

Blurry Close-ups – American Literature and 9/11

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In the next half hour I'll be talking about the representation, or perhaps more precisely: the seeming *lack* of representations, of 9/11 in American literature.

An important aspect about 9/11 is that the event belongs to us all. When we say 9/11, we not only speak of the actual attacks on World Trade Center and the Pentagon, but also of the global media event where people throughout the world simultaneously saw the unfolding events, while being cut off from the physical attack. Everyone witnessed the event, and everyone to some extent experienced its traumatizing effect on their own body. Of course, I don't mean to compare the experience of the TV audience with the 3000 victims or their families, but it's a fact that 9/11 is woven inextricably together with the visual representation of the event, and that we all therefore to some extent took part in the event.

So we all have a part to play in the construction of the collective memory of 9/11. This is also a point made by the American author Don DeLillo in an interesting essay from December 2001: »In the Ruins of the Future«. DeLillo's essay deals with just this struggle to create a collective narrative of 9/11; a so-called counter-narrative which can oppose both the official version of 9/11 and the oversimplified narratives about the event which were brought to us by the mass media in the days following the attack – memorably characterized by Susan Sontag as »self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions«.

In his essay DeLillo points to the Internet as a possible reservoir for such collective counter-narratives, and anyone who has googled 9/11 in an idle moment and encountered some of the millions of pages with alternative interpretations and wild conspiracy theories will know that he's got a point. But of course the novelist Don DeLillo also points to the novel as a natural medium for counter-narratives, and in what follows I shall take a closer look at how the American novel has related to 9/11 and its aftershocks.

It has been pointed out again and again that the cover of DeLillo's massive novel *Underworld* (1997) appears to be a spooky prophecy of 9/11. The photo on the cover is from 1972 and shows the newly constructed twin towers which almost seem to grow into the sky. As a counterpoint to these monuments of capitalism, the foreground of the picture contains a small church tower, and this counterposing of capital and faith seems especially pertinent in light of 9/11, where 19 religious fanatics attacked the very heart of Western consumerism. In a further accumulation of symbolism, the cross in the foreground is mirrored in the bird which from our perspective seems headed for one of the towers, like a plane on a collision course.

The idea of *Underworld* as a prophecy of 9/11 is only strengthened by DeLillo's previous novels, such as *Players* and *Mao II*, where he has written extensively about both the heavenward arrogance of the twin towers and the nature of terrorism. Already before the attack in 2001, DeLillo seemed predestined to write a novel about the cataclysmic event, and expectations were high when his novel *Falling Man* was published in May last year.

The cover of *Falling Man* is a sort of inversion of the cover of *Underworld*. As is to be expected, World Trade Center appears once again, but in a radi-

cally different form. In fact, one has to look closely to spot the twin towers at all. On the front of the book all we see is a photograph of a blue sky over a cloud cover. The photo is clearly shot from an airplane and gives us unpleasant associations to the four airplanes transformed by the terrorists into deadly missiles. There does seem to be a subtle allusion to the twin towers in the two vertical lines that run down the middle of the title, but we have to look at the back of the book before the World Trade Center itself appears. As the only part of Manhattan, the twin towers rise above the clouds, once again emphasizing the almost unnatural character of the building. At the same time, the photo refers to a famous aerial photograph from 1928, where the Woolworth-building – at that time New York’s tallest skyscraper – breaks through the clouds in a similar fashion.

So on the one hand, the World Trade Center seems to be the actual subject of the cover of *Falling Man*, but on the other hand, it’s impossible to ignore the peripheral placement of the towers, which constitutes a striking contrast to the cover of *Underworld*, where the towers are front and center, and are almost pushed into the viewer’s face. Considering the self-proclaimed theme of *Falling Man* – 9/11 and the days after – the twin towers seem strangely absent from the cover, and their peripheral placement is symptomatic of most American fiction about 9/11: It doesn’t tackle 9/11 head on, and sometimes it can be outright hard to spot the event. The cover of *Falling Man* thus unwittingly provides an accurate image of how little of this important event American authors have so far been able to show us.

