Jen Webb

Writing/Rights: representation as art and action

Abstract:

Cities have in the past years become venues for disaster and threats of more disaster to come. The actual disasters in New York, London, Paris, Madrid, Bali and Baghdad have their own material identity; and a more ephemeral identity mediated through the representations made of them in the news media, government commentary and stories. The threats of disaster too have a material form in the language through which they are conveyed; and an ephemeral form in the representations made to citizens, and the representations made within those people's imaginations. Their representational properties are also extended through laws that ostensibly protect human *persons*, while limiting human *rights*.

In this paper I will examine the notion that creative writing is art *and is* social action. Is it possible to make city-based fictions that test representations of disaster and its threat, and critically assess intrusions made on human rights? Some novels, I suggest, do precisely this by representing both humans and cities as characters wrestling with a moment of history, and with the presence of terror. Two examples are DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* and McEwan's *Saturday*. In a period characterized as an age of 'terror', where it is mainly urban spaces that are seen as targets for terrorists, I suggest that this may gesture to a way of writing that foregrounds alternative notions of community: that may afford a way of mobilising human writes/rights.

Keywords:

Human Rights – Terrorism – Cities – DeLillo – McEwan

Biographical note:

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The (very long) introduction

11 September 2001. Like just about everyone else in the world (everyone with a TV) I sat transfixed and (to my shame) not just horrified, but also a wee bit titillated, by what I saw on the screen. I could hear, through the open back door, telephones begin to ring in my neighbours' apartments. Then my phone – my phones: my daughter called on the mobile; my partner rang on the landline. We kept our triangulated conversation going while flipping through the channels, trying to find a point of entry to the story, trying to make it both real and contained – for ourselves, and for each other.

My daughter hung up first, and went on to do whatever young women do on Brisbane nights. My partner and I kept it going a bit longer, until at around midnight we said goodnight. But I still watched the television screen, where journalists and commentators continued to fret and plot around the event, the still shapeless but increasingly (in)formed, event. I watched, and reflected on it, and felt somewhat disgusted by myself – my curiosity, my (dare I say it) mild excitement, tinged by the sorrow we feel for a distant horror. I tried to put it into shape; tried to make sense of it: why this thing, now? Why not? Why this much coverage when the deaths of millions in the Congo (and elsewhere in the world) attract only a brief mention on the SBS news? How could I fall into cold Empire-criticism when it was individual humans with individual lives and loves that had been snuffed out? And so on.

Alex Houen describes the attack on New York as 'A trauma that is so real it can only be experienced as a kind of fiction' (2004: 419). Like writers around the world, I began that same night to see the event in literary form. Then, and in the days that followed, lines for possible poems began scrolling through my head (later I read a remarkably similar poem in an anthology – a testament perhaps to the power of cliché, or to how language and form limit our ways of thinking and seeing?) I didn't write a poem; or a story either – after all, it wasn't my story, it wasn't my home, my city. The narrative impulse continued to tease me but I diffused it by writing a scholarly work or two, and that was that.

Other writers handled it differently; and from the amateur to the world-class, it seems, practically everyone had a literary bash at what was almost immediately named 'September 11'. I have seen dozens of short stories, hundreds of poems (of varying quality), and books full of essays that tackle head-on the moments of that day. Novelist Don DeLillo, for instance, lived not far from the Twin Towers, and his niece lived very close to Ground Zero, and so he experienced it twice: once in his own identity, once vicariously through her. His first (public/published) response was an essay in *Harpers* in December 2001. There he took on the problem of September 11, and what happened to his niece on that day, and how he found his way around his home city of New York in the months that followed. Only later – in 2003 – did he publish a novel, *Cosmopolis*, that is set safely in 2000, well before the disaster, but uses the concepts he raised in that essay. Cartoonist Art Spiegelman (known best for his book *Maus*, a graphic-novel memoir of the Holocaust) responded immediately by producing a cover image used by the *New Yorker* that also formed the cover for a collection of writings published by Ulrich Baum. Later Spiegelman put out his *In the*

shadow of no towers (2004), a response in graphic essay form. The *Guardian* leapt into print, and within only days of the event began published a series of essays that engaged the attack from a literary/scholarly perspective. British novelist Ian McEwan was among the first, and on 15 September 2001 his essay was published, followed in 2004 by his novel *Saturday* in which, like DeLillo, he revisits those first responses.

