

**IMAGINING THE TERRORIST MIND**  
**A Preliminary Approach**

Benno Lagerweij  
University of Amsterdam  
Supervisor: Prof. Dr. David Thorburn



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## Introduction

It's beyond my skill as a writer to capture that day [Sept. 11, 2001] ... Nor do I pretend to understand the stark nihilism that drove the terrorists that day and that drives their brethren still. My powers of empathy, my ability to reach into another's heart, cannot penetrate the blank stares of those who would murder innocents with abstract, serene satisfaction.

(Barack Obama, preface to the 2004 edition of *Dreams from My Father*.)

What was going through the minds of Mohamed Atta and the eighteen other al-Qaeda members when they hijacked four airliners and directed them towards the WTC, the Pentagon and the Capitol? Like Barack Obama, most of us find their “blank stares” incomprehensible. Many of us would shudder at the thought of seeing inside their minds. George W. Bush certainly did not feel they even deserved empathy: in his dramatic speech on September twelve he assured America that there would be a “monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail.” He claimed Americans were “facing a different enemy than we have ever faced,” but the definition he gave of “this enemy” was vague and unspecific: “This enemy hides in shadows and has no regard for human life (...) This is an enemy who preys on innocent and unsuspecting people, then runs for cover (...) This is an enemy that thinks its harbours are safe, but they won't be safe forever.” In the wake of 9/11, the government launched a War on Terror in order to “defeat terrorists and their organizations” and to “identify, locate and destroy terrorists and their organizations” (*National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* 15-7).

The WTC attacks thus re-introduced the term ‘terrorism’ to a whole new mass audience – certainly everybody in the Western world owning a TV set. The term ‘terrorism’ itself has, of course, a long history: it was first used in the late eighteenth century to refer to the bloody regime in France following the French Revolution. Its meaning, however, has shifted throughout the years (Houen 19). Largely on account of 9/11, the latest incarnation of the term tends to be almost exclusively applied to jihadists,

extremist Muslims committing violent actions in the name of Islam. When news broadcasts, newspapers and magazines speak about terrorism, they implicitly understand it to be what the British novelist Martin Amis called “the ferocious patriarchy of Islamism” (“Terror and Boredom” 60).

Contemporary artistic products dealing with terrorism likewise often seem to take the WTC attacks as their reference point: cultural responses to the event came from film makers, cartoonists, pop stars, television producers and so on. Among them, the representatives of the so-called ‘serious’ literature also set out to make sense of the attacks – writers such as Amis, Jonathan Safran Foer, Ian McEwan, John Updike, Frank Bidart devoted novels, poems and essays to 9/11 and its aftermath. Some of these works tried to delve deeper into the character of “this enemy”: who were these terrorists and why did they do what they did? Occasionally a writer took up the challenge of actually writing from the point of view of one of the perpetrators.

The texts I would like to discuss here all find their authors stepping inside the mind of a terrorist, who may be the protagonist or a minor character. Two of the texts were written before 9/11, the other three after. In Joseph Conrad’s classic *The Secret Agent* the terrorist is an anarchist; in Doris Lessing’s *The Good Terrorist* a communist; and in Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, John Updike’s *Terrorist* and Martin Amis’ *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* a jihadist<sup>1</sup>. The characters are (potential) suicide terrorists – with Lessing’s Alice as a possible exception. I have deliberately chosen not to focus on assassins, because they create a different experience – although one that shares many elements with suicide terrorist attacks. The targets of assassins are often people who have stepped into the political arena, courted controversy and therefore, in the assassin’s opinion, need to be eliminated. The terrorists discussed here plot or carry out actions that

(would) take the lives of innocent people. Apart from that, most of them have to prepare for their own death.

The questions I would like to address mostly pertain to the “powers of empathy” of the authors who created these characters. To what degree can they identify themselves with their fictional terrorist? Are they capable of sympathy for him/her? What ideas about terrorism do they express through their portraits? Another important question is whether there might be differences in the way the post-9/11 works imagine the terrorist, as compared to Conrad and Lessing’s pre-9/11 representations. Is Amis’ Muhammad Atta, for example, significantly different from Conrad’s Professor, or is he little more than a collection of old ideas in new clothes? DeLillo is a ‘transitional’ author in this case, since terrorism had been a recurring topic in his novels long before the WTC attacks took place.

Obviously, the particular texts chosen here could never hope to represent the full spectrum of terrorist literature: in the hundred-year span between the publication of *The Secret Agent* and that of *Falling Man*, countless authors have addressed the theme. Nor are the texts discussed here often considered literary touchstones – that is, with the exception of *The Secret Agent*. (I think it is safe to predict that Amis, DeLillo and Updike will be remembered primarily for other works.) My choices, then, are far from inclusive – but the scope of the project is such that inclusiveness would be impossible within this space. Additionally, my focus on the representation of the terrorist characters means there is less room for extensive discussion of formal features of the texts. This essay should therefore be seen as a preliminary approach to a topic that needs to be explored more exhaustively and comprehensively.

Throughout what follows I urge the reader to keep in mind how problematic and unstable the term ‘terrorism’ is. A major problem is that its distribution is highly dependent on power structures and geopolitics. In 1983 Ronald Reagan praised the resistance of the

Afghani freedom fighters as “an example to all the world of the invincibility of the ideals we in this country hold most dear, the ideals of freedom and independence.” Less than twenty years later Bush’s armies marched into Afghanistan under the banner of a War on Terror – arguably directed against the same people Reagan had praised. Another example that illustrates the problem is the Nazis’ Third Reich, by general consensus a regime of extreme terror. The Nazis themselves, however, consistently referred to European resistance fighters as terrorists – men and women who are venerated today as heroes. Going back in history even further, we may ask to what extent the crusades can be seen as an early instance of religiously inspired terrorism. Can we draw parallels between Christian and Islamic extremism? In the documentary *Jesus Camp*, we hear Pastor Becky Fischer, who organises an annual summer camp for Evangelical children, express an awed respect for jihadists: “I want to see young people who are as committed to the cause of Jesus Christ as the people are to the cause of Islam. I want to see them as radically laying down their lives for the gospel as they are over in Pakistan, and in Israel and Palestine, and all those different places, because - excuse me, but - we have the truth.”

I have no wish to offer a working definition of terrorism here, because questions of subjectivity and indefiniteness will be part of the argument. At best, the characters described here tend to be seen as terrorists by most of the people who have read these books; in much the same way as, say, Sherlock Holmes is seen as a detective, or Macbeth is seen as a tyrant.

## Joseph Conrad's Professor

One of the texts that was frequently referred to in newspaper articles directly following the Twin Tower attacks, was Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907). Before 2001 the novel had already been extensively analysed as perhaps the quintessential novel about terrorism. Indeed, practically every article concerned with terrorism and literature mentions the novel at some point. When Conrad wrote *The Secret Agent*, the term terrorism was more or less equated with anarchism and fear of anarchists was widespread in Britain. Although the number of casualties in Europe remained relatively small (between 1880 and 1914, 160 people died in an anarchist attack – excluding Russia), the fear had taken on such proportions, that in 1898 a large conference against anarchism was held in Rome, “history’s first international gathering convened to combat terrorism” (Bach Jensen 91-3). The media played an important role in nourishing fears and paranoia among the general public: they helped create a false myth of the anarchist as a monster seeking to destroy the Western world. Predictably enough, it did not take long before both anarchists and governments started to believe in the myth and act in accordance with it.

Conrad himself was not unfamiliar with radicalism. His father had been a Polish nationalist, ‘a Red’, in Warsaw – and had been exiled to Russia with his wife and child. An orphan from the age of eleven, young Joseph was mostly raised by an uncle in Kraków, Poland (Houen 68). Although Conrad did not inherit his father’s rebellious spirit, - he was a conservative person all his life - he did feel compelled to write about anarchism and the anarchist threat. *The Secret Agent* was not a commercial success when it was first published, but this had been the case with all Conrad’s previous works – his talent was, at that time, still only recognised by a small elite. After he became a well-known and widely read author (around 1913), the book slowly made its way into the canon of modern literature.

The secret agent of the title is a corpulent middle-aged man named Adolf Verloc, who leads a double-life. To the outside world, he runs a bric-a-brac-cum-pornography shop, where he lives with his wife Winnie, her half-witted brother and her mother. At the same time, he works as a spy for the embassy of a Great Power (the obvious implication is Russia), and has infiltrated in a group of revolutionists. These revolutionists gather for meetings in Verloc's shop, and Verloc dutifully reports about them. The councillor of the embassy is worried that England has made itself too vulnerable to terrorist acts, because the British do not take the anarchist threat seriously enough. In his opinion "(w)hat is desired is the occurrence of something definite which should stimulate their vigilance" (23). Another embassy employee, Mr Vladimir, orders Verloc to set up an attack which should serve as a warning. To generate maximum effect he suggests the symbolic destruction of "the sacrosanct fetish of to-day" (34): science. Verloc must blow up the Greenwich Royal Observatory. The secret agent is shocked, but not in a position to disobey orders, so he organises the bombing attack. He obtains explosive materials from one of the anarchists, a man who is nicknamed the Professor, and gives his brother-in-law, Stevie, instructions how to detonate the bomb. Stevie is easy to manipulate, because he is mentally retarded, but the choice turns out to be disastrous. On the day of the attack, Stevie stumbles and falls before reaching the Observatory, blowing up himself instead of the building. The bombing garners media attention, but of course a lot less than if it had succeeded in its aims. Chief Inspector Heat, the policeman who deals with the case, soon discovers the attack was set up by the embassy, and he confronts Verloc, who, agitated and frustrated by the fact everything has gone wrong, swears he will make the embassy pay for having pressurised him into the bombing. But before he can take revenge, Winnie Verloc finds out that her husband has caused Stevie's death and this is so shocking to her that she stabs him mortally with a carving knife. She flees from the shop, leaving her husband's dead body on the sofa, and

outside runs into one of the anarchists, Alexander Ossipon. Ossipon consoles her and, having secretly loved her for some time, promises he will help her escape. However, Winnie's hysterical behaviour finally makes him decide to stay behind while she leaves on a cross-Channel boat. It later turns out that she drowns herself on the way to the continent.

With so many tragic events heaping up over the course of the novel, it comes as no surprise that *The Secret Agent* is a deeply pessimistic book. Conrad was partly inspired by a real anarchist's failed attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory in 1894. When his friend Ford Madox Ford told him in a conversation that the anarchist had been "half an idiot" whose sister committed suicide afterwards, the story - which to Conrad was first and foremost "Winnie Verloc's story" (7) - started taking shape in his mind. It turned out to be one in which nearly all of the characters are in some way corrupt, or deceiving others, a tale of "moral squalor"(1). To some extent the pessimism is made bearable by an undercurrent of black humour that can be found not only in the mocking, ironic tone with which Conrad describes his characters, but also in Stevie's unfortunate "pratfall", and the gory fact that he has to be scraped from the streets.

Conrad writes from an omniscient perspective throughout the book, and grants his readers access to all of the story's important characters. The novel's subtitle - "A Simple Tale" - is, on the surface, appropriate: *The Secret Agent* is highly readable. However, Conrad plays a notable trick with chronology: we learn about the horrific outcome of the bombing while it is still in its preparation stage. This violent overturning of time (a much less common narrative strategy in 1907, than now) can be seen as paralleling the anarchist's desire to overturn law and order. Additionally, we will see Conrad's break with linear narrative return as a significant element in later literary works dealing with terrorism.

When journalists and writers started commenting on the prophetic relevance of *The Secret Agent* to the 9/11 attacks, they obviously had in mind some aspects of the text more

than others. There was, for example, the symbolic aspect of the terrorist action: the destruction of the Twin towers was an attack on capitalism in the same way the bombing of the Observatory was an attack on science. But that is where the similarities end: the Observatory is, of course, left unharmed, and, more importantly, its bombing was planned by a governmental organisation rather than by terrorists. Nor can the book's "terrorists" be said to resemble the plane hijackers: they mostly gather for group discussions about the future of the Proletariat and write anarchist literature. One of them, Michaelis, "the ticket-of-leave apostle of humanitarian hopes" (96), has served a term in jail, and likes to lecture the others on his political philosophy. At one point this friendly, slightly eccentric gentleman goes off to the country to write his autobiography. Another anarchist, Karl Yundt, calls himself 'the terrorist' and he likes to share his vision with the other anarchists: "I have always dreamed (...) of a band of men absolute in their resolve to discard all scruples in the choice of means, strong enough to give themselves frankly the name of destroyers, and free from the taint of that resigned pessimism which rots the world. No pity for anything on earth, including themselves, and death enlisted for good and all in the service of humanity" (44). A frightening vision, indeed, but Yundt is another paper tiger - the narrator compares him to a "senile sensationalist" (44). The third of the group, Alexander Ossipon, is perhaps the most reasonable of them - he strongly disapproves of the "silly recklessness" (73) of the Observatory bombing and finds it hard to believe that Verloc, this "man of no ideas" and "intellectual nonentity" (71), is behind the attack. Ossipon's reasons for visiting the anarchist meetings may also have something to do with his hidden passion for Winnie Verloc. At any rate, it is safe to say that these people, for all their revolutionary talk, are relatively harmless. And even their conversations seem less inspired by political indignation, than by a love of hearing themselves talk. It may actually be argued that it is the retarded "suicide bomber" who is most genuinely upset about the

state of the world. Stevie, we learn early in the book, cannot bear injustice. When he sees a cabman whipping his horses, he is indignant. But when the cabman tells him he has got his wife and four children at home to take care of, Stevie is struck by a pang of “convulsive sympathy” (150) for him. Somewhat later, thinking over “the poor cabman beating the poor horse in the name, as it were, of his poor kids,” he tells his sister: ““Bad world for poor people”” (153).