American literature does have a solid tradition of political novels that in a passionate and intelligent manner delve into various historical and political

subjects. Prominent examples include Thoreau's *Walden*, John Dos Passos' USA-trilogy, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. In light of this proud tradition, one could reasonably expect a veritable boom of passionate and acute novels about 9/11, but here seven years after the event the expected boom hasn't occurred. There have been plenty of so-called 9/11-novels, to be sure, but considering the global implications of the event it would have been reasonable to expect an enlargement of the perspective. However, instead of the expected expansion we have witnessed a reduction. And instead of the righteous fury we have come to expect from previous American novels, we have witnessed a retreat, and pertinent analyses of the event have to be sought in other media, such as film or the Internet. The novel genre has mostly had remarkably little to say of the event and its political and social ramifications. Not that fiction writers are necessarily obliged – or even qualified – to explain the terrorist attack, but nevertheless they're often the ones we turn to in our quest for counter-narratives that can put events into human perspective. In the case of 9/11, though, the individual perspective dominates the foreground to such an extent that the social and historical context fades out of sight.

DeLillo's *Falling Man* is a good example of this tendency. The novel portrays the married couple Keith and Lianne, who had split up but get together again after the attack. After having escaped from the burning towers, Keith seeks a safe harbor and returns to Lianne and their son Justin, and the rest of the novel depicts their attempt to come to terms with each other and with the unthinkable events on September 11.

Of the time before 9/11 one of characters says: »That's another world, the one that makes sense«. Something has been shaken loose after the fall of the towers, both in the individual characters and the surrounding society. After 9/11 all that is solid has melted into air, and the rootless main characters try to find solid ground in a newly senseless world.

A central theme in the novel is therefore the attempt to create a semblance of order in the new, confused world; to hang onto or to construct some sort of meaning in the rampant meaninglessness. This has always been an important theme for DeLillo, but in his earlier novels, the longing for order often manifested itself as paranoia. In novels like *Running Dog*, *Libra* and *Underworld* his characters tried to master a complex reality by projecting a vast network of paranoid connections onto a world run by coincidence. The drift toward order manifests itself differently in *Falling Man*. Instead of forcing a meaningful structure upon a contingent reality, the characters in DeLillo's latest novel turn their back on the world and construct small, private retreats to protect them from a frightening reality. Keith loses himself in small rituals, such as the wrist extensions which were actually meant to heal an injury he suffered during his escape from the towers, but which he continues performing long after the wrist has healed:

» He found these sessions restorative, four times a day, the wrist extensions, the ulnar deviations. These were the true countermeasures to the damage he'd suffered in the tower, in the descending chaos. [...] His injury was slight but it wasn't the torn cartilage that was the subject of this effort. It was the chaos, the levitation of ceilings and floors, the voices choking in smoke. (40)

When the ritual repetitions of these sessions no longer suffice, he surrenders himself to the pleasures of playing poker – not for the money or the excitement, but for the rules and the reduction of complexity they represent:

» The money mattered, but not so much. The game mattered, the touch of felt beneath the hands, the way the dealer burnt one card, dealt the next. He wasn't playing for the money. He was playing for the chips. (FM, 228)

In the rituals of poker, the outside world's infinite set of variables is reduced to a – quote – »little binary pulse located behind the eyes« – unquote. Coincidence is harnessed by a codified framework, and the ahistorical nature of the game constitutes a convenient refuge from scary world-political events:

» These were the times when there was nothing outside, no flash of history or memory that he might unknowingly summon in the routine run of the cards. (FM, 225)

Keith's escape from reality is mirrored by Lianne, who initially attempts to master the attack and its consequences, but who quickly realizes that the complex event surpasses her ability to understand it. Like Keith, she therefore loses herself in small rituals, like counting backwards.