Writers write. In the face of horror, of confusion, of overwrought emotions, writers write. And in many cases those immediate appalled responses perform as the drafts for a major work to come. Writers write. They make sense of the world by writing, they reflect their times and events in narrative or poetic or scenic form.

But that doesn't change anything. Does it? After all, what good are the arts, as John Carey (bleakly) asks. Not much good, he (like many of us) responds. After September 11 writers wrote their sense of what was going on, but that wasn't the end of the story; it didn't resolve the story; it didn't change anything. Goethe said, *Coming events cast their shadows before them*. And this *event*, this assault on New York (oh, and on Washington too, of course), was only a shadow for what was to come. What came were events as real, as appalling, more prolonged and more destructive than their shadow.

I imagine that those *events* in the Middle East, Pakistan, parts of Africa, Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere are also framed as narrative by those who suffer them; but a narrative of a different order. It is difficult, I suspect, for we who live in this golden world to experience war in our streets and homes as actuality. Our only real frame of reference for the disaster was Hollywood. The planes arcing into the Towers; the flames, like a child's desperate drawings; the people distressed on the street below; the people running, covered in ash, carrying shoes and briefcases and bottles of water; the people falling from the sky: all this came across as another instance of what we have seen so often on the big screen. For those elsewhere, those who experienced (and are still experiencing) first-hand the fallout, the what-came-next, the stories that serve to organize and delimit the horrors must surely take a different form: must surely reflect the meaning of being for those who live in what Zizek calls *the desert of the real*. For them, the people who live in 'the desert of the real', the response to a massive shock may very well start in the narrative of the everyday, with *Oh no! Not again!* For the lucky children of the west it is more likely to be *It can't happen here!* But it can, and it did, and in some ways always has, as Slavoj Zizek points out:

> when a New Yorker commented on how, after the bombings, one can no longer walk safely on the city's streets, the irony of it was that, well before the bombings, the streets of New York were well-known for the dangers of being attacked or, at least, mugged. (Zizek 2001)

Those in the desert of the real know the disaster is always present; we (who presumably do not live in the real) don't expect it to happen, not to us. And when it happened, and could not be denied or wrapped up in the security blanket of 'just one incident', 'soon to be tidied up', 'just an aberration', the response was to look instead to story to make it all better. First, the quotidian tales told to strangers at bus stops, or to familiar faces at work or school. Then, the media tales: Arundhati Roy, Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, Ian McEwan, Zadie Smith, Jay McInerney ... these and a

number of others turned out harrowed and harrowing essays in the later months of 2001, feeling their way towards a way to understand and accommodate the event.

In 2002 more substantial publications were appearing: sociologist Ulrich Baer edited a collection of 110 stories (and poems) by New York writers (the Towers were 110 storeys high; the 110 pieces in the collection aim to replenish those now-absent places). Then came the scholars: Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio and Slavoj Zizek, those prolific writers on community and identity and meaning, raced into print in 2002 with slim volumes that analysed the tragedy as a media event. Poets and short story writers tackled the issue in literary journals. And within a few years the first full-length works of fiction hit the shelves.

Why write?

What is the compulsion to turn tragedy into script? For Baer, it is because writers can 'help to account for loss and make survival meaningful' (2002: 2). He explains this point by referring to his own experience. Living as he did after 11 September 2001, in *the shadow of no towers*, he found that reading other people's writing provided him a safe place:

> In literature, I found neither consolation nor a substitute for grief but rather the foothold on reality from which I had slipped momentarily. Novels in particular, in their efforts to construct fully realized alternative universes, seemed navigable and inhabitable the way downtown was not. … I read literature as an escape: even novels about catastrophes seemed to provide the coherence that was missing from my life. In its ways of incessantly building and transforming a world, literature helped me confront reality without promising wholeness or denying absence, shock, and loss. (2002: 7)

To confront reality; to acknowledge loss. Is this what writing can offer, why writers turn immediately to their work in the face of any shock? Why like vultures we circle over disaster, waiting to take our bite?

I want to leave that to each writer's own reflection, or speculation. There are no correct answers; only ways of thinking about the question.