However, the character whose name was on most people’s lips after 9/11 is not Stevie, but the man who is at first sight Stevie’s opposite: the Professor. The Professor, a lone wolf constructing bombs in his room in Islington, is usually seen as the real terrorist of the novel - even though we do not know whether he has ever carried out a terrorist attack. He is an associate of the anarchists, but not really part of the group. Coming from a humble background, he is the talented and intelligent son of a fanatical Christian preacher. Burning ambition, and perhaps laziness, have led him to create for himself “a goal of power and prestige to be attained without the medium of arts, graces, tact, wealth – by sheer weight of merit alone” (76). In order to be more powerful than anyone else, he carries a bomb with him wherever he goes, prepared to set it off should anyone come too close for his taste. When he walks the streets of the city, he is filled with scorn and fear for the people, thinking of them as a plague of insects: “They swarmed numerous like locusts, industrious like ants” (77). He seems to feel most comfortable alone in his room, where he works fourteen hours a day to create the perfect detonator.

The Professor, like Michaelis and Yundt, is full of himself and likes to theorise. He sees himself as a serious, hardworking man; in his opinion, the anarchists are just playing an insignificant game with the police: ““Revolution, legality – countermoves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical”” (67). Talking to Ossipon about the difference between him and the rest of the world, the Professor says: ““Their character is built upon

conventional morality. It leans on the social order. Mine stands free from everything artificial. (...) They depend on life, which, in this connection, is a historical fact surrounded by all sorts of restraints and considerations, a complex, organized fact open to attack at every point; whereas I depend on death, which knows no restraint and cannot be attacked. My superiority is evident” (66). Ossipon finds it difficult to have a conversation with the Professor, because the man only wants to talk about one thing: the superiority his detonator gives him over other people.

This makes the Professor a good example of what the Russian revolutionary Victor Serge called ‘the lunatic of one idea’<sup>2</sup>. Although the term has negative connotations, the Professor sees having one idea as a strength rather than a weakness. Recalling a street encounter with Chief Inspector Heat, he tells Ossipon: “(Heat) was thinking of many things – of his superiors, of his reputation, of the law courts, of his salary, of newspapers – of a hundred things. But I was thinking of my perfect detonator only” (67).

The contempt the Professor has for Heat is entirely mutual: “The perfect anarchist was not recognized as a fellow-creature by Chief Inspector Heat (111)”; “(T)he physical wretchedness of that being, so obviously not fit to live, was ominous; for it seemed to (the Chief Inspector) that if he had the misfortune to be such a miserable object he would not have cared how soon he died” (87). Nobody likes the Professor, and the omniscient narrator is not about to disagree. While he is not very generous to any character in the novel, Conrad reserves his most loathsome adjectives for the “sallow little Professor” (262), whose “pedantic fanaticism” allows him “a sinister freedom” (77). In particular the final passage on the Professor is loaded with judgment: “He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men” (269).

The Professor may appear to be cold and calculating, but beneath this appearance lies a “vengeful bitterness” (77). This bitterness stems from a feeling the world has done him injustice by not recognising his talents. There are a few remarks about the jobs he had to leave, because he quarreled with the authorities, but the full story of his grievances remains unclear. We have no access to this information, just as we do not know his name - only his nickname. The same goes for his psyche. The reader enters inside his mind, but is left with the feeling that it is only a limited access. We are confronted with a cardboard nihilist walking around with his detonator, which gives him a tedious idea of omnipotence. If we accept that no person is one-dimensional, then we obviously only get to see one dimension of the Professor, which alienates him from us to the point where he becomes a caricature. This, of course, makes him by far the most convenient character in the book onto whom to project our fears and disgust of the terrorist.

So the Professor was singled out as the archetype of modern evil, but he is just one out of many dubious characters in the book. Dubious may not even be the correct word here, because in a way he is only matched in frankness by Stevie - wearing a bomb instead of his heart on his sleeve. Still, when the novel ends, the Professor has not blown himself up, and we may even question whether he would if the police did try to arrest him – we only have his word for it. Conrad wrote interestingly about his plans for the Professor in one of his letters:

I don't think I've been satirizing the revolutionary world. All these people are not revolutionaries – they are shams. And as regards the Professor, I did not intend to make him despicable. He is incorruptible at any rate. In making him say: ‘Madness and despair, - give me that for a lever and I will move the world’, I wanted to give him a note of perfect sincerity. At the worst he is a megalomaniac of an extreme type. And every extremist is respectable (quoted in Watt 113).

It is worth wondering how Conrad could think his portrayal of the Professor is in any way sympathetic or even nonjudgmental, but it is equally worth noting that his feelings about the character were apparently more complex than most of his readers'. His friend Ford

Madox Ford, who, as mentioned before, had been present at the conception of the novel, wrote: “(Conrad) had really made efforts to get behind the revolutionary mind. I supplied him with most of the material of that sort of book, and it was instructive in the extreme to see him react to those accounts of revolutionary activities” (quoted in Watt 119). Conrad’s revolt at anarchism is certainly expressed in the novel, but *The Secret Agent* does not adopt an overly simple attitude towards terrorism, and it does not single out one culprit. In fact, Conrad’s attitude resembles in some aspects that of Verloc: “Anarchists or diplomats were all one to him. (...) His scorn was equally distributed over the whole field of his operations” (214). More importantly, it are the Western intelligence services, not the anarchists, who have staged the Observatory bombing. Interestingly, the alarming notion that the powerful British establishment could be more dangerous than the subversive anarchists, is, at least partly, supported by historical facts. Bach Jensen (2009) writes that late nineteenth century governments were indeed tempted to

exploit and exaggerate the danger of terrorism in order to attain political goals distinct from simply repressing terrorism. For example, German chancellor Bismarck in the 1880s and Italian Prime Minister Francesco Crispi in the 1890s used the fear of anarchist terrorism to pass laws later employed to suppress their countries’ respective socialist parties. This was despite the fact that the socialists did not support terrorism (106).

In *The Secret Agent* there is a strong sense that the whole city is suffering from a fever. A key word occurring throughout the novel is ‘madness’. In the opinion of Mr Vladimir of the embassy, the most successful terrorist act is the one that destroys logic: “(W)hat is one to say of an act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable; in fact, mad? Madness alone is truly terrifying, inasmuch as you cannot placate it either by threats, persuasion or bribes” (36). Chief Inspector Heat thinks along the same lines: he compares the Professor to “a mad dog to be left alone” (111). But there is also madness in Winnie Verloc’s murder of her husband (in his last moments Mr Verloc thinks: “His wife had gone raving mad” (228)) and in her own suicide at sea, which a

newspaper hauntingly describes as “This act of madness or despair” (265). The novel, then, is Conrad’s gloomy pessimistic vision of a monstrous city sick with corruption and fear, a city which creates conditions for terrorism. The Professor could even be seen as a metaphor for the citizen’s pent-up paranoia about the dangerous impersonality and lack of safety in an urban environment; the fear he inspires is his way of dealing with the fear the city inspires in him.

In his 1920 author’s note Conrad writes the “bare bones” of the tale make “a grisly skeleton” (7), and he is almost apologetic about “the moral squalor of the tale” (1), but he also remarks that he does not regret having written it. Talking about how he had tried to engage with the revolutionist mind, he writes: “I have no doubt (...) that there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist, I won’t say more convinced than they but certainly cherishing a more concentrated purpose than any of them had ever done in the whole course of his life” (7). We see again how Conrad does not want to or is unable to mask his disdain of the revolutionary, but it turned out he was fascinated enough by the subject to return to it in his next novel. *Under Western Eyes* (1911) shows parallels both with *The Secret Agent* and Conrad’s own biography. It is less comic than its predecessor, and, although the setting and events are darker, the tone of the book is softer, more personal, less judgmental. The novel’s terrorist, the assassin Haldin, is given a fairer hearing than any of the anarchists in *The Secret Agent*: Conrad’s attempt at understanding this violent revolutionary is less hindered by ironic distance here, although he does not step into the terrorist’s mind as he had done with the Professor. Haldin is portrayed as a victim of a cynicism that is spread all over Russia and is caused by the dreadful conditions of the country (105). Haldin tries to explain his action to the book’s main character Razumov: “You suppose that I am a terrorist, now – a destructor of what is. But consider that the true destroyers are they who destroy the spirit of progress and truth,

not the avengers who merely kill the bodies of the persecutors of human dignity” (67-8). When he realises Razumov has no respect for him, Haldin “bowed his head; his hands hung between his knees. His voice was low and pained but calm. ‘I see now how it is, Razumov – brother. You are a magnanimous soul, but my action is abhorrent to you – alas...’” (101).

## Doris Lessing's Alice Mellings

We will now take a leap of 75 years, a period throughout which terrorism continued to play a role in international politics. Fear of anarchists, still prominent when Conrad wrote *Under Western Eyes*, became replaced by new fears, as the first international conflict of the twentieth century arose. It was, in fact, a terrorist act – the assassination of Arch duke Franz Ferdinand – that triggered World War I. Largely on account of the October revolution of 1917, which led to the creation of the Soviet Union, European countries started to associate terrorism with Bolshevism (Bach Jensen 90). At the same time, the German Nazi party, particularly its *Sturmabteilung*, arguably operated as a terrorist organisation through much of the 1920s; Hitler was jailed twice during those years. By 1933 both Germany and the Soviet Union suffered totalitarian regimes of terror. After the defeat of the Nazis, European fear of terrorism remained linked to fear of communism; from the 1960s onwards, several left-wing paramilitary groups started to make headlines with their violent actions. In Germany this was the RAF, in Spain, the ETA, in Italy, the Red Brigades, and in Ireland, the IRA. At the time Doris Lessing wrote *The Good Terrorist* (1985), the IRA were busy planning a large offensive with weapons they had received from Libya.

Unlike the conservative Conrad, Lessing had been actively involved in communist groups and interacted with revolutionaries. She was born in 1919 in Persia (Iran) to parents who were severely traumatised by their experiences in World War I. The family moved to Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) when Doris was six and she left school at 15 – after which she educated herself. She left Rhodesia after two failed marriages, one of them to a German political activist. Shortly after her arrival in London in 1949 her first novel *The Grass is Singing* was published and became an instant success. At the same time Lessing joined the writers group of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). She had been an active

member of the Communist Party in Rhodesia, who were staunch admirers of Stalin during World War II. With the advent of the Cold War, however, their attitudes changed, and many became disenchanted with the ideology – among them Lessing, who left the party in the mid 1950s. The collapse of Communism, but also its appeal and ideals, became a theme to which she would return repeatedly in her oeuvre. *The Golden Notebook* (1962), while mainly seen as a feminist manifesto, also deals extensively with communism. *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958), the third book of her *Children of Violence* series (1952-69), gives a fictionalised account of her involvement with African communists. Likewise, the empires in her science fiction pentalogy *Canopus in Argos: Archives* (1979-83) often bear more than a passing resemblance to fascist and communist societies. The protagonist of *The Good Terrorist* is also a communist – this time one who is drawn to terrorist action. Lessing has argued that the reasons some people become terrorists are similar to the ones that used to convert people to communism. Talking about how she and others were initially attracted to the movement, she said:

I think [this interest in communism] was rooted in the First World War and people's passionate identification with what had been done to the soldiers, which crossed all the national boundaries. I think that's where a disgust and contempt for government began, at the level we see it now. The automatic reaction of practically any young person is, at once, against authority. That, I think, began in the First World War because of the trenches, and the incompetence of the people on all fronts. I think that a terrible bitterness and anger began there, which led to communism. And now it feeds terrorism. Anyway, that's my thesis. It's very oversimplified, as you can see (quoted in Garner).

“Disgust and contempt for the government” and “bitterness and anger” also play a major role in *The Good Terrorist* – but since the novel is set in the late 1970s-early 1980s, Lessing has to imagine a new generation of ‘children of violence’. Upon its release, many readers who had disliked Lessing's ventures into science fiction, welcomed the author's return to realist fiction – the genre which had made her famous in the first place. Apart from returning to earth, Lessing also employs a fairly traditional narrative structure in her

novel: there is no disrupted chronology, and the whole story (there is no subdivision in chapters) is told from the point of view of the title character, a 37-year-old English woman named Alice Mellings.

Alice has been moving between squats and student homes for fifteen years, living on Social Security, even though she has a degree in economics and politics. She has ended up in her mother Dorothy's flat, together with her one-time boyfriend Jasper. Jasper has been living off Alice for years, letting her take care of him and spending all her money. Alice is blinded by an almost motherly love for Jasper: the fact that he treats with her contempt and is, in fact, homosexual, does not seem to influence her feelings for him. Dorothy Mellings is less than pleased with the two visitors, and after a fight Alice and Jasper leave. The novel's opening scene sees them moving into another London squat, where a small commune of mainly leftist activists live. Alice, a practical and talented organizer, immediately starts turning the squat into a proper home: she makes sure there is running water and electricity, negotiates with the city council so the house will not be cleared by the police, decorates the living room and cooks for the other squatters. Initially, they are irritated by her attempts, clinging to their romantic idea of dirt, dust and broken windows, but their irritation turns to a muted respect when they realise how convenient Alice makes life for them.

