Le Simplegadi ISSN 1824-5226

Vol. XIV-No. 15 April 2016 DOI: 10.17456/SIMPLE-23

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0

Silvia Albertazzi

"And then I smiled": Recent Postcolonial Fiction and the War on Terror

Abstract I: Nel saggio si mettono a confronto le reazioni di un autore americano e due postcoloniali all'attacco alle Twin Towers dell'11 settembre 2001. Il romanzo del pakistano Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* è analizzato in parallelo con *Terrorist* di John Updike e *The Unknown Terrorist* dell'australiano Richard Flanagan, lavori in cui si rappresenta, nell'un caso, il divenire di un terrorista, dall'altro la sua creazione ad opera dei media.

Abstract II: The aim of this essay is to compare the reactions to the 2001 attack to the Twin Towers as they are related and reflected upon in Western and non-Western fiction. We start from the analysis of a novel by a Pakistani author, Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Then, we compare the genesis of a terrorist, as it is depicted by the American author John Updike in *Terrorist*, and the creation of a terrorist by the media, which is the main subject of *The Unknown Terrorist* by the Australian 2014 Man Booker Prize Winner Richard Flanagan.

In his "Discours de l'histoire", Roland Barthes affirms that "le discours littéraire comporte très rarement les signes du 'lecteur'; on peut même dire que ce qui le spécifie c'est d'être – apparemment – un discours sans *tu*, bien qu'en réalité toute la structure de ce discours implique un sujet de la lecture". He goes on to add that "dans le discours historique, les signes de destination sont communément absents" (Barthes 1984: 157).

We should bear these affirmations in mind when considering the most significant postcolonial novel written in the wake of 9/11, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, by the Anglo-Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid. What strikes us most in Hamid's novel is that it is written in the second person, being the long monologue of a young Pakistani man who tells an unknown American how he lost his American job and love after 9/11, and came back to his mother country. Even though his interlocutor never speaks, Hamid's protagonist keeps addressing him, in a continuous attempt to enchain him with his words. In this sense, Hamid's discourse might be considered the opposite of Barthes's 'discours historique', which is characterized by the absence of an addressee. In fact, not only do we find precise signs of destination throughout the novel, but also the marks of the reader

(here confused with the fictive listener) are everywhere. To paraphrase Barthes, you could even call this novel 'a discours *avec* tu', which is to say, a literary work very different from historical fiction and historiography. Moreover, if we note how the protagonist reminds one of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner (not to speak of the similarity between his listener and the Wedding-Guest), we can almost talk of 'discours poétique' as far as this novel is concerned. The deeper Changez, Hamid's main character, gets absorbed into his monologue, the more his speaking acquires the tone of an intimate conversation not so much with the unidentified American as with the reader.

Yet the unease we feel reading Changez's comments shows that Hamid's use of the second person is also significant from a political point of view. As Judith Butler has noted, if we want "to expand our understanding of the forms that global power has taken" (Butler 2004: 8) we must learn not only to narrate our stories from another point of view, but also "to receive an account delivered in the second [person]" (Butler 2004: 8). The 'I' we use when telling our stories is called into question when related to the Other: Hamid shows us that when the telling is done by this very Other, we, like Changez's American interlocutor, are left speechless. We are afraid of understanding the Other's point of view, of being convinced by his words, of being "infected in a morally perilous way by the thinking of the presumed enemy", as Butler puts it (Butler 2004: 8).

Between the lines of Changez's account of his falling out of love with America, it is impossible not to read all the ambiguities of the current East/West relationship, seen through mutual prejudices and misrepresentations (Lasdun 2007). Changez is the Other as we have created him on the basis of his diversity; a product of American cultural fundamentalism, his misadventures depict the darker side of globalization. It is not by chance that his story 'pivots on a smile', as the reviewer of the *New York Times* wrote (Olson 2007). Indeed, an uncanny smile is his first reaction as he watches the attacks of September 11, 2001 on television. "I stared as one – and then the other – of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased" (Hamid 2007: 72).