But I do want to explore two particular writers, each of whom wrote the disaster in an essay and then in a novel; each of whom used a world-class city as their setting; each of whom explore what writers might do to 'account for loss and make survival meaningful'. The writers are Don DeLillo and Ian McEwan; their essays, as I noted above, were followed by novels that are informed and inflected by current events – the war on terror in particular. Each, though, has basically ignored the quote clash of civilisations, instead focusing on the ways individuals engage with those directly in their path. Each novel has a central male protagonist, professionally and economically successful (in DeLillo's case, obscenely so), white, networked but rather isolated. Each is a very observant man; each is idiosyncratic in his observation; each possesses depths of humanity and mountains of ice.

DeLillo's Eric Packer is the head of a major international finance house; he lives

alone in a tower, like a fairytale princess. He moves through New York encased in his custom-built limousine, pampered and secured by his staff (analysts, theorists, security, IT specialists, medical specialists). He is entirely absorbed by relations of value between currencies, and is prepared to send the American economy into freefall in his gamble against the yen. He is alienated despite the people who cluster around him; he can barely recognise his own wife (and in fact hasn't even consummated the marriage, until almost the end of the novel). He has a *bête noir*, Benno Levin, who stalks him and plans revenge against him for crimes, not against humanity, but against Benno's own humanity.

McEwan's Henry Perowne is a far more humble, far more human character, though equally selfish or self-oriented. His passion is split between his work as a neurosurgeon, and his family – his wife and two children, all three beautiful, cultivated and healthy, all three always with Henry in their hearts. He is not alone as Eric is, but nonetheless has depths of isolation. Like Eric he is destructive, but only in the manner of a fundamentally benign, if clumsy, individual. Like Eric he has a *bête noir*, Baxter, who stalks him and plans revenge against him for crimes, not against humanity, but against Baxter's own humanity.

The story of each novel takes place in a single day, in a single place, one of the two centres of the universe – New York (DeLillo) and London (McEwan). Each is haunted by a spectre – the *desert of the real*; or, what it means to be a human being in a world filled with human beings and human suffering and claims on human rights. Each novel seems to be informed by the seeing and feeling and thinking those authors engaged in at the moment of the attack, and subsequently; so in each it is possible to see not just how a writer might tackle this massive issue of a 'war on terror', but how their earlier writing of an essay for public consumption constitutes a form of writerly research that was later translated into story.

McEwan's essay was headlined 'Only love and then oblivion', DeLillo's 'In the ruins of the future'. McEwan's deals with the 'fevered astonishment' felt by television viewers on 11 September and the instant response to the attack:

> In our delirium, most of us wanted to talk. We babbled, by email, on the phone, around kitchen tables. We knew there was a greater reckoning ahead, but we could not quite feel it yet. Sheer amazement kept getting in the way. The reckoning, of course, was with the personal. … We were beginning to grasp the human cost. This was what it was always really about.

For McEwan, then, it was all about human beings, connecting (the victims) or failing to connect (the terrorists) with others. 'Only love, and then oblivion': in the face of the disaster, in the immanence of death, individuals turned to other individuals to express their love: love in the face of hatred.

For DeLillo, though, the narrative is terrorism in the face of the effects of Empire on the rest of the world. His essay is no less concerned than is McEwan's with the immediacy and the personal quality of love – a considerable part of it is a tender portrait of his niece gathering precious objects, gathering her family, calling her father to say goodbye. But he takes what is often called the 'bigger picture' – the picture that frames geopolitical rather than domestic concerns, that sheets responsibility home to

economic and strategic rather than personal-passionate aspects. He writes, in his 2001 essay:

> The dramatic climb of the Dow and the speed of the internet summoned us all to live permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital, because there is no memory there and this is where markets are uncontrolled and investment potential has no limit. All this changed on September 11. Today, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists. (2001: 33)

Though like McEwan he discusses the centrality of narrative and of personal connections, he identifies the heart of the issue as a struggle between religious extremism and global capital. And he identifies the modern state as central to the drive, on the part of the young suicidal believers, to take it all apart:

> It was America that drew their fury. It was the high gloss of our modernity. It was the thrust of our technology. It was our perceived godlessness. It was the blunt force of our foreign policy. (DeLillo 2001: 33)

And not just America per se, but the America that is the future, exemplified by 'the daily sweeping taken-for-granted greatness of New York. The city will accommodate every language, ritual, belief and opinion' (DeLillo 2001: 40). The city is the perfect setting, because it is a stage, the cynosure of all eyes, the ideal spot in which both to disappear and to make a massive splash.