Apart from Jasper and Alice, the core activists living in the squat are Bert, his girlfriend Pat and the lesbian couple Roberta and Faye. They are all members of the Communist Centre Union (CCU), a small London based organisation. Jasper is a dreamer, who sees himself as a born leader of the Revolution. At one point, when a public meeting is convened by the CCU, he gives an exalted speech that lacks any sense of proportion: "This is for all of us a historic moment. There are very few of us in this room today, but we are a chosen few – chosen by the time we live in, chosen by history itself! – and there is nothing

we cannot achieve if we set ourselves to do it” (236). Bert is like Jasper, enthusiastic and irresponsible, and fond of quoting Lenin. By contrast, his girlfriend Pat is a pragmatic woman, amused and annoyed by the amateurish actions of the group, and she eventually leaves them in order to be trained at a Soviet spy school in Eastern Europe. Roberta, like Alice, is older than the other squatters, and her main concern is to look after her mentally unstable girlfriend. Faye, an egotistical, hysterical girl, is always throwing tantrums and has on several occasions tried to commit suicide. The fact she was a battered baby may explain her fits, and when Alice meets her first she notices how Faye “gave the impression of trembling slightly all over” (31).

The first half of the book deals mostly with Alice’s remarkable feat of single-handedly turning the squat into a comfortable communal home. She even helps one of the squatters find a job. Meanwhile, the CCU members discuss their targets and aims. Like the coffee table terrorists in Conrad, the squatters mostly *talk* about violent revolution; their actual acts are relatively harmless and rarely go beyond joining demonstrations and spray-painting slogans. Some members, in particular Jasper and Bert, are eager to offer their services to the IRA, wanting to fight for their cause in England. On the surface, then, their lives are centred on the communist cause. But the reader often gets the impression that their political commitment serves as a mask for personal concerns. When Jasper demands money from Alice “for the Party” (36) or “the Cause” (160), Alice knows he spends practically all of it on cruising escapades. Faye’s world revolves entirely around herself and all her actions are driven by a purely personal anger. She and Roberta also like to watch violent pornographic films, which may raise doubts about their motives for joining the Revolution. In fact, most of the squatters feel attracted to the glamour of violence - although at the same time they are afraid of it.

The squat next door – No. 45 - is also occupied by activists. They are, however, of a different kind – more serious, more professional. Occasionally, a man known as Comrade Andrew comes there and he is impressed with the neighbouring woman who has such great pragmatic skills and astuteness. Thinking Alice may make a good spy, he takes her aside and warns her against Bert, Jasper and the others: “Alice, you should get free of this riff-raff (...) They are playing, Alice, like little children with explosives. They are very dangerous people. Dangerous to themselves and to others (...) If you do things properly and carefully, then only the people get hurt who should get hurt” (243-4). Alice is not convinced, and she seems unable and unwilling to break free from the group. Two activists from No. 45, Caroline and Jocelin, decide to move in with Alice and her comrades. Jocelin in particular is dedicated to violent action; she studies books such as *The Use of Explosives in an Urban Environment* and constructs bombs. Slowly the activities in No. 43 are becoming more serious, particularly after Jasper and Bert return from Ireland, where they make contact with the IRA. The IRA has rejected them, which makes them even more determined to show what they are capable of.

The group’s first ‘attack’ is meant to test out the explosives and is directed against a cement post. It is not effective. The next morning, they anxiously search the newspapers for articles, but there is only a line in *The Guardian* saying some hooligans have blown up a street corner, and a small piece in the local *Advertiser*. In the *Advertiser* piece they read that an old widow spotted them, thinking they were only “having a bit of a lark.” When the bomb exploded, her windows burst, and she sustained minor injuries from the glass. The squatters’ responses to the article are typical of their different personalities: “‘Oh, poor old thing,’ quavered Alice. She did not look at Jocelin for she knew the look would be reproachful. ‘Silly old cow,’ said Faye. ‘Pity we didn’t do her in properly. We’d have done ‘er a favour, we would’” (336).

Meanwhile, two packages containing machine gun parts have been delivered, to which the group again react in different ways. Alice, who has never seen a gun before, is shocked, while Jasper and Bert are overjoyed and start enthusiastically pulling the weapons together (“We’ll find a use for it, all right”). Jocelin, the professional, icily asks them what they think they are doing: “Now you’ve got fingerprints all over it,” she says, “with such contempt that first Bert and then Jasper let go the guns, and fell back” (331). They decide to get rid of the packages and continue with the preparations for their new terrorist attack. The lack of media attention has made them even more eager to prove they are competent terrorists and they plot an attack on a hotel in plain daylight. Alice organises a car for the group, in which Jasper and Faye will set off a time bomb, constructed by Jocelin. Alice and Bert will stand on the look-out. Unsurprisingly, on their big day things do not go as planned. They are extremely nervous, Bert has a “leaden, sickly colour, like a corpse” and Alice is “sick with tension” (380). Before the car has even arrived at the scene, Alice is eaten up by her doubts about the attack and runs to a booth in the hotel where she phones the Samaritans charity. It is a confused, surrealistic phone call, especially because halfway through Alice changes her mind again:

Alice said, ‘Oh, quick, quick, there’s a bomb, it’s going to go off, come quickly, it’s going to be in a car.’ ‘Where is this car?’ inquired the Samaritan, in no way discomposed. When Alice did not at once answer, ‘You must tell us. We can’t get someone there until you tell us.’ Alice was thinking: But the car isn’t even there yet. How do I know it will get there at all? Then she thought of those people, all those poor people, and she said despondently, ‘Well, perhaps it will be too late anyway.’ ‘But where? The address, do tell us the address?’ Alice could not bring herself to give the address. ‘It’s in Knightsbridge,’ she said. She was going to ring off, and added, as an afterthought: ‘It’s the IRA Freedom for Ireland!’ (379)

When the car arrives, it turns out there is no parking space in front of the hotel, but fortunately two cars leave. However, the bomb has not been timed correctly and goes off too early, killing Faye and four other people. Roberta, seeing “the bloody mess” that is her girlfriend, is sobbing uncontrollably, and Jasper, covered in blood, clumsily runs from the

scene. When they are all back home, they are shaken and fraught, and Bert attempts to liven up their spirits by solemnly reading a Lenin quote: “The law should not abolish terror; to promise that would be self-delusion or deception (...) The paragraph on terror should be formulated as widely as possible, since only revolutionary consciousness of justice and revolutionary conscience can determine the conditions of its application in practice” (388). The others are not listening, and there is a great feeling of anti-climax. However, this time the attack does not go unnoticed by the press, which, on the basis of Alice’s call, assume it is an IRA attack. The IRA are quick to respond that they would never do anything so pointless; they promise to knee-cap those who have taken to murdering innocent people in their name. The group decide to disband and leave one after the other, until only Alice is left. And she has gotten herself into big trouble: during the preparations for the bomb attack, two people had paid a visit to her. One was a Russian agent who had demanded to know where the gun packages went, and the other was a man who had asked her for information about Comrade Andrew. She had not given it much attention then, but now she is scheduled to meet of both of them on the same day. She realises the second man must have been English secret service, and this realisation makes her feel strangely relieved. Thinking of the ridiculous situation she is in, she panics for a moment, and then recomposes herself to “go out and meet the professionals” (397).

Perhaps the most important question we should ask about this woman is: to what extent can she be called a terrorist? It is difficult to classify her actions as true works of terrorism: she once throws a brick through her father’s window in anger, she steals a thousand pounds from him, and spray paints a slogan or two. Of course, she is an accomplice in the bombing plot, but at the same time she tries to prevent it by calling the Samaritans. She is all for the Revolution, but she can not live with the idea that innocent people will have to die for it. Few would deny the fact that her behaviour is highly

irresponsible: the brick, for example, missed her father's young daughter by inches. But how likely would Alice have been to throw it, if she had known the child was in the room? On the other hand, we feel that she may well be capable of far worse actions in her fits of blind rage. All in all, especially on the basis of her association with terrorist organisations, one is probably justified in calling Alice a terrorist. But this automatically raises the question whether this way of categorising is not too blunt – after all, to brand a person a terrorist is not a small thing.

Alice has a complex, contradictory character. There are continuous conflicts between her gentle, caring side and her furious contempt of the established order. For Alice, the embodiment of this established order are her parents Cedric and Dorothy, and her treatment of them often seems like an extreme form of teenage rebellion – except that Alice is well in her thirties. Alice's notes to her parents are amusing and revealing, because they show both her humaneness and her anger. This is the note she sends to her father to help one of the squatters get a job:

Dear dad,  
This is Jim MacKenzie. He can't get a job. He's a printer. Why don't you give him a job? You are supposed to be a fucking progressive? He has been out of work for four years. In the name of the Revolution.  
Alice (183).

Cedric and Dorothy, friendly, unassuming people, are completely bewildered by their daughter's behaviour, and they blame Jasper for it. Jasper is certainly eligible for being part of the problem, but there seem to be deeper psychological issues with Alice. Like Faye, she is mentally unstable, constantly veering between extremes of love and hate. One moment she is overjoyed by something, only to burst into tears of anger less than a minute later. Her astuteness is muddled, too. For all her powers of perception when it comes to other people, she is unable to analyse her own condition and see how much she resembles her homely mother. Dorothy tells her daughter: "it turned out that you spend your life exactly as I did.

Cooking and nannying for other people. An all-purpose female drudge”(353). Although Dorothy’s observation is correct (in fact, the book might as well have been called *The Good Housewife*), this is of course not the way Alice prefers to see herself.

Then again, she is also likely to object to being classified as a terrorist. She would probably rather be called a ‘good revolutionary’ – which brings us back to the comparison Doris Lessing made between communists and terrorists. Interestingly enough, Lessing had already given a definition of ‘the good communist’ thirty years earlier in *The Golden Notebook*: “Jack is a ‘good communist’. That is, he has genuinely and honestly driven out of himself the false pride that might make him resent his lack of independence. (...) He does not resent, in principle, the fact that it is a sub-committee ... that takes decision he must carry out. On the contrary, he is all for this sort of centralism” (293). If we apply this definition to Alice and her comrades, they would come out not very good communists. Initially, they are hungry to take orders from the IRA, but when the IRA orders them to stay away, they say: ““Who are the IRA to tell us what to do in our own country?”” (305). In her conversation with the Russian terrorist Alice patiently tells him: ““Don’t you understand, you can’t give us orders, we aren’t Russians”” (327). Even so, the squatters remain sympathetic to the Irish cause, and they certainly still see themselves as soldiers for the Revolution. They are good revolutionaries in the sense that they have surrendered themselves to one language – that of the communist ideology.

Of course, if the communist truth is the only truth, other opinions can not be accepted, and should be avoided. Alice, for example, can not bring herself to read books for this reason: “She used to wonder how it was that a comrade with a good, clear and correct view of life could be prepared to endanger it by reading all that risky equivocal stuff that she might dip into, hastily, retreating as if scalded” (66). Alice seems to be afraid of encountering other points of view, thinking it might jeopardise her mental health. The irony

is, of course, that her own tunnel vision does exactly that – and sometimes the reader is given the impression that deep inside Alice knows this, too.

With her background, it is no surprise that Doris Lessing has more than once written about the unhealthy effects of blindly following a doctrine. In 2007, the year she won the Nobel Prize for Literature, she wrote an article for *The Guardian* on the reception of *The Golden Notebook*, in which she summarised the book's message: "Any kind of single-mindedness, narrowness, obsession was bound to lead to mental disorder, if not madness. (This may be observed most easily in religion and politics.)" ("Guarded Welcome"). A short essay called "The Languages We Speak" was published in the same year as an addendum to *The Good Terrorist*. Here Lessing repeats her idea that people can be "taken over" by the language they speak (communism, Christianity, mysticism), and this will eventually lead to madness. She writes: "There is one thing that surprises me about *The Good Terrorist*. It is how people see Alice. The girl is of course quite mad. This confirms what I have said so often in this context: if a mad person is in a political setting, or a religious one, a lot of people won't even notice he or she is mad" (13).

Alice may certainly be a schizophrenic, or at least suffer from bipolar disorder. In this light, it may be interesting to mention Alice's obsession with voices. One of the first things she notices about any person she encounters is their accent. She observes how many of the revolutionaries have adopted an accent (Faye's cockney, for example), that makes them feel closer to the working class (Scanlan, 186-7). Alice's own voice "dated from the days of her girls' school in North London, basic BBC correct, flavourless. She had been tempted to reclaim her father's Northern tones, but had judged this dishonest" (29). The conflict between the working class voice of communism and other voices thus literally becomes a conflict between accents.

The contradiction does not end there. Lessing feels that many terrorists are themselves anomalous figures. Talking about the squatters living in her street while she was writing *The Good Terrorist*, she notes how they would utter violent slogans such as: “‘Come the revolution we’ll have to kill ten million (twenty million, thirty million) of the bourgeois.’ But they were full of humanitarian busyness, rescuing cats, supporting orphans in Africa, giving money to badly treated donkeys, being kind to old people” (12). This contradiction we also see in Alice, and it accounts for the great irony of the novel: Alice’s “humanitarian busyness” – her home-making, her charity, and her concern for others - in the end leads her into terrorism. The oxymoron of the book’s title is both appropriate and unsettling.

