

Terrorism and the Critique of American Culture: John Updike's *Terrorist*

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Commentators have by and large not liked Updike's penultimate novel very much. For many reviewers, Updike had simply written a bad, even a very bad, book, and literary critics have generally followed suit.¹ At worst, Updike is accused of racial profiling; at best, we have tepid, almost patronizing approval.² Most critics, however, have largely chosen to ignore the book, or give it only minimal consideration.³ Richard Gray, for example, devotes less than a page to *Terrorist* (2006) in *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11*, ultimately concluding that *Terrorist* "never really fits together as a meaningful story."⁴ However, just as nonhyperbolic assessments of 9/11 are starting to appear, answering at a distance David Simpson's 2006 call for more thoughtful responses,⁵ so a more positive understanding of Updike's novel

I would like to thank the reviewers for their immensely helpful suggestions. I also gratefully acknowledge my debt to Robert Appelbaum for sparking my interest in terrorism and for his ongoing encouragement.

1. See Kristiaan Versluys's summary of reviews in *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 170–71.

2. Mita Bannerjee, "'Whiteness of a Different Color': Racial Profiling in John Updike's *Terrorist*," *Neohelicon* 35 (2008): 19; John Carlos Rowe, "Global Horizons in *Falling Man*," in *Don DeLillo: "Mao II," "Underworld," "Falling Man,"* ed. Stacey Olster (London: Continuum, 2011), 133.

3. As of October 2014, the MLA International Bibliography records twenty-four articles on *Terrorist*; Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* has eighty-three.

4. Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 34.

5. For example, John Gray notes that 9/11 differed in scope, but not in kind, from other terrorist attacks (*Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* [New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2007], 180–81), and George Packer observes that despite the frequent assertions that 9/11 changed everything, "[in] most of the ways that mattered, 9/11 changed nothing" ("Coming Apart," *New Yorker*, September 12, 2011, 64). See David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 8–9. Terry Nardin and Daniel Sherman, editors of *Terror, Culture, Politics: Rethinking 9/11* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), also doubt whether "9/11 has transformed cultural politics in any decisive or lasting way" (3).

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seems to be developing. For example, Anna Hartnell, after noting that Updike's "achievements [in *Terrorist*] have been significantly underrated," explores the novel's refusal to participate in "the national triumphalism that underpins much post-9/11 reflection in the US."⁶ I agree that *Terrorist* has been seriously underestimated, and in this essay, I want to expand on Hartnell's work to examine the extraordinary intervention Updike makes—at considerable professional risk, as I will show below—in post-9/11 discourse.⁷

By writing a novel that explicitly empathizes with a potential suicide bomber (*Terrorist* tells the story of Ahmad Ashmawy, an eighteen-year-old Egyptian American about to graduate high school who is drawn first to Islam and then to Islamic terrorism), Updike certainly goes against the conventions described in Robert Appelbaum and Alexis Paknadel's taxonomy of terrorism novels: "The cultural work of the terrorism novel from 1970 to 2001 has been by and large to legitimate the position of innocence occupied by terrorism's victims and the political society to which they belong. . . . These novels tell us that terrorism is the violence of an Other; it is illegitimate violence perpetrated from an illegitimate position."⁸ So many 9/11 fictions fit this description that nearly the entire genre has been dismissed as suffering from a "failure of imagination."⁹

But fictional works need not follow this route. As Samuel Thomas notes, there is a "cultural tradition of sorts" that invites the reader (or the audience) to a more expansive understanding of terrorism.¹⁰ One might

6. Anna Hartnell, "Violence and the Faithful in Post-9/11 America: Updike's *Terrorist*, Islam, and the Specter of Exceptionalism," *Modern Fiction Studies* 57 (2011): 478.

7. Hartnell argues that despite Updike's "apparently genuine attempt to displace reductive readings of Islamist violence, 'Islam' does ultimately emerge as other" in *Terrorist* (ibid., 479). Similarly, Samuel Thomas claims that *Terrorist* "ends up reinscribing many of the ideological patterns . . . that it at least seeks to interrogate, if not debunk" ("Outtakes and Outrage: The Means and Ends of Suicide Terror," *Modern Fiction Studies* 57 [2011]: 442). I think both err on this point.

8. Robert Appelbaum and Alexis Paknadel, "Terrorism and the Novel, 1970–2001," *Poetics Today* 29 (2008): 427.

9. Michael Rothberg, "A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray," *American Literary History* 29 (2009): 153; and Gray, *After the Fall*, 16–17.

10. Thomas, "Outtakes and Outrage," 435. The impact of 9/11 on literature has received a fair amount of attention. In addition to Versluys and Gray, see also Martin Randall, *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* (Edinburgh University Press), 2011; Ann Kenston and Jeanne F. Quinn, eds., *Literature after 9/11* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Cara Cilano, ed., *From Solidarity to Schisms: 9/11 and After in Fiction and Film from Outside the US* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009); Matthew Biberman and Julia Reinhard Lupton, eds., *Shakespeare after 9/11: How a Social Trauma Reshapes Interpretation*, *Shakespeare Yearbook* 20 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2011). The topic of literature and terrorism generally has also generated a small, albeit growing, bibliography. See Barbara Mel-

include such disparate works as Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima*; Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*; Doris Lessing, *The Good Terrorist*; John Le Carré, *The Little Drummer Girl*; Eoin McNamee, *Resurrection Man*; Stephen Spielberg's film *Munich*; Sahar Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns*; Yasmina Khadra, *The Attack*; and Nadeem Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*.¹¹ Separated as they are by time, place, subject, genre, and ideological orientation, these works problematize both terrorism and the usual reactions to it by undoing any easy distinction between "Us" and "Them" and, especially in the works by Le Carré, Spielberg, Khadra, and Aslam, narrating the justifications for terror in ways that invite, if not sympathy, then understanding. This essay places John Updike's *Terrorist* in this "cultural tradition," seeing it as breaking with the conventions described by Appelbaum and Paknadel and allowing for a broader, and more troubling, understanding of Islamic terrorism.

I

For a term that is so widely used, and the basis of so much domestic and foreign policy, it is surprising how little agreement there is on terrorism's definition.¹² Writing in the mid-1980s, Walter Laqueur found "109 different definitions of terrorism provided between 1936 and 1981," and the ensuing years have not granted us any more clarity.¹³ Indeed, the FBI's 2002–5 report on terrorism begins with this caveat: "There is no single, universally accepted, definition of terrorism."¹⁴ For example, while the bureau defines terrorism as a violation of criminal or international law, with the

chiori, *Terrorism in the Late Victorian Novel* (London: Croon Helm, 1985); Margaret Scanlan, *Plotting Terror: Novelists and Terrorists in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001); Jeffery A. Clymer, *America's Culture of Terrorism: Violence, Capitalism, and the Written Word* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Alex Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature: From Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson* (Oxford University Press, 2002), and Georgiana Banita, *Plotting Justice: Narrative Ethics and Literary Culture after 9/11* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

11. Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima* (New York: Penguin, 1987); Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, ed. John Lyon (Oxford University Press, 2004); Doris Lessing, *The Good Terrorist* (New York: Knopf, 1985); John Le Carré, *The Little Drummer Girl* (New York: Penguin, 1983); Eoin McNamee, *Resurrection Man* (New York: Picador, 1994); Stephen Spielberg, director, *Munich* (2006); Sahar Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns*, trans. Trevor LeGassick and Elizabeth Fernea (New York: Interlink, 1985); Yasmina Khadra [Mohammed Moulesshoul], *The Attack*, trans. John Cullen (New York: Anchor Books, 2007); Nadeem Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil* (New York: Vintage, 2008).