But New York is not McEwan's city; London is an equally great metropolis, one equally capable of accommodating all differences. But where DeLillo's city is cold, sealed off, full of alienation and anomie, McEwan's London is the setting for a myriad small, local, personal dramas; it is close, it is home. In *Cosmopolis*, the city is a grid, a paper thing that nonetheless has real effects. In *Saturday* it is a series of connected spaces where people play out their lives.

Cities/stories

Two stories; two cities; the sites of two recent attacks motivated by precisely the same drive – to take apart a symbol of western culture. In each case, the stage for a human and a political event, a built environment where people live together and apart, where they live out their own narratives, where they produce their own stories, where they try to get by as best they can.

A city is not only a place of human habitation; it is also a story, as David Mitchell's Marco says (in *Ghostwritten* 1999). But if cities are stories, they follow experimental narrative approaches: they're closer to a Calvino tale than an Agatha Christie, unable to sustain a coherent narrative, unable to reach closure, not achieving resolution but only a moment of being. This is particularly evident in the stories that are New York or London. These are wealthy, healthy, educated centres of human endeavour. But they are also messy, cruel, anarchic, lost sites where individuals drift or devour.

Cities are not just this; they are also where most of us live:

> Wednesday, May 23, 2007, represents a major demographic shift, according to scientists from North Carolina State University and the University of Georgia: For the

first time in human history, the earth's population will be more urban than rural.
Working with United Nations estimates that predict the world will be 51.3 percent
urban by 2010, the researchers projected the May 23, 2007, transition day based on
the average daily rural and urban population increases from 2005 to 2010. On that
day, a predicted global urban population of 3,303,992,253 will exceed that of
3,303,866,404 rural people. (Kulikowski 2007)

We are a species that is increasingly urban rather than rural, increasingly trained to
live in tiny communities embedded in a mass of unknown, unloved, barely
acknowledged other people. We are used, now, to hearing unrelenting noise, seeing
massive movement, moving in crowded public spaces between impossibly tall
buildings, absorbing particles of other people, of industrial waste, of exhaust fumes
and of left-over McDonalds meals in the odours we inhale. We live in cities. Our
bodies are of the earth, earthy, but our identity, our knowledge, our relationship to
self, other and place are synthetic.

This is not a criticism. Cities are *fabulous* places – places of story, of fable; they are
where most stories – public and personal – are told. And despite all appearances,
cities are quite readily altered. Torval, the security chief in *Cosmopolis*, makes this
clear when he tells Eric that they will not be able to drive across the city because of
road blocks set up for the president's visit: 'Barriers will be set up … Entire streets
deleted from the map' (11).[1] This mutability is, I suspect, because a city is poised
rather than grounded, based in the imaginary rather than the actual – the imaginary of
course being that domain that Althusser marked out as the site that makes
misrecognition possible (Althusser 1997a: 95). A city is thus not simply its people, its
roads, its industry, its leadership: it is also images, memories and misrecognition.

Of course a city is not just story; it is also actual roads and buildings, physical spaces.
But at the same time a city *is* because it is people in place, people in communities. It
is a social, and not only a built, space; and like any social space has identity only
because of the stories that give it form. It exists because people exist. It exists because
at some point, someone decided it would be a good idea. It exists, too, because at
some level it fits us, or we it.

There is a long history of considering the ways in which buildings metaphorise the
human body, and how buildings and bodies intersect: starting with Vitruvius and his
perfect human body proportioned for the ideal building – the body of Christ perfectly
contained by and contoured to the cross; or Fiumara and his drawing of the
cathedral/man. More recently this analogy has been extended and rerendered in many
forms. We can think of the Coop Himmelblau cooperative's 'Dissipation of our
bodies in the city', the superimposition of cities on/as bodies. We can refer to Richard
Sennett's discussion of the way cultures understand cities as human bodies, with
roads as veins and parks as lungs. We can listen to architect Nigel Coates who
discusses urban design and insists that cities are living organisms, 'a collage of
fragments' (cited Glancey 1999: 24), and that their 'architecture is the connective
tissue between body and place' (Glancey 1999: 7). And we can read theorists of space
and place like Steve Pile, Victor Burgin, Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Michel de
Certeau, who analyse and describe how we appropriate the abstraction of space/s and

instantiate cities by using our bodies to map out space, and our minds to invent utopias and heterotopias we can inhabit, at least discursively.