One way, perhaps, to reconcile the two opposites is to view Alice as a good person who has been led astray by forces she can not understand nor control. Indeed, Alice may well be accused of a distorted sense of reality. Which is what her father does when he says: “you live in such a dream-world, but that thousand pounds is not a sum that the firm can afford to lose. We are suffering from the recession too, you know” (217). Most tellingly, in the final scene the authorial voice describes Alice in terms that strongly evoke Lewis Carroll: “Smiling gently, a mug of very sweet tea in her hand, looking this morning like a nine-year-old girl who has had, perhaps a bad dream, the poor baby sat waiting for it to be time to go out and meet the professionals” (397). This is how Lessing seems to suggest we see Alice the terrorist, as a poor baby lost in a wonderland of violent language and destructive acts.

A moment of dramatic irony occurs when Alice and Roberta take a taxi home just after the catastrophic bombing, and listen to the driver rant about the attack. “(He) said it was a shocking thing; probably those Arabs again; they had no sense of the sacredness of

life, not like the Westerners, if he had his way he would stop the Arabs from coming here”  
(384). It is to “those Arabs” we will now turn.

## Don DeLillo's Hammad

While jihadism is a relatively new term, jihad itself has been a religious duty for Muslims from the beginning of Islam (the term is mentioned in the Qur'an, which was developed over the course of the seventh century A.D.). The Arabic word jihād translates as 'struggle', and signifies every kind of striving in God's cause. The Prophet is said to have distinguished between 'little jihad' – the outer struggle – and 'great jihad' – the spiritual struggle within oneself. In the Western world, however, jihad is almost exclusively understood to be a Holy War, an Eastern equivalent of the crusades.<sup>3</sup>

In 1983, the Beirut barrack bombings first introduced many Westerners to the concept of Islamic terrorism (an uneasy and contestable term, since many Muslims perceive Islam to be a peaceful religion): the bombings were claimed by an organisation called Islamic Jihad. However, until the 1993 WTC bombing, the majority of jihadist attacks took place on foreign soil. Although America had had its own problems with domestic terrorism (notably with the leftist Weathermen, the Black Panthers, and – ever since the late nineteenth century – the Ku Klux Klan), fear of terrorism took on new proportions after al Qaeda's 2001 WTC attacks.

American novelist Don DeLillo, who rose to literary prominence roughly around the same time Islamic terrorism started to make a name for itself, has often been regarded as a Nostradamus of 9/11. Countless passages in his works acquired an almost prophetic aura in the wake of September 11. It might even be argued there was no need for him to write about the actual attacks, since he had already written so extensively about terrorism in his earlier novels: in *Players* (1977) one of the protagonists works at the New York Stock Exchange and becomes involved with a terrorist network targeting Wall Street; *The Names* (1982) is about an American risk analyst who is confronted with a mysterious cult of assassins; in *Libra* (1988) DeLillo explores John F. Kennedy's assassination from the point

of view of his assassin Lee Harvey Oswald; and *Mao II* (1991) tells the story of a writer who goes to Beirut to negotiate the release of a fellow writer held hostage by terrorists. An important *idée fixe* in DeLillo's works can be summed up by his famous remark in *White Noise* (1985) that "all plots tend to move deathward" (26). In his fiction DeLillo repeatedly speculates about a link between narrative plot and terrorist acts. In an oft-quoted interview he said:

I do think we can connect novelists and terrorists (...). In a repressive society, a writer can be deeply influential, but in a society that's filled with glut and repetition and endless consumption, the act of terror may be the only meaningful act. People who are in power make their arrangements in secret, largely as a way of maintaining and furthering that power. People who are powerless make an open theater of violence. True terror is a language and a vision. There is a deep narrative structure to terrorist acts, and they infiltrate and alter consciousness in ways that writers used to aspire to (quoted in Passaro 84).

Surely most novelists would object to this statement – it seems to imply that the novel can only be meaningful in a repressive society, and the aspiring Western novelist is really a 'poor man's suicide bomber'. The quotation, then, may reveal more about DeLillo's own paranoia than about the position of the novelist in contemporary society. In one of the scenes in *Mao II*, the reclusive author Bill Gray is asked by his publisher:

(I)sn't it the novelist, Bill, above all people, above all writers, who understands this rage, who knows in his soul what the terrorist thinks and feels? Through history it's the novelist who has felt affinity for the violent man who lives in the dark. Where are your sympathies? With the colonial police, the occupier, the rich landlord, the corrupt government, the militaristic state? Or with the terrorist? And I don't abjure that word even if it has a hundred meanings. It's the only honest word to use (130) .

DeLillo here again expresses *his* view of what a novelist should be – "the violent man who lives in the dark". In fact, his remarks about the narrative structure of terrorist acts are repeated almost verbatim elsewhere in *Mao II*, except that it is Bill Gray who utters them (157). Many people, then, felt the WTC attacks could easily have been invented by DeLillo in one of his novels. The attacks also, in a way posed a problem for the author, since, as Andrew O'Hagan put it: "What is a prophet once his fiery word becomes deed? What does

he have to say? What is left of the paranoid style when all its suspicions come true?” Nonetheless, DeLillo felt compelled to use September 11 as material for a new novel, which turned out to be *Falling Man* (2007).

Keith Neudecker, a New Yorker, is the central character in the novel. A lawyer who works in the WTC, he experiences and survives the attacks. Not knowing where to go in the midst of the dust and the rubble, he returns to his ex-wife Lianne and their son Justin, and moves in with them. DeLillo describes how Keith and Lianne live through the days following the attacks, and tries to capture the mood of the city at a time when “every cabdriver in New York was called Muhammad” (28). Keith starts an affair with a woman whose briefcase he took with him from the burning tower; Lianne visits her mother and her mother’s German boyfriend for long discussions on the attacks; Justin and two of his friends stand by the window scanning the skies for more planes sent by the evil Bin Laden – whom they have phonetically rendered as Bill Lawton. One day Lianne happens to see a performance artist who, dangling from a maintenance platform, mimics the position of the ‘falling man’ who was photographed jumping from the burning WTC: “She wished she could believe this was some kind of antic street theater, an absurdist drama that provokes onlookers to share a comic understanding of what is irrational in the great schemes of being or in the next small footstep. This was too near and deep, too personal” (163). As the days following the attacks turn into years, Keith starts making money as a professional poker player. Originally he had played the game with a group of friends on a weekly poker-night, but after the death of some of these friends in the attacks, the poker-nights stopped. In a final scene we see Keith in a numbed state at another poker tournament, unaware of time and space, “except for the tournament schedule” (230).

Another narrative runs counter to the story of Keith and his family. This second narrative takes place before September 11, starting in the late 1990s, and is divided into

three brief chapters following each of the three main parts in the book. These short chapters are written from the perspective of Hammad, one of the jihadists who was on the first plane to fly into the WTC. We first meet him in Germany where he is a member of the Hamburg Cell formed around Mohamed Atta (who is called Amir here). The next time we encounter him he is living in Okomis, Florida, where he, Atta and several others have gone to prepare for the fatal attacks. In the final scene the book's two narratives – Keith's and Hammad's - 'collide' in the moment when the planes crash into the towers; the reader is thus transported back to where it began. This is doubtless a deliberate strategy to stress the idea that the WTC attacks somehow disrupted time – and another reminder of the connection DeLillo sees between terrorism and narrative.

*Falling Man* is serious and elegiac, containing little humour. A New Yorker himself, DeLillo called it “the toughest novel I’ve done in an emotional sense” (quoted in Block). Typically, he creates a New York where the familiar is defamiliarised, and ordinary everyday scenes are presented in a slightly Kafkaesque light. Compared to *The Secret Agent* and *The Good Terrorist*, there is not much of a straightforward storyline: plot takes a backseat to the characters’ philosophical reflections, such as: “God used be an urban Jew. He is back in the desert now” (46); “The sun’s not on our wall. It’s out there. It’s not *up* there. There is no up or down. It’s just out here” (186); “I know that most lives make no sense. I mean in this country, what makes sense?” (215) The dialogue is often elliptical and ambiguous, and symbolic references to 9/11 are never far off. Indeed, the WTC attacks are present in one way or another on almost every page. The towers, for example, turn up on a still life by Morandi (“Two of the taller items were dark and somber, with smoky marks and smudges” (49)), and in stacks of poker chips (“He did not want columns so high they might topple. He did not want columns that looked alike. The idea was to arrive at two allotments of equal monetary value” (128)). All the characters seem to be on a quest to

make sense of the terrorist attack, and the way it has changed their lives. Lianne, for example, feels particularly awkward about the fact the terrorists were Muslims, and struggles to find an appropriate attitude towards Islam. This struggle ranges from her hysterical outburst against a neighbour who is playing Middle Eastern music every day, to a more appropriate curiosity: “People were reading the Koran. She knew of three people doing this. (...) They’d bought English language editions of the Koran and were trying earnestly to learn something, to find something that might help them think more deeply into the question of Islam. She could imagine herself doing this” (231).

Asked when he decided to write part of *Falling Man* from the perspective of one of the jihadists, DeLillo told an interviewer: “It happened relatively early [in the writing process]. I had mixed feelings about it. I didn’t particularly want to write about a terrorist, particularly since it involves the deaths and injuries to real people in a city that I love. But I also felt a sense of what we might call novelistic responsibility. I didn’t think I could tell the entire story without the presence of one of the men or at least a fictional version of one of the men who was involved in those attacks” (quoted in Block). Hammad’s story takes up only seventeen pages of the novel but, being part of the central event in the novel, he looms large in the background of the remaining 229. Nonetheless, as a character, he is elusive. The reader learns very little about his origins. Since there was no actual Hammad on flight 11, the character is likely to be a composite of several hijackers – the majority of whom were born in Saudi Arabia in the late 1970s, early 1980s. There was, however, a hijacker on flight 93 who fits Hammad’s profile to some degree: Ziad Jarrah, born in Lebanon in 1975, to a family of secular Muslims. Jarrah probably served as a model for DeLillo’s character, but there are too many differences to say that they are the same person.

When Hammad is introduced, he lives in Hamburg, sharing a flat with other al-Qaeda members who have come to Germany for technical education. Hammad and his

flatmates spend much of their time feeding their paranoia about the Western world and its supposed threat to Islam: “Everything here was twisted, hypocrite, the West corrupt of mind and body, determined to shiver Islam down to bread crumbs for birds”(79). The men can not explain this threat rationally: “Nobody knocked down their door in the middle of the night and nobody stopped them in the street to turn their pockets inside out and grope their body for weapons. But they knew Islam was under attack” (83). According to the extremists, the prime wrongdoers are the Jews, closely followed by the Americans. The accusations sometimes take ridiculous forms: the Jews are, for example, blamed for building toilets too close to the floor, “so a man’s stream of liquid leaves his body and travels so far it makes a noise and a splash, which people in the next room can sit and listen to” (79). Hammad’s flatmate Amir, who leads the group’s discussions, tells his fellow-jihadists that Islam is “the struggle against the enemy, near enemy and far, Jews first” (80).

We do not know how or why Hammad became part of this group, and Hammad initially does not seem to know either: “He had to fight against the need to be normal” (83). He is irritated by his own love of food, which causes him to be fat, and feels guilty about his attraction to women, which is a sin. He has a girlfriend at first, but as he starts to radicalise he leaves her – promising he will come back, knowing he will not. In Islamism Hammad has found a means to structure his life and give it a sense of direction. Jihad has become a calling: “Things were clearly defined. He was becoming one of them now, learning to look like them and think like them. This was inseparable from jihad. He prayed with them to be with them. They were becoming total brothers” (83). As Hammad becomes more involved with the jihadists, his paranoia grows to absurd proportions. He looks at joggers in the park and elderly people sitting in beach chairs and only thinks “world domination.” It makes him proud to think of the ways in which the jihadists undermine the

power of 'the state': "The state has fiber optics, but power is helpless against us. The more power, the more helpless. We encounter through eyes, through word and look"(81).

Hammad leaves Hamburg for a training camp in Afghanistan, where he learns that "death is stronger than life" (172). In the camp he is handed an Arabian knife to slit a camel's throat with: "They made a noise when he did it, he and the camel both, braying, and he felt a deep warrior joy, standing back to watch the beast topple" (174). It is not unlikely that this is the first time Hammad kills in cold blood, and it certainly reads like an initiation rite: afterwards he kisses the bloody knife. Returning from the camp, the group led by Amir move to Okomis, Florida for flight training. It is here they start actively working towards the day of their death. DeLillo here stresses once again "the magnetic effect of plot" (174) and repeats his notion that all plots inevitably lead toward death.

