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Source: *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2 (April 2011), pp. 355-373

Published by: Modern Humanities Research Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/modelangrevi.106.2.0355>

Accessed: 20-10-2015 11:40 UTC

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MARRIAGE, RELATIONSHIPS, AND 9/11: THE
SEISMOGRAPHIC NARRATIVES OF *FALLING MAN*,
THE GOOD LIFE, AND *THE EMPEROR'S CHILDREN*

In the emerging canon of literary fiction engaging directly with 9/11, there is no more widely explored theme than marriage and relationships. Three of the most significant of these novels, in terms of literary authorship and volume of readership, Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2005), and Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006), focus on this subject. This discourse is so generally prevalent, though, that in a 2007 survey of 9/11 fiction, 'The End of Innocence', Pankaj Mishra asks disbelievingly: 'Are we meant to think of domestic discord, also deployed by DeLillo and McInerney, as a metaphor for post-9/11 America?'¹ Mishra's remark is to some degree representative of wider criticism of the generally narrow focus of these texts; many of them are frequently cited as lacking any wider historical context or political insight, and certainly in the case of the three works studied here, any allegorical possibilities are conflicted or oblique. Discussing these three novels in particular, Richard Gray writes that 'the crisis is in every sense of the word, domesticated [. . .] cataclysmic public events are measured purely and simply in terms of their impact on the emotional entanglements of their protagonists'.² Additionally, apart from the protagonist of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) or the cricketers of Joseph O'Neil's *Netherland* (2008) and certain small tokenistic sections of the other novels, 9/11 fiction focuses not just on New York and New Yorkers, but on a very elite and unrepresentative, bourgeois section of New York. The central protagonists comprise a Manhattan lawyer and a freelance editor (*Falling Man*), a literary editor, writer, stockbroker, society socialite (*The Good Life*), and a large cast of privileged New York literati (*The Emperor's Children*), and indeed this trend extends to many of the other examples of 9/11 fiction, e.g. *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (two Manhattan lawyers) or *Windows on the World* (wealthy property broker and famous author). Nevertheless, this enterprise of dramatizing privileged American domesticity in the spectre of the mourning city, exemplified by *Falling Man*, *The Good Life*, and *The Emperor's Children*, is revealing and useful in a more meaningful and far-reaching way than perhaps this micro-focus might suggest. Analysing Ulrich Baer's suggestions regarding the possibilities of novel representation of 9/11, Alex Houen develops three 'clearly divergent' novelistic strands that

¹ Pankaj Mishra, 'The End of Innocence', *Guardian*, 19 May 2007, Saturday Review section, p. 5.

² Richard Gray, 'Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis', *American Literary History*, 21 (2009), 128–48 (p. 134).

could possibly be employed in a novel representation of 9/11.³ The first is a 'transformative realism—it honours the "shocking singularity" of the event while turning it into a story'. This evokes Jenny Edkins's description of the first of two ways in which people respond to trauma: 'The first involves an attempt to forget trauma and to incorporate what happened into the narrative forms we already have available. It means telling the story, fitting the event into a linear narrative framework.'⁴ Despite the clear differences of the three texts, particularly the relative narrative complexity of *Falling Man*, these are logical ways of reading them all, as 9/11 is the backdrop for relationship narratives which ostensibly act as social barometers, measuring the impact of the attacks and the pressures they exert on the domestic and banal. This essay, however, will suggest that it is a variation of Houen's second category that is able to elucidate the lasting significance of the three texts. Houen states: 'The second is a kind of seismographic registering of events, in which writing is subject to them as a form of unconscious, historical symptom' (p. 421). The seemingly narrow domestic focus of these novels and their intent to explore traumatic rupture aside, the narrative arc of the relationship stories bears an underlying compliance with the more contentious notion that the social realities of 9/11 and the post-9/11 period can be more accurately understood in terms of temporary disruption rather than an epoch or traumatic moment as so many felt or feel it was. What is manifest in these texts is not allegory, but rather a subliminal or unconscious restoration of equilibrium, evoking ideas of continuity, history, and context.⁵

