-depth and dominant depiction of mid-
twentieth-century political history. The plot of the novel can either stand alone or “get along” as Fletcher observes “without interpretation” and remain an interesting and absorbing historical text (7). What is most remarkable though is the lack of engagement with the allegorical content of the text after Kingsolver revealed it as her intended literary approach to the subject of 9/11 literature. Since The Lacuna first appeared in print, Kingsolver has time and again made this claim, but the novel has been continuously overlooked as a 9/11 text in favour of more overt narratives. A brief overview of Kingsolver’s many interviews in which she categorically states that her objective when writing this novel was to “explore why it is…that a large part of America is uncomfortable with challenging the status quo,” could have made the allegorical implications within the narrative compelling for analysts (Holmquist 11). As the use of allegory is not unusual when addressing sensitive political areas in fiction, it might have been expected during this emotional period that at least one American writer would have used the device to examine political reaction to the attacks and their aftermath. As recently as the nineteen nineties, allegory had been used effectively as a literary lens through which contemporary American politics could be closely observed. Gary Johnson employed Northrop Frye’s interpretation of the literary devise in order to examine its presence in Philip Roth’s American Pastoral (1997). Johnson’s astute observations of Roth’s text using Frye’s analysis are also pertinent when addressing the possible critical approaches that could be used to discuss The Lacuna. As explained by Johnson, Frye claimed that “the modern critic is more comfortable with the “ironic and paradoxical” rather than the allegorical because the former are “more consistent with the modern literal view of art…as withdrawn from the explicit statement” (236). Many post-9/11 novels seem to hold back in some way from explicit realism, and instead use the implicit formula
that makes up the alternative history. This method has been further classified as “counterfactual” (Gibbs 201). Post-9/11 texts that view the world in this way have been ably analysed in Gibbs *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (2014), and need no further defining here. Gibbs argues that one of the agreed purposes of alternative scenarios is that they can be used “in order to demonstrate that historic actuality is thoroughly non-deterministic and highly contingent” (203). Certainly alternative histories involve choices that don’t always produce the same result, which is why allegory in this instance might be a more constructive approach. Most allegories, by their very definition, examine a history that cannot be altered.

However, sometimes “history cleaves and for one helpless moment stands still, like the pause when the ax splits a log and the two halves rest on end waiting to fall” (*TL*392). It is in this cleaving, this lacuna, that we can view what has happened before in similar circumstances and can seek to alter current events. Allegory reflects the “doubleness” and points out that it has happened here (Fletcher 7). What the allegorical author strives to ensure is that we remember, so that it does not happen again.

By correlating these two specific phases of American history Kingsolver draws to mind shameful episodes which remain firmly within the realm of living memory. She uses this parallel experience and echoes Updike by suggesting that the United States, as a nation, should progress and learn from its historical past, rather than insistently repeating a dark period. Jameson too, in *The Political Unconscious*, drew attention to this Cold War era, which has so intrigued Kingsolver. His assessment raised in the final decades of the twentieth century contrasts strongly with the issues which had concerned William James in the first decade of that century. Jameson points out:
that great ideological rivalry between capitalism and communism, which [is],
no less passionate and obsessive than that which, at the dawn of modern
times, seethed through the wars of religion, [and] marks the final tension of
our now global village. (Jameson 80)

Kingsolver used *The Lacuna* to depict the rivalry signified by both James’s and
Jameson’s now prophetic twentieth-century words. The concepts and ideas evoked
by both these theorists had culminated in the events of September 2001. But they
continue on well into the twenty-first century and regrettably give rise to the new
millennium’s current bogeyman. In order to evoke a further and perhaps more
dangerous tension in our technologically established global village Kingsolver’s text
reminds the reader of this earlier, yet still well-remembered, modern day persecution.
She employed her fiction to promote the idea that something other than the
overwhelming advancement of globalised western ideology could be possible.
Kingsolver’s background naturally drew her to this methodology. Her own
experiences in the autumn of 2001 and those subsequently, seem to have made it
apparent to her that many Americans remain politically ignorant of the effect their
government’s actions have on the rest of the world. The ethos of Kingsolver’s post-
9/11 articles and her post-9/11 novel were the same, but stylistically her approach
became more subtle as the dust settled and the decade advanced.