12. See Houen's excellent survey on the proliferation of definitions and inconsistency of application in *Terrorism and Modern Literature*, 7–9.

13. Walter Laqueur, "Reflections on Terrorism," in *The Terrorism Reader*, rev. ed., ed. Walter Laqueur and Yonah Alexander (New York: New American Library, 1987), 380.

14. Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Terrorism, 2002–2005* (Washington, DC: FBI, 2005), iv.

implication that the courts should handle terrorism cases, the CIA does not. Instead, the CIA defines terrorism as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents,” which moves terrorism into the realm of war and military responses (and also inoculates states against being designated as “terrorists”).¹⁵

As both cause and consequence of the lack of a clear, commonly accepted definition, “terrorism” has been used to cover all manner of violence from political assassinations to medieval siege warfare to the Holocaust to cyber-attacks that focus on computer networks and information. Some have traced the history of “terrorism” as far back as antiquity, and the term has been applied to incidents occurring all over the world.¹⁶ Further complicating matters, terrorism often occurs in already violent environments, and distinguishing between “terrorism” and criminal violence, guerilla warfare, protest, or paramilitarism can be exceedingly difficult.¹⁷ “Which revolutionary or counterrevolutionary practices during the eight years of the Algerian war constituted terrorism?” asks Martha Crenshaw.¹⁸ Are the Shankill murders in 1970s Belfast, in which a Protestant gang kidnapped, tortured, and murdered over thirty Catholics, to be thought of as sectarian violence, terrorism, or the acts of psychotic serial killers?¹⁹ While a definition remains elusive, there is agreement that “terrorism” has very negative connotations, and so the term is hurled against one’s enemies, regardless of applicability (or sense). Thus Syria’s President, Bashar al-Assad, blames the uprising against him on “foreigners” and “terrorists,” and Hamas, labeled a terrorist organization by Israel, accuses Israel of “sponsoring terrorism in the region and in the world.”²⁰ So many different parties have used this term in so many ways to mean so many different things that it seems as if the only viable definition of terrorism would be “violence you don’t like.”

15. Central Intelligence Agency, “Terrorism FAQs,” <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/cia-the-war-on-terrorism/terrorism-faqs.html>.

16. See Gérard Chaliand and Arnaud Blin, “Zealots and Assassins,” in *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to Al Qaeda*, ed. Gérard Chaliand and Arnaud Blin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 55–78; and the *Encyclopedia of World Terrorism* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1997), generally.

17. Martha Crenshaw, “Thoughts on Relating Terrorism to Historical Contexts,” in *Terrorism in Context*, ed. Martha Crenshaw (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 12.

18. Ibid.

19. The Shankill murders are fictionalized in McNamee’s *Resurrection Man*.

20. Neil MacFarquhar, “Assad Condemns Houla Massacre, Blaming Terrorists,” *New York Times*, June 3, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/04/world/middleeast/assad-condemns-houla-massacre-blaming-outside-terrorists.html>; “Hamas Accuses Israel of Sudan Blast,” *Gulfnews.com*, October 26, 2012, <http://gulfnews.com/news/region/sudan/hamas-accuses-israel-of-sudan-blast-1.1094256>.

Nonetheless, within this confusion, one can detect two contradictory principles that help narrow the definition and guide the literary treatments of terrorism over the years:

*Terrorism speaks.*²¹

Terrorism is unspeakable.

Terrorism speaks. Terrorism is neither random violence nor an insane act. The terrible December 2012 massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut, by a disturbed individual, sickening as it may be, or the September 2012 mass shooting at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, cannot be rightly called “terrorism” because neither assailant intended to convey a larger point. Terrorism’s perpetrators always mean to convey some sort of message. Terrorism, as nineteenth-century anarchists put it, constitutes “propaganda by deed” (*propagande par le fait*).²² The precise content will vary—the terrorist act may be a protest against political oppression, an act of vengeance, a blow supporting a national independence movement, an ideological statement, or any combination thereof—but there will always be a point. Suicide bombing, for example, may appear utterly senseless, but as John Gray points out in his analysis of the “war on terror,” over 95 percent of such incidents between 1980 and 2004 had clear political objectives.²³

The choice of targets also contributes to terrorism’s message. As Mark Juergensmeyer has argued, terrorist attacks are “*dramatic events* intended to impress for their symbolic significance”; their deeds are not just violence, but “*performance violence* . . . designed to have an impact on the several audiences that they affect.”²⁴ Consequently, terrorists often direct their attention toward targets that are deeply resonant. As Joseph Conrad’s Russian diplomat in *The Secret Agent*, Mr. Vladimir, noted in his lecture on “the philosophy of bomb throwing,” for maximum effect the violence should be directed against the ideological heart, or “sacrosanct fetish,” of the day; for Conrad, that “fetish” was “science,” hence Vladimir’s directing Verloc to blow up the Greenwich Observatory.²⁵ Jumping ahead to 9/11, as Bruce Lincoln first pointed out, Osama bin Laden has been “quite concrete in identifying his chief grievances.”²⁶ Al Qaeda attacked America, as bin Laden

21. I owe this idea to Robert Appelbaum, “Milton, the Gunpowder Plot, and the Mythography of Terror,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 68 (2007): 468.

22. On this phrase’s origins, see Martin A. Miller, “The Intellectual Origins of Modern Terrorism in Europe,” in Crenshaw, *Terrorism in Context*, 42–43.

23. Gray, *Black Mass*, 176.

24. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 123–24.

25. Conrad, *Secret Agent*, 24.

26. Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 26.

said in a videotape dated October 7, 2001, because when Arabs or Palestinians are killed, “we hear no denunciation”; instead, the United States “backed the butcher against the victim,” and he wants American troops out of the “the land of Muhammad.”²⁷

Terrorism is unspeakable. Yet to those on the receiving end, terrorism is unspeakable. As Juergensmeyer argues, the point of terrorism is not just publicity but to have a specific effect on the act’s witnesses: “terrorism without its horrified witnesses would be as pointless as a play without an audience,”²⁸ and as Talal Asad says in his provocative (in every sense) book, *On Suicide Bombing*, horror—in particular, the horror of suicide bombing—is defined by the “inability to recount that experience, to grasp it verbally.”²⁹ In other words, to attract and to maintain attention, terrorists need to think of deeds that go beyond anything previously accomplished, something that breaks all bounds, thus resulting in the audience being rendered speechless because they lack the terms to comprehend what happened.³⁰

The first act to illustrate this paradigm would be the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 in London, in which a group of disaffected Catholics sought to blow up England’s parliament and royal family.³¹ Obviously, political violence and assassination were hardly unknown to the early modern period: the plotters wanted to come up with something that would shock England into recognizing the Catholic plight. Therefore, they came up with an idea that was, according to Father Henry Garnet, “a most horrible thing, the like of which was never heard of.”³² Attorney-General Edward Coke agreed, and he began his prosecution by declaring that the deed so surpassed any known crime it was “*Sine Nomine*, without any name which might bee *adequatum* sufficient to expresse it. . . . This treason doth want an apt name.”³³

27. Ibid., 106–7 (Lincoln’s translation).

28. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 139.

29. Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 72.

30. Alex Houen understands the “unspeakability” of terrorism in terms of the postmodern sublime in “Sacrifice and the Sublime since 11 September 2001,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, ed. Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 251–61.

31. Earlier instances of mass murder inspired by religious fanaticism, such as the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, did not inspire the same sense of incomprehensibility because Protestants had intellectual terms at the ready to understand these events. The murdered were martyrs, and the murderers agents of the perfidious Catholic Church that persecutes adherents of the true church. While the numbers of dead are sickening, these events were easily placed in a larger context. See Peter C. Herman, “‘A deed without a name’: Macbeth, the Gunpowder Plot, and Terrorism,” *Journal for Cultural Research* 18 (2014): 119.

32. Henry Garnet, quoted in Antonia Fraser, *Faith and Treason: The Story of the Gunpowder Plot* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 130.

33. *A true and perfect relation of the proceedings at the severall arraignments of the late most barbarous traitors* (London, 1606), sig. D4v. See also Appelbaum, “Mythography,” 465–66.

Equivalently, Conrad's Mr. Vladimir tells Verloc that to have the proper effect, the bombing must be "incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable." That is exactly how Inspector Heat views the matter when he runs into The Professor; shooting anarchists on sight, he says, "will be the game. But I'll be damned if I know what yours is. I don't believe you know yourselves."³⁴ More contemporaneously, Yasmina Khadra's 2005 novel, *The Attack*, concerns the aftermath of a suicide attack by a Palestinian woman married to a successful Bedouin doctor. An Israeli policeman interrogating the husband says, "I'm trying to understand, but there are some things I'll never understand." The husband is equally uncomprehending: "How can a person, like that—how can a person just strap on a load of explosives and go blow herself up in the middle of a party?"³⁵

A great deal of the rhetoric surrounding 9/11 fits this paradigm exactly. On the one hand, bin Laden could not have been clearer about 9/11's meaning, yet, at the same time, numerous Western critics and thinkers regularly assert 9/11's literal unspeakability. Kristiaan Versluys, for example, writes that 9/11 "is a limit event that shatters the symbolic resources of the culture and defeats the normal processes of meaning making and semi-osis. . . . [9/11 involves] the total breakdown of all meaning making systems"; Jacques Derrida declares that "what is terrible about 'September 11,' what remains 'infinite' in this wound, is that we do not *know* what it is and so do not know how to describe, identify, or even name it"; Slavoj Žižek notes that we constantly hear "how the attacks were a totally unexpected shock, how the unimaginable Impossible happened"; and Jean Baudrillard underscores the impossibility of anyone understanding 9/11: "We try retrospectively to impose some kind of meaning on it, to find some kind of interpretation. But there is none."³⁶

So it also goes in much 9/11 fiction.³⁷ Renata, the protagonist of Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall*, makes allowances for President George Bush's lame rhetoric in his speech to Congress because 9/11 is beyond language: "there were no proper words"; later, she observes that "no one can find the right words" to describe the site of what used to be the World Trade Center.³⁸ Anna, a member of the chorus of Alzheimer's

34. Conrad, *Secret Agent*, 25, 70.

35. Khadra, *Attack*, 36, 92.

36. Versluys, *Out of the Blue*, 1, 2; Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 94; Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* (New York: Verso, 2002), 14; Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays* (New York: Verso, 2002), 30.

37. The post-9/11 emphasis on unspeakability supersedes an earlier emphasis on, as Don DeLillo puts it, "the curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists" (*Mao II* [New York: Penguin, 1991], 41), explored in detail in Scanlan, *Plotting Terror*.

38. Lynne Sharon Schwartz, *The Writing on the Wall* (New York: Counterpoint, 2005), 74, 88.

patients in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, cannot grasp what 9/11 means, and the reason is not her disease: "But this, what happened, it's way too big, it's outside someplace, on the other side of the world. You can't get to these people or even see them in their pictures in the paper. You can see their faces but what does it mean? Means nothing to call them names. I'm a name-caller from before I was born. Do I know what to call these people? . . . [Accidental deaths are comprehensible.] But here, with these people, you can't even think it. You don't know what to do. Because they're a million miles outside your life."³⁹

However, there is another reason for terrorism's unspeakability: because the act breaks all rules of civilized behavior, we are not allowed to understand it. As Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass have observed, terrorism's "frontal assault on any type of norm" makes investigating terrorism profoundly transgressive, and so "the very attempt to 'know' how the terrorist thinks or lives can be deemed an abomination."⁴⁰ Considering the terrorist point of view is literally "*forbidden*. . . . There must be no common ground between terrorist Unreason and political reason."⁴¹ Zulaika and Douglass offer the example of the Irish politician, diplomat, and writer Conor Cruise O'Brien's rejecting any attempt at "understanding" the IRA because "'know thine enemy' may be a first stage in giving in to him," and one can find many such examples arising from 9/11.⁴² For instance, Alan Dershowitz (as expert as one could imagine in presenting alternative views of reality) dismisses any notion of treating religiously inspired terrorists as thinking beings: instead, they are "cunning beasts of prey: we cannot reason with them, but we can . . . outsmart them, cage them, or kill them."⁴³

As one might expect, "the tabooing of knowledge in the interest of moral indignation" was vigorously enforced after 9/11.⁴⁴ After the novelist Barbara Kingsolver wrote an op-ed suggesting that one lesson from 9/11 might be learning "honest truths from wrongful deaths," Jonathan Alter responded with an editorial in *Newsweek* excoriating her "mindless moral equivalency"; he called this piece "Blame America at Your Peril."⁴⁵ Almost anybody who

39. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (New York: Scribner, 2007), 64.

40. Joseba Zulaika and William A. Douglass, *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 155, 149.

41. *Ibid.*, 180.

42. *Ibid.*, 150.

43. Alan Dershowitz, *Why Terrorism Works: Understanding the Threat, Responding to the Challenge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 182. See also Simpson, *Culture of Commemoration*, 141–42.

44. Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*, 150. See also Hartnell, "Violence and the Faithful," 482–83.

