2017-05-01

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Old World Readings of a New World Novel: European Perspectives on John Updike's *Terrorist*

LAURENCE MAZZENO AND SUE NORTON

Given the diverse and polarized reaction by reviewers and scholars in the decade immediately following its publication, John Updike's 2006 novel, *Terrorist*, is likely to become a textbook case for reception studies. In reception studies, differences in space (in Updike's case, globally) and time play an important role in shaping a reader's reaction to a text.[1] Within months of its publication, *Terrorist* generated hundreds of reviews in dozens of countries around the globe; scholarly articles began appearing less than a year later. Most notable is not simply the sheer number of publications devoted wholly or in part to this novel, but the wide range of critical commentary. By way of brief example: the expatriate American novelist Lionel Shriver argued that *Terrorist* "may be Updike's finest novel," while Christopher Hitchens claimed to be so disgusted by it that he sent it "windmilling across the room in a spasm of boredom and annoyance." What difference do these initial evaluations mean to subsequent readings of the novel? Sorting out the place of *Terrorist* in the Updike canon is likely to be an ongoing project for some time to come. This essay is an early attempt to initiate that work.

As most scholars will agree, no matter how valuable a text may be as a window onto the culture that produced it, no work of literature will endure unless it appeals to the aesthetic sensibilities of readers over time. But to view *Terrorist* from a purely aesthetic perspective is virtually impossible. In "Racing Toward the Apocalypse," Bob Batchelor makes an important observation about the critical straightjacket we

find ourselves in when approaching the novel: "One cannot analyze *Terrorist* outside the context of 9/11" (175). The work is a product not only of Updike's personal experience—he witnessed the attacks from Brooklyn Heights—but also "what pundits deemed 'the post 9/11 world,' a new cultural environment fundamentally different than had existed before" (175). To this we must add a further limiting factor: our knowledge of Updike's earlier work inevitably colors our reading of his later work. In "The Writer in Winter," published by *AARP* in 2006, Updike himself worried that, like many aging writers, he was at risk of having been "typecast." He recognized that reader expectations are driven by past experiences of a writer's work. Indeed, Salman Rushdie called *Terrorist* "beyond awful" and suggested that Updike "should stay in his parochial neighborhood and write about wife-swapping because it's what he can do" (qtd. in Campbell).[2]

WHY LOOK TO EUROPEAN CRITICS?

When *Terrorist* appeared, the United States was five years beyond 9/11 and three years into a war in Iraq that was growing increasingly unpopular. Roughly half of the American people wanted to wipe out terrorism at any cost, while the other half wanted to curb the adventurism of the Bush administration. Many American reviewers' assessments of *Terrorist* had as much to do with their political bias as with their literary judgment—perhaps even more so. In an early review in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Harry Levins offers a prescient assessment of the novel's impact in America: "*Terrorist* is likely to upset lots of people. American Muslims surely will complain that Updike has depicted them as mindless zealots, while some on the civil-rights side will accuse Updike of stereotyping his poor urban black characters. Red-state Americans will grouse that Updike portrays US society largely in Ahmad's terms: hedonistic, carnal and godless." More than a hundred reviews prove him largely correct, with a few notable exceptions. One never can be certain if American reviewers are unhappy with Updike's politics or his aesthetic sensibilities, but they seem, as a rule, either to blame him harshly for transgressing into territory they believe should have been off limits to him, or praise him for exposing the dangers of home-grown terrorism.[3]

The reaction by scholars from the Middle East was consistently hostile. Titles tell the tale: Maryam Salehnia's "Political Zionism and Fiction: A Study of John Updike's *Terrorist*," Amal Al-Leithy's "Stereotyping Islam: A Critical Study of Terror in John Updike's *Terrorist*," and Mohammad Deyab's "Muslim Stereotypes in John Updike's *Terrorist*" leave no doubt about their orientation. These and other

Middle Eastern scholars universally dismiss Updike's misguided portrait of Islam as another glaring example of Western ideological blindness.