If the allegorical content is not fully acknowledged *The Lacuna* can indeed
appear unduly complicated and its characters somewhat stilted. Readers seem
particularly disappointed in the character of Harrison Shepherd. He, along with some
of the other characters in the novel, is regarded as one-dimensional and not
“engaging” (Corrigan). This could indicate, as Frye has contended, that “[u]nder the
excitement of a particular occasion [in this case the events that followed 9/11]
familiar ideas become sense experiences” (90). In *The Lacuna* the thrust of what the author was attempting to say supersedes the formation of endearing and engaging protagonists. Although the evidence of her previous work suggests that Kingsolver is skilled in character creation, the allegorical indications appear to be her primary concern in *The Lacuna*. Here her characters are used as symbols to expatiate a plot whose primary intention is to speak allegorically.

As the world moved forward into the second decade of the new millennium, and the political manoeuvrings of the Bush administration, now discredited in many ways, Kingsolver’s allegorical interpretation became increasingly more palatable. In interview with Maya Jaggi, Kingsolver alluded to her concern about *The Lacuna*. Upon the election of Barack Obama she wondered if her new allegorical novel: would become irrelevant. But it wasn’t a day before the Fox News howlers took up the call that Barack Obama wasn’t born in the US, and cries of ‘communism’ and ‘don’t mess with my health care’. The book is still acutely relevant and its philosophy still remains germane in 2013. (n. pag.)

Kingsolver’s novel, therefore, stands with worthy predecessors. Like other contrary political and socially-minded writers before her, the literature she produces “doesn’t tell you what to think. It asks you what you think” and in *The Lacuna* Kingsolver is asking you to think historically in order to gain some perspective on what you think about contemporary events (Hesse 1). By offering a synopsis of the period, and including the Moscow Trials in her allegorical analysis, Kingsolver was following a strong literary and historical theme previously addressed by George Orwell in the classic allegorical text *Animal Farm* (1945). The Russian revolution and the subsequent spurious Moscow trials, which were contemporaneous with Orwell’s worldview, are the basis for his symbolic representation of the Soviet Union. Not
unlike Kingsolver’s “vow to use [her post-9/11 experiences] to make something really important” (Holmquist 11), Orwell claimed in a slim volume, aptly titled *Why I Write*, that one of the main reasons that he went into print was “because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing” (8). *Animal Farm*, Orwell goes on to clarify, “was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole” (10). The allegory in Orwell’s *Animal Farm* is unmistakeable to most mature readers, while the historical element in Kingsolver’s novel makes her use of the allegorical mode more ambiguous. However, her intentions were the same as those expressed more than sixty years earlier by Orwell. She too “had always been interested in testing the relationship between art and politics…and wondered] how we humans can look at evidence of something terrible right in front of our faces and…refuse to see it” (Holmquist 110).

“In the beginning were the howlers” (*TL3*).

“In the beginning were the howlers” is the phrase that opens Kingsolver’s first novel since the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon and the verbal assaults on herself (3). The bellowing would “start with just one…That would start the others near him, nudging them to bawl along with his monstrous tune…As it was in the beginning, so it is every morning of the world” (3). Although the inference implied in the text can clearly be understood to indicate that Kingsolver is conjuring up for the reader an image of howler monkeys in Isla Pixol, Mexico, when the picture is viewed allegorically and analysed politically it can also be construed to depict the media Howlers who attempted to out-roar rational post-9/11 voices like Kingsolver’s. Howler monkeys, deemed to be the loudest land mammal, provide an
all too easy analogy for the noisy senseless clamour regularly raised by the media. The position being taken as the novel progresses implies that a noise similar to that of these monkeys is often used by mass media to drown out opinions which run contrary to the one their faction follows. “[B]ut the newsmen can’t make [a thing] true by saying so, even by saying it many times” (652) argues Violet Brown from inside the narrative. Kingsolver uses Brown to “speak for the man who keeps quite” (667), to create the counter-narrative and explain the “times you have inherited” (670).