45. Barbara Kingsolver, "Reflections on Wartime," *Washington Post*, November 23, 2001, A24; Jonathan Alter, "Blame America at Your Peril," *Newsweek*, October 15, 2001, 41.

spoke about the 9/11 hijackers as anything other than subhuman monsters found themselves subject to vitriolic abuse and possible professional sanctions. Susan Sontag asked, "Where is the acknowledgement that this [9/11] was not a 'cowardly' attack on 'civilization' or 'liberty' or 'humanity' or 'the free world' but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?" For this, Sontag found herself denounced as "deranged," suffering from "moral idiocy," and fated to "occupy the Ninth Circle of Hell," where Dante places Judas Iscariot and Cain.⁴⁶ Bill Maher made a comment similar to Sontag's, and as a consequence, FedEx and Sears pulled their advertising from his show, a dozen affiliates suspended broadcast, and ultimately, ABC canceled *Politically Incorrect*.⁴⁷

All of this is to say that when John Updike embarked on a novel that portrays a potential suicide bomber "as sympathetically" as he could, he took a genuine risk, and he did so fully aware that many would not be pleased by his approach.⁴⁸ "I guess I have stuck my neck out here in a number of ways," Updike told the *New York Times*, adding, "I sometimes think, 'Why did I do this?' I'm delving into what can be a very sore subject for some people."⁴⁹ And as the reaction to his novel shows, Updike rightly anticipated harsh responses.⁵⁰ For instance, the review in the *Wall Street Journal* condemned Updike's attempt to see a terrorist as anything other than a monster because to be a terrorist is to be monster: "Mr. Updike cannot quite make the turn from this confused boy to the life-destroyer that a terrorist must be."⁵¹

The reasons Updike chose to embark on this project have not been sufficiently noted, however, with the consequence that Updike has not—with the sole exception of Anna Hartnell—been given sufficient credit. Updike conceived *Terrorist* as both an exploration of the roots of Islamic terrorism

46. Susan Sontag, "Talk of the Town," *New Yorker*, September 24, 2001, 32. The criticisms of Sontag are quoted in Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in Insecure America* (New York: Holt, 2007), 24, 35.

47. Faludi, *Terror Dream*, 35.

48. John Updike, "Holy Terror: Updike Goes inside the Mind of a Muslim Teen," interview by Alden Mudge, *BookPage*, June 2006, <http://bookpage.com/interview/holy-terror>.

49. John Updike, "An Interview with John Updike: In *Terrorist*, a Cautious Novelist Takes On a New Fear," interview by Charles McGrath, *New York Times*, May 31, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/31/books/31updi.html>.

50. Updike also suffered attacks from leftist critics who believed that a white American has no right "to pontificate on anything outside the Western Hemisphere" (Versluys, *Out of the Blue*, 159). Salmon Rushdie, for example, opined that Updike "should stay in his parochial neighbourhood and write about wife-swapping, because it's what he can do" (James Campbell, "A Translated Man," *Guardian*, September 29, 2006, <http://www.guardian.com/books/2006/sep/30/fiction.salmanrushdie>).

51. Joseph Bottum, "A Jihadist Grows in Jersey," *Wall Street Journal*, June 9, 2006, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB114981793871275776.html?mod=2_1167_1.

and as a critique of post-9/11 discourse. In his interview with *BookPage*, Updike explained: "I think there are enough people complaining about the Arab menace that I can be allowed to try to show this young man as sympathetically as I can."⁵² Even more pointedly, Updike told the *New York Times*, "I think I felt could understand the animosity and hatred which an Islamic believer would have for our system. Nobody's trying to see it from that point of view."⁵³

Seeing from "that point of view," of course, is exactly what we are not supposed to do, according to Zulaika and Douglass but also Bottum, O'Brien, Dershowitz, Alter, and all of Kingsolver, Maher, and Sontag's many antagonists. Updike clearly thought that such a deliberately blinkered approach was wrong, and so he decided to break the taboo and try "to see it from that point of view." Consequently, Updike has his Muslim characters describe what the world looks like from their perspective, and their views partly overlap with Updike's long-standing criticisms of American culture as materialistic and self-destructive (the book does not endorse, it should be said, their view that America consciously seeks Islam's destruction).⁵⁴ As Hartnell rightly puts it, "The Islamist critique of American society is in many ways Updike's own."⁵⁵

II

Throughout the novel, Ahmad reiterates his critique of America as vapid and godless, indeed, vapid because it is godless. The rampant sexuality of his fellow students disgusts him: "All day long, at Central High School, girls sway and sneer and expose their soft bodies and alluring hair. Their bare bellies, adorned with shining navel studs and low-down purple tattoos, ask,

52. Updike, interview by Mudge.

53. Updike, interview by McGrath. Updike is exaggerating, of course, as many tried to understand 9/11 "from that point view." See, e.g., Noam Chomsky, *9-11* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002); Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalism: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* (London: Verso, 2003); and Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left* (London: Verso, 2003), 3. But as Sontag's treatment shows, such attempts were highly unwelcome. As Ali puts it, "I want to write of the setting, of the history that preceded [9/11], of world that is treated virtually as a forbidden subject in an increasingly parochial culture that celebrates the virtues of ignorance, promotes a cult of stupidity, and extols the present as a process without an alternative" (1).

54. Updike's distaste for contemporary American culture also informs *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (New York: Knopf, 1996). When a member of a radical Christian sect delivers a jeremiad on America that could have come from Shaikh Rashid or Ahmad, saying, "The public schools of this country . . . are cesspits of thievery, bullying, cigarette-smoking, glue-sniffing, pill-taking, instruction contrary to fact, and free condoms, the representative of officialdom, a social worker, responds: 'I was raised a Mormon, I can't disagree with a lot of what you say'" (421).

55. Hartnell, "Violence and the Faithful," 484.

What else is there to see?”⁵⁶ So does the equally rampant materialism of his teachers (“they are men and women like any others, full of lust and fear and infatuation with things that can be bought” [4]), and the secular values embedded in the high school curriculum: “The values [his teachers] believe in are godless: biology and chemistry and physics. On the facts and formulas of these their false voices firmly rest, ringing out into the classroom. . . . Only what we can measure and deduce from measurement is true. The rest is the passing dream that we call our selves” (4). Defending his decision not to continue his education, Ahmad (echoing his imam, Shaikh Rashid) says, “Western culture is Godless. . . . And because it has no God, it is obsessed with sex and luxury goods” (38); and Ahmad tells his friend (and future prostitute) Joryleen that Islam provides what contemporary American culture does not: “The mosque and its teachers give them what the Christian U.S. disdains to—respect, and a challenge that asks something of them. It asks austerity. It asks restraint. All America wants of its citizens, your President has said, is for us to buy—to spend money we cannot afford and thus propel the economy forward for himself and other rich men” (72). When Joryleen protests that George W. Bush “ain’t my President,” Ahmad responds that it does not matter because all American presidents are the same: “They all want Americans to be selfish and materialistic, to play their part in consumerism” (72). He considers his mother, Terry, “a typical American, lacking strong convictions and the courage and comfort they bring. She is a victim of the American religion of freedom, freedom above all, though freedom to do what and to what purpose is left up in the air. *Bombs bursting in air*—empty air is the perfect symbol of American freedom” (167). Ahmad feels entirely superior to America. Driving through New Jersey while delivering furniture, “he takes interest less in its pockets of a diluted Middle East than in the American reality all around, a sprawling ferment for which he feels the mild pity owed a failed experiment” (177).