In *9/11 and the War on Terror* (2008) David Holloway argues that '9/11 was long in the making, and the pre-9/11 and post-9/11 worlds were broadly continuous not discontinuous'.⁶ Holloway illustrates this by moving through separate fields of discourse; history, politics, mass media, literature, cinema, and photography. However, the novels under consideration here do not adopt a panorama of this sort. Furthermore, they are not directly pointing to this kind of continuity, but to the restoration of equilibrium. These narratives that are entangling their emotional upheavals with 9/11 are certainly enacting a 'seismographic' paralleling. As stated, these novels are actually narratives of marriage or relationships that build in 9/11 as a background or context. However, they are explicitly presented as '9/11 novels', the titles and book jackets alone establishing the two discourses as inseparable (like *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, *The Good Life* features the twin towers of the World

³ Alex Houen, 'Novel Spaces and Taking Place(s) in the Wake of September 11', *Studies in the Novel*, 36 (2004), 419–37 (p. 421).

⁴ Jenny Edkins, 'Forget Trauma? Responses to September 11', *International Relations*, 16 (2002), 243–56 (p. 248).

⁵ Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 4.

⁶ David Holloway, *9/11 and the War on Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 4.

Trade Center casting the shadows of a man and woman), and the narratives of 9/11 and the relationships are undoubtedly correspondent. Even then, if they cannot carry explicit national allegories, the implications and suggestions in the narrative structure and plotting of these domestic dramas demand analysis.

The argument here, that despite their narrow focus and clear intent to examine the rupture caused by 9/11, these novels are rooted in ideas of continuity, is further complicated but ultimately given weight by the media-generated notion of post-9/11 shifts in gender roles, and the important critical accounts of these media interpretations, particularly Susan Faludi's *The Terror Dream* (2008). Indeed, several notable theoretical works across a wide range of fields explore the myth-making capacity of the post-9/11 American media. Edkins generically emphasizes the enormity of media influence and its propensity for bombast in post-9/11 journalism: 'in many parts of the world September 11 represented not so much a traumatic discontinuity but the beginning of a 'season of hyperbole' and exaggeration in the western media' (p. 245). Faludi, though, meticulously details the way in which the media relentlessly propagated the notion of a widespread return to particular gender archetypes, and crucially questions the urge to revisit classic cold-war gender stereotypes:

Why were independent female voices censored and a bugle call sounded to return to Betty Crocker domesticity? Why were our political and cultural stages suddenly packed with Lone Ranger leaders, Davy Crockett candidates, and John Wayne 'manly men'? Why, in short, when confronted with an actual danger, did America call rewrite?⁷

Faludi makes careful use of National Consensus statistics to reveal the line of demarcation between reality and media fantasy regarding notions of increased birth rates and women migrating from the workplace to establish themselves as homemakers. But clearly it is not a straightforward matter of the actual situation on the one hand versus media hyperbole on the other, since lived lives are affected by the media's output, however fictitious it may be, or complicit with a neo-conservative government seeking military conflict. Therefore, while theoretical texts such as *The Terror Dream* or Derek Gregory's *The Colonial Present* (2005) offer empirical accounts of the way in which certain indisputable realities amount to powerful continuity narratives of 9/11 that lie beneath the media hyperbole, this essay will show how the three novels under scrutiny reflect murkier social realities, probing the space between myth and empirical fact. And, while the worlds they explore are indeed unrepresentative, it is precisely because of the social 'set' that they dramatize (those with the closest proximity to 9/11 and arguably the most to

⁷ Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: What 9/11 Revealed about America* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), p. 199.

lose in the attacks) that the eventual restoration of equilibrium in the novels becomes an equally powerful statement about the impact of the attacks.