In *The Lacuna* Kingsolver provides a background to the inherited history of Americans by offering several interconnected stories from a number of differing perspectives or vantage points. It is therefore, a novel with more than one possible beginning and ending. Kingsolver presents her reader with choices: “Here is another way to begin the story, and this one is also true” claimed the narrator early on in the text (6). “The rule of the fishes is the same as the rule of the people: if the shark comes, they will escape, and leave you to be eaten” (6) or force you to “burrow through rock and water – [through the] lacuna” (666). These cryptic opening and closing positions remain obscure and it is up to the reader to decide whether Harrison has worked past his fear or allowed himself to be consumed by it; to know whether he has “save[d] [him]self” or been left “to be eaten” (7). By the end of the novel Harrison Shepherd has undoubtedly leapt into a lacuna, but each person who reads the narrative must decide whether this action has liberated or devoured the writer. Each reader must decide if Harrison’s story is merely intended as an outlet to allow Kingsolver to rail against the unjust persecution of an individual or if there are more complex objectives. If, as Machosky contends, “allegorical expression has a lot to say about the problem of agency” then Kingsolver used Harrison Shepherd as her
agent in order to compel readers to recognise the damage that could be caused by manipulative government and media sources (481). Through him she symbolically highlighted the events which incorporated her own personal experience following 9/11. When the metaphorical sharks came after Kingsolver in the autumn of 2001, she, like Harrison, was left to form her own means of escape or be devoured.
Conclusion

In the conclusion to his comprehensive study of post-9/11 novels *Out of the Blue*, Kristiaan Versluys envisaged that:

It is safe to assume that in the future new works will join the existing corpus of 9/11 fiction. At the same time, it is impossible to predict exactly what direction this new fiction will take or whether 9/11 will produce a novel of such stature that it will become the indexical landmark for all other 9/11 fiction…It is also a matter of mere conjecture whether the new 9/11 fiction will remain the preserve of male white writers or whether it will be marked by more gender and ethnic diversity or acquire a more outspoken international dimension. Yet whatever form the new 9/11 fiction will take, one may venture the guess that almost eight years after the events, the immediate shock has worn off and that as a result, the concerns expressed will be less directly related to the experience of trauma. (183)

This study of post-9/11 American fiction was first visualised in 2009, the point at which Versluys concluded his thorough and thought-provoking examination of the novels of 9/11. The intention when this work began was to examine some existing texts by prominent American writers that discernibly engage with 9/11 and its after-affects. The objective was to offer a close reading of the chosen novels and to listen diligently not to the traumatised but to the political voice within the text. As a consequence of the thesis restrictions narratives have been omitted from this examination that might profitably have been studied in a similar manner to the ones that has been employed here. This may well indicate that a larger examination of the political voice within the genre is warranted. The most obvious omissions from
within the 2001-2009 timeframe are Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004) and *Exit Ghost* (2007), and Paul Auster’s *Man in the Dark* (2008). In *Exit Ghost*, for example, Roth reintroduces the reader to a character he first created in 1979’s *The Ghost Writer*. In a manner reminiscent of Updike’s *Bech* series, Roth divulged to reviewer Hermione Lee that in the earlier narrative he was “concocting a half-imaginary existence out of the actual drama of [his] life,” and engaged in “an act of impersonation” when he imagined his protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman (n. pag). As the plot of the more recent novel unfolds, Roth’s alter-ego, Zuckerman, re-emerges from a lengthy hiatus in the Berkshires Rip Van Winkle-like, “on the corner of Sixth Avenue and West 54th” (*Exit Ghost* 15). Initially *Exit Ghost* and its main protagonist do appear to have a significant contribution to make to the 9/11 discussion. Roth effectively imagines the anxiety and traumatic repercussions the terrorist attacks had on contemporary New Yorkers and on Americans in general. However, not unlike Updike and DeLillo’s additions to the 9/11 field he was unable to sustain the initial momentum. As we have seen with both Foer and DeLillo’s contributions to the genre, amnesia and retreat have been powerful figures for politics post-9/11, and here Roth too, displays this familiar trend.