The intimate close-up of Keith and Lianne and their increasingly desperate attempt to come to terms with the attack is the hub of the novel, but in addition to the two main characters we find a number of minor characters,

such as Lianne's fragile mother Nina and her lover Martin, who used to be a terrorist in West Germany back in the 70'es, but who has taken on a new identity and is now a successful art dealer. In a couple of dialogues between Nina and Martin, DeLillo does, after all, try to introduce some of the perspectives and ideas that couldn't fit into the close-up of Keith and Lianne. The few attempts at a broader focus in *Falling Man* are found in these dialogues which among other things touch upon the relationship between the United States and the rest of the world. At one point, Martin says:

» We're all sick of America and Americans. The subject nauseates us. [...] For all the careless power of this country, let me say this, for all the danger it makes in the world, America is going to become irrelevant. [...] Soon the day is coming when nobody has to think about America except for the danger it brings. It is losing the center. It becomes the center of its own shit. This is the only center it occupies. (FM, 191)

The prophecy of America's future marginalization in the global order is merciless, but still it is as if DeLillo takes the sting out of the condemnation by putting the words in the mouth of an unsympathetic European ex-terrorist. As a result of former controversial statements, the self-proclaimed rebel and outsider Don DeLillo has been labeled a »bad citizen« by the conservative press, and he has stated that he considers this label a badge of honor. But in the case of 9/11 it is – perhaps understandably – as if the subject has been so sensitive that he has had to construct another outsider, Martin the European, as a kind of alibi for making unpopular statements. The critique of America

finds a natural place in DeLillo's previous novels, but in *Falling Man* he seems to have had a hard time integrating his critique into the story of Keith and Lianne. Martin is dragged in from the wings a couple of times as a mouthpiece for USA-critical viewpoints, but he never becomes a proper part of the plot, and as a result of his very occasional appearances, the adult ex-terrorist reminds this reader of a naughty boy who opens the door to the living-room, shouts a few nasty phrases, and quickly runs away before anyone can catch him.

Equally unintegrated in the novel are the chapters with Hammad, one of the 19 terrorists whose preparations for the attack are described in three short sequences. In novels like *Players* and *Mao II*, DeLillo attempts to confront terrorism head on and lay bare some of its historical causes and implications, but these ambitions seem absent from the snapshots of Hammad, which rather constitute an intimate portrait of terrorism, or rather an intimate portrait of the terrorist as a young man. *Falling Man* first and foremost focuses on terrorism as acts committed by specific men with specific thoughts, feelings and urges, and as a confirmation of this intimate perspective we even follow Hammad into the bathroom to masturbate.

The ex-terrorist Martin and the terrorist Hammad both play a part in *Falling Man*, but they remain peripheral to the intimate close-up of Keith and Lianne. The terrorist attack and its political repercussions continuously fade into the background of the novel, and DeLillo's intimate take on a world-historical event gave rise to a number of disappointed reviews. As a result of DeLillo's previous work, critics had expected a definitive novel of 9/11; a vast panorama that put the event into global perspective and contributed to a bet-

ter understanding of the causes and effects of the attack. Instead they got a blurry close-up of a dissolving marriage.

The striking thing is that the intimate focus of *Falling Man* is symptomatic of the vast majority of American 9/11-novels. In their 9/11-novels, Ken Kalfus, Jay McInerney and Joseph O'Neill even give us the same story of a dissolving marriage. Of course there is no doubt that the many ruinous marriages in 9/11-fiction are to be taken as a metaphor for the surrounding events. The Big Crisis is displaced into the private sphere. But it is remarkable how little space the Big Crisis actually takes up in these novels.

This is also the case in Jonathan Safran Foer's much praised novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, which tells the story of the 9-year-old Oskar who lost his father in the attack. Like DeLillo, Foer is not particularly interested in the complex causes of the event or in its political and historical consequences, and the only thing he has to say about a person like Mohammed Atta is that he is evil. Rather, Foer wishes to zoom in on the individual consequences of the attack. The novel focuses on a single broken destiny, on Oskar, and unfolds his story in order to make some universal statements about loss and sorrow.