While the main focus of these novels is on long-term relationships, they all contain important passages discussing purely sexual relationships and respond to varying media tropes of post-9/11 sexuality, including a frequently alleged phenomenon of the immediate post-9/11 period, which the media quickly termed ‘terror sex’: the idea that New York, gripped by collective trauma, was experiencing heightened sexual activity through a desperate need for human contact and intimacy in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. Ostensibly, the terror-sex myth and the media’s role in it directly contradict Faludi’s account of neo-conservative media advocating very gendered moral obligations, though this is largely explained by the fact that it was a very early phenomenon, occupying just the initial weeks after 9/11. This was quickly superseded by media-propagated archetypes of ‘protector’ masculinity and ‘domicile’ femininity that gained momentum as the media quickly aligned themselves to the strategies of the Bush White House. But it is a useful preliminary to examine the representation of sex or ‘terror sex’ in these novels, since it reveals the way in which they lay out the literary parameters and positions of distance that they attempt to hold from the media fictions, while also establishing an important tone of knowingness or self-reflexivity that underpins the relationship narratives.

A *Salon* article of 21 September 2001 is typical of these early accounts of ‘terror sex’. It describes an anonymous woman’s experience: ‘she had been noticing a new phenomenon among her close friends since Tuesday. The world had changed; so had relationships. Now, just about everyone she knew was having what she and her friends call “terror sex”.’⁸ In *The Good Life*, descriptions of this kind of activity come through similarly gossip-based situations. In one scene rescue workers evoke terror sex as a big media story: “I hear everybody’s fucking their brains out uptown” Jerry said. “There was an article about it today.”⁹ Nothing of this nature happens to any of the characters in these novels, however, and the ‘terror sex’ discourse retains for the characters, and for the reader, the distance of speculative newspaper articles—gossip and myth. DeLillo addresses the notion of a heightened sexuality in the second chapter of *Falling Man*, which begins with a long cerebral paragraph describing the ordinary or mundane as being exceptionally sexually charged in the days after 9/11:

Sex was everywhere at first, in words, phrases, half gestures, the simplest intimation of altered space. She’d put down a book or magazine and a small pause settled around

⁸ Cole Kazdin, ‘Sex in a Time of Terror’, *Salon*, 21 September 2001 <<http://www.salon.com/sex/feature/2001/09/21/terror>> [accessed 8 November 2010].

⁹ Jay McInerney, *The Good Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 134. All further references will be to this edition.

them. This was sex. They'd walk down a street together and see themselves in a dusty window. A flight of stairs was sex [. . .]¹⁰

This is a very different kind of passage but ultimately maintains a similar distance from actual events in the narrative, as do the conversational episodes of *The Good Life*, by describing a kind of aura rather than actual experience. DeLillo's evocation of this 'aura' is very suggestive in that it posits an alternative to the gossip and hyperbole. The kind of reckless, spontaneous episodes described in the *Salon* article and evoked frequently in all of these texts bears some relation to what Kai Erikson describes: 'Traumatized people calculate life's chances differently [. . .] traumatized people often come to feel that they have lost an important measure of control over the circumstances of their own lives.'¹¹ However, accounts of terror sex remain gossipy and anecdotal, and the novels explicitly handle them as media exaggeration. Furthermore, there are other facets of collective trauma that we might apply to this discourse; Erikson also describes a sense of euphoria experienced by traumatized survivors:

a 'stage of euphoria' quickly follows [. . .] The energy with which rescuers work and the warmth with which neighbours respond act to reassure victims that there is still life among the wreckage, and they react with an outpouring of communal feeling, an urgent need to make contact with and even touch others by way of renewing old pledges of fellowship. (Erikson, p. 189)

This bears more resemblance to the earlier quotation from *Falling Man*, where DeLillo describes a heightened aura of sexuality attaching to everyday life. It is also suggestive of a more subtly underpinning reality behind both the initial 'terror sex' and subsequent 'baby boom' strains of media mythologizing, as it suggests that in scenarios of collective trauma there may be a palpable need for intimacy and contact: not necessarily a reckless sexuality but enough of a general shift in mood for media interpretation to begin generating this kind of mythology.

Another important facet of the sex scenes, particularly in *The Good Life* and *Falling Man*, is a certain self-reflexivity. These relationship narratives, which shift or unsettle markedly with the advent of 9/11, carry a distinct knowingness or inevitability regarding the post-traumatic re-evaluation of core values. This is foretold in allusions to this heightened need for contact and intimacy—there is the distinct feeling that this is a tried narrative. In *The Good Life* Russell evokes this as he walks through a crowded street:

The enforced intimacy of sweating bodies was strangely comforting. Russell found himself pressed against a beautiful, nameless girl he recognized—dark and delicate, of

¹⁰ Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (New York: Scribner, 2007), p. 7. All further references will be to this edition.