Obviously, this reaction comes from the identification of the Twin Towers as an emblem of American capitalism, and of US financial and technological power. While the towers, as Don DeLillo suggested, were "a justification […] for technology's irresistible will to realize in solid form whatever becomes theoretically available" (DeLillo 2001: 466), the dramatic alteration of the Manhattan skyline stands for a huge change of perspective, imposed by a small group of 'Others' to that majority Changez never managed to be part of. "At that moment" – Changez explains - "my thoughts were not with the *victims* of the attack […] no, I was caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees" (Hamid 2007: 73).

As we noted before, Changez's smile marks the turning point of the novel: a brilliant Princeton student, and later a highly regarded employee at an elite financial company,

Changez had already started doubting his role and place in the American affluent society before 9/11. Yet it is only after it that he reconsiders his life in New York to the point of loathing himself for accepting the American way of life, and being so eager to embrace Western capitalism. Reflecting on his former self, he comments: "I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with kinship to mine" (Hamid 2007: 152). Knowing that in the Ottoman empire the janissaries were Christian boys trained to fight against their own people, we realize how different the post 9/11 Changez is from the one who could affirm with pride that, though never being an American, he was "immediately a New Yorker" (Hamid 2007: 33).

In the wake of September 11, Changez starts being watched with mistrust; he loses interest in his job, is fired, and, while his American fiancée ends in a mental asylum, he returns to Pakistan, where he joins anti-American protests. Whilst, at the beginning of the novel, we identify Changez with the 'reluctant fundamentalist', the more he goes on with his tale the more we realize that the real fundamentalism at issue here is American capitalism, emblematized by the motto of Changez's former boss: 'Focus on the fundamentals'. This reversal leads to the impossibility of determining who is the potential killer and who the victim out of Changez and his listener. At the end of his long tale, Changez compares himself to an up-to-date Kurtz "waiting for his Marlowe" (Hamid 2007: 183). Yet throughout the novel, the reader is more likely to see him as a postmodern version of Conrad's narrator. If we agree with Christian Salmon when he says that Ground Zero is Narration Degree Zero (Salmon 2004: 16), Hamid's Changez is a narrator trying to build his tale on that void. "The narrative ends in rubble", wrote Don DeLillo shortly after 9/11, "and it is left to us to create the counter-narrative" (DeLillo 2001: 461). However, the true counter-narrative of September 11 is not his *Falling Man*, nor Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud, and Incredibly Close*, nor any other Western fiction trying to fit this anguished material into the frame of our 'postmodern' age (Versluys 2009; Albertazzi 2011; Albertazzi 2012). Only a non-Western author, an Other, could replace the old narrative with a new one. Changez himself lets us understand why when he describes his post-9/11 vision of America:

> […] it seemed to me that America […] was increasingly giving itself over a dangerous nostalgia at that time. […] I had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward; for the first time I was struck by its determination to look back. […] I, a foreigner, found myself staring out at a set that ought to be viewed not in Technicolor but in a grainy black and white (Hamid 2007: 114-115).

To be free of that dangerous nostalgia, the counter-narrative of Ground Zero must be told by a foreigner and deal with the unpleasant truths that we, Westerners, would not like to hear. In this sense, Changez's listener is really compelled to "hearing beyond what we are able to hear", which, according to Butler, is the necessary condition for opening oneself to

Le Simplegadi ISSN 1824-5226
Vol. XIV-No. 15 April 2016 DOI: 10.17456/SIMPLE-23

"a narration that decenters [one] from [one's] superiority" (Butler 2004: 18). It is quite useless, therefore, to doubt the reliability of Changez as a narrator. Changez is mainly asking for recognition by the American Other, and "when we ask for recognition for ourselves, we are not asking for an Other to see us as we are, as we already are, as we have always been, as we were constituted prior to the encounter itself. Instead, in the asking […] we have already become something new, since we are constituted by virtue of language in the broadest sense, one without which we could not be" (Hamid 2007: 144). By depriving his listener of will through the violence of his addressing (Hamid 2007: 139), Changez creates his own counter-narrative of 9/11 far from America, in the "last days of what passes for spring […] in Lahore" (Hamid 2007: 31).