As such, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is a good example of what William Thackeray in the preface to his historical novel *Henry Esmond* (1852) called *familiar history* – as opposed to *heroic history*. Familiar history is not interested in the larger historical picture, but in the actions and reactions of individual human beings. This also seems to be Foer's agenda, and in that sense his novel is not really a novel of 9/11. The historical catastrophe disappears into the background of Oskar's story, and the novel primarily becomes a sto-

ry about losing a loved one; a universal subject which just happens to have 9/11 as its historical backdrop. When Foer thus seems exclusively interested in the individual consequences of the attack, in the child who lost his father, and when he renounces any interest in the collective aspects of the catastrophe, he might as well have taken a car accident as his starting point. As with DeLillo, McInerney, and Kalfus, 9/11 is not the main issue, but a more or less random catalyst that interferes in the private lives of the characters.

So far, the contribution of the American novel to the discussion of 9/11 has mostly been to de-collectivize the event; to take a collective experience and show us the individual, particular consequences of it. The novels about the epoch-making event are thus a long way from the unifying counter-narrative outlined by DeLillo in his 9/11-essay.

With their depoliticized and intimate focus, American 9/11-novels don't seem to live up to the enormous challenge posed by the attack. There seem to be a number of reasons for this apparent letdown. Of course one of the most obvious explanations for the reticence of the novelists is that the event is still so recent that it's difficult to form an overview of the complex situation and put events into perspective. But by now it's been seven years since the attack and a number of 9/11-novels have already been published. In his review of *Falling Man*, Tom Junod even calls 9/11-literature a veritable new genre, and the publication by Routledge of the critical anthology *Literature After 9/11* seems to bear him out. In other words, the lack of an overview is not a result of a lack of novels about 9/11.

The question is rather whether writers are even interested in providing such an overview. An important tendency these past seven years has been the

conception of 9/11 as a monstrous singularity, a sublime and thus unspeakable event. As DeLillo writes in his essay:

» But when the towers fell. When the rolling smoke began moving downward, floor to floor. This was so vast and terrible that it was outside imagining even as it happened. We could not catch up to it. [...] The event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile. [...] In its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity. (39)

A similar idea has been expressed by the author William Gibson, who has called 9/11 »an experience outside of culture«. DeLillo, Gibson, and others seem to argue that we simply cannot fit such an anomaly into our usual cognitive apparatus – and it seems that others have had a similar experience.

9/11 *is* without a doubt a radical event, but it still seems as though writers are busy putting up interpretational and representational No Admittance-signs around the event, just as many have tried to put a fence around Auschwitz as something too monstrous to even talk about. The problem with this prevailing idea of 9/11 as an incomprehensible singularity, as some sort of absence, is that the event is far from absent from a political perspective. 9/11 is very much present, with enormous consequences, and it is crucial that we are able to talk freely about the event.

The idea of 9/11 as a singularity, as a bolt from the blue, contributes to the dehistoricizing and depoliticizing of the event, and in many ways it has structured the different narratives about 9/11, both the private, the official, and the fictional ones. The event is cut off from its causes, so to speak, which

constitutes a possible explanation for the absence of political and historical perspectives from the narratives. Such perspectives are too complex and uncomfortable in the sense that they would also have to address America's own responsibility regarding 9/11. This has understandably enough been taboo. No matter how the United States have behaved in relation to the rest of the world, they hardly deserved the terrorist attack. That America didn't deserve the attack, however, is not the same as saying that the nation's politics don't have anything to do with the event. 9/11 didn't take place in a historical vacuum, but so far novelists haven't addressed the larger context. They have, like the American mass media, torn the event loose from a larger historical and political context, and the personal or intimate perspective in their narratives is a necessary consequence of this severance. Judith Butler has written pertinently on this issue. Of the dominant narratives of 9/11 she says:

» In the United States, we begin the story by invoking a first-person narrative point-of-view, and telling what happened on September 11. It is that date and the unexpected and fully terrible experience of violence that propels the narrative. If someone tries to start the story earlier, there are only a few narrative options. We can narrate, for instance, what Mohammed Atta's family was like, whether he was teased for looking like a girl, where he congregated in Hamburg, and what led, psychologically, to the moment in which he piloted the plane into the World Trade Center. [...] That kind of story is interesting to a degree, because it suggests that there is a personal pathology at work. It works as a plausible and engaging narrative in part because it resitu-

ates agency in terms of a subject, something we can understand, something that accords with our idea of personal responsibility [...].

