

Rodica Mihăilă
University of Bucharest

THE FALLING MAN OF THE 9/11 NOVEL

Keywords: *the 9/11 novel, terrorism, the Muslim Other, falling man, photography, ethical challenge, humanism of the Other.*

Abstract: *Focusing on two 9/11 American novels, Jonathan Foer's Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2004), which has for a coda a sequence of fifteen photo illustrations based on the photograph of a falling man, and Don DeLillo's Falling Man (2007), in which Richard Drew's famous "falling man" photo provides the central symbol, the present study investigates the redeeming of the "falling man" images and reveals an ethical challenge and a new humanism at the core of the recent American novel, that takes the novel away from the postmodernist logic of non-agency and derivativeness.*

Richard Drew's photograph of a man diving to his death from one of the TWC twin towers seconds after the terrorist attacks, was one of the most shocking and disturbing documents of the human drama generated by the 9/11 events.¹

In Tom Junod's inspired description of the "Falling Man"

[the man] departs from this earth like an arrow. Although he has not chosen his fate, he appears to have, in his last instants of life, embraced it. If he were not falling, he might very well be flying. He appears relaxed, hurtling through the air. He appears comfortable in the grip of unimaginable motion. He does not appear intimidated by gravity's divine suction or by what awaits him. His arms are by his side, only slightly outriggered. His left leg is bent at the knee, almost casually. His white shirt, or jacket, or frock, is billowing free of his black pants. His black high-tops are still on his feet....[He] is perfectly vertical, and so is in accord with the lines of the buildings behind him. He splits them, bisects them.... [He] is the essential element in the creation of a new flag, a banner composed entirely of steel bars shining in the sun. Some people who look at the picture see stoicism, willpower, a portrait of resignation; others see something else -- something discordant and therefore terrible: freedom. There is something almost rebellious in the man's posture, as though once faced with the inevitability of death, he decided to get on with it. (Junod)

More than 200 people referred to as "jumpers" are believed to have jumped from the North tower during the one and a half hours before the tower finally collapsed.² As Junod observes, in contrast to the Falling Man, the jumpers "appear to be struggling against horrific discrepancies of scale. They are made puny by the backdrop of the towers.... Some of them are shirtless; their shoes fly off as they flail and fall; they look confused, as though trying to swim down the side of a mountain." (Junod)

The A.P. photo of the Falling Man ran in *The New York Times* and in all the major newspapers on September 12, 2001. Then it was banished while, in the name of human decency and dignity, all images of jumpers became, by consensus, taboo if they were more or less identifiable. In fact, the Falling Man was no exception, for Drew's photograph, as he admits, was one in a sequence of twelve, the only one in which, for only a fraction of a second, the man fell in such a dignified, controlled manner. In all the other eleven

¹ See the photo taken by Richard Drew at 9:41:15 a.m. on 9/11/2001 at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Falling_Man.jpg

² See a compilation of photos of jumpers at http://americandigest.org/mt-archives/9_11_jumpers.jpg

outtakes “he fell like everyone else, like all the other jumpers trying to hold on to the life he was leaving, which is to say that he fell desperately.” (Junod)

There is no doubt, however, that if the photo of the Falling Man was unpublishable because of its very reality, it was also highly symbolic of the upcoming Age of Terror, the fall from grace and the loss of all hope reminiscent of the inscription on the gates of Dante’s *Inferno*. As such it appealed both to reporters, who tried to identify the actual Falling Man in the famous picture and to writers in search of ways to deal with a reality that had rendered fiction irrelevant.

Taking as examples Jonathan Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2004), which has for a coda a sequence of fifteen photo illustrations based on the photograph of a falling man by Lyle Owersko (2001/Polaris) and Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007) in which Drew’s “falling man” photo provides the central symbol, my critical comments aim to point out a new humanism at the core of the 9/11 American novel striving to redeem the “falling man” images and to transfigure the horror.