The originality of Hamid's novel is best appreciated if we compare it to an American work on the same subject, *Terrorist*, by John Updike. Here the popular chronicler of the American middle-class deals with the genesis of a potential terrorist, a New Jersey adolescent who embraces Islam both out of rage against US consumerism and in a pathetic attempt to retrieve the father figure he lost in his babyhood. Updike's position is clear from the title, since, as the Italian critic Daniele Giglioli has observed, "Il terrorismo è la violenza degli altri. Non ci appartiene, arriva dal di fuori, non possiamo imputarcelo. È incomprensibile. Noi non lo faremmo mai. Noi chi? Tutti. Nessuno si definisce terrorista" (Giglioli 2007: 7). The setting of *Terrorist* is a cliché leading to the assumption that terrorism grows in situations of marginality: other clichés are the young age of the protagonist and his being unacquainted with sex - and even scared by it (Juergensmeyer 2000). Updike gives his protagonist, Ahmad, such a stereotyped voice that, as Amitav Ghosh commented, "Although he is a native-born American and has never left the United States, he speaks as if he had learned English at a *madrassa* run by the Taliban" (Ghosh 2006). Nor does any of the other characters defy stereotype: once again, we cannot but agree with Ghosh when he says: "only two of them are half-way believable, and they are Jack Levy and Ahmad's Irish-American mother. It is no accident, perhaps, that neither of them is brown" (Ghosh 2006).

Jack is Ahmad's opponent in an almost Manichean battle between Good and Evil: in an all-American view, Ahmad stands for merciless religious fundamentalism and Jack for secular humanism. At the end of the novel, preventing the realization of Ahmad's suicidal act of terrorism, Jack becomes one of those heroes Americans need so badly, according to DeLillo. Moreover, preventing Ahmad's tragic gesture, Jack also prevents the spectacularization of the terrorist act, which is at the basis of another novel coming from a postcolonial reality, *The Unknown Terrorist*, by the Australian author Richard Flanagan. Flanagan's book does not in fact deal with the spectacular implications of the act itself, but with the creation of a terrorist by the media, in a kind of perverse show. The plot of the novel is very simple: after a one-night stand with a stranger during the Sydney Mardi Gras, a pole dancer, Gina, nicknamed the Doll, suddenly finds herself hunted by the police

as a dangerous terrorist. She is guilty only of being caught with the wrong man in the wrong place by a surveillance camera. Her dramatic persecution shows not only how morbidly terrorism attracts the media but also how the media themselves control and direct the way people see, and the interpretation of what they see. Gina's tragic experience is an ambiguous process of virtualization, leading, in Žižek's words, to a "dematerialization of 'real life' itself, its reversal into a spectral show" (Žižek 2002: 14). Since the beginning of her story Gina believes that the whole world is based on deception, because "people were never who they seemed" (Flanagan 2007: 47). Yet, it is only when a failed anchorman, Richard Cody, having been refused by her, uses his position to manipulate reality, that the Doll's life really "acquires the features of a staged fake" (Žižek 2002: 14).

Fundamental, for the creation of the terrorist, is the iteration of her image on the TV screen. The blurred video in which she is caught with the handsome foreigner who will later be identified as a terrorist is broadcast endlessly throughout the country. The repetition of Gina's video seems to confirm that, as Slavoj Žižek affirms, "the opposite of existence is not nonexistence, but *insistence*: that which does not exist, continues to *insist*, striving towards existence" (Žižek 2002: 22). By broadcasting Gina's image continuously, television creates a state of fear and anxiety around her face, which, with every new appearance, loses humanity and eventually becomes the face of evil itself. What is original in Flanagan's novel is that this face is white: it is a Western one: Gina belongs to 'us', yet she is accused of acting like (or for) 'them'. Therefore, Gina's fate might be *our* fate. In this sense, *The Unknown Terrorist* is a cautionary tale: the author wants to warn us against "the instrumental use of the threat of terrorism and the risk of totalitarian choices for our Western societies in a perennial state of emergency" (Wu Ming1: 2010, my translation).