European perspectives, however, suggest interpretive orientations less biased by national chauvinism or religious ideologies. Of more than fifty reviews of *Terrorist* in European newspapers and periodicals, the majority appeared in western European countries: fifteen in Britain, seventeen in Germany, five in France, and five in Denmark. Reviews were also published in Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Spain, Hungary, and Albania. Although it is hard to produce a simple "favorability scale" for these reviews, many of which offer surprisingly nuanced analysis of the novel, favorable notices generally outnumbered unfavorable ones by a margin of two to one.

Among positive reviews, several major trends emerge: approval for Updike's ability to understand his character; his appreciation for religious, ethnic, and racial diversity; and his withering critique of contemporary American values. Swedish reviewer Ragnar Strömberg, who calls *Terrorist* "without doubt one of Updike's strongest novels," suggests that it fits well into the Updike canon because it depicts a young man's quest for value and reveals the fragility of American identity. Writing in Germany's *Stern*, Gisela Ostwald even suggests that Updike's treatment of religion—including Islam—is quite favorable; notably, she says, the Imam is not made out to be a villain. Almost all who approve of *Terrorist* point out that Updike's real target is American decadence. Hungarian Miklós Vámos reflects the view of this contingent: Updike "takes as his subject not terrorism, but American consumerism."

A common charge made by European reviewers who find the novel wanting is that Updike relies too heavily on stereotypes. Hence, Pankraj Mishra lumps in Updike with other American novelists who have produced "identikit terrorists." Dutch reviewer Julie Smit finds the book well written but full of clichés. James Wood complains that "when Ahmad speaks, he sounds like V.S. Naipaul" and when he thinks "he sounds like John Updike." This view is shared by many others, including some who admire the novel. *Frankfurter Allgemeine* reviewer Julia Encke finds the novel tacky. Natasha Walter, who has not always been kind to Updike, admires him for his attempt at getting into the mind of a terrorist—a difficult task both artistically and politically, she says—but finds *Terrorist* artificial, too dependent on research and not enough on imagination. The same objections are made in the *London Review of Books* by Thomas Jones, who describes *Terrorist* as an "imaginative failure" (29).

In the same AARP essay, Updike says that an older writer often finds himself competing against his younger self, and European reviews of *Terrorist* prove his point. The Updike canon certainly influenced Tim Adams's judgment that "this is a profoundly curious novel for John Updike to have written." Claire Allfree writes in the *Metro* that the novel "feels like the work of an ageing author trying to understand the modern world and his changing country out of a sense of moral obligation." Mads Rosendahl Thomsen suggests that Updike "peaked earlier." Wieland Freunde finds it necessary to remind readers of *Die Welt* that Updike was among the defenders of the Vietnam War—perpetuating a half-truth that is now influencing a third generation of critics. Also writing in *Die Welt*, Uwe Wittstock asks the broader question, can a Westerner credibly represent the motives of anti-Western fundamentalists? Implying that such representation is indeed impossible, she dismisses *Terrorist* as unworthy of Updike. Bryan Appleyard of *The Times* salvages his fairly negative reaction to *Terrorist* by resorting to comparative judgments: *Terrorist* "is not Updike's best novel," he admits, but it is "way better than almost everybody else's best" (6).

In addition to the dozens of reviews that appeared within two years of the novel's publication, *Terrorist* has received an unusual amount of critical attention from European scholars in the past decade. To date, nearly thirty scholarly articles and book chapters by Europeans discuss the novel at some length.[4] How they approach *Terrorist* depends in part on the individual critic's theoretical and political leanings. In their various hands, Updike's tale becomes a malleable text in which the words on the page are open to widely differing interpretation. In some respects, European critics have been less kind to *Terrorist* than European reviewers who share with their American counterparts the same broad norms of reviewing. Updike himself endeavored to codify these norms in *Picked-Up Pieces* where he wrote, "Do not imagine yourself a caretaker of any tradition, an enforcer of any party standards, a warrior in any ideological battle, a corrections officer of any kind" (xix). Reviewers, Updike advised, should "try to understand what the author wished to do, and do not blame him for not achieving what he did not attempt" (xviii). Literary critics, by contrast, tend to be academics and often take "party standards" as the starting point.