But even though Islam has “rendered him immune” to the allurements of materialism (151), Ahmad’s perspective is not so much threatening as threatened: American culture deliberately and maliciously seeks “to disrupt that primal union [Ahmad feels with his God] and take the All-Merciful and Life-Giving One from him” (40). But while he sees America as a threat to his personal faith, others see a more broad-based assault, and it is with these characters that we see Updike paying attention to how terrorism speaks and what it has to say. Shaikh Rashid believes that America has embarked on a “crusade against Islam” (183), and the Islamic television channels “beamed from Manhattan and Jersey City solemn panels of bespectacled professors and mullahs discussing the anti-Islamic fury that has perversely possessed the present-day West” (197). When Charlie (to whom we will return below),

56. John Updike, *Terrorist* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 3, hereafter cited parenthetically.

in his role as CIA mole, entices Ahmad to join his terrorist cell, Charlie only grudgingly agrees with Ahmad's belief that the West wants "to take our God" (188); rather, for Charlie, America's threat is either imperialistic ("The Western powers steal our oil, they take our land") or a fundamental denial of human dignity: "They take from Muslims their traditions and a sense of themselves, the pride in themselves that all men are entitled to" (188). At the novel's start, Ahmad tells his high school counselor, Jack Levy, that after rampaging throughout the world, America "is coming after Islam, with everything in Washington run by the Jews to keep themselves in Palestine" (38). In sum, Updike's Muslim characters think of themselves as a beleaguered minority confronting a vastly superior power that desires their psychic and spiritual destruction while stealing their wealth and land.

The question, then, is why should the reader take any of this seriously? Part of the answer, I think, is that Updike uses these characters to channel the actual view of America among radical Islamists. One does not need an Islamist critique to understand that American high schools are filled with hormonally charged teenagers, but Ahmad's hyperawareness of the steamy sensuality of his classmates echoes the works of Sayyid Qutb, the ideological father of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and of radical Islam generally (and hardly a household name at the time Updike wrote *Terrorist*).⁵⁷ Toward the book's end, Ahmad tells Jack Levy that Qutb "came to the United States fifty years ago and was struck by . . . the open wantonness between the sexes" (302). In Qutb's essay on his experiences in America to which Ahmad and Updike refer (translated into English in 2000), Qutb describes American women as hypersexualized: "The American girl is well acquainted with her body's seductive capacity. She knows it lies in the face, and in expressive eyes and thirsty lips. She knows seductiveness lies in the round breasts, the full buttocks, and in the shapely thighs, sleek legs, and she shows all this and does not hide it. She knows it lies in clothes: in bright colors that awaken primal sensations, and in designs that reveal the temptations of the body—and in American girls these are sometimes live, screaming temptations."⁵⁸ Similarly, Shaikh Rashid, Charlie, and the bespectacled

57. Partly due to Updike's describing his "homework" as looking at newspapers and reading "a few books, such as [Ahmed Akbar's] *Islam Today* [London: Tauris, 1999]" ("John Updike's *Terrorist*," interview by Tom Ashbrook [audio], "On Point with Tom Ashbrook," June 13, 2006, <http://onpoint.wbur.org/2006/06/13/john-updikes-terrorist>), critics have dismissed his research as "scant" and "superficial" (Hartnell, "Violence and the Faithful," 479; Pankaj Mishra, "End of Innocence," *Guardian*, May 18, 2007, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/may/19/fiction.martinamis>). But the knowledgeable references to Qutb (not mentioned in Akbar's book) in *Terrorist* show that Updike read more deeply than he allowed in interviews.

58. Sayyid Qutb, "The America I Have Seen": In the Scale of Human Values (1951), in *America in an Arab Mirror: Images of America in Arabic Travel Literature; An Anthology, 1895–1995*, ed. Kamal Abdel-Malek (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), 22.

imams channel Osama bin Laden's claim that the 9/11 attacks were not unprovoked aggression but a response to America's long-standing treatment of the Arab world: "What America is tasting today is but a fraction of what we have been tasting for decades," he further claims, the American troops invading Afghanistan are not there to fight terrorism, but "to fight Islam."⁵⁹ Bin Laden, in other words, sees himself and Islam as victims, not victimizers. Ahmad's condemnation of the American "religion of freedom" and its consequences echoes bin Laden's views of the same: "You are a nation that permits acts of immorality, and you consider them to be pillars of 'personal freedom,'" as does Charlie's statement that the West steals Arab oil echoes bin Laden: "You steal our wealth and oil at paltry prices because of your international influence and military threats. This theft is indeed the biggest theft ever witnessed by mankind in the history of the world."⁶⁰

If Updike uses Ahmad, Shaikh Rashid, and Charlie as conduits for Islamic grievances, other characters reflect how most Americans remain deaf to these voices. Terrorism is genuinely unspeakable to the novel's Secretary of Homeland Security, who admits to his assistant, Hermione, that he has no idea why anybody would attack the United States: "Why do they want to do these horrible things? Why do they hate us?" (48). The Secretary's question echoes much of the rhetoric, both governmental and popular, after 9/11. In his address to a joint session of Congress immediately after 9/11, President George Bush said, "Americans are asking, why do they hate us?"⁶¹ Hermione answers the Secretary's query in terms that are literally black and white: "They hate the light. . . . Like cockroaches. Like bats," and she quotes John 1:15: "The light shone in darkness . . . and the darkness comprehended it not" (48). Her answer demonstrates the "the tabooing of knowledge in the interest of moral indignation."⁶² To cast oneself as "the light" and depict the Other as "the darkness" serves to reinforce one's own sense of virtue and undoes any impulse toward trying to understand the motives, let alone the humanity, of one's adversaries.

While the Secretary channels the incomprehension of many politicians after 9/11, Hermione and her sister, Beth, represent another regrettable aspect of American culture after the attacks—the fall into nostalgia. In her analysis of post-9/11 culture, Susan Faludi demonstrates how "throughout the fall of 2001, the media attempted to position the assault on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as a reprise of Pearl Harbor, a new 'day of

59. Osama bin Laden, "Oath to America," in *The Al Qaeda Reader*, ed. Raymond Ibrahim (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 193.

60. Osama bin Laden, "Why We Are Fighting You," *ibid.*, 203, 199.

61. President George W. Bush, "Address to a Joint Session of Congress Following 9/11 Attacks," <http://georgewbushwhitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

62. Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*, 150.

infamy' that would reinvigorate our World War II ethic of national unity and sacrifice."⁶³ To give two examples, *Newsweek* columnist Jonathan Alter asserted that "most Americans view history through a 'Greatest Generation' World War II prism,"⁶⁴ and a photo mash-up of Thomas E. Franklin's image of firefighters at Ground Zero raising the American flag and the iconic shot of Marines raising the flag at Iwo Jim circulated widely.⁶⁵ "We reacted to our trauma," Faludi continues, "not by interrogating it but by cocooning ourselves in the celluloid chrysalis of the baby boom's childhood."⁶⁶

Updike has three characters who represent America's retreat into the past. Beth likes talking with her sister, Hermione, because Hermione's blunt manner of speaking "reminds Beth of home, of northwest Philadelphia with all its humid greenery and trolley cars and corner grocery stores stacked with Maier's and Freihofer's bread" (128), and the Secretary opines that he and his wife once loved going to the movies: "Judy Garland, Kirk Douglas—they gave good honest value, every performance one hundred ten percent. Now all you hear about these kid movie actors . . . is drunk driving and who's pregnant out of wedlock" (260–61). More poignantly, Hermione bemoans the loss of feeling secure, horrified by the thought of what "a few men with assault rifles [could do] in a mall anywhere in America," and she compares America's present sense of vulnerability with the past: "Remember the old Wanamaker's? How we used to go there as children with such happy hearts? It seemed a paradise, especially the escalators and the toy departments on the top floor. All that's gone. We can never be happy again—we Americans" (132).⁶⁷

III

Updike no more approves of the Secretary, Beth, and Hermione's self-reinforcing ignorance and nostalgia for an idealized past than he endorses Ahmad's and Shaikh Rashid's wilder opinions about America's foreign con-

63. Faludi, *Terror Dream*, 4.

64. Alter, "Blame America," 41.

65. See, e.g., Matt Wells, "Ground Zero Photo under the Hammer," BBC News, April 19, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1938665.stm>. A Google search will reveal multiple sites featuring this image.