If we allow Irving Howe’s twentieth century assessment to set the criteria for the post-9/11 political novelist, Roth’s and Auster’s texts, along with the more thoroughly analysed work of Updike, DeLillo, Foer and Kingsolver, all seem to “have been unable to sustain a [political] theme” (Howe 161). They fail to meet the challenges Howe laid down; his test indicates that the political writer should:

[M]ake ideas or ideologies come to life, to endow them with the capacity for stirring characters into passionate gestures and sacrifices, and even more, to create the illusion that they have a kind of independent motion, so that
they themselves – those abstract weights of idea or ideology – seem to become active characters in the political novel. (21)

Of the novels that appeared during the period between the fall of the towers and the autumn election of 2008, none completely fulfils these requirements. However, the ones chosen here for examination seemed to me to have, in some perceptible way, attempted to take a step beyond the trauma of the occasion. As Versluys had presumed in 2009, I assumed when this study began that future work in the 9/11 field would no longer be monopolised by the concept of trauma. However, many American novels that cover contemporary times appear to be haunted by the trauma of 9/11. Sprawling epics of generational conflict like Jonathan Franzen’s Freedom (2010) seem shadowed by the event, as does Thomas Pynchon’s Bleeding Edge (2013). Similarly, while female writers of the calibre of Lorrie Moore and Joyce Carol Oates have introduced a welcome view of the impact the Iraq War has had on those directly affected by the Government’s military response, the points they raise are nonetheless often weighed down by more domestic issues.48 And, even though Don DeLillo’s reengagement with the genre, Point Omega (2010), has gone on to foreground some of the more disturbing aspects of Bush’s war on terror, there is a perceptible incompleteness within his fictional argument and thus the narrative miscarries its political message by failing to “penetrate human emotion” (Howe 21). Perhaps of all the writers to address the after-effects of 9/11 during the second decade of the twenty-first century, Amy Waldman is the one who presented the most satisfying portrayal of post-9/11 American life. In her 2011 novel, The Submission, she plainly demonstrates that after the attacks there was “a new, ominous strain of intolerance in the land” (164). And by the end of the narrative she projects a logical

48 Moore’s Gate at the Stairs appeared in 2010 and Oates has recently offered Carthage (2014).
visualisation of what the future may hold with regard to East/West communication if the United States maintains their current political strategies.

As this study has demonstrated, each of the four post-9/11 novels analysed inheres different, but distinctive, political undertones. Foer’s caricature of American innocence, Oskar, confirms the deep-rooted impression of America’s pre-9/11 naiveté. However, when both the character and the novel are analysed they emerge as much more complex than the reductive metaphor that they can appear to be. The prosaic introductory question “What The?” indicates a sincere attempt to engage with what happened on September 11th 2001, albeit in a stunned manner (1). As has been made evident in this study, both Oskar and the question being asked are essentially used as a mask to conceal the unpalatable political observations deeply embedded in the text. The author has given utterance to his child character who personified the paranoia evident in the prevailing political discourse of the period. He has also used this intelligent, but apparently guileless figure, to highlight how the then government’s pseudo-ingenuous military response impacted on U.S. society as a whole. Oskar’s posited innocence forces an examination of the reasons surrounding the prevailing atmosphere of distrust and suspicion, while the aphasia displayed by the child’s grandparents is an emphatic reminder that America was not the first nation singled out to suffer in this way. By inviting his readers to consider the blameless victims of former aggressive military campaigns, Foer enticed them into an engagement with the past in order to help them to re-imagine the 9/11 attacks from a different and more discriminating perspective, and to consider how their own reaction might impact on everyone’s future.