Hammad's flight training, apparently, is not a great success. The group go to a flight school, and play flight simulator computer games in their rented house, but Hammad lacks the skills, and jealously notes that Amir is already flying small planes. In his mind he repeats the aviation theory over and over again: ("The windshield is birdproof. The aileron is a moveable flap" (176)), and on his wall he keeps a poster of the flight deck, which he studies so intently the others call it "his wife." At the same time, Hammad is preparing himself for his death. He writes a letter to his parents, but tears it up instead of sending it. He keeps shaving, because it is important that he look Western, but he stops changing his clothes ("clean or dirty didn't matter" (175)). Most tellingly, Hammad seems to disconnect his mind from his body: "He sat in a barber chair and looked in the mirror. He was not there, it was not him" (175). In a strange twist, the image of Hammad at the barber's returns several pages later, but now in the present tense: "Now he sits in the barber chair, wearing the striped cape" (178). This is the only passage in the novel written in the present tense, which gives an idea of Hammad having conquered time, as it were. Sitting in the

barber chair, both in the past and in the present, Hammad thinks about “the day to come, clear skies, light winds, when there is nothing left to think about” (178).

For all his solemn thoughts, Hammad, in the end, comes across as clumsy and directionless, even though he pretends to have found his mission in jihad. He feels nauseated in the flight simulator and cannot stop himself from eyeing the check out girl in the supermarket. He keeps assuring himself that he is now different, that he has become a man: “He wore a bomb vest and knew he was a man now, finally, ready to close the distance to God” (172). But doubts or fears keep nagging at his mind: “Does a man have to kill himself in order to count for something, be someone, find the way?” (175). Being a man, being part of a brotherhood is what Hammad seems to want most dearly. In order to be part of the brotherhood, however, he must stop asking questions. When, during the preparations for the attacks, he brings up the subject of “the others,” Amir tells him there are no others. “The others exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them” (176). (Amir’s explanation instantly calls to mind Sartre’s famous line *L’enfer, c’est les autres*. Hammad himself thinks “It sounded like philosophy.”) One of his fellow-jihadists reprimands him: “You think too much, Hammad” (177). On occasion Hammad is able to suppress the voices in his head and then he does not think “about the purpose of their mission. All he saw was shock and death. There is no purpose, this is the purpose” (177). This state of numbness is comforting to Hammad, because he does not have to ask questions and can simply surrender himself to the truth of jihad.

Several reviewers have suggested a link between Hammad and Keith in the novel. There is something to say for this idea: Hammad’s stoic determination at jihad mirrors Keith’s stoic determination at poker. They both detach themselves from the complexities of life and instead surrender to a ‘religion’ that gives them clear rules and affirms their masculinity. Keith, at a poker tournament, reflects on the nullifying influence poker has on

his life: “The point was one of invalidation. Nothing else pertained. Only this had binding force. He folded six more hands, then went all-in. Make them bleed. Make them spill their precious losers’ blood. (...) A fresh deck rose to the tabletop. Fortune favors the brave” (230-1). In much the same way as he connected novelists and terrorists, DeLillo here seems keen to make a connection between the world of poker and that of terrorism. The connection is, of course, symbolic - nobody dies in a poker game – but DeLillo suggests that similar processes go on in the minds of ‘the players.’ At one point, Lianne tells Keith: “You want to kill somebody. (...) You’ve wanted this for some time. I don’t know how it works or feels but it’s a thing you carry with you” (214). Keith responds by joking it is a pity he is too old for the army, or he could “kill without penalty and then come home and be a family” (214), but the reader is not told whether he agrees with Lianne’s observation. Of course, comparing terrorists to poker players is no less exaggerated or irresponsible than comparing them to novelists. More valid is the link DeLillo suggests between the jihadists and the German Rote Armee Fraktion.

Apart from Hammad, there is another real terrorist in the novel. The German boyfriend of Lianne’s mother, Martin, is a man with a past. He has told her he was a member of Kommune 1, who were involved in violent actions in the late 1960s, and shown her a poster he keeps, with the nineteen wanted Baader-Meinhof terrorists on it. Martin feels the nineteen jihadists of 9/11 are in some ways like them, Lianne’s mother tells her daughter: “He thinks they’re all part of the same classical pattern. (...) They have their visions of world brotherhood” (147). The kinship Martin feels with the jihadists, is not shared by the people around him. They are not eager to look for similarities, although they are painfully aware that this unwillingness stems from racial sentiments. Lianne is shocked and ashamed when she catches herself thinking: “Maybe [Martin] was a terrorist but he was one of ours (...) godless, Western, white” (195).

Not surprisingly, DeLillo is less afraid of comparing Western and Eastern terrorists. In this light, it may be worthwhile to point out several strong similarities between *Falling Man* and an earlier, influential novel that explores the psyche of the terrorist: André Malraux' *Man's Fate* (1933). This novel deals with the 1927 revolt against Chiang Kaishek by Chinese terrorists. The protagonist, a young man named Ch'en. Like Hammad, he is a thinker, and he has decided that suicidal terrorism is, paradoxically, the meaning of life. Having rejected his Christian education, Ch'en has embraced a new religion, that of death. At one point Ch'en has a conversation with the American pastor who educated him as a child. When the pastor asks him why he has abandoned faith, Ch'en answers: "Who tells you that I have not found my faith?" (173). The pastor keeps nagging the terrorist, and asks him: "Do you think every religious life is not a daily conversion?" At that moment, Ch'en suddenly connects with his old mentor, and thinks: "This man was speaking of himself and he was telling the truth. Like Ch'en, this man *lived* his idea" (174). The pastor notices the change and says: "Each night, Ch'en, I shall pray God to deliver you from pride. (...) If He grant you humility, you will be saved. Now at last I can read in your eyes and understand, as I could not a while ago." But Ch'en reasserts himself and tells the pastor: "Listen to this. In two hours I shall kill a man." He looked straight into the eyes of his companion, this time. Without reason, he raised a trembling hand to his face, crumpled the lapel of his coat: "Can you still read in my eyes?" No. He was alone" (174-5). Thus, the terrorist's allegiance to death has isolated him from the pastor – and from the rest of society, or, in Ch'en's words "the ones who don't kill: the weaklings" (59).

In the novel's opening pages, Ch'en is initiated into death, when he assassinates an opponent with a knife. Standing before the sleeping man he is about to kill, Ch'en contemplates how this action will forever change his life. In a conversation with his foster father shortly after the assassination, Ch'en tells him how he is now caught up in his own

fate. After the conversation his foster father thinks that Ch'en will now have less than ten years to live, ten years he will frantically spend in a world of death. This emphasis on fate is also present in DeLillo: his jihadists, too, feel "the claim of fate (...) There was the statement that death made, the strongest claim of all, the highest jihad" (174). Interestingly, Malraux also makes an important reference to gambling. One of the characters in the book, Baron de Clappique, is a financial benefactor of the terrorists. On the way to warn one of his friends that the police will arrest him, Clappique becomes involved in a gambling session he cannot break himself away from. Staring at the spinning ball, he equates it with his own fate: "It seemed to him that this ball was placing chance in his service to pay all fate's debts. (...) He staked sixty dollars on even, once more. That ball which was slowing down was a destiny - *his* destiny" (252-3). While placing another bet, "he was discovering that gambling is a suicide without death: all he had to do was place his money there, to look at the ball and wait, as he would have waited after swallowing poison; a poison endlessly renewed, together with the pride of taking it. (...) Now, now he was playing his last cent, his life and that of another, especially that of another. He knew he was sacrificing Kyo; it was Kyo who was chained to that ball" (255) – Kyo, the man Clappique is supposed to warn, is arrested shortly after.

Even if DeLillo was not inspired by *Man's Fate*, the parallels in the way these books perceive the terrorist mind are noteworthy (although the tone in *Man's Fate* is less distant, and the inner struggles of the characters are more developed). Malraux' novel is, moreover, interesting because it became quite popular, especially among communists. In fact, several World War II resistance fighters are known to have strongly identified themselves with Ch'en, and used *Man's Fate* as a kind of handbook. In this case, then, DeLillo's idea of a novelist's understanding of "the violent man in the dark" may apply – but *Man's Fate* is clearly an exception. How many jihadists are likely to recognise

themselves in Hammad? Although he is never vilified or demonised, he never really comes to life either and DeLillo seems hesitant to truly get under Hammad's skin.

## John Updike's Ahmad Mulloy (Ashmawy)

John Updike's penultimate novel *Terrorist* was published in 2006. On its release it attracted more media attention than usual because many felt Updike had chosen an uncharacteristically contemporary theme. The 21<sup>st</sup> century urban setting of the novel was radically different from the author's preceding recent work: *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000) took place in medieval Denmark, and *Villages* (2004) in rural New England. In an interview several months before the book was published Updike said: “[*Terrorist* is] meant to be a kind of a take on terrorism now and the whole world situation, really, the angry Islam, and beyond the angry Islam, I think, the fact that the world seems more and more painfully and strictly divided between the haves and the have-nots. So that I take indeed the whole Arab resentment of the US as one facet of the general resentment of the Third World for the First World, which finds itself coping with unwelcome immigrants and racial minorities” (“Book TV After Words”). *Terrorist* was reasonably well-received, but also generated some extremely harsh criticism: “The novel is almost wholly without credibility” (Skloot); “one of the worst pieces of writing from any grown-up source since the events he has so unwisely tried to draw upon” (Hitchens). Several reviewers were puzzled or amused by the idea of a 74-year old Christian author attempting to place himself inside the mind of an eighteen-year-old Muslim fundamentalist. They mostly started from the assumption that, since terrorism was such alien terrain for Updike, the book was bound to be flawed. *The New York Times* aptly summed up the general mood with its opening question: “The bard of the middle-class mundane, the chronicler of suburban adultery and angst, tackling Islamic radicalism and the call to jihad?” (Kakutani)

*Terrorist's* protagonist, Ahmad Mulloy (Ashmawy), is the son of an American mother of Irish descent, Teresa, and an Egyptian father who abandoned them when Ahmad was three. The boy and his mother live in the fictional city of New Prospect in New Jersey.

Ahmad, who is graduating from high school, has become an extremist Muslim under the influence of his imam, a Yemenite named Shaikh Rashid. Rashid urges him to pass his commercial driver's license test, so he can work for one of the imam's friends, Charlie Chehab, who owns a furniture delivery service. The furniture deliveries are really a cover-up for less innocent activity. Having become a truck driver, Ahmad is asked to transport four tons of explosives, which he is supposed to set off while driving through the Lincoln tunnel in the morning rush hour. The jihadists think this suicide mass-murder will surpass the 9/11 attacks in its impact, and Ahmad welcomes the chance to become a martyr for his God. Meanwhile, Ahmad's school counsellor, Jack Levy, a 63-year-old married Jew, has been trying hard to persuade Ahmad to go to college. At the same time, the counsellor has an extramarital affair with Ahmad's mother Teresa. Through his sister-in-law, Jack learns that Ahmad is involved in the terrorist plot and through several coincidences and lucky turns he manages to talk Ahmad out of the plan minutes before the disaster would have taken place. By then, we learn the planned attack had been closely monitored by the CIA all along.

With *Terrorist*, Updike tried his hand at the thriller genre, something he had not done before. This resulted, in his own words, in “an Updike thriller” – a book that makes use of the genre conventions, but keeps a more leisurely pace than the average thriller. Its story, a fairly straightforward narrative, is told from a limited, third-person point of view, that alternates between the minds of Ahmad and Jack Levy (and, for a couple of brief passages, those of Jack's wife and the Secretary for Homeland Security). While Updike, unlike Conrad and DeLillo, does not play with the chronology of his story, he typically chose to write the whole book in the present tense. This creates a directness and urgency that is appropriate to the subject matter, and would not be there if he had used a past tense. However, despite its contemporary topic, *Terrorist* is in fact less different from Updike's

other work than it may seem at first. Terrorism may not be familiar ground to Updike, but religion and adultery – both central to the novel – are his signature themes. On the subject of Islam the author was no novice either: his 1978 novel *The Coup* takes a sura from the Qur'an as its motto, and is set in a fictional Islamic country, Kush, whose unstable colonial politics and tribal cultures Updike richly evokes. Ahmad's budding sexuality allows the author to grant his character elaborate musings on the female body that readers will instantly recognise as Updikean. The use of the present tense, a device made famous by Updike, can be traced back to *Rabbit, Run* (1960). But the most striking familiar element in *Terrorist* may be that for all the heavy implications of the title the events described are rather mundane. Updike himself famously said that one of the primary goals of his fiction was to “give the mundane its beautiful due,” and this holds as much for *Terrorist* as for any of his other works. The novel is about terrorism, yes, but it is also about a boy graduating and starting his first job, about the relationship between a woman in mid-life crisis and a man trapped in an unhappy marriage. Of course, that does not change the fact that Updike's novels had not contained jihadist characters before, and that choosing to write from the perspective of a potential suicide bomber was a bold move.

What does the reader learn about Ahmad's inner life? To begin with, it is predominantly organised around his faith: Ahmad is a devout Muslim. He also judges others by fundamentalist Islamic standards, as can be seen in the following passage where he reflects on the teachers in his high school:

The teachers, weak Christians and non-observant Jews, make a show of teaching virtue and righteous self-restraint, but their shifty eyes and hollow voices betray their lack of belief. They are paid to say these things, by the city of New Prospect and the State of New Jersey. They lack true faith; they are not on the Straight Path; they are unclean. (...) Infidels, they think safety lies in accumulation of the things of this world, and in the corrupting diversions of the television set. They are slaves to images, false ones of happiness and affluence. But even true images are sinful imitations of God, who can alone create (4).