The American novel was slow in responding to the 9/11 catastrophic and essentially “transformative event”. As V.S. Naipaul explained in a 2005 interview, “fiction had finally been rendered irrelevant by the events of 9/11 and their geopolitical aftershocks.” (Gray 14) DeLillo, whose novels, from *Players* (1977) to *Mao II* (1992) and *Underworld* (1997) abound in terrorists and terrorist themes foreshadowing the 9/11 attacks, reaches similar conclusions. In a post-9/11 essay, “In the Ruins of the Future,” he admits that finally the terrorist has definitely replaced the novelist in the ability “to alter the inner life of the culture.” (DeLillo 2001) Against the hard evidence of death and destruction, “the narrative ends in the rubble” and the only thing left for the novelist to do is “to create the counter narrative,” – as in fact DeLillo did in his own 9/11 novel *Falling Man* – to write stories about “people running for their lives” and “stories of heroism and encounters with dread,” which take us “beyond the hard numbers of dead and missing and give us a glimpse of elevated being.” (DeLillo 2001) In other words, give us the measure of their humanism.

As proved by many examples, of which Joyce Carol Oates’ short story *Mutants* is among the first, 9/11 humanism often takes the form of human solidarity expressed in the need of knowing the other, in the compassion and responsibility for the other, which should take precedence over one’s own freedom. Levinas, in his ethical philosophy inspired by his Holocaust experience, calls this kind of humanism “humanism of the other.” (Levinas 2003)

It is this humanism, this ethical challenge, that distinguishes the voice of the post-9/11 novel, even if each writer’s narrative techniques and aesthetic options may differ widely, from realism to postmodernism and post-postmodernism, as in the case of Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), and DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007) - the two novels I selected to illustrate my point.

Foer’s novel filters the events of September 11 through the consciousness of Oskar Schell, a weird, exceptionally bright and imaginative 9-year-old boy, whose father was among the WTC victims. The book combines two narrative threads: one is a sort of detective story told by Oskar, about his search for the lock that fits a key he has found among his father’s belongings, the other is an epistolary account based on letters and diaries written by Oskar’s German grandparents, who never recovered from the traumatic experience of the 1945 firebombing of Dresden.

Like his alienated literary siblings Holden Caulfield in Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, Oskar Matzerath in Gunter Grass’s *The Tin Drum* and Billy Pilgrim in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, Oskar, a trespasser of both the real and the surreal, lives within the self-created refuge of his prolific imagination, the only space where the 9/11 apocalyptic events that defied all reason and understanding can be represented and where the persisting fear can be dealt with.

After 9/11, Baudrillard, who had described terrorism in the early 80s as “the only non-representative act,” “antinarrative,” and “hyperreal”, produced by a media-mad society (Baudrillard, 1983: 50-52), came to the shocking conclusion that: “this terrorist violence is not ‘real’. In a way it is even worse: It is symbolic.”

(Baudrillard, 2001: 141) Symbolic, in the sense of generating fear. Fear is a result of uncertainty and ignorance (Bauman 2) and it can also be the result of the opposition between Self and Other.

Oskar's fear is partly the result of ignorance and uncertainty, but even more so, of a relation between Self and Other short-circuited or rendered absurd and hysterical by the terrorist attacks:

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

The absurdity of a distorted relation between Self and Other leading inevitably to the mistaken identification of all Arabs with terrorists, echoes the horrific absurdity of the religious fanaticism that inspired the 9/11 attacks and is amplified throughout the novel by the use of the grotesque. In the novel's absurd world, Oskar's grandmother is blind, his grandfather is mute; she keeps writing her life story on a typewriter with no ribbon, he carries around thousands of blank letters. And the examples could continue.

The only antidote to the post-9/11 fear is what Levinas called "the humanism of the Other"—love, compassion, responsibility for the other and a deep need to connect, which give Foer's book a special touch of humanity. "How could such a lonely person have been living so close to me my whole life?" wonders Oskar after talking with one of his neighbors, a lonely and sad Mr. Black, "If I had known, I would have gone up to keep him company. Or I would have made some jewelry for him. Or told him hilarious jokes. Or given him a private tambourine concert." (Foer 163)

The last fifteen pages run backwards the image of the falling man in Owersko's 9/11 photograph until the man disappears up in the sky, which is Foer's way of reminding the reader of the manipulative, fabricated spectacle culture that produces such terror and of something neither technology nor art can do — that is, give back life and safety. In a more optimistic version, it may also signify a still possible apotheosis of man, instead of the fall from grace.