Don DeLillo’s novels prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks tended to engage strongly with the negative political and economic truths of U.S. globalisation.
Chapter Two identified a strident political voice in much of this author’s highly regarded late twentieth-century work and revealed a theme that leads directly to the events of September 11th 2001. DeLillo’s “In the Ruins of the Future” links twenty-first-century American political concerns with western economic aggressiveness, and clearly states that American arrogance drew the fury of the terrorists, and that their anger was directed at that physical embodiment of U.S. power, the Twin Towers. However, *Falling Man*, instead of being the anticipated “indexical landmark” (Versluys 183), from the “Man who invented 9/11,” offers an introspective view of post-9/11 America not dissimilar to the more cautious work of less noteworthy writers (*Junod Esquire*). As has been shown in this study, DeLillo positioned his political opinions as marginalia in the narrative, placing the main thrust of his story in the trauma of the era. This study probes beneath the micro story of Keith and Leanne Neudecker’s trauma, which has been the main focus of other examinations, and listened instead to the macro details presented in the foreign accents of the “other” characters. It has particularly analysed the cadence of the European, Martin Ridnour, and that of the Muslim extremist, Hammad. But it has also listened closely to the modified tone of the American children of the text. In a manner similar to Foer’s characterisation of Oskar, DeLillo has used his child protagonists as a metaphor for American innocence.

Building on John Updike’s discussion of 9/11 prior to writing *Terrorist* (2006), his initial intention to attempt a sensitive portrayal of the “other” in American society becomes apparent. This analysis extensively examines *Terrorist* and engages with Updike’s concerns for those characters, and in this context has gone a step further than other examinations of 9/11 work by examining the root of his alternate analyses. In an in-depth investigation of the post-9/11 writing produced
by Updike, some interesting anomalies became evident. The research showed that within the short story “Varieties of Religious Experience” (2002) Updike had made a much more emphatic political statement than he had projected in his later novel. By choosing that title for his short story, Updike implied that the argument he would present was formed from concepts first mooted by America’s foremost twentieth-century philosopher, William James. James’ earlier version of *Varieties of Religious Experience* has been examined in this study in order to appreciate how Updike used this work to support his own impression of alternative philosophical and religious principles.

As Kristiaan Versluijs had anticipated in his concluding remarks for *Out of the Blue*, Barbara Kingsolver’s response to the events of 9/11 are “less directly related to the experience of trauma” (183), or at least, not the same sense of trauma that had seemed to silence many of her fellow writers. As has been shown here, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 Kingsolver made some apparently unpalatable political statements that impacted negatively on her life. But rather than presenting a novel that candidly engages with the events of the day itself, Kingsolver’s *The Lacuna* (2009) is a direct response to the political aftermath. It exposes the disproportionate hostility she experienced when she “argued for a more nuanced sense of national purpose” (see Appendix A). With *The Lacuna*, Kingsolver both identified and attempted to fill a void in the 9/11 discourse. By using her novel to allegorically contrast the public and media reaction to the op-ed articles she published in the autumn of 2001 with the anti-Communist witch-hunts of the McCarthy era, she has attempted something unique within the 9/11 genre. Kingsolver’s narrative highlighted that reactionary intolerance of any shade or hue should be considered dangerous and offensive in a nation based on the
Enlightenment doctrine that all men are created equal, and that central to that belief, is the right of freedom of expression.

The twenty-first century equivalent to Harriett Beecher Stowe, Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, or Kurt Vonnegut, has not emerged yet in this new millennium, and there may be more than one explanation as to why writers have drifted away from direct engagement with public issues. Perhaps as Don DeLillo so notably argued in *Mao II*, novelists are no longer able to “influence mass consciousness” to the same extent (157). They do not occupy the cultural position they held when Stowe condemned slavery. Now, and like DeLillo’s 1990s character, author Bill Gray, presciently contended, “The dangers [terrorists] represent equals [writers’] failure to be dangerous” (*Mao II* 157). These prophetic words appear true, for when DeLillo entered the post-9/11 epoch and more clearly saw “terror,” his art provoked a much “less [political] impact” (157). Although the political tensions writers face may be weighty, as Barbara Kingsolver’s allegorical narrative indicates, today’s novelists still should share with their predecessors the ability to represent the twenty-first century American worldview. Authors remain arbitrators of public opinion, and as such, are looked to and expected to put forward various ways of looking at the world which can often be ways that governments or hegemonies might prefer to gag.
Appendix A

E-mail Interview conducted by Clair Sheehan with Barbara Kingsolver, November 27th 2013.