Infidels, sinful, false images.. Ahmad formulates Islam primarily in negative terms here, and he does so for most of the book. (Although it should be added that the critique of capitalism Ahmad voices, certainly has validity.) His faith often seems more an outlet for his anger than a source of comfort: “These devils seek to take away my God” (3) is his first thought in the book. Nor are the high school teachers the only ones who are criticised so harshly by Ahmad; most people are unclean devils in his opinion. But stripped of their religious element Ahmad’s dark thoughts disclose ordinary teenage angst. He often behaves like a typical lone teenager, both afraid of and attracted to the adult world he will enter after having graduated. Already early in the book the reader learns that “Ahmad knows he must have a future, but it seems insubstantial to him, and repels his interest” (18). He is nervous, frustrated, has no friends and says he does not need them either – doubtless out of self-protection, for he feels more attracted to a girl in his class than he wants to admit. Sex puzzles him: he is a virgin who blushes easily and tends to rationalise his fear of sex through religious explanations. Ahmad is also jealous of his mother's lovers and, most of all, he is aching for a father. The search for a substitute has led him to become a Muslim - a tribute to his Egyptian father, who, ironically, did not care for religion at all.

Apart from the link with his father, Ahmad's conversion to Islam (and his subsequent radicalisation) can be seen as his way of proclaiming an identity in a multicultural, cosmopolitan environment. People from many different nationalities live in New Prospect, though largely “brown, in its many shades” (12) and Ahmad himself has of course a mixed racial background. Being part Egyptian and part Irish is confusing to him and he feels he has to make a choice. The reader is often given the impression that he wants to be one hundred percent Arab, but Ahmad is still far from fluent in the Arabic language, and reads from a Qu'ran that has the English translation on its facing pages. While Jack Levy suggests that a bright boy like Ahmad should “confront a variety of viewpoints,”

Ahmad prefers to parrot Shaikh Rashid who has told him that “such a relativistic approach trivializes religion” (39). These opposing voices – Levy’s secularist First World versus Rashid’s religious Third World – are the crucial theme and counter theme in the novel. Levy continually points out to Ahmad that he should treasure America’s cultural melting pot: “Hey, come one, we’re all Americans here. That’s the idea, didn’t they tell you that at Central High? Irish-Americans, African-Americans, Jewish-Americans; there are even Arab-Americans” (301). Rashid abhors this diversity: “The enemy has only the mirage of selfishness, of many small selves and interests, to fight for: our side has a single sublime selflessness. We submit to God and become one with Him, and with one another” (235).

Both Levy and Rashid, however, are cynics, only half-believing the truths they preach. Shortly after his celebratory remark, Levy sighs: “Once you run out of steam, America doesn’t give you much. It doesn’t even let you die, what with the hospitals sucking all the money they can out of Medicare” (304). Ahmad suspects that “Shaikh Rashid is so furiously absolute in his doctrines because God has secretly fled from behind his pale Yemeni eyes” (39).

Levy and Rashid’s opposing voices literally converge in Ahmad, a child of East and West, and are the source of conflict for him. Ahmad cannot bring himself to hate all Americans, even if they are infidels. In fact, the object of his romantic interest is a black Christian girl, Joryleen Grant. With some reluctance he actually attends an African-American church service, to hear the girl sing in her gospel choir. Listening to the gospel songs, Ahmad thinks: “yelping devils,” but he cannot take his eyes off Joryleen’s lips, “the widest-open, freshest mouth” (66) in the choir. Joryleen, when she sings, uses the same elevated religious language (“Do-hoo thy friends despise, for-horsake thee?” (64)) as Ahmad, when he reads the Qur’an – but for her it carries little meaning and is merely a means to an end – the joy of singing. Most of the time Ahmad is critical of her; he

disapproves, for example, of her pierced tongue. But all his judgments grow from his religion. Voicing a personal opinion is not an option, for it may conflict with the fundamentalist Islamic ideas, may lead him from the Straight Path. Joryleen, in turn, makes fun of Ahmad's piety: "What does your Mr. Mohammed say?", "How's old Allah doing?" It is obvious, however, that they feel attracted to each other, and the impossibility of forming a relationship with her is a source of pain to Ahmad. One night close to the day of the terrorist attack, Ahmad's employer Charlie, who has promised to "get him laid", calls a prostitute for him. It turns out to be Joryleen. She and Ahmad have a conversation and although his virginity remains intact, Ahmad experiences "a convulsive transformation, a vaulting inversion of his knotted self like that, perhaps, which occurs when the soul passes at death into Paradise" (226). Here we see Ahmad for the first time link worldly pleasure to religious desire. And of course it confuses him: some days later, Ahmad tells Jack Levy: "not only you have romantic difficulties" (305).

These emotional conflicts complicate the stereotype of the radical Islamist, but Ahmad's faith is not shallow nor a mere excuse for an identity. Quite the opposite: for all his anger, his love for God comes across as truly genuine, although sometimes bordering on the obsessive. He "has grown accustomed to being God's sole custodian" (39) and feels protective towards God, almost as a mother would toward her child. In his final conversation with Joryleen, Ahmad admits that he thinks of God as "a kind of human being," although he knows that this is blasphemy: "At times I have this yearning to join God, to alleviate His loneliness" (226).

Ahmad's gentleness extends to the people surrounding him, although he tries to maintain a distance. In his crucial confrontation with Ahmad, Jack Levy tells him: "I'm betting you won't set it off. You're too good a kid. Your mother used to tell me how you couldn't bear to step on a bug. You'd try to get it onto a piece of paper and throw it out the

window” (296). Ahmad is quick to explain this away, to rationalise his action – but by now the reader knows that this is his typical reaction to any suggestion of vulnerability. A less fortunate aspect of his fragility is pointed out to him by his mother Teresa: it makes him impressionable: “Everything I suggested you thought was a good idea. It worried me, even, you seemed so easily led” (239). Influenced by both Shaikh Rashid and his employer Charlie Chehab, Ahmad is slowly drawn into the jihadist network. Although he wants to be part of the jihad, he initially shies away from its more violent side. Meeting Charlie Chehab for the first time, he witnesses a discussion between Charlie and his father, Habib Chehab, an older Lebanese immigrant, who is firmly pro-American. Habib Chehad, talking about the prisoners in Guantamo Bay, describes them as

dangerous men. They wish to destroy America. That is what they say to reporters, even though they are better fed by us than ever by the Taliban. They think Nine-Eleven was a great joke. It is war for them. It is jihad. That is what they say themselves.” (...) “Jihad doesn’t have to mean war,” Ahmad offers, his voice shyly cracking. “It means striving, along the path of God. It can mean inner struggle (149).

An undercover CIA agent, Charlie Chehab is of course merely pretending to be a jihadist. Charlie is jovial, and keeps talking to Ahmad about sex on TV (“I’d love to make commercials” (172)), while at the same time making strong statements about the Holy War (“The Western powers steal our oil, they take our land” (188)). Interestingly, he does not see these contradictions as in any way problematic. “You’ll like him, Ahmad,” Shaikh Rashid has told his pupil. “He’s very American” (145). This is, of course, the last thing Ahmad wants to hear, but he finds he does indeed like Charlie. Charlie is actually the only person in whose company Ahmad feels at ease: he is comfortable enough even to tease him occasionally - something he would never do with his teacher.

To a lesser extent, the contradictions in Charlie can be found in Shaikh Rashid as well. As already mentioned, he does not seem fully convinced of the absoluteness of Islam. This irritates Ahmad, who does not like his teacher to voice doubts. He thinks: “the

student's faith exceeds the master's; it frightens Shaikh Rashid to be riding the winged white steed of Islam, its irresistible onrushing. He seeks to soften the Prophet's words, to make them blend with human reason, but they were not meant to blend: they invade our human softness like a sword" (7). As the day of the terrorist attack approaches, Rashid seems to grow even more afraid, and there is a hint that Ahmad has made the wrong choice. When he visits him on the night before the attack, he sheepishly asks him: "Dear boy, I have not coerced you, have I?" and, somewhat later, "You do not feel manipulated by your elders?" (270). The reader gets the impression that Rashid secretly hopes that Ahmad will back out. Although he is by no means the noblest character in the book, Rashid seems to care a lot for Ahmad – in a way maybe even more than the boy's mother does. Perhaps his affection can be explained from the fact that Ahmad is the only pupil he has left from his Qur'an class – Ahmad has been attending his classes twice a week for seven years. It is also not unthinkable that Rashid is in love with Ahmad – he is full of 'dear boy's and 'my pet's, and calls him a "beautiful tutee" (108) and his "prize pupil" (271).

During the final conversation with his mentor, Ahmad assures Rashid he does not feel manipulated by his elders. Indeed, while Rashid and Charlie have certainly influenced his decision, Ahmad's main reasons for becoming a jihadist are strictly personal. Where DeLillo's Hammad felt attracted to jihad because it made him feel more manly, Ahmad seems untroubled about his masculinity. Funnily enough, other characters in the book have their doubts. Jack Levy thinks Ahmad might be gay, and Teresa has considered this possibility, too. At school, Joryleen's pimp boyfriend Tylenol baits Ahmad: "You know what a flying fuck is, Arab? (...) A flying fuck is when you do it to yourself, like all you Arabs do. You all faggots, man" (98). Ahmad takes this calmly, and it is clear that he himself is sure of his heterosexuality. Nor is he much bothered by Tylenol's racial stereotyping. Banerjee (2008) is correct when she argues that *Terrorist* is "a novel obsessed

with, and not only curious about, skin colour” (16). But Ahmad himself, although he is clearly not happy with his dun skin, does not feel passionately about racial discrimination or about the treatment of American Muslims. When an indignant Charlie Chehab claims that the Western powers “take from Muslims their traditions and a sense of themselves, the pride in themselves that all men are entitled to” (188), Ahmad thinks it sounds “a bit false, a bit forced.” His own main objection against the Western powers is that they take away his God – his jihad is indeed an “inner struggle,” a personal project, with the exception that thousands will have to die for his fallacy.

The reader often feels Ahmad would like to be frigid and careless like DeLillo’s Hammad: “What you call an explosion is to me a pinprick,” (305) he brags to Jack Levy. But Ahmad really cares too much to feel Hammad’s nihilism: he is a sheep in wolf’s clothing. This suggests he may be more similar to Lessing’s Alice, the other good terrorist. Both are genuinely devoted to their cause, and believe their actions will lead to good. In *The Good Terrorist*, however, there is a more even balance between the innocence and inexperience of Alice and her comrades, and the desperate clumsiness of their eventual terrorist action (five killed). The discrepancy between the sulky, but essentially friendly teenager Ahmad and the enormity of the destructive act (thousands would have been killed) he is about to commit is much greater. This makes the book an easy target for accusations of improbability. Perhaps, though, it is not so unrealistic after all; many of Mohamed Atta’s former friends from Egypt testified that he was a polite, unassuming person. In fact, one of them commented that Atta would become emotional when an insect was killed (Cloud) and it is not unlikely Updike knew this and deliberately wove it into the novel. Moreover, four years after the publication of *Terrorist*, a thirty-year old naturalised American citizen from Pakistan, named Faisal Shahzad, tried to detonate a bomb in a car in Times Square. Although older than Ahmad, there are several remarkable parallels: Shahzad, too,

converted himself, as it were, to Islamism; like Ahmad, he was considered to be a friendly and polite person; and, like Ahmad, he was well-educated (BA from the University of Bridgeport) and intelligent. Had Updike still been alive, he might have enjoyed re-reading the *San Francisco Chronicle* review that said *Terrorist* was “almost wholly without credibility.”<sup>4</sup>

It is also worth noting that Updike, of the writers discussed here, was the first to imagine Mohamed Atta in a literary work. His 2002 short story “Varieties of Religious Experience” (first published in *The Atlantic*, later collected in *My Father’s Tears and Other Stories*) contains episodes from the lives of four characters, taking place shortly before and on September 11, among them the famous terrorist. It opens with sixty-three year old American Dan Kellogg briefly losing his faith in God while watching the towers crumble and fall from his daughter’s apartment: “There is no God” are the first words of the story. The sentence is interesting, because it almost seems to mimic Ahmad’s opening line: “These devils have taken away my God.” It is as if Updike envisages an ‘eye for an eye’ construction in which the terrorist punishes the Americans for having taken his God away, by taking away their God through his terrorist act. Updike then shifts to Mohamed Atta sitting in a bar in Florida drinking Martinis with his fellow-hijacker Nawaf Al-Hazmi. Updike’s portrayal of Atta is less complex and interesting than that of Ahmad: his Atta is full of hatred, directing his gaze at the “whores” and “underfed sluts” in the bar and boasting to the bartender “I am a pilot.” The portrayal shows similarities to that of DeLillo, and, as we will see, of Amis: none of the three authors seem willing to turn Mohamed Atta into the insect-loving man who may have been a source of inspiration for Ahmad. The story deals with some of the same themes as *Terrorist*, but introduces the theme of science as related to religion and terrorism. “Varieties of Religious Experience” takes its name from a 1902 book by the American pragmatist William James (brother of novelist Henry),

who discusses the ways people apply religion and the power it may have over a person's life. For James, religious belief is in the end more powerful than science, an idea the Updike story addresses, when Dan Kellogg thinks: "How could something so vast and intricate [as the WTC], an elaborately engineered upright hive teeming with people, mostly young, be dissolved by its own weight so quickly, so casually? The laws of matter had functioned, was the answer. The event was small beneath the calm dome of sky." In the Atta sequence we learn that "Mohamed had studied engineering among the infidels, learning the mathematics they had stolen centuries ago from the Arabs": the attacks, then, are a way for him to steal it back.