We fit. But we never fit perfectly. The misfit, the bits that hang over the edges, or the gaps where we do not connect, is the condition of community and communication. Humans don't get it right, and don't make it final. Community and communication, words that don't, but sound as though they should, share a common root,[2] are marked by deferral. This is of course necessitated by the juxtapositioning of the absent world and the present signification; the absent meaning and the present enunciation (Derrida 1991: 61). Whatever potential or actual identity a city (or a story) might have in itself, we come to it only through the detours of representation and representability, through loss and anxiety, through thrill, through accidental encounters. 'The logic of the city is to excite and stimulate, to postulate a realm of simultaneous and contradictory compelling possibilities' (Lehan 1998: 205). The possibilities circulate, settle briefly, flow. In the city and in the story, writers can postulate possibilities, can follow flow, tracing and analysing and evaluating desire, tracing and analysing what follows desire: control and containment of all the individuals in an urban space.

Terror and the human

What they are tracing right now is risk. Cities are said to be the battleground for the war on terror. We are targets, those of us who live in cities. Osama has threatened even Sydney! *Stay away from crowded places, behave on public transport, move away from the doors, mind the gap!* Fair enough: few of us know more than a tiny fraction of our fellow city/zens; how can we possibly tell who is at breaking point, who at taking point, who is likely to drive a fertilizer-loaded truck into a landmark? Though those of us sentient during the 1970s will remember that back then London, and Jerusalem, and Saigon, and Johannesburg (et cetera) were sites for terror. Whatever our leaders tell us, nothing particularly new is going on. Political theorist Rosemary O'Kane (2007) lists the Zealot movement of the first century CE as the first actual terrorist movement (it ended with mass suicide of the 'rebels' at Masada, in 73CE), but really, any number of anti-establishment events before and after could be classified as terrorism; and most have taken as their targets the places where the leaders live; the centres of mass population (*get more bang for your buck!*).

Those who live in cities must always take this threat seriously. In *Saturday,* Henry Perowne wakes very early and looks out of his window, at the sleeping city, and sees a light in the sky:

> He doesn't immediately understand what he sees, though he thinks he does. In this first moment, in his eagerness and curiosity, he assumes proportions on a planetary scale: it's a meteor burning out in the London sky, traversing left to right, low on the horizon, through well clear of the taller buildings. (13)

He is eager: just as across the world on September 11 and 12 and 13 in 2001 people watched the event unfold again and again and again and again with a sort of eagerness. *Something unexpected is happening*, and his first instinct is pleasure, in which we can identify something of the anomie of the city dweller: *I'm bored; I don't*

care about the consequences, I just want something to happen. But quickly Henry shifts from his notion of a planetary object to a human one:

> Horrified, he returns to his position by the window. … Only three or four seconds have passed since he saw this fire in the sky and changed his mind about it twice. It's travelling along a route that he himself has taken many times in his life, and along which he's gone through the routines, adjusting his seat-back and his watch, putting away his papers, always curious to see if he can locate his own house down among the immense almost beautiful orange-grey sprawl; east to west, along the southern banks of the Thames, two thousand feet up, in the final approaches to Heathrow. (14)

It has become not a planetary, but an aeronautical event; and it is, perhaps, impossible since 2001 to see anything both aeronautical and unexpected happening in a city environment and not anticipate the worst: 'Everyone agrees, airlines look different these days, predatory or doomed' (16).

The importance of this fleeting event is shown by the attention paid to it in the narrative. On page 13 Henry first notices the fire in the sky; by page 19 he closes the shutter on the world. The narrator has spent over five pages at, say, 250 words per page to recount perhaps 10 seconds of event. Let's think about that; the whole novel involves 24 hours recounted over 276 pages; moving at a steady pace, that would be 11.5 pages per hour; or about 0.2 pages per minute. McEwan's narrator takes around 5 pages – or nearly 30 minutes of available story time – to recount what can have taken at most a minute (and more likely just a handful of seconds), and what turns out to be a bit of a fizzer after all (it's a mechanical, not a political, problem). This is asking us to pay attention, in a structural way. *Notice this*, the narrator says; notice what is going on; notice how we in the West respond to the unexpected.