Sheehan: Would I be right in thinking that *The Lacuna* serves two purposes: first, even as Freda enabled an unwitting Harrison to smuggle his journals out of Mexico through her artwork, you have ‘smuggled’ your political opinions to the public through your own art; second, the novel also serves as an example for other writers who may wish to raise a political voice in a post-9/11 environment? Would you please comment on these hypotheses?

Kingsolver: I should hope *The Lacuna* serves as many purposes as it has had, and will have, readers. All novels serve many purposes. Some of them that I imagine specifically for this novel are enjoyment and escape, and perhaps empathy for people like Harrison Shepherd in some of his many different facets – a closeted gay man, a child unloved by his mother, a young man who suffers post-traumatic stress after seeing the murder of someone he loves, a very shy person who endures terrible invasions of his life because of fame, and finally, a man whose career and life are destroyed by false accusations. Also, the novel provides a glimpse into many different kinds of historical moments – revolutionary Mexico, bohemian, artistic Mexico, the cheerful patriotism of the US during World War II, and so on.

This novel is very frankly about historical events, culminating in the political witch-hunts that happened in the U.S. in the late 1940’s. I did not make up these events, they are not my opinions. I personally find that period quite fascinating, and think it
has had lasting effects on art – that’s an opinion. It’s not “smuggled,” it’s very obvious. If I weren’t interested, I wouldn’t have devoted seven years to researching that history, and writing about it.

When I’m writing, I think only about craft: language, plot, voice, character, theme. I tried out some new techniques in this novel that I have not seen used in fiction, ever before, specifically the construction of a narrative in the form of journal entries that never use the first-person pronoun (until the last 2/3 of the novel, after the protagonist has located his identity as a writer). This sort of thing is very difficult, and requires intense concentration. I don’t waste any energy thinking about how the novel will be received by readers and writers after I'm finished. I write with no sense of my own person, as an “example” or anything else.

Sheehan: In your book of essays High Tide in Tucson (1995) you state that at the time of the Gulf War you went into political exile in the Canaries. But you came back to “face the tyranny of words [vowing to love America] and never shut up” (235). Many of the essays in this volume raise issues which are equally as contentious as those that you wrote after the 9/11 attacks. However, I find no analogous tyranny of words against what you had written during the Gulf War and the extreme reaction to your voice post 9/11. This seems to indicate that, pre-9/11, writers had more autonomy around what they wrote. Do you feel this is a fair assessment?

Kingsolver: For a few months after the 9/11 attacks, many people in the US were very frightened and the public discourse took on a cast of hyper-patriotism and willingness to sacrifice freedom of speech in favor of perceived safety. Because I
published a number of op-ed pieces during that time that argued for a more nuanced sense of national purpose, I became a scapegoat. But that sense of emergency faded after about a year. I’m convinced that if I published more or less exactly the same editorials now, I would not be targeted as I was then. It was temporary. I would not be willing to generalise about anything that changed permanently for writers after 9/11.

Sheehan: In your 2010 interview with Irish Times columnist Kate Holmquist you acknowledge that you underwent a period of persecution, led chiefly by the conservative media within the United States. This persecution appears to have been directed at articles you had written in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. How long did the persecution continue? Are there repercussions from that period today?

Kingsolver: See above. I endured certain kinds of public scorn, and a few serious threats, for about one year after that September. Some of it persisted, in certain kinds of media, but only because of a lack of imagination in those quarters. (Eventually they went onto find other scapegoats, e.g., the Dixie Chicks.) I do not believe any of that criticism had anything to do with my literary work, just the handful of op-ed pieces. The people who sent me hate mail did so entirely on hearsay – Rush Limbaugh, for instance, had apprised them of my bad character. The spokespeople for radical fundamentalism don’t read literary novels.
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