The importance of that photograph in Foer's novel takes us directly to DeLillo's *Falling Man*, where the falling man turns out to be a performance artist who appears around the city in the weeks after 9/11 leaping from high places—only to be caught by a safety harness and suspended, midair, dressed like a businessman, in the posture of someone falling from the World Trade Center. Bystanders are shocked, offended, and confused. The New School hosts a panel called "Falling Man as Heartless Exhibitionist or Brave New Chronicler of the Age of Terror"; the Guggenheim invites him to leap from its top floors "at scheduled intervals over a three-week period." Obviously, De Lillo has built his novel around the question of the very existence of 9/11 art — what can art possibly add to an event we've already experienced and reexperienced so often?

De Lillo tries, as he confesses, to write a "counternarrative", for reality has obviously outdone the possibility of art to express it. His story focuses on a Manhattan middle-class family in the aftermath of the attacks. Keith Neudecker, a 39-year-old lawyer, manages to escape from the first tower and returns to his wife, Lianne, a freelance editor, from whom he has been separated for more than a year and to his son Justin. The family also includes Lianne's mother, Nina, a retired professor of art history whose husband, an architect, shot himself when Lianne was young, and her long time lover, Martin Ridnour, a European art dealer, with a German beard and an Austro-Hungarian nose, a regular traveler between the U.S. and Europe, and former terrorist in Germany in the 1960s (his real name Ernst Hechinger).

Two short chapters, one taking us to Germany and the other into the plane which hit the first tower, are dedicated to Hammad, one of the 9/11 hijackers. An exchange Iraqi student in Germany, fully indoctrinated by the spirit of Islamic fundamentalism, he is trained for suicide missions and wears a plastic key on a chain around his neck to open the door to Heaven when the time comes. Despite Mohamed Atta's

swift presence which is meant to endorse Hammad's credibility, the latter serves only as a mouthpiece for jihadist ideology and, more significantly, a possible impersonation of the "falling man," another way in which the novel subverts the stereotypic representation of the terrorist Other as exclusively Muslim. As the plane was approaching the tower, "[Hammad] flew through the minutes and felt the draw of some huge future landscape opening up, all mountain and sky."

Significantly, both Foer and DeLillo use Germany (the 1945 bombing of Dresden and the terrorist groups of the 60s and early 70s) as a means of destabilizing or subverting the opposition Western democratic Self/Muslim terrorist Other. As Martin argues, the jihadists and the radicals of the sixties and seventies "have something in common": "...they're all part of the same classical pattern. They have their theorists. They have their visions of world brotherhood." (147)

As a rule, terrorism indicates an epistemological short circuit of the connection between Self and Other, the us/them radical polarization and antagonistic confrontation. For the hijackers, "the others [the victims] exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them. This is their function as others." From the other side of the divide, trying to find out more about Martin's past, Lianne shamefully admits: "Maybe [Martin] was a terrorist but he was one of ours ...which meant godless, Western, white." (195)

The relation of us/them, Self and Other and the idea of otherness is central to the novel. The identification of the terrorist as Muslim and the fear, suspicion and resentment this identification induces in the process of othering at the macro level of American society is seen as one of the most damaging long-term effects of the 9/11 attacks.

The sample of New Yorkers that DeLillo presents, minimalist as it may be, suggests both the cosmopolitan character of the city and the multicultural mosaic of American society. Florence Givens, the other survivor of the novel, is a "light-skinned black woman" (92), the man that helps Keith at the hospital is "a tall Latino kid", Terry Cheng, the poker maverick is a Chinese-American, Elena, Lianne's neighbor, is a Greek, and David Janiak, the performance artist, is Russian. The terrorist attacks short circuit many of the connections that keep this multiethnic society together. In his essay "In the Ruins of the Future" DeLillo observes that "the sense of disarticulation we hear in the term 'us and them' has never been so striking, at either end." (DeLillo 2001) In many respects, *Falling Man* is a novel about this disarticulation, about disconnectedness. Keith feels "a dimension of literal distance between himself and others," (212), the demonization of the Muslim as terrorist is extended to all Muslim Americans. Keith, out of the towering inferno, fears that "it must be hard to find a taxi at a time when every cabdriver in New York was named Muhammad." (28) Lianne loses her temper and to her own surprise, physically aggresses her neighbor, Elena, for listening to Arabic music, "under [the] circumstances." (119)

The book elaborates extensively on the constructed character of the opposition the West vs. Islam, Orientalism vs. Occidentalism, and the power of stereotypes, and insists on an interactive relation between Self and Other: one cannot be known without the other, -- which should also apply in the case of the relation with the Muslim Other, usually based on stereotypes rather than knowledge.