It is reasonable for Henry to have this response: it could well have been another hijacked aeroplane-bomb. He lives in the heart of a city that has itself often, and recently, been the target of terrorist action. And after all, cities are the ideal stages for acts and threats of terrorism; not just because they are places where we expect drama (*in the big city there are a million stories*) but also because they lend themselves to drama and performance; they lend themselves to wild behaviour because no one really belongs, not like they do in tiny communities.

In villages and rural communities, individuals occupy the local space by virtue of birthright: the rights accorded to specific individuals by virtue of connection and descent. Friends and relations have their home there. The city, on the other hand, is the home of the citizen. Citizen; civil – words that don't quite, but sound as though they should, share a common root.[3] In cities we belong on the basis of citizenship, not birthright. Citizens belong by virtue of the articulation of natural rights – the rights accorded to all by virtue of their being alive and present. But natural rights apply in so abstract a domain that they barely apply at all. Think, for instance, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 (which relies on the doctrine of natural rights): it cannot define 'human being'; it cannot say who counts and who doesn't, for the purposes of the Declaration. Because it attempts to offer dignity, liberty, equality, and brotherhood to all, it remains in the realm of the abstract. Philosopher Charles Malik, who with René Cassin and Pen-Chung Chang drafted the Declaration, asked: 'Is man

merely a social being? Is he merely an animal? Is he merely an economic being?' (cited Ishay 2004: 221) – questions not resolved by the Human Rights Commission despite heated discussions. 'We all know' who is a human being; but no one, it seems, can agree on who should receive the benefits of human rights legislation. In both *Saturday* and *Cosmopolis* this is drawn very vividly to readers' attention: the ways in which some people are simply worth less than others. For Eric, really no one matters; for Henry, no one matters as much as his family does. Each lives in a city, but also in a tiny solipsistic world; a nation of one.

This is the easy option. It is difficult to be a member of a community, because this demands the capacity to get on with others, and at the same time look after yourself. (This is the same problem we find in human rights: *my* right to freedom of expression is limited by *your* right not to be vilified, for instance.) It's difficult enough in small communities, as social history shows us, but the real potential and deep problems of subjectivity come into their own with the history of the city. The citizen, the subject of the city, is that problematic creature who is at once a self-actualising individual, and a cipher undifferentiated from all the others scurrying like ants through the streets, shops and factories. Our relative invisibility or indistinguishability emerges here, in the city, and so emerge too the well-acknowledged problems of *Gesellschaft*. Part of a whole, isolated from the whole: this is the character of urban living, and why, I suspect, cities are excellent targets not only for actual acts of terror, and also for media and governmental acts that produce in citizens a sense of fear. It's great stuff for story. Robert Drewe, in his capacity as editor of *The Book of the City*, writes:

> in any artistic rendering of the city theme alienation is a constant. Given the anonymity the city provides, it could hardly be otherwise. Artists, especially writers, have recognised this dichotomy, and that cities have always provided a sense of freedom by providing anonymity, notwithstanding the estrangement and isolation that goes with it. Indeed, the city's impetus towards modernity is to be found in that narrow zone between the loss of community and the discovery of self. (2001: 5)

This is manifest in each novel, in the particular isolation of each protagonist. Both novels open with descriptions of insomnia (*nessum dorma*). McEwan's Henry is alone, though surrounded by sleeping family, because he doesn't want to wake them – for reasons simultaneously selfish and caring. For DeLillo's Eric, though, 'there was no friend he loved enough to harrow with a call' (5). Henry's response is in keeping with his basically humanist attitude; he recognizes that the city induces insomnia, that there is a community of the wakeful all at their own windows, while the rest of the city sleeps. Eric, on the other hand, is entirely isolated (a reflection, perhaps, of American exceptionalism, reprised in the initial weeks and months following the New York attacks): 'Nothing existed around him. There was only the noise in his head, the mind in time' (6).

They are isolated too during working hours; each has many colleagues (or, in Eric's case, staff), but neither has friends, not in any real sense. This is not a comfortable state; the anomic state of the city/zen does not relieve individuals of the need to rub up against others. Although in larger cities, as Friedrich Engels showed (1968: 30-31), we can pretty much ignore everyone not like us, still from time to time those we have

'othered' will impress themselves on us, and can't entirely be ignored or deferred, or caused to disappear.