66. Faludi, *Terror Dream*, 5. Mohsin Hamid also observes in his novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (New York: Harcourt, 2007) that after 9/11, America "was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia" (115).

67. Beth and Hermione's nostalgia also recall Rabbit Angstrom's desire for a lost world: "Rabbit feels betrayed. He was reared in a world where war was not strange but change was: the world stood still so you could grow up in it. He knows when the bottom fell out. When they closed down Kroll's, Kroll's that had stood in the center of Brewer all those years, bigger than a church, older than the courthouse" (John Updike, *Rabbit at Rest*, in *The Rabbit Novels*, 2 vols. [New York: Ballantine, 2003], 2:419).

duct and hostile intentions toward Islam. Both represent equally blinkered perspectives. Yet if Updike rejects the extremes, he also sympathizes with both sides. Updike may satirize the Bush administration's willful ignorance in the Secretary's incomprehension of America's enemies or his country's faults, yet he also understands that the Secretary is charged with an essential yet nearly impossible task: to "protect in spite of itself a nation of nearly three hundred million anarchic souls . . . the clashing claims of privacy and security, convenience and safety" (44, 46). And if it is easy to mock Hermione's nostalgia for a lost American Eden, her sense of America's vulnerability to a devastating attack because of capitalism's nature is far from wrong: "Capitalism has been so *open*—that's how it has to be, to make it work. . . . An open society is so *defenseless*. Everything the modern free world has achieved is so *fragile*" (132).

Similarly, while Updike does not believe that America is engaging in a war against Islam, he recognizes that Muslims occupy a very uncomfortable place in American society, especially after 9/11. Ahmad's mother, Terry, had to change their phone number, stating, "We were getting hate calls. Anti-Muslim" (79). During the high school graduation ceremony, Jack Levy thinks that the imam (who may be Shaikh Rashid, although never identified as such) "twangs out a twist of Arabic as if sticking a dagger into the silent audience" (111) and embodies "a belief system that not many years ago managed the deaths of, among others, hundreds of commuters from northern New Jersey" (112); and the Secretary of Homeland Security advises Hermione to tell her sister that "she should get out [of New Prospect]. It's full of Arabs—Arab-Americans, so called" (26).

However, Updike's point goes well beyond sympathetically looking at post-9/11 America from a variety of perspectives since, as already noted, he seems to fully endorse the Islamic critique of America's exhausted consumer culture. Ahmad and Jack Levy may be inverted images of each other (Jack lost his faith and Ahmad found his at the same age, eleven), yet they agree in their disgust at America's obsession with consumption. Jack Levy sees himself helplessly shouting advice to the young "as they slide into the fatal morass of the world—its dwindling resources, its disappearing freedoms, its merciless advertisements geared to a preposterous popular culture of eternal music and beer and impossibly thin and fit young females" (23), an image entirely at odds with the obesity surrounding both Ahmad and Jack. America, as Jack sees it, "is paved solid with fat and tar" (27). Levy's assessment reflects his own cynicism and disillusionment, but his description of America recalls, deliberately, I think, a key moment in another of Updike's works that critically examines the idea of America: the ending of the Rabbit tetralogy. Confronted with his adulterous liaison with his daughter-in-law, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom decides, like Huck Finn, to light out for the territories and drive back to his Florida condo rather than

attempting to make things right. Along with detailing the route, Updike chronicles how Rabbit, ignoring common sense and medical advice, continuously “succumbs to the temptation” and has one outrageously caloric, cholesterol-ridden meal after another, ultimately dying of a massive heart attack at age fifty-six.⁶⁸ Critics have noted how throughout the tetralogy, Rabbit functions as a “mirror” for America, and Rabbit’s inability to control his fat intake, which kills him, reflects Updike’s worry that the uncontrolled consumerism of American culture will also prove fatal.⁶⁹ The common trope of obesity as exemplifying America’s decline, also present in *The Coup* (1978),⁷⁰ suggests how in all three works Updike “sees a fallen, morally exhausted world intoxicated by sex and consumerism and enslaved to its own images.”⁷¹ To be sure, Updike does not think of America solely as a country lost in a fog of sex and consumption. The bravura sermon Ahmad hears at Joryleen’s church (52–61) surely answers Ahmad’s frequent denunciations of America as a purely atheistic culture, so much so that even Ahmad is forced into a fleeting moment of religious toleration: “[The preacher] has been in his kafir way wrestling with devils, wrestling even with Ahmad’s devils” (61). But the allusion to Rabbit’s ending reinforces how Ahmad, Charlie, and Jack have, for the most part, accurately taken contemporary America’s measure.

The physical structure of Central High School, once exemplifying the promise of an ascendant country, now represents the decay of America’s original promise:

When constructed in the last century, the twentieth by Christian reckoning and the fourteenth after the Prophet’s Hegira from Mecca to Medina, the high school on its little rise hung above the city like a castle, a palace of learning for the children of millworkers and of their managers alike, with pillars and ornate cornices and a motto carved in granite, KNOWLEDGE IS FREEDOM. Now the building, rich in scars and crumbling asbestos, its leaded paint hard and shiny and its tall windows caged, sits on the edge of a wide lake of rubble that was once part of a downtown veined with trolley-car tracks. (11)

68. Updike, *Rabbit at Rest*, 401, 403.

69. Donald J. Greiner, “Updike, Rabbit, and the Myth of American Exceptionalism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike*, ed. Stacey Olster (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 155; James A. Schiff, *John Updike Revisited* (Boston: Twayne, 1998), 59–60.

70. For example, Americans have just awakened, Ezana says to Colonel Ellelloû, to the fact that “they as a race are morbidly obese,” and the Colonel describes American economic imperialism thus: “These people are pirates. Without the use of a single soldier their economy sucks wealth from the world, in the service of a rapacious, wholly trivial and wasteful consumerism” (John Updike, *The Coup* [New York: Knopf, 1978], 85, 114).

71. Hartnell, “Violence and the Faithful,” 485.

The school's physical decrepitude, its decline from a "palace of learning" to a toxic structure standing amid "rubble," symbolizes the larger failure that has led people such as Ahmad to look elsewhere for guidance or inspiration, with Islam providing what America cannot. "All I'm saying," Levy says to Ahmad's mother, Terry, "is that kids like Ahmad need to have something they don't get from society anymore. Society doesn't let them be innocent any more. The crazy Arabs are right—hedonism, nihilism, that's all we offer. Listen to the lyrics of these rock and rap stars. . . . Kids have to make more decisions than they used to, because adults can't tell them what to do. We don't know what to do, we don't have the answers we used to; we just futz along, trying not to think" (205–6). If American culture will no longer "tell them what worth is," kids like Ahmad will turn to something or someone that does: in this case, radical Islam and Shaikh Rashid.