In this universe of people made moral cowards by venality, and terrorized by economic anxiety and skulking xenophobia (Conrad 2007), the Doll and Cody "cling to their own varieties of emptiness with the ferocity of religious fanatics" (Iweala 2007). In particular, Cody seems to personify Žižek's "Homo sucker", who, "while he tries to exploit and manipulate others, […] ends up being the ultimate sucker himself" (Žižek 2002: 71). Seeing in Gina's story the chance for a return to success and popularity, he builds a castle of suppositions around her guilt, never taking into account the possibility of her innocence, but easily convincing both public opinion and politicians of her being a dangerous terrorist. Wounded and terrified, Gina ends by being caught up in a horrific machine she is helpless to stop: in Butler's words, she is literally given over to the Others [no longer us, not yet them] in ways she cannot predict or control (Butler 2006: 46). Thus, her parable becomes the mirror of a crisis that, according to Flanagan, is not political. As the Australian author says, it is more "an epidemic of loneliness, of sadness – and we are completely unequal to dealing with it" (Moss 2007).

Le Simplegadi ISSN 1824-5226
Vol. XIV-No. 15 April 2016 DOI: 10.17456/SIMPLE-23

In her isolation, The Doll is the convenient scapegoat for a world of globalized terror and trade. Moreover, if it is true, as Butler says, that "each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies" (Butler 2006: 20), the choice of a pole dancer as a protagonist emphasizes the risk of violence each body is at just by virtue of its exposure. "A site of desire and physical vulnerability" (Butler 2006: 20), Gina's body attracts envy from women, lust from men and contempt from both men and women. According to Flanagan, as a pole dancer she is "at [the] very point of intersection of the sadness and sickness and complete hypocrisy of the world" (Moss 2007). "A convenient place to start" for a writer, since, as Flanagan explained, "It's good to have a character about whom people will arrive at an immediate judgement and that allows you then to take the reader to a different place. You can make them realise that perhaps their judgement was wrong, and perhaps the other judgements they live with are also as ill-based" (Moss 2007).

Here Flanagan's work differs radically from *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum*, the 1971 novel by Heinrich Böll from which it takes its basic outline. In Böll's plot, inspired by the terrorist craze that shook Germany in the '60s and '70s, the protagonist, a governess wrongly accused of being the accomplice of a terrorist, is so prudish that she has been nicknamed 'the nun'. On the contrary, the Doll has no honour to lose. Consequently, whilst Katharina Blum ends by killing the journalist who has destroyed her reputation, the Doll herself *is* killed in a sort of "bloody day of judgement" (Conrad 2007), characterised by an apocalyptic scenery: the sudden ice storm that struck Sydney in the winter of 2004.

In fact, Sydney is more than just a setting in Flanagan's book: in a way, the metropolis, with its lurid sights, its contradictions, its corruption and its dropouts, stands for Australia, the author's mother country, towards which he shows an unconcealed rage. "I wanted to make a mirror to what I felt Australia has become", he declared (Moss 2007). To stress his polemical intentions, Flanagan dedicated his novel to David Hicks, an Australian drifter converted to Islam, who was captured by the Americans in Afghanistan, where he served with the Taliban regime, in 2001. After spending five years in Guantanamo Bay, in accordance with a pre-trial agreement, out of his desperation for release, he pleaded guilty to the charge of providing material support for terrorism and was sent back to Australia to serve the remaining nine months of a suspended seven-year sentence, without any media contact. When asked by an interviewer whether he considered his dedication to Hicks "needlessly provocative", Flanagan justified his choice with these words:

> You don't have to agree with [him] and I don't. […] I don't support the murder of innocent people anywhere by anyone, but what really matters is truth and individual freedom, and when those things start coming under such heavy attack as they have in recent times, then people should be very disturbed (Moss 2007).

And he concluded:

> The danger for western societies at this moment is that we seek to protect ourselves by creating and feeding difference and by making people feel alienated, and that's not possible to share with other human beings the possibility of being fully human. The best defence we can offer against evil is […] by letting people back in (Moss 2007)[1].

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Albertazzi, Silvia. 2011. "Un fragile simulacro, un parco a tema": Manhattan nei romanzi del post 9/11. A cura di Roberto Vecchi & Rita Monticelli. *Topografia delle culture*. Bologna: I libri di Emil, 161-178.

Albertazzi, Silvia. 2012. *Belli e perdenti*. Roma: Armando Editore, 137-164.

Albertazzi, Silvia. 2013. Sous les yeux de l'Orient: les consequences du 11-Septembre dans la fiction postcoloniale récente. Cécile Girardin & Philip Whyte eds. *Continuité, classicisme, conservatisme dans les littératures postcoloniales*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 195-204.