John Hawley argues that *Terrorist* is one of several "studies of the making of a terrorist" that "are rapidly becoming a literary trope as a subgenre within portrayals of disturbed late adolescence" (242). As one of more than a hundred published 9/11 novels, *Terrorist* is often analyzed along with other texts and subjected to extensive (or sometimes just perfunctory) comparative criticism. For example, in their chap-

ter on 9/11 fiction in *Sacred Violence: Political Religion in a Secular Age*, David Martin Jones and M. L. R. Smith place Updike among those novelists who view terrorism inspired by fundamentalist beliefs as an existential threat to Western ways of life. They point out—in what may be reasonably interpreted as criticism of the Bush administration specifically and American policy toward non-Western nations in general—that there is another tradition of the 9/11 novel, one that sees terrorism as a political statement against an imperialist colonial government representing the worst of Western hegemony. Similar commentary can be found in articles by Catherine Morley, Katherina Dodou, Birgit Däwes, and Ingrida Žindžiuvenė.[5]

The consensus among European critics—though by no means a universal conclusion—is that Updike fails in creating a believable protagonist. The reasons for this judgment vary. Among British scholars, Richard Gray believes Updike is making a good-faith attempt to use his own "unbounded distaste for the secular temper of contemporary America and a world of commodities" to get into the mind of a young Arab American, but is "never able to engage his protagonist imaginatively" (34). Martin Randall argues that *Terrorist* suffers because Updike's familiar preoccupations (sex and religion, and concern for the quotidian in American life) overshadow his attempt to get inside the mind of the terrorist. Claire Clambers has a harsher view: Updike simply resorts to stereotype, using Islam "rather reductively" (175). Geoffrey Nash believes Updike "does not have the semantic tools to penetrate the mysteries of Muslim identity," a fault he shares with other Western novelists, since "the failure to engage with non-western cultures and identities" is "pervasive" (108). Behind this judgment resides, of course, the assumption that a novelist's imagination cannot compensate for some direct experience (or perhaps academic expertise). Czech scholar Michal Sýkora argues that Updike has sidestepped the problem of confronting the non-Western mind by creating a hero that "is no terrorist" (87). Sýkora believes the novel is a failure because its didacticism, "ideological manipulation," and ham-handed introduction of "correct models of behaviour (the brave Levy, Muslims loyal to the USA), turn most [readers] against Updike" (88).

In two articles that offer a measured critique of *Terrorist*, Anna Hartnell insists that, despite his denials and explanations to the contrary, Updike's chief aim in *Terrorist* is to "take on Islam in the wake of 9/11" ("Writing Islam" 135). Unfortunately, she feels, Updike's protagonist emerges as "Other," an example of "commonplace Orientalist stereotypes" (135). Hartnell charges Updike with ideologically induced blindness: "Christianity polices Updike's religious vision," she says, "and further highlights his own secularist stance" (143). Hartnell's criticisms pale beside those

of University of Mainz Professor Mita Banerjee, who says Updike's novel participates in the project of restoring whiteness as the dominant ideology by painting as suspect all other racial and ethnic groups. She argues that Updike's "psychological profiling" in the novel often slips into "racial profiling," a symptom of "a much wider logic haunting the war on terror" (15). Using legal terminology, Banerjee concludes that the novel is "a racial prerequisite case trying—and ultimately rejecting—an Arab American's claim to whiteness and hence to cultural citizenship" (19). In an article that points out how the tendency to attribute suicidal violence to non-Western nations fails to account for Western versions of the phenomenon, Arata Takeda of the University of Tübingen argues that *Terrorist* is one of several novels by Westerners that tend to "culturalize or religionize the motives for suicide bombing and thus, independent of their authors' intentions, to risk reinforcing a biasing trend" (471). By such lights, Updike as a writer of Western white privilege is destined to failure in attempting to imagine someone from a non-Western culture.