While religion provides Ahmad answers and, in conjunction with his desire to belong, motivation to wage jihad, it is not clear by the novel's end if any religion can supply answers. Ahmad abandons his plan to blow up the Lincoln Tunnel—an insight Updike doubtless intended to answer the charge that the Qu'ran is exclusively violent—after having an epiphany, based on the fifty-sixth sura, "The Event," that "God does not want to destroy: it was He who made the world" (306). Yet Ahmad's final thoughts admit defeat. Emerging from the tunnel, Ahmad and Jack find themselves on Eighth Avenue, where Ahmad's religion dies: "All around them . . . the great city crawls with people [hugging to themselves] their reason for living another day, each one of them impaled live upon the pin of consciousness, fixed upon self-advancement and self-preservation. That, and only that. *These devils*, Ahmad think, *have taken away my God*" (311). Surveying New Yorkers going about their business, they seem to confirm Qutb's sense of Americans as a people far from God, but Islam is no longer a consolation for Ahmad, as the novel's final words reveal that he is now alienated from the God he has repeatedly said was "closer to him than his neck-vein" (145; see also 152 and 184). Thus the book ends with a lapsed Muslim joining the lapsed Catholic (Terry Molloy) and the lapsed Jew (Jack Levy). In what may be the novel's sourest insight, it seems that selfish, materialistic America affords no place for any religion other than the "born-again" (32) Christianity practiced by the Secretary of Homeland Security.⁷²

72. In his interview with the *New York Times*, Updike admitted that he originally imagined the central character of this novel as a Christian, "a young seminarian who sees everyone around him as a devil trying to take away his faith" (Updike, interview by McGrath). While it may seem that the devil has won and faith destroyed, we should also remember that Updike was extremely skeptical of the intimacy with God Ahmad claimed he enjoyed. See Marshall Boswell, "Updike, Religion, and the Novel of Moral Debate," in Olster, *Cambridge Companion*, 45.

IV

Ahmad and Jack Levy, however, are not the only important characters in *Terrorist*, and while they have been the object (for good reasons) of much attention, critics have left alone the complex role played by Charlie Chehab in Updike's treatment of terrorism. Charlie is a CIA "asset" (259), a mole charged with uncovering the terrorist cell that he entices Ahmad into joining. Charlie therefore occupies a fascinating, liminal position. As an American agent, his job is to defeat the forces that would harm his country, and Updike drops occasional hints that Charlie is more American than jihadist. His obsession with sex, culminating with his hiring Joryleen to "devirginate" Ahmad (217), seems out of character for a dedicated Islamist, and his lapse into American exceptionalism—"You don't hold Iraq to the same standard as the U.S. Bigger, you better be better" (157)—seems, Ahmad realizes "strange, slightly out of tune" (157). Charlie is also surprisingly critical of the black and white terms in which his fellow plotters see the world. Hearing the various Arab leaders categorized as either "tool" or "hero," Charlie observes to Ahmad: "Interesting to see their minds work. Tools, hero: no shades in between. As if Mubarak and Arafat and the Saudis don't all have their special situations and their own intricate games to play," an insight that also strikes Ahmad as "slightly false" (249–50).

Yet Charlie, very much unlike the Secretary, understands full well America's limitations, as shown by the debate with Charlie's father. The elder Chehab praises the United States as a welcome contrast to the vicious civil wars of his native Lebanon: "America, I don't understand this hatred. I came here as a young man, married but my wife had to be left behind, just me and my brother, and nowhere was there the hatred and shooting of my own country, everybody in tribes. Christian, Jew, Arab, indifferent, black, white, in between—everybody get along. . . . I say to Maurice, 'This is honest and friendly country. We will have no problems'" (146–47). While his experience cannot be gainsaid, Charlie reminds his father that this rosy view of America omits a great deal, such as the history of oppression endured by African-Americans: "Papa, . . . there are problems. The *zanj* weren't given any rights, they had to fight for them. They were being lynched and not allowed in restaurants, they even had separate drinking fountains, they had to go to the Supreme Court to be considered human beings. In America, nothing is free, everything is a fight" (147). Charlie's father responds that whatever America's problems, the United States cannot be compared to the tyrannies of the Middle East and Eastern Europe: "Your friend Saddam Hussein, he knows prisons. The Communists, they knew prisons. The average man [in America] knows nothing about prisons" (148). Again, Charlie's father is mainly right. For the most part, Americans enjoy vastly greater freedoms and legal protections than those who lived (and died) under Hussein

or communist dictatorships. But Charlie reminds his father that in America too, a man can now be jailed in perpetuity without trial and (until the election of Barack Obama) subject to torture: "Papa, what about our little concentration camp down at Guantanamo Bay? Those poor bastards can't even have lawyers" (149). America, Charlie points out, does not always live up to its ideals.

Updike uses Charlie to make an extraordinary argument that directly contradicts the vast majority of post-9/11 discourse on the relationship between America and Al Qaeda. For President Bush and so many others, the two have virtually nothing in common. Al Qaeda's sole goal, according to President Bush, is to "plot evil and destruction"; they are "enemies of freedom," and they attacked the United States because "they hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other."⁷³ But to Charlie, revolutionary America is actually Al Qaeda's role model. First, George Washington provides the tactics for contemporary resistance movements: "He learned to take what came, to fight guerilla-style: hit and hide, hit and hide. He retreated but he never gave up" (181). But more surprisingly, Charlie asserts that Washington is the direct ancestor of America's contemporary antagonists: "He was the Ho Chi Minh of his day. We were like Hamas. We were Al-Qaida [*sic*]" (181). This is a shocking comparison (one can only imagine the reaction of the novel's Secretary of Homeland Security if he heard it). Charlie means that Washington and his band of "soldiers in rags" (179) demonstrated the value of asymmetric warfare: like 9/11, the American Revolution "showed the world what can be done against the odds, against a superpower. He showed—and this is where Vietnam and Iraq come in—that in a war between an imperialist occupier and the people who actually live there, the people will eventually prevail" (181). Taking the comparison even further, if the jihadis are the legitimate heirs of Washington and his army, America, Charlie argues, is now the equivalent of George III and England, whose bullying on the Continent and in the colonies made them universally hated: "All of Europe was out to cut England down to size. Like the U.S. now" (182). America has become what it originally fought against, and the colonial response to George III anticipates and justifies the Islamic jihad against the United States. Far from having nothing in common, "These old revolutions," as Charlie tells Ahmad, "have much to teach our jihad" (183).