Appadurai, Arjun. 2006. *Fear of Small Numbers. An Essay on the Geography of Anger*. Durham-London: Duke University Press.

Barthes, Roland. 1984. *Le bruissement de la langue*. Paris: Seuil.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1990. *La transparence du mal*. Paris: Galilée.

Böll, Heinrich. 1974 [2009]. *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum oder Wie Gewalt entstehen und wohin sie führen kann*. Leipzig: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag.

Butler, Judith. 2004 [2006]. *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

Conrad, Peter. 2007. Days of Thunder Erupt Down Under. *The Observer*, 8 April (accessed on 4 November 2015) http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/apr08/crimebooks.features.

De Lillo, Don. 2003 [2001]. In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September. William H. Chafe, Harvard Sitkoff & Beth Bailey eds. *A History of Our Time: Readings on Postwar America*. New York: Oxford University Press (accessed on 19 July 2010) https://www.questia.com/library/117202936/a-history-of-our-time-readings-on-postwar-america.

Eagleton, Terry. 2005. *Holy Terror*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Flanagan, Richard. 2007 [2008]. *The Unknown Terrorist*. London: Atlantic Books.

Giglioli, Daniele. 2007. *All'ordine del giorno è il terrore*. Milano: Bompiani.

Gilroy, Paul. 2005. *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

[1] This essay is an updated English version of "Sous les yeux de l'Orient" (Albertazzi 2013).

Ghosh, Amitav. 2006. A Jihadist from Jersey. *The Washington Post*, 4 June (accessed on 4 November 2015) http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/01.
Hamid, Mohsin. 2007 [2008]. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Orlando: Harcourt Inc.
Iweala, Uzodinma. 2007. Unusual Suspect. *The New York Times*, 22 July (accessed on 4 November 2015) http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/22/books/review/Iaweala.
Juergensmeyer, Mark. 2000. *Terror in the Mind of God. The Global Rise of Religious Violence.* Oakland: the Regents of the University of California.
Lasdun, James. 2007. The empire strikes back. *The Guardian*, 3 March (accessed on 4 November 2015) http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/mar/03/featuresreviews.
Moss, Stephen. 2007. The art of darkness. *The Guardian*, 20 April (accessed on 4 November 2015) http://www.guardian.co.uk.books/2007/apr/20/terrorism.fiction.
Olson, Karen. 2007. I Pledge Allegiance. *The New York Times*, 22 April (accessed on 4 November 2015) http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/20/arts/.
Salmon, Christian. 2004. Prefazione all'edizione italiana. Far rotta verso Sud. Christian Salmon & Joseph Hanimann eds. *Diventare minoritari. Per una nuova politica della letteratura*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 7-19.
Stone, Robert. 2006. Americanization, real and imagined. *The New York Times*, 16 June (accessed on 4 November 2015) http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/16/arts/.
Updike, John. 2007 [2006]. *Terrorist.* London: Penguin Books.
Versluys, Kristian. 2009. *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*. New York: Columbia University Press.
WuMing1. 2010. Se le donne diventano vittime sacrificali. *La Repubblica*, 3 September: 55.
Žižek, Slavoj. 2002. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real.* London: Verso.

Silvia Albertazzi is Full Professor of English Literature at the University of Bologna, where she is also Director of a Ph.D. program on World Literature and Cultural Studies. She is the author of the first Italian book on Postcolonial Theory, *Lo sguardo dell'Altro* (Carocci 2000). In 2006, her geocritical essay *In questo mondo, ovvero, quando i luoghi raccontano le storie* (Meltemi 2006) won the 1st Literary Prize for Essay Writing "Alziator". She is the author of the chapters on the XVII and XVIII centuries of *Breve storia della letteratura inglese* (Einaudi 2004). With Roberto Vecchi she edited *Abbecedario postcoloniale* (Quodlibet 2004), and with Ferdinando Amigoni, *Guardare oltre. Letteratura, fotografia e altri territori* (Meltemi 2007). Her latest works are the monographs *Il nulla, quasi* (Le Lettere 2010), on literature and photography; *Belli e perdenti* (Armando 2012), on the crisis of the hero in contemporary English fiction, and *La letteratura postcoloniale. Dall'Impero alla World Literature* (Carocci 2013).
silvia.albertazzi@unibo.it