Some valid complaints have been directed toward Ahmad's use of language. Citing the book's opening passage, critic James Wood commented on what he saw as Updike's unwillingness to fully step inside the mind of his character: "It seems very unlikely that a schoolboy thinking about how much he had grown in the last year would think: 'I shall not grow any taller, in this life or the next.' (...) Updike is unsure about entering Ahmad's mind, and crucially, unsure about our entering Ahmad's mind, and so he plants his big authorial flags all over his mental site" (Wood: 2009 24). Certainly, Ahmad's command of English (in thought *and* speech) is astonishing, especially for a foreigner. Of course, Updike was clever enough not to make him a *real* foreigner without losing the 'Third World' element. This means he can legitimately have Ahmad speak "like V.S. Naipaul" and "think like John Updike" (Wood: 2006 26). However, although it is true that Ahmad's spoken English is rather polished for a boy his age, the objection may be somewhat unfair. After all, Ahmad is a serious, intelligent person, and Jack Levy, too, notes that "(t)he boy speaks with a pained stateliness; he is imitating, Levy feels, some adult he knows, a smooth and formal talker" (34). This could explain why Ahmad's language is so stiff at times: he, a native speaker of English, may be imitating Shaikh Rashid, a Yemenite to whom English is

a second language. Ahmad himself offers a glimpse of the language processes that go on in his mind, when he talks to Levy about his father, who, “(h)aving despaired of ever earning more than a menial living by the time I was three, (...) decamped. Is that the correct word? I encountered it in an autobiographical memoir by the great American writer Henry Miller, which Miss Mackenzie assigned us in Advanced English” (35). In addition, it is worth noting that the Times Square bomber, too, had a reasonable command of the English language, and his use of language is quite similar to Ahmad’s, as a sentence from one of his e-mails may demonstrate: “I hope that you also note how far we have gone astray from (Siratul Mustakeem) Straight Path (Quran and Sunnah). My friends it is all evident from Quran and Sunnah as to what happens to a nation when it fails to follow God’s revelation” (quoted in Elliot).

Interestingly, reviewers were strongly divided over Ahmad: a “cartoonish stick figure” (Kakutani), “not only the nicest person in the book, but as engaging a young man as you could meet in a day’s march” (Hitchens), “a wooden actor with a bad accent” (Skloot), “could you ask for a nicer boy?” (Shainin), “as stilted as a wise man in a Hollywood film” (Cartwright), “a luminous jerk, a romantic egoist” (Leonard). If Ahmad’s credibility as a jihadist has not convinced every reviewer, then at least he makes up for it with his credibility as a character – he is ‘round’ enough to elicit different emotional responses from people. Indeed, the strength of *Terrorist* lies in its remarkable ability to generate sympathy in (at least some) readers for the terrorist society is taught to abhor.

## Martin Amis' Muhammad Atta

In the same year Updike published *Terrorist*, British postmodern author Martin Amis created a fictionalised version of Mohamed Atta, the hijacker-pilot of flight 11, for his short story “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta.” Unlike Updike and DeLillo (or, indeed, Conrad and Lessing), Amis based his literary character on a real person - ironically, given that Amis would, of these five authors, be the one least associated with realism. The characters in his novels are often grotesque in an almost Dickensian way; they are rarely virtuous and their behaviour tends to be selfish, excessive and perverse. Among his protagonists are the sleazy director of commercials John Self in *Money* (1984), the concentration camp doctor Odilo Unverdorben in *Time's Arrow* (1991), and the self-proclaimed 'murderer' Nicola Six in *London Fields* (1989). *The New York Times* famously described Amis' style in 1990 as the 'New Unpleasantness.' In his debut novel *The Rachel Papers* he has his hero say: “nice things are dull, and nasty things are funny. The nastier a thing is, the funnier it gets.” This may be as close as it gets to a motto for Amis' literary output: his work is full of the vocabulary of disgust. His characters spend a lot of time burping, masturbating, or throwing up. The author seems to have a special fascination for defecation – as witnessed, for example, in this passage from *Time's Arrow*, where Tod Friendly (Unverdorben) looks at himself in the mirror:

I expected to look like shit but this was ridiculous. Jesus. We really *do* look like shit. Like a cowpat, in fact. Wow. Is there anybody genuinely around in there? Yes: slowly it took on form – Tod's head. Flanked by the great guitars of the ears, his hair lay thin over the orange-peel scalp, in white worms. Greasy, too (18).

Several lines later Tod reflects that “all life, (...) all sustenance, all meaning (and a good deal of money) issues from a single household appliance: the toilet handle” (18). Another typical feature of Amis as a writer, is that he likes to display his mastery of the English language. Kingsley Amis criticised his son for “the terrible compulsive vividness in his style,” which a random sentence in *London Fields* for example may illustrate: “Even during

his best periods, his purple patches of epiphanic swiping and stiffing, of fiddling and gypping and duping and diddling, when money was coming in hard from all directions, Keith never had a good time, financially” (169). Postmodern playfulness pervades Amis’ work: there are stylistic curiosities such as telling a story in reverse (*Time’s Arrow*) or writing it in phonetic speech (“What Happened to Me on My Holiday”), and most of the characters go by prophetic, often unrealistic names (Fielding Goodney, Spunk Davis, Marmaduke Clinch). On occasion, Amis even let himself feature as a character in his novels: *Money* contains a character named Martin Amis, and *London Fields*, a mysterious writer named Mark Asprey/Marius Appleby, who signs with MA. But the humour in his work is mostly black and a sense of apocalypse is never far away.

A respected novelist, Amis is also a non-fiction writer and journalist. The September 11 attacks fuelled his imagination, generating articles and essays in *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The New Yorker* and other papers. Eventually a collection of some of this material was published as *The Second Plane* in 2008. In *The Second Plane* Amis is clearly on a crusade against Islamism, which he distinguishes from Islam (Amis himself started out as an atheist, but switched to agnosticism later). He describes Islamism as the extremist variant of the religion Islam and is keen to stress the distinction between the two concepts. In a long essay “Terror and Boredom” he writes: “naturally we respect Islam. But we do not respect Islamism, just as we respect Muhammed and do not respect Muhammed Atta” (50).

Amis was, however, fascinated enough by Atta to turn him into a literary character. “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” was first published in *The New Yorker* and later collected with the essays in *The Second Plane*. The story (which came illustrated with some of the video stills showing Atta in the Portland, Maine airport) is a description of the terrorist's last day on earth up to and including his death in the 9/11 attacks. By making use

of documents such as the 9/11 Commission Report and the will Atta composed in 1996, Amis made sure the details in his story was historically accurate. However, he was not interested in simply writing a journalistic account of what had happened: he wanted to recreate Atta's own voice, his inner world. As a starting point, Amis takes a quotation by the 9/11 Commission, which could not find a “convincing explanation of why Atta and Omari drove to Portland, Maine, from Boston on the morning of September 10, only to return to Logan on flight 5930 on the morning of September 11.” - Amis' story sets out to supply this explanation, and in the process gives the reader a view inside Atta's mind.

Amis' Muhammad Atta is thirty-three and full of self-loathing and cynicism. He expresses his thoughts in a strangely awkward, formal English, indicative of his foreign background. In the bathroom he thinks in terms like “the chore of ablution, the ordeal of excretion, the torment of delipation”; he talks about being absolved from the “atrocious crime of the self-felony”; and staring at his own face he thinks it is “somehow incontinent.” This vivid, distinctive language (“his excellent English” in Atta's own view) brings the character to life. It also gives a feeling of 'foreignness' that is appropriate because Atta himself is a foreigner.

The world seen through Atta's eyes is not a joyous place. He hates laughter and music. He hates women, too, yet is obsessed with them as well. His fascination for the girlfriend of one of his fellow jihadists, Ziad (the man who may have served as a model to DeLillo's Hammad), gives him sleepless nights during which “he kept wondering how their bodies conjoined, how she must open herself up to him, with all her heaviness and darkness...” In ordinary situations, too, sex is never far from his mind. Watching the hotel guests standing with him in the elevator, Atta “briefly horrified himself with the notion that they were all lovers, returning early to their beds.” Most extreme is fantasy about raping the stewardess on the plane – which, in the end, he does not do, because he decides that “the

combination of women and blood” is to him “wholly unmanageable.” 'The World' itself has to Atta “always felt like an illusion – an unreal mockery.” His negative worldview goes hand in hand with his self-hatred: he sees himself as emotionless, devoid of passion. Reflecting on Ziad and his girlfriend, he decides that “romantic and religious ardour came from contiguous parts of the human being; the parts he didn't have.” By consistently using his full name throughout the story Amis creates a distance, as if even Muhammad Atta can only think of himself in the third person: looking in the mirror he sees “the face of Muhammad Atta” and there are numerous reflections on “Muhammad Atta's mind” and “Muhammad Atta's body.” The reader also feels this distance when Atta re-reads his own will and testament of 1996, containing his wish that the person who washes his body wear gloves and not touch his genitals: “these anxieties were now academic.”

Apart from (largely sexual) frustration it is not clear what lies beneath all this hatred. Now and then there is a tentative hint of sadness, as when he realises why he has always hated music: “all of it, even the most emollient melody, had entered his mind as pain.” Most explicitly there is disappointment and remorse at the end of the story, the moment of his death: “How very gravely he had underestimated life. His own he had hated and had wished away; but see how long it was taking to absent itself and with what helpless grief was he watching it go, imperturbable in its beauty and its power.” This vivid and emotional description, while it will not inspire compassion for Muhammad Atta in many readers, does make it somewhat easier to relate to him – since love of life is more universally shared than love of death.

And yet love of death makes him decide to be a jihadist. According to Amis, religion has little to do with that decision: “Muhammad Atta was not religious. (...) Muhammad Atta did not believe in the virgins, did not believe in the Garden. (How could he believe such an implausibly, and dauntingly, priapic paradise?) He was an apostate;

that's what he was.” How different this is from Updike's God-loving and, ultimately, caring Ahmad! Muhammad Atta dismisses and even ridicules Islamic faith, convinced that “for centuries God has forsaken the believers, and rewarded the infidels.” Politics, too, are no reason for Atta to join the jihadists – he does not care for the situation in Palestine, for example. The attraction of Jihad lies in the simple fact that it was, “by many magnitudes, the most charismatic idea of his generation. To unite ferocity and rectitude in a single word: nothing could compete with that. (...) And it suited his character. If you took away all the rubbish about faith, then fundamentalism suited his character, and with an almost sinister precision.” Atta revels in extremist ideas, not because they are good, but because they are extreme. And because they ultimately lead to the one thing he believes in – death. He says that his partaking in the plot is inspired by “the core reason”, and the core reason is, “all the killing – all the putting to death. (...) Killing was divine delight. And your suicide was just a part of the contribution you made – the massive contribution to death.”

Another aspect of jihad that appeals to Muhammad Atta is its all-male organisation. Being a jihadist is an affirmation of his masculinity, and allows him to forget his sexual frustration and fear of women. It also makes him proud that the West has no real answer to jihad. The only equivalent he sees of this “peer group piously competitive about suicide” are fire fighters: “They were called the 'bravest', accurately in his view.”

If Muhammad Atta comes across as a thoroughly unpleasant character, there is little doubt that this was the author's intention, since in his essay Amis had already clearly stated that “we do not respect Muhammad Atta.” Moreover, he seems to take a sadistic delight in portraying Atta as clumsy and unattractive. In the beginning of the story he slips over a leaking shampoo sachet in the shower, and he cuts himself while shaving, and throughout Atta suffers from “disused gastric juices” and “the ungainsayable anger of his bowels.” Most colourful perhaps is the observation that “his breath smelled like a blighted river.”

(The familiar realm of Martin Amis is easily recognisable.) Atta's extremist side shows similarities with Conrad's Professor, and they can hardly be coincidental. In an interview Amis talked about how *The Secret Agent* helped him understand the psyche of Muhammad Atta: "Conrad said the essential characteristics of the terrorist, of the destroyer, are vanity and sloth. And I thought: that doesn't seem right to me. But when you think it through it holds, I think, because with this kind of personality the desire to make an impression is overwhelming (...) There are only two ways to make an impression. One is by devoting your life to science or art, or some recognisable positive achievement. The other is destruction" ("In Conversation with Martin Amis"). The quotation may tell us less about Conrad than about Amis. The crude assertion that it must be either one or the other, gives Amis full reign to revel in the monstrosity, the Other, of the terrorist - he has no wish to humanise Atta, or make him less alien. His attitude comes across loud and clear in a platform discussion on 'monsters,' which was part of the 2007 edition of The New Yorker Festival. Amis was interviewed together with Ian Buruma, who had written a book about the jihadist Mohammed Bouyeri – the assassin of Dutch film director Theo van Gogh. Whereas Buruma talked about the social anxieties of second generation immigrants, Amis clearly enjoyed amusing the audience with all the saucy details he knew out about the "inexplicable entity" Osama bin Laden.