This is doubtless easier to hear than that a network of individuals dispersed across the globe conjured and implemented this action in various ways. [...] Isolating the individuals involved absolves us of the necessity of coming up with a broader explanation for events. (Butler, 5)

Butler's arguments constitute a precise description of the intimate narrative approach to 9/11 found in most American novels about the event. The idea of 9/11 as a bolt from the blue makes it harder to situate the event in a political and world-historical context, and it deprives the authors from other perspectives than the purely personal.

It's important to stress that this intimate tendency in the American novel can't be exclusively reduced to a consequence of the terrorist attack. Even though it's tempting to make such a connection, considering the epoch-making nature of 9/11, the intimate focus that characterizes most 9/11-literature wasn't born on September 11, 2001. Just as the planes didn't just appear out of an historical vacuum, the intimate turn in American fiction didn't appear out of the blue, but is a natural continuation of a general introspective movement in contemporary American fiction, which gradually surfaced in the 90'es. In the absence of intrusive world-historical crises in that decade, American writers increasingly turned toward the things that were close at hand, to family and individuals as opposed to society; to local matters at the expense of global matters.

So 9/11 didn't create this specific literary tendency, but on the other hand I would argue that 9/11 reinforced the intimate focus or at least made it more

visible. At any rate, in relation to 9/11 it becomes painfully obvious what this intimate turn has to forgo. With its clear turning away from the political and historical toward the intimate and personal, the modern American novel hasn't really lived up to the challenge posed by 9/11, and it hasn't really addressed the larger causes and consequences of the event. In an increasingly globalized world, the American novel has turned inwards and become less global than ever. The novel is traditionally one of the most capacious genres, and even though the American novel in the past couple of decades has abandoned the expansive political and historical mode, one could, especially in relation to the global event 9/11, wish for a larger vision; a greater willingness from American fiction writers to put matters into a global perspective, instead of limiting themselves to the self-sufficient view of the world portrayed by Saul Steinberg in his famous *New Yorker*-cover back in 1976. It was first and foremost Americans who were attacked on September 11, 2001, but the historical background and the political ramifications of the attack transcend the American private sphere. With Judith Butler:

» Perhaps the question cannot be heard at all, but I would still like to ask: Can we find another meaning, and another possibility, for the decentering of the first-person narrative within the global framework? I do not mean that the story of being attacked should not be told. I do not mean that the story that begins with September 11 should not be told. These stories have to be told, and they are being told, despite the enormous trauma that undermines narrative capacity in these instances. But if we are to come to understand ourselves as global actors, and acting within a historically established field,

and one that has other actions in play, we will need to emerge from the narrative perspective of US unilateralism [...] to consider the ways in which our lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others. (Butler, 7)

Such stories of 9/11 have already been told in other genres and media, for instance in Michael Moore's documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which with its passion, its mix of genres and its willingness to draw various more or less paranoid connections seems quite similar to the explosive political novels of the 70'es. Or in Stephen Gaghan's movie *Syriana*, which isn't about 9/11 per se, but whose complex linking of terrorism with religion, colonialism, geopolitics, economics, oil, poverty etc. clearly has 9/11 as its backdrop or its ultimate referent. Both movies offer a sort of overview of the attack, an attempt at a causal explanation and a depiction of some of the personal as well as global consequences of the event.

We can agree or disagree with the political messages of these movies, but we should respect their willingness to draw lines between the personal and the political, the local and the global, and the present and the past. If we are to have useful literary counter-narratives about 9/11 – and I can't see why we shouldn't – it seems that what we need by now are stories that reach beyond the limited sphere of the personal and situates the individual in a global reality where »everything is connected«, as the poster to *Syriana* has it. What we *don't* need are more apolitical and ahistorical blurry close-ups, which only serve to obscure that terrible day and what it did to us.