But there is a group of European critics that has written about *Terrorist* quite favorably. For example, Pamela Mansutti challenges Banerjee's "jingoistic" (108) reading, arguing that "whiteness does not come out as strong as Banerjee thinks" (113). Mansutti also argues, contra Hartnell, that "the religious underpinnings of Updike's poetics were essential in the construction of *Terrorist* . . . I believe Updike has a larger vision in *Terrorist* that questions the cultural imperialism of 'whiteness' by making the ethnic gaze of the young Arab American protagonist, Ahmad, the gaze we side with throughout the story" (108). Like Mansutti, Phillipe Cantié praises Updike for being able to get inside the mind of a budding terrorist rather than seeing the book's impressionable adolescent, Ahmad, only externally. Martina Wolff reads the novel as an exploration of identity formation in contemporary multicultural America. Dominic Head defends *Terrorist* on literary grounds, arguing that Updike is using the tools available to him to create an imagined scenario in which the protagonist's enactment of his growing rage against American culture is counterbalanced by the "beauty of the ordinary," which Updike is so adept at describing. Ulla Kriebernegg suggests that the political dimension of the novel is not to be found principally in its focus on the clash between Western and non-Western values; rather, Updike is concerned with "a renegotiation of Americanness for all of his characters and a search for or re-affirmation of some common ground beyond ethnic and religious borders."

However, it is Belgian critic Kristiaan Versluys who offers what is possibly the most extended defense of the novel's merits by a European in *Out of the Blue: Sep-*

tember 11 and the Novel. Arguing that *Terrorist* is indeed flawed if read as a political tract—or an indictment of Islam—he constructs a close reading that emphasizes Updike's imaginative powers in exploring "the inner struggles of a boy adrift, who is attracted to the certainties of fundamentalist Islam but ultimately declines to pursue a life-denying ideology to its logical conclusion" (172). Somewhat incongruously, however, Versluys tends to write in the dichotomous language he wishes to expunge from the critical conversation—noting, for example, the presence of "several key scenes in which this tug-of-war between the directives of a strictly interpreted and death-driven Islam are opposed to the promptings of instinct and the joy-giving evidence of the senses" (174)—a description sure to disappoint Muslim readers (and others) who may not recall his earlier qualifier that Ahmad is drawn to a decidedly fundamentalist version of Islam.

Indeed, sensitivity to the varieties of Islamic experience is essential to any fair interpretation of the text. Irish scholar John-Paul Colgan argues that *Terrorist* is not simply another 9/11 novel but is part of Updike's ongoing critique of American society, and he insists that Updike posits the figure of an adolescent, multicultural terrorist to examine and critique mainstream American values. Colgan's understanding of the novel's moral purpose is consistent with the perspective of Ireland's most well-known book reviewer, Eileen Battersby, on Updike's writing career in general. In her eulogizing column in *The Irish Times* in January of 2009, she begins by telling her readers that "John Updike, an observer who not only loved his country, he liked it, has died." She goes on to praise Updike's powerful historical awareness and to extol the subtle and deft ways in which he told the stories not only of his characters, but of America as well. Her sense of Updike's overriding purpose—a purpose both social and aesthetic—is shared, as well, by Irish critic Brian Duffy who maintains that one of Updike's greatest achievements is his resonant response to "modern existential despair" (27).

These three words, "modern existential despair," comprise an apt phrase by which to describe Ahmad Mulloy's psychological plight. As so many European critics and reviewers have argued, Updike constructs this Irish-American-Egyptian Angry Young Man at the center of his novel mainly so that he can gaze upon contemporary America's demoralizing culture of instant gratification and rampant consumerism. As Colgan writes, "by constructing viewpoints that develop as a result of multicultural contact, Updike is able to comment critically on the nature of American progress to a degree that would not otherwise be possible" (129). Had Updike not "liked" his country quite so much, he probably would not have

ventured to offer us, in a post-9/11 world, a sympathetic, aspiring jihadist to steer us through a tunnel.

LITERARY MERIT AND LONGEVITY

In offering any judgment about the merits of *Terrorist*, it may be wise to remember Samuel Johnson's observation that it is not possible to judge writers' reputations until a hundred years have passed since their death. Perhaps the same criteria ought to pertain when evaluating books so that sufficient time will have elapsed for the transitory events that shape initial reactions to fade from memory and permit more disinterested judgments. After all, no one reads Tolstoy's *War and Peace* today principally as an analysis of the Napoleonic Wars.