Apart from making Atta a despicable and occasionally clownish character, Amis, in his short story, also seizes the opportunity to reflect more seriously about terrorism. Whereas DeLillo tries to draw parallels between terrorists and novelists, and terrorists and poker players, Amis is keen to establish a connection between terrorism, boredom and time. Muhammad Atta repeatedly uses the concept "dead time" to refer to periods where nothing seems to happen, at least nothing significant. His journey on September 10 to see his imam was "dead time, as dead as time could get, like queuing, or an interminable red

light”; the checkpoint screening at the airport is dead time and Atta is already convinced that the plane attacks will inspire “more, perhaps much more, dead time, planetwide.”

Talking about this link between terrorism and time, Martin Amis told an interviewer that “Mohamed Atta achieved immortality”, by “ever living in just that one act” (“In Conversation with Martin Amis”). He transposed the idea into the story’s narrative structure. Part one starts with the sentence: “On September 11, 2001, he opened his eyes at 4 a.m., in Portland, Maine; and Muhammad Atta’s last day began” (95). Part two consists solely of a repetition of this sentence - thus inviting the reader to start at the beginning again, and re-live the day, as it were, endlessly. Hence, too, the plural “last days” in the title when the story is really about a “last day”. Atta himself describes his condition as “the condition of boredom, unbounded boredom, where all time was dead time.” Still, “it was appropriate, perhaps, and not paradoxical, that terror should also promote its most obvious opposite. Boredom.” This, of course, is Amis speaking, not Atta. The longest essay in *The Second Plane* is called “Terror and Boredom” and in a 2006 article “30 Things I’ve Learned About Terror,” Amis says:

Terror brings with it boredom. This was very much the case in Stalin's Russia. It was the two pillars – you get them half-dead with boredom and then you scare the life out of them every waking second. And then you really have a docile population. It's different in our culture. It's not just airport queues and this feeling of meaninglessness that comes over you when you're taking your shoes off and going through security. A homely analogy would be when you realise you're having dinner with a fanatical Christian. What you realise is that all the higher faculties in your mind have to go to sleep while you're in the presence of belief. Your reason is no good to you; it's not an actor in you at all. That's boredom. It's dead time. And faced with fanaticism that's what one feels.

In another article, published in 2007, he links jihad with Russian communism: “In organisational terms, Islamism is Leninist. The radicals, with their advanced consciousness, form a vanguard, and seek power in the name not of the supranational proletariat but of the ummag, the supranational community of believers.”

Like DeLillo, Amis has spoken widely about terrorism, although Amis only became interested in the topic after 9/11. However, his earlier novel *Time's Arrow* already shows several interesting parallels with "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta." First of all, the book's protagonist is a state terrorist (it is worth remembering that the term terrorism was first applied to a regime): doctor Odilo Unverdorben, who assists Uncle Pepi (Dr Joseph Mengele) in Auschwitz with his medical experiments. After the war Unverdorben flees to America and resumes his activities under a different name. Amis' fascination with time is strongly present: the story is literally told backwards starting with the doctor waking from the "blackest sleep" that is death and ending with his father who "will come in and kill me with his body" – his conception. Worth noting here is that Amis did not choose to write *Time's Arrow* from the actual perspective of Unverdorben/John Young/Tod Friendly, but chose instead to observe him through a kind of second consciousness (a "Tod and I" presence – the German punning no doubt intended). The material is therefore presented in a detached way, which makes for disturbing reading, somewhat similar to that in the short story, although Amis reveals more about Atta's mind than he does about Unverdorben's. Had Amis published *Time's Arrow* together with a collection of essays on camp doctors, it is no more than likely his theoretical ideas would have found their reflection in the novel. In the case of "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" the link with Amis' non-fiction material is so clear that it raises the question: where does the character stop and the author begin? Where does the essayist take over? Is not Muhammad Atta merely a platform for Martin Amis (Amis cannot have failed to notice that Atta's initials are his own) to expand on his theory of boredom, dead time and 'the thing which is called World' (all three notions occur elsewhere in his essays)? Or an excuse to add another diabolical character to his cabinet of curiosities?

## Speculative Conclusions

Literature and terrorism have interacted, and keep interacting, with one another in a number of interesting, complex ways. Texts that inspire violent actions are, more often than not, ideological works, or, as may be the case, religious works. They are usually placed in a different category than novels (and are sometimes not considered literature). But fiction, too, has on occasion led to terrorism. Certain terrorists, for example, have been inspired by a literary character. We already mentioned Malraux' Ch'en, but another example would be Conrad's Professor. He is said to have inspired the so-called 'Unabomber': an assistant professor of mathematics at Berkeley University, who sent packages containing home-made bombs to several Americans between 1978 and 1995. The Professor's statement that he depends on death, and society, on life, was also seen as eerily foreshadowing Osama bin Laden's blunt remark: "We love death. The US loves life" – although we have no reason to assume that bin Laden read Conrad. Perhaps the most extreme recent occasion when fiction inspired terrorism, was the 1988 publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*: the fatwā issued on the author led to book burnings, bombings of book stores, and the killing of Rushdie's Japanese translator.

On the other hand, terrorism has, of course, also influenced fiction. The anarchist bombings of the early twentieth century, the assaults of the Red Army Faction, the Twin tower attacks – all found their way into novels and short stories (and, of course, into other cultural realms – films, plays, paintings). As mentioned before, the five texts discussed here form a very small, almost arbitrary selection of a wide range of literary representations of terrorists. But the diversity in their authors' personal, political and religious backgrounds at least ensures various different perspectives on the topic. As we have seen, both Conrad and Lessing had first-hand experiences with people who were involved in terrorism; however, none of the authors discussed here were ever involved in terrorist action themselves – so

when they sat down to imagine their fictional terrorist's mind they could only rely on their empathic powers. This is obviously what a novelist does with most of his/her characters, but in the case of such a universally detested and stigmatised figure as the terrorist, empathy, let alone sympathy, may not easily be achieved.

Before addressing the question of empathy, it is worthwhile to look at some differences and similarities in the profiles of the characters. As we have seen, the five terrorists are as diverse as the authors who imagined them, but there are common traits in their portrayals as well. One characteristic these terrorists seem to share is that they have been "taken over by the language they speak," in Doris Lessing's words. Lessing thinks that unconditional surrender to the language of an ideology is essential to the terrorist – whatever form this ideology takes. She wrote: "If I were to write *The Good Terrorist* now, [the characters] would not be talking revolution, which has become thoroughly discredited, but some kind of religious language" ("The Languages We Speak" 12). Indeed, the terrorists here have different languages they let themselves be guided by: for Ahmad it is the language of Islamism, for Alice that of Leninism, and for the Professor and Muhammad Atta a language of anarchism/nihilism. With Hammad it is slightly more difficult to pinpoint because he is less convinced about what he is doing than the others; it seems he eventually settles on a kind of half-hearted nihilism. Each of these languages is, at least in the perception of the terrorists, univocal and unambiguous. Camus in his famous essay *The Fastidious Assassins* (1951) quotes a Nazi party declaration: "All of us, here below, believe in Adolf Hitler, our Führer ... and (we confess) that National Socialism is the only faith which can lead our people to salvation" (79). But, in a slightly altered version, this declaration could just as well have come from al-Qaeda. This suggests there are few significant differences between terrorists on either side of 9/11, and the jihadist may not be a "different enemy than we have ever faced." According to Camus, frustrated religion lies

at the basis of any kind of terrorism: “The terrorists undoubtedly want first of all to destroy – to make absolutism totter under the shock of exploding bombs. But by their death, at any rate, they aim at recreating a community founded on love and justice, and thus to resume a mission which the Church has betrayed. The terrorists’ real mission is to create a Church from whence will one day spring the new God” (57).

We have seen how Lessing was keen to stress that blindly pursuing one political or religious idea will eventually lead to madness. Most of the texts here contain references to madness in relation to terrorism: the Professor is “calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world” (269); Ahmad is nicknamed Madman for his fanatical religious belief; and it is hard not to see Atta’s obsession with violent death, ‘killing for the delight of killing’, as mad in the extreme.

Another recurring theme most of these writers address is the effect terrorist acts exert on time. Several of the texts use an unconventional structure in order to highlight how terrorist acts violently disrupt time: in *The Secret Agent*, scenes following the Observatory’s bombing - itself an attack on time - precede scenes that take place before the attack; Hammad’s pre-9/11 narrative keeps interrupting the novel’s main, post-9/11 narrative, aggressively breaking its linear flow; and Muhammad Atta’s last day is repeated over and over again.

The motivations that drive these characters to terrorism vary. Some of them, especially the ones who feel unconfident about their masculinity, or are afraid of women, are attracted to an idea of brotherhood. This certainly goes for Hammad, and, to a lesser extent, Atta and Ahmad. Alice, of course, being a woman, has no such concerns – although she, too, cherishes a utopian idea of a world full of comrades. For others it is the promise of fame: this seems especially the case with the Professor, but a certain vanity also manifests itself in Hammad and Ahmad: both of them form mental pictures of themselves making the

headlines after their death. We have also seen how various forms of bitterness and resentment play a role.

When it comes to empathising with the fictional terrorist, the author's choice of narrative perspective has important consequences. This may be illustrated by comparing the final scenes of two of the works. On the last page of *The Secret Agent*, Conrad's God-like narrator looks down at the pathetic terrorist walking the streets, "frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable and terrible in the simplicity of his idea," passing on "unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men" (269). *Terrorist* ends in a scene that closely resembles Conrad's, but here it is Ahmad, the terrorist, who is looking down from the cabin of his truck: he sees the same streets full of people, reduced "to the size of insects (...) scuttling, hurrying," and he thinks "*These devils have taken away my God*" (310). The book thus ends, as it began, in the terrorist's mind. Whereas Conrad's omniscient perspective invites us to look at the terrorist from a safe distance, Updike forces the reader to see through the terrorist's eyes. The latter perspective will, of course, for most readers greatly enhance their empathic understanding of the terrorist's inner life – since empathy literally means 'in feeling.'

In this light, there is a notable difference between the characters offered by Updike and Lessing, and those by Amis and DeLillo. A problem with the latter two is that the characters they have created seem to be built on preconceived notions, and primarily serve as vehicles for their creators' theoretical analyses of terrorism. DeLillo himself explained that "in contemporary writing (...) characters seem to live in a theoretical environment rather than a real one." Interestingly, he added: "I haven't felt that I'm part of that" (DeCurtis 62). Yet Hammad remains, like his double in the novel, Keith, a frosty nihilist philosopher. Similarly, we have seen that Muhammad Atta's thoughts read like a summary of Amis' essays in *The Second Plane*. By comparison, Ahmad and Alice are given

(relatively) more autonomy – they are presented as human beings, who laugh and cry, make friends and enemies. Updike and Lessing also provide us with a fuller biography of their characters: we get to know their parents, for example. Hammad’s parents are mentioned, too, but we are not let in on his feelings about them. Nor do we get a profound insight in the nature of his brief affair with the Turkish girl. If we are to believe Amis, Muhammad Atta, on his last day, did not once think about his friends and family. Although it is true that the short story form does not lend itself to an extensive description of Atta’s personal background, Amis could have revealed certain details that would have made him more human.

Perhaps most importantly, Alice and Ahmad see terrorism as a means to an end, while Hammad and Atta see it as an end in itself. The former are, perhaps paradoxically, life-embracing terrorists: they care about others, and operate from a genuine belief that their actions will lead to good. Naturally, we condemn their actions, but at the same time we recognise their integrity. Conversely, how many readers will identify with Atta’s total rejection of life, and total embrace of death? By taking both bin Laden (“we love death”) and Bush (“this enemy has no regard for human life”) at their word, Amis avoids the complexities of the outlook Conrad offers in *Under Western Eyes*, viz. that “the oppressors and the oppressed are all Russians together” (51). If the approach of DeLillo and Amis initially feels more shocking or provocative, in the final analysis, Updike and Lessing take the bigger risk: by de-alienating and humanising their fictional character, they complicate our attitude to terrorism.

Empathic strategies in the cultural representations of terrorists deserve to be studied more exhaustively and in greater depth. Novels are a good place to start, because they most literally invite us to ‘read’ the mind of a character. However, other cultural forms – television, poetry, film, pop songs – should be given sustained attention as well. Taken

together, these representations play an important role in shaping our perceptions of the people many of us fear most. They confront us with powerful questions, not only about the terrorist Others, but, depending on the degree we are allowed to share their inner experience, about our selves.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A note on terminology and spelling. The term jihad is sometimes capitalised, but I will write it in lower case. The official term for a Muslim committed to violent jihad is mujahid, but I will use the more common term jihadist. The first name of the 9/11 jihadist Atta is usually spelled Mohamed – which is the spelling I will use here, except when referring to Amis' fictional Muhammad Atta.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the phrase is taken from Wallace Stevens' 1945 poem "Esthétique du Mal," which describes a discussion between Serge and a narrow-minded communist.

<sup>3</sup> The military form of jihad is called 'jihad by the sword'. Other forms are 'jihad of the heart' (one's internal fight against evil), 'jihad by the tongue' (speaking the truth) and 'jihad by the hand' (performing good deeds).

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps even more interesting with regard to the issue of Ahmad's credibility, was the arrest at JFK Airport of two aspiring jihadists, on June 6, 2010. The two were leaving for Somalia to join the jihadist al-Shabaab organisation. One of them, twenty-year old Mohamed Mahmoud Alessa, was born in the US, and lived with his parents in New Jersey. Moreover, like Ahmad, the two young men had been set up by an undercover police officer.

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