¹¹ Kai Erikson, 'Notes on Trauma and Community', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 183–99 (p. 194).

Indian extraction, he imagined—from shared trips on the elevator, enveloped in her musky scent. Was this to be the legacy: wartime couplings, sudden intimacies, frenzied couplings in stairwells and broom closets? (*The Good Life*, p. 119)

This passage clearly alludes to a historical precedent. In *Falling Man* the idea of a sudden need for intimacy is necessarily more closely tied to the larger relationship narrative. On 9/11 Keith and Lianne instinctively move back in together after Keith miraculously walks out of the burning towers, and their desire for contact is not necessarily spontaneously passionate or unconsidered:

And it's interesting, isn't it, the way you move about the bedroom, routinely near-naked, and the respect you show the past, the deference to its fervors of the wrong kind, its passions of cut and burn. She wanted contact and so did he. (*Falling Man*, p. 39)

When Keith and Lianne do have sex it is not spontaneous or reckless but inevitable, and afterwards, when Lianne pragmatically considers the man next to her, what comes through is, again, this sense of knowingness: 'My husband. He wasn't a husband. The word spouse had seemed comical, applied to him, and husband simply didn't fit' (*Falling Man*, p. 70). This is a different kind of knowingness from the one Russell conveys in *The Good Life*: whereas Russell sees a historical precedent in 'wartime couplings', Lianne, in the first sexual encounter with her estranged husband in years, admits that it was the 'tenderest sex' she had known but hints at an underlying reality in their relationship that even great tragedy and a subsequent need for companionship and meaning cannot negate.

Re-evaluation of relationships and marriage in a post-9/11 condition of uncertainty becomes the primary theme of *The Good Life* and *Falling Man*. Characters explore meaning in their relationships through the course of the narratives, which ultimately reveal the degree to which 9/11 has effected genuine change in their lives. McNerney is explicit in his wish to explore this:

The Good Life is first and foremost a love story. It's about the way in which the collective trauma of 9/11 prompted many of us, especially those of us here in New York, to re-evaluate our lives, to re-examine our values, our careers, our marriages.¹²

DeLillo also clearly sees his characters as engaged in a process of re-evaluation. Describing them individually, he states:

the question Keith asks himself for the first time after the terrorist attacks: *Who am I? What's my identity?* Suddenly he realizes how much he loves his son, that he wants to be close to him. Lianne always wanted to be like other people, until through 9/11 she seems stronger to herself.¹³

¹² Jay McNerney interviewed at <<http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780739325315&view=auga>> [accessed 8 November 2010].

¹³ Don DeLillo interviewed in *Die Zeit*, 11 October 2007 <www.scribd.com/doc/15077981/DonDeLilloInterview07> [accessed 8 November 2010].

Both texts document the impact of the attacks on the banal or domestic, but what is ultimately revealed, underneath the detailed reporting on the impact of trauma on domesticity, is a complex narrative combination. On the one hand there is the illumination, under the pressures of post-9/11 disorientation, of long-standing relationship issues—the suggestion that the attacks have brought to the surface latent marital discord. On the other, there is an eventual restoration of equilibrium, a reversion to patterns of pre-9/11 normality. Both of these strands are extremely evocative in their respective underlying suggestions and do contain allegorical possibilities. However, Kristiaan Versluys's account of *Falling Man* disputes any restoration of equilibrium in this text.¹⁴ For Versluys, the 'endless re-enactment of trauma presented in *Falling Man* allows for no accommodation or resolution' (p. 20). Versluys's term 'melancholia' is astute and the analysis of the solemnity of DeLillo's milieu is precise. In particular, the assertion that 'September 11 figured as the collapse of everything that is familiar and, in its familiarity, comforting' (p. 21) is accurate in its foregrounding of the way DeLillo focuses on the 'familiar'. It must be acknowledged as well that in spite of this concern for the familiar, DeLillo's milieu is more extensive than McInerney's or Messud's; he includes a subnarrative thread that follows a character called Hammad, one of the 9/11 terrorists, as well as another couple—Lianne's mother and her partner—who provide important counterpoints. However, Versluys's reading ignores the importance of the carefully plotted prehistory of the relationship between Keith and Lianne, which is an integral aspect of the text. Furthermore, the assertion that 'In *Falling Man*, trauma is not healed; it spreads like a contagious disease' (Versluys, p. 30) misses the importance of the repeated patterns of working through in which the characters participate and, crucially, Lianne's eventual emergence from her traumatic haze, which breaks the traumatic cycle. This will be examined in the following pages, but it is worth noting here Gray's illustration of the way in which the knowingness of *Falling Man* detracts from its depiction of trauma: 'the structure is too clearly foregrounded, the style excessively mannered, and the characters fall into postures of survival after 9/11 that are too familiar' (Gray, p. 134). What Gray does not recognize, though, is that this knowingness—or what is 'too clearly foregrounded'—is an important part of the architecture of the novel, setting up the restoration of equilibrium.

The process of working through is also integral, and much of this revolves round the idea of re-evaluation. Andrew O'Hagan draws attention to the importance of this in his lengthy review of the novel. Referencing passages of the text which describe the relationship between Keith and Lianne, and its history, he states:

¹⁴ Kristiaan Versluys, 'American Melancholia: Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*', in Versluys, *Out of the Blue*, pp. 19–48.

These descriptions are among the best things in the book: they have the force of felt life, and through them we begin purely to understand what estrangement really means with this Manhattan couple. They each have known a little hate. But how can they relate to each other now that hatred means something else, now that it means flying planes into public buildings?¹⁵

Amid the melancholic landscape of *Falling Man*, this theme of re-evaluation is constant. Keith describes 'what he'd lately taken to be the truth of his life, that it was meant to be lived seriously and responsibly, not snatched in clumsy fistfuls' (*Falling Man*, p. 137). Similarly, Lianne 'listened to what he said and let him know she was listening, mind and body, because listening is what would save them this time, keep them from falling into distortion and rancor' (*Falling Man*, p. 104). Indeed, both of these novels feature protagonists who have a renewed sense of the importance of 'meaningful' relationships after 9/11. In *Falling Man* Keith literally walks out of the burning towers and back into his marital home, from which he had been estranged for years. In *The Good Life* Corrine and Luke begin an affair, searching for a more meaningful, authentic love than the stagnant home lives they have suffered for years. While the characters in *Falling Man* reconstitute their marriage, re-evaluation in *The Good Life* means the beginning of an affair. As Louis Menand states, 'McInerney's premise is that after September 11th anything seemed possible to the survivors [. . .] They could start over, and have the life that they had always felt too scared or dependent or guilt-ridden to have.'¹⁶ Perhaps the aptness of Versluys's term 'melancholia' does not lie in its Freudian sense of arrested mourning, but rather accrues its fullest meaning in the underpinning theme of re-evaluation in both texts; the pervading inevitability that the process of renewal will be temporary and short-lived.

Narratively, *Falling Man* and *The Good Life* are structured very similarly: both contain three sections or acts, beginning with the events of 9/11 and going on to cover similar chronologies. In *The Good Life* these are literally entitled 'Indian Summer', 'That Autumn', and 'Holidays'. The first two sections cover, respectively, the day before 9/11 in which, over five chapters, much of the background story is established, and the weeks after the attacks, when Corrine and Luke meet while helping out in a soup kitchen for rescue workers, and embark on their affair in this mood of re-evaluation. In the final section covering Christmas, the affair collapses. In *Falling Man* the three sections are more cryptically entitled 'Bill Lawton', 'Ernst Herchinger', and 'David Janiak', and while the time-span of the action of the novel is

¹⁵ Andrew O'Hagan, 'Racing against Reality', *New York Review of Books*, 28 June 2007, pp. 4–8 (p. 6).

¹⁶ Louis Menand, 'The Earthquake: A Manhattan Affair', *New Yorker*, 6 February 2006 <http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/02/06/060206crbo_books1?currentPage=2> [accessed 8 November 2010].

wider, ending in 2004, the narrative arc is similar. DeLillo's section titles refer to symbolic or mythical characters but also pertain directly to a similar chronology. Bill Lawton is the mythical name for Bin Laden made up by Keith and Lianne's son Justin as he anxiously searches the skies in the weeks after the attacks; as in *The Good Life*, much of the background story for the couple is established in this section. Ernst Herchinger is the real name of Martin Ridnour, the shadowy European art dealer who is Lianne's mother's partner, revealed to have once been involved in terrorist activities himself and whose presence forces Lianne into increasingly uncomfortable reflection, which carries over into the domestic setting of Keith and Lianne restarting their marriage. David Janiak is the symbolic performance artist known as Falling Man, who appears throughout the novel and divides public opinion; 'Falling Man as Heartless Exhibitionist or Brave Chronicler of the Age of Terror', reads one fictional headline. In the final section set in 2004, which ends with Lianne's recovery, David Janiak dies. This death is symbolically important in its paralleling of Lianne's recovery: as Falling Man epitomizes the spectacle and divisiveness of 9/11, his dying evokes a decline in 9/11 media hyperbole and a waning of post-9/11 disorientation. The two texts cover slightly different time-frames but follow a very similar arc and teleology. Ultimately, both texts provide sufficient insight into the protagonists' relationships before the attacks. In *Falling Man*, after Keith walks in from the towers, we quickly learn about the couple's history, 'the eventual extended grimness called their marriage' (*Falling Man*, p. 7). In fact, as if to demonstrate the novel's intention of using the couple's marriage as a kind of barometer, the narrative moves directly from the opening scene in the towers to a discussion between Lianne and her mother Nina just days after, about the history of their marriage. The opening five chapters of *The Good Life* alternate between domestic scenes of Corrine and Russell Calloway and Luke and Sasha McGavock on 10 September, dramatizing the unhappiness and delineating the discontentment in both of these marriages that will underpin the affair between Corrine and Luke. The novel is of course revisiting the couple that were the subject of *Brightness Falls* (1992), though *The Good Life* is not a sequel. The emphasis on their prehistory in the novel is important as it facilitates a very conventional arc: the image of the couples before the attacks, a period of reaction to the catastrophe, and then the restoration of equilibrium, or return to normal patterns and habits. 'Seismographically', though, these texts are at their most suggestive in the fact that they are not simply using tried narratives in order to 'incorporate what happened into the narrative forms we already have available' (Edkins, p. 248), but are rather making subliminal suggestions that this also may be the narrative of 9/11, a narrative with history and a kind of resolution. As Houen states, the writing

is 'subject to them [the events of 9/11] as a form of unconscious, historical symptom' (p. 421).

The most striking aspect of these conventional narrative arcs and their restoration of equilibrium is the return to normality or convention in the characters themselves. Initially both couples make significant changes in their relationship or marital situations and express new views regarding the importance of relationships. Corrine embarks on an affair with married man Luke because her experience with him feels more 'meaningful'; 'Her conversations with Luke were more engaging than any she'd had with Russell for years' (*The Good Life*, p. 148). Lianne, in *Falling Man*, expresses a renewed need to have Keith at home with her: 'She wanted to go home and talk to Keith [. . .] Talk to Keith or not talk at all. But she wanted him to be there when she got home' (*Falling Man*, p. 69). These are marked behavioural turns, both based on a renewed importance in relationships. The two narratives actually evolve in different ways and are even opposites in the crude sense that one relationship is dissolving and the other reforming, though the sense of re-evaluation and renewed desire for meaning in the protagonists is central to both. Furthermore, both texts underpin a surface emphasis on change and rupture, what *The Good Life* describes as 'the trauma that had ruined their sleep and clouded their dreams', with sustained allusions to the characters' pre-9/11 problems (*The Good Life*, p. 147). As already indicated, some of the most affecting passages measure the effect of the attack on the banal in the aftermath, and these can overshadow the importance of the plotting of prehistory. Luke's thought in *The Good Life*, for example, that 'it seemed nothing short of miraculous that you could still pick up the phone and conjure up moo shu pork, shrimp toast, and fried dumplings' on the Sunday after the attacks (*The Good Life*, p. 74). Or similarly, in *Falling Man*, Keith, while watching runners in Central Park, muses: 'The ordinariness, so normally unnoticeable, fell upon him oddly, with almost dreamlike effect' (*Falling Man*, p. 51). This is perhaps what we expect in the 9/11 novel, images of the banal in traumatic aftermath. But underneath these descriptions of the palpable effects of the attacks, the narratives build in the couples' histories. Corrine and Russell are deeply unhappy before 9/11, as evidenced by their bickering in the early chapters, by the revelation of Russell's infidelities and Corrine's near infidelity, and by her overt statement: 'long before the eleventh, he had been growing increasingly preoccupied and short-tempered' (*The Good Life*, p. 148). Keith and Lianne were of course separated before 9/11 brought them back together, and there is sustained allusion to their past problems. The strange gambling addiction and detached personality that consume Keith after they reunite are crucially shown to have pre-9/11 roots:

He used to come home late, looking shiny and a little crazy. This was the period, not

long before the separation, when he took the simplest question as a form of hostile interrogation [. . .] He carried that glassy look in his eyes and a moist smile across his mouth, a dare to himself, boyish and horrible. (*Falling Man*, p. 103)

This is particularly suggestive as Keith's slide into numbness and gambling addiction, which could readily be identified as post-traumatic, is clearly shown to have deeper origins. Versluys points to Keith's eventual residence in Las Vegas and gambling addiction as emblematic of his trauma and of the novel's 'portrayal of enduring loneliness and unresolved melancholy' (p. 38). There is no doubt that much of Keith's demise is emblematic, but it is also clear that his eventual, maudlin, post-9/11 existence, living 'inside a bubble and outside of time', was predictable without the advent of 9/11, or at least that the condition he succumbs to in the desert originates years earlier (Versluys, p. 39). The notion of pre-existing problems that are exacerbated by 9/11 is perhaps the single most provocative aspect of these texts. The impact of this suggestion of pre-existing issues is somewhat blunted by the other clear suggestion in the relationship narratives, the return to pre-9/11 conditions, or normality.

Both couples try to find new, lasting meaning in relationships after 9/11 but ultimately the shadow of the fallen towers does not amount to an impact big enough to effect lasting change and eradicate familiar behavioural patterns. There is an important scene in *Falling Man* in which Keith is contemplating telling Lianne about his new, intimate relationship with a fellow survivor, Florence, and simultaneously trying to convince himself that he genuinely wants to re-establish the marital home:

She would say, after we've just renewed our marriage. She would say, after the terrifying day of the planes has brought us together again. How could the same terror? She would say, how could the same terror threaten everything we've felt for each other, everything I've felt these past weeks? (*Falling Man*, p. 103)

Ultimately, after attempting to rebuild his marriage Keith drifts away and Lianne expresses not only her readiness to be single again but also her readiness to end the period of rupture: 'She was ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way they were before the planes appeared that day, silver crossing blue' (*Falling Man*, p. 236). This is not Lianne wishing she could be transported back to the security of pre-9/11 America but rather accepting that she does not need her husband and that she can resume life without him. Luke and Corrine's romance also disintegrates at the end of *The Good Life*, again through characters falling into familiar patterns. On the afternoon of Christmas Eve they lie to each other, deploying the kind of routine deception that characterizes their married lives, both claiming to be doing 'nothing really' later on. When they meet each other at a performance of *The Nutcracker* with their respective families, the affair is over. Benjamin Strong states that

'*The Good Life* may be the most provocative novel yet about September 11, precisely because it dares to suggest that most of us weren't changed at all.'¹⁷ This is certainly supported by one explicit instance, where Luke questions the lasting significance of the attacks:

It seemed to him both hopeful that he could once again imagine the city as a backdrop to the dramas of daily life and sad that the satori flash of acute wakefulness and connectedness that had followed the initial confrontation with mortality in September was already fading behind them. (*The Good Life*, p. 353)

This is the most overt suggestion of a wider return to normality in the text. As stated above, the emphasis on the arc of the relationship throughout is overshadowed by the disruption that 