Nevertheless, some preliminary predictions might be made about *Terrorist* based on the reactions of Europeans who have written about the novel. Several reviewers and most critics who read *Terrorist* as a political document find it wanting. On the other hand, those who see it as fiction in which Updike uses the current worldwide interest in terrorism to explore familiar themes—particularly in this instance, coming-of-age in contemporary America—give the novel considerably higher marks. Either way, general interest in the novel has been sustained over a decade. Many other 9/11 novels have appeared, some by authors whose reputations rival Updike's. Yet *Terrorist* continues to figure prominently not only in discussions focused on Updike but also in those that treat the larger political dimensions of America's self-proclaimed war on terror, with its attendant—if sometimes unstated—assumptions about the nation's role as the defender of "freedom."

The novel also goes some way toward escorting us, interested readers from anywhere, on an inventory of contemporary American societal anxieties: obesity, jihad, bullying, public-school mediocrity, racial profiling, fear of aging, and even loneliness. New Prospect, the novel's made-up suburb in decline, offers an apt vantage point from which Updike allows us to take stock of the many ordinary forms of human suffering that equally ordinary human compassion could alleviate. Ahmad's last-minute choice to forego destruction and veer toward the George Washington Bridge, despite his seething anger toward the devils who have taken away his God, suggests the possibility of American renewal, of a new founding. While critics and reviewers of serious fiction may inhabit an overlapping realm of intellectualism and judgment, readers of fiction inhabit our perilous world. And in that space, thematics of hope offer abiding, perennial appeal. For better or worse, then, *Terrorist* is likely to be one of the novels on which Updike's enduring reputation is affirmed.

NOTES

1. The effect of initial and subsequent reader response on the reputation of a work or author is discussed at length by contributors in Machor and Goldstein 2001.

2. Reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic expressed surprise that Updike would decide to write a novel against type. Gail Caldwell begins her generally laudatory review with the observation that "we tend to regard [Updike] as the author of a certain kind of novel: gorgeous prose, white-guy existential despair, sex in the suburbs." Reva Klein observes, "In *Terrorist*, John Updike has waded into unfamiliar and inevitably shark-infested waters: religion, radical Islam, race, prejudice. Heady, edgy, very of-the-moment stuff, but at the end of it, you wish he'd stuck to the material he is good at and is at home with: the physical and metaphysical angst of suburban, middle-class America." Paul Constant argues that, because he's grown older, Updike seems incapable of adjusting to the new society around him: "The world has changed and Updike can't quite change with it. He can only stand and gape."

3. It is not simply that a majority agree that the novel is "shopworn" (Kakutani) or "lame-brained" and "improbable" (Gates). Charles Demers questions Updike's authority to write such a work, arguing his status as an older, privileged white male make it impossible for him to enter into the mind of a working-class young Muslim. Sheheryar Badar Sheikh concludes that he could only have written this novel for money. Even the "red-staters" Levins mentions could find fault: Warner Huston excoriates Updike as a liberal too sympathetic to this supposedly misunderstood group. Many who praise the novel do so for extraliterary reasons: Ian Mulgrew believes *Terrorist* suggests "that there is far more common ground than is contemplated by the US Administration's demonic jingoism." Tracy Simmons, writing in the conservative *National Review*, describes the novel's portrait of Ahmad as "sympathetic, if not sympathizing," and considers the work a cogent examination of fundamentalism. Roger Burdette sees *Terrorist* as a potential morale booster; Updike's "interesting and entertaining—albeit fictional— glimpse into how a terrorist's reasoning processes" is important "during a time when thousands of American and coalition service members are putting their lives on the line against real, live terrorists."

4. The number of scholarly assessments by American critics is not quite as high; we have identified fewer than two dozen articles and book chapters published between 2006 and 2016.

5. To be fair to European critics, some have noticed that there has been a tendency to disparage all novels like *Terrorist*. As David Brauner of the University of Reading noted in 2010, the "relatively few American fictions engaging explicitly with 9/11" focused on "the American experience"; those like Updike's "that have attempted to inhabit the minds of the perpetrators of terrorism have received harsh criticism for the alleged shortcomings of their portrayals" (3).

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