The 'others' for Eric and Henry are both small, ordinary and underprivileged (by comparison with their subjects). They are, nevertheless, capable of setting in motion dreadful events – analogues, perhaps, for the apparently ordinary mothers' sons who flew those aeroplanes into the World Trade Centre. And in each case, it seems from the narration of the novels, the protagonist did not precisely ask for the trouble that followed, but certainly was complicit with it. Henry was unnecessarily abrupt with the people he bumped into on the street (or who bumped into him) he was too rich, his car too expensive, he was too self-satisfied, his home too comfortable, his family too loving. Baxter, the man he dismissed and dissed, subsequently and disastrously pressed himself on Henry's attention. Eric was unnecessarily unkind to others, to his staff, too dismissive of their needs and dreams, too self-absorbed, too driven by the need to succeed at any price. By ignoring him, he dismissed and dissed Benno, who subsequently and disastrously pressed himself on Eric's attention. Welcome to the desert of the real.

But in many ways, it seems to me, these two novels tell two sides to the same story. In McEwan it is the reasonable but frequently insensitive, sometimes guilty yet sometimes compassionate, *always thinking it's in control* West: the one that tries to minimize harm while also minimizing inconvenience to the self. In DeLillo it is the spoilt, indecently wealthy and self-indulgent, *heedlessly and needlessly destructive* West: the one that brings down itself along with everything and everyone else – the West as spoilt child. The West as terrorist. McEwan's Henry does not mean harm; in fact, he does considerable good. He takes care of those he loves, and of his patients; he does not impose himself on others. He is, however, smug, self-satisfied, unwilling to put himself out for anyone else, used to and expecting a life of ease. The world is there for his contemplation. When it, the *desert of the real*, forces itself onto his consciousness and into his world, his response is first hapless shock, then violence, then the impulse to clean up his own mess, to go back, like Benjamin's Angel of History, and repair the things that are broken. DeLillo's Eric is not like this. Eric is rapacious, childish, amoral, selfish, destructive. In his 2001 *Harper's* article DeLillo describes the narrow worldview of the terrorist mind:

> He knows who we are and what we mean in the world – an idea, a righteous fever in the brain. But there is no defenceless human at the end of his gaze.

There is no one for the terrorist but himself. There is no one for Eric but himself. Contemplating his possible end, Eric comes to this conclusion: 'When he died he would not end. The world would end' (2003: 6). Benno, his avenging angel, points this out, describing his character in these terms:

> 'The huge ambition. The contempt. I can list the things. I can name the appetites, the people. Mistreat some, ignore some, persecute others. The self-totality. The lack of remorse. These are your gifts,' he said sadly, without irony. (2003: 191)

And here is, I think, the coda of each novel. We are guilty, we who live in the West, we who know little of the desert of the real. This is not to say that the terrorists are not also guilty, but there is no effective way we can separate ourselves any longer, in any

real sense, from what is going on out there. These two writers, in their own way, in their very different novels, suggest the same thing – the thing novelists have been saying for decades: we must connect (Forster). We must love one another or die (Auden).

Let me finish with what each novelist wrote in the days immediately following the attacks on New York, thinking about what it must mean to be a terrorist; to be a human being, planning this sort of atrocity. DeLillo first:

> Does the sight of a woman pushing a stroller soften the man [the terrorist waiting for his moment] to her humanity and vulnerability, and her child's as well, and all the people he is here to kill? This is his edge, that he does not see her … there is no defenceless human at the end of his gaze.

There is no point of connection, no human moment. There is no shared association through birthright or through the doctrine of natural rights. There is only an outside.

Mining the same ground, McEwan writes:

> If the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed. … The hijackers used fanatical certainty, misplaced religious faith, and dehumanising hatred to purge themselves of the human instinct for empathy. Among their crimes was a failure of the imagination.

Writers have no right to this failure; writers must imagine, and hopefully will imagine what it means to connect, and will write this possibility into the alienated world.

Endnotes

1. This not only foreshadows the actual deletion of parts of New York following the 2001 attacks; it also reminds us that all is narrative – that what appeared to be a concrete and integral built environment exists for us because it exists on paper and in permits.

2. community: Old French, *communete*, from the Latin *communitas*, common; communication: Old French *comunicacion*, from the Latin *communicare*, to share

3. civil: late Middle English, via Old French, from Latin *civilis*, from *civis* citizen; citizen: late Middle English, from Anglo-Norman French, based on Latin *civitas* city

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