A novel about disconnectedness at every level, including the elliptical, jerky dialogues, disconnectedness as a syndrome of the new "Age of Terror," *Falling Man* is no exception when it comes to the ethical imperative, to knowing the other, and to reaching out for the others. The closing chapter of the book juxtaposes two ways of living in the aftermath of 9/11: 1) in isolation from the others, as in the case of Keith, "self-sequestered" (212) in his un-involvement, in the repetitive gestures of his daily life and the routine of the poker game, and 2) trying to know the other, reaching out for the others, like Lianne, "the girl who wanted to be other people" (233): "Others were reading the Koran, she was going to church...It was not something godlike she felt but only a sense of others. Others bring us closer." (233)

Despite the book's title and its central symbol, the performance artist called falling man, and despite DeLillo's ample use of photographs in books like *Mao II*, Drew's photograph is not reproduced, being

mentioned only at the end of the book, when memory is proclaimed to be the only photosensitive surface: a mere photograph could never render the horror of the event. In the long series of textualizations of the falling man photo, the performance artist's repeated shows, the flight of the hijacker to his target, the implied biblical reference in Lianne's description of the falling man photograph ("a falling angel, ... his beauty was horrific" (222), and finally, Keith's identification with the falling man, the evidence provided by the original photograph is made totally meaningless - just as the infinite replications in Warhol's paintings, a technique adopted by DeLillo, deprive of meaning the original image. The book ends with another replication of Drew's photo, in the version of Keith, the survivor: Coming out from the towering inferno "he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life" (246).

Wondering "Who was the falling Man?" in Drew's photo, Lianne concludes that "that nameless body coming down, this was hers to record and absorb" (223) or put it differently, that "all we know of him becomes a measure of what we know of ourselves" Acknowledging the limitations of art to cope with reality, the textualization of Drew's photo in DeLillo's novel leaves open the possibility of redeeming humanity and recovering hope through love and responsibility for the other.

Despite their many differences, the two novels I have discussed, present a version of America, which is already visibly marked by the dawn of the "age of terror." Testing the limitations of art to render the Foer, and especially DeLillo, go beyond the American borders to place terrorism in a wider Euroatlantic perspective, and DeLillo raises questions about the unity of the West and the US presence in Europe. But most importantly, they strive to restore hope in the possibility of action and human solidarity, trying to keep alive humanity in each of us. The ethical challenge at the core of what seems to be a new impulse in the recent American novel, away from the postmodernist logic of non-agency, non-history and derivativeness, turns into a promise to revitalize the novel with a plus of significance and of universal value.

For, as Terry Eagleton put it, "if literature matters today, it is chiefly because it seems ... one of the few remaining places where, in a divided, fragmented world, a sense of universal value may still be incarnate; and where, in a sordidly material world, a rare glimpse of transcendence can still be attained" (208).

Works Cited

- Baudrillard, Jean. "In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities." *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities or, The End of the Social Order and Other Essays*. Trans. Paul Foss and Paul Patton. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.
- . "The Spirit of Terrorism." Trans. Kathy Ackermann. *Telos* 121(Fall 2001): pp. 134-142.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Fear*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2006
- DeLillo, John. *Falling Man*. New York: Scribner, 2007.
- . "In the Ruins of the Future." *Guardian*, December 22, 2001.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory. An Introduction*. Second Edition. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005.
- Gray, Paul. "Collateral Damage." *New York Times Book Review*. Sunday, February 19, 2006: 14.
- Junod, Tom. "The Falling Man." *Esquire* (September 11, 2008/ September 11, 2003) http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Humanism of the Other*. Trans. Nidra Poller. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003.
- Updike, John. *Terrorist*. London: Hamish Hamilton. Penguin Books, 2006.