V

As I hope I have shown, Updike's decision to break the taboo surrounding terrorism's "unspeakability" by channeling and partly endorsing the Islamic

73. Bush, "Address to a Joint Session."

complaints about the West along with limning the ties between jihad and the American Revolution result in a more compelling and certainly more daring novel than most commentators have allowed. The most misunderstood aspect of Updike's novel, however, is his treatment of Ahmad, the eighteen-year-old product of his Irish-American mother's brief marriage to an Egyptian exchange student. Critics have been especially harsh on Updike's creation. One reviewer called him "a completely unbelievable individual," while another found Ahmad "a solemn robot," oddly attributing Updike's artistic failure to the author's inability to "imaginatively comprehend the roots and character of Islamist jihad against the West."⁷⁴

Updike at several points in the novel ascribes Ahmad's radicalization to the absence of his Egyptian father, Omar Ashmawy, who "decamped" when Ahmad was three years old. As Ahmad's mother, Terry, puts it, "I guess a boy needs a father, and if he doesn't have one he'll invent one." But she herself calls this "cut-rate Freud" (117), acknowledging that this theory is reductive and in the end, unconvincing.⁷⁵ A better and deeper explanation, Updike realizes, lies in the alienation resulting from Ahmad's mixed ethnicity. Americans sense that he is not one of them. Ahmad has to remind Jack Levy, "I am not a foreigner. I have never been abroad" (35), and while Joryleen's boyfriend and future pimp, Tylenol, frequently refers to Ahmad as "Arab" (e.g., 15 and 97). Tylenol also taunts Ahmad with not really belonging to any category: "Black Muslims I don't diss, but you not black, you not anything but a poor shithead. You no raghead, you a *shithead*" (16). Tylenol is more perceptive than he doubtless knows. The narrator tells us that "though [Ahmad] was not the only Muslim believer at Central High, there were no others quite like him—of mixed parentage and still fervent in the faith" (177). On the other hand, to the Yemeni Shaikh Rashid "Ahmad is American" (145), and Ahmad understands the qualification. While he has "chosen" to be a Muslim (177), his identification with Arabs extends only to adopting the religion: "For four or so blocks to the west, the so-called Arab section, begun with the Turks and Syrians who worked as tanners and dyers

74. Michiko Kakutani, "John Updike's *Terrorist* Imagines a Homegrown Threat to Homeland Security," *New York Times*, June 6, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/06/books/06kaku.html>; James Wood, "Jihad and the Novel," *New Republic*, July 3, 2006, <http://www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/jihad-and-the-novel>.

75. There are precedents for ascribing terrorism to domestic turmoil—a study of West German terrorists "found a high incidence of fragmented families"; a quarter "had lost one or both parents by the age of fourteen; loss of the father was found to be especially disruptive" (Jerrold M. Post, "Terrorist Psycho-logic: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Psychological Forces," in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, ed. Walter Reich [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990], 28). But this approach has not been widely accepted, mainly because too many terrorists do not fit the profile.

in the old mills, stretches along this part of Main Street, but Ahmad never ventures there; his exploration of his Islamic identity ends at the mosque" (99). Ahmad no more fits in with the immigrant Arab communities in New Jersey than he does with white Americans or African Americans.⁷⁶ On his way with Charlie to meet their fellow conspirators, they pass through the areas of New Prospect where "emigrants from the Middle East, Turks and Syrians and Kurds" settled, the store signs combining "Arabic script and Roman alphabet, *AlMadena Grocery*, *Turkiyen Beauty*," but instead of kinship, Ahmad senses that he "would not fit in here. . . . To Ahmad these blocks feel like an underworld he is timidly visiting, an outsider among outsiders" (244).

While Ahmad's disgust with America's consumer culture is genuine, the primary reason he decides to become a suicide bomber is not outrage at America's foreign policy but a desire to belong. After Shaikh Rashid asks Ahmad if he is willing to become "a *shahīd*," a martyr, Ahmad is overjoyed because, finally, the outsider, the marginalized, the person who is neither one identity nor another, becomes unambiguously part of a larger group: "After a life of barely belonging, he is on the shaky verge of a radiant centrality" (234). Updike's Ahmad thus illustrates the "dangerous intersection between the personal and the political," "the local and the global," that Samuel Thomas argues "enframes the act of suicide terror."⁷⁷

Updike has been accused of inventing a character who shares nothing with the actual 9/11 terrorists; they did not come from broken homes and were all Arabic, and therefore the novel provides no insights into actual terrorists.⁷⁸ This charge is only superficially correct. While Ahmad and the 9/11 hijackers have different ethnic backgrounds and domestic situations, they decided to become suicide bombers for the same fundamental reason: alienation. According to Lawrence Wright, the 9/11 hijackers never felt they belonged anywhere: "Despite their accomplishments, they had little standing in the host societies where they lived. . . . The Pakistani in London found that he was neither authentically British nor authentically Pakistani; and this feeling of marginality was just as true for Lebanese in Kuwait as it was for Egyptians in Brooklyn."⁷⁹ Ahmad and the hijackers, alone, alienated, "turned to the mosque," where they found in radical Islam the answers and the sense of belonging that eluded them elsewhere.⁸⁰

76. I owe this point to my student, Ben Nahoum.

77. Thomas, "Outtakes and Outrage," 429, 438.

78. Kakutani, "John Updike's *Terrorist* Imagines."

79. Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 304.

80. *Ibid.*, 304–5.

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Updike's *Terrorist* clearly deserves a place in the developing canon of fictional works that deal complexly with terrorism, books that expand one's understanding of the phenomenon. Like Conrad in *The Secret Agent*, Updike gives us "the philosophy of bomb throwing" from [the radical Islamic] point of view;⁸¹ and like Le Carré's use of Gadi Becker in *The Little Drummer Girl* to voice the Palestinian perspective in a way that clearly shows considerable sympathy, Updike uses the CIA mole, Charlie Chehab, to bridge the divide separating America and the Islamic terrorist.⁸² But there is a limit to how far Updike's imagination can go. In a 2006 interview, Updike was asked, "Is there anywhere that a 74-year-old novelist cannot go, even into the mind of an 18-year-old Arab-American terrorist?" Updike responds that Ahmad "is American, and that's the key. I would not attempt to animate from inside a Palestinian terrorist or an Iraqi freedom-fighter or whatever, but I did think I could handle an American who was self-converted at the age of 11."⁸³

Updike can "animate," as he says, American characters, bringing us over the novel's course into the minds of Ahmad, Charlie, Jack Levy, Terry, Beth, Hermione, and the Secretary of Homeland Security. Yet Updike cannot bring himself to invent what might go on inside the head of a genuine Islamic terrorist, such as Shaikh Rashid, who remains, as Conrad's Inspector Heat says of The Professor, "inaccessible."⁸⁴ And like Conrad's Professor, Shaikh Rashid remains free at the end of *Terrorist*. "For now," Jack Levy tells Ahmad, "he's vanished" (300). Having shaved his beard and traded "his usual shimmering embroidered caftan [for] a gray Western-style suit" (266), the Shaikh passes, as did Conrad's Professor, "unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men."⁸⁵ Perhaps he will be caught; Levy adds, "he won't make it back to Yemen, I can promise you" (300). But Updike leaves the matter unresolved. The particular terrorist plot may be defused in *Terrorist*, but the larger issues remain. By breaking the taboo against investigating the terrorist's motivations and perspectives, let alone granting the terrorist an intelligible subjectivity, Updike invites his readers to think hard about America's culture and place in the world. Far from a failure, Updike's *Terrorist* should be seen as part of the "political and aesthetic project" of understanding terrorism in our post-9/11 era.⁸⁶

81. Conrad, *Secret Agent*, 24.

82. Le Carré, *Little Drummer Girl*, 195–214.

83. Updike, interview by Ashbrook.

84. Conrad, *Secret Agent*, 69.

85. *Ibid.*, 227.

86. Rothberg, "Failure of the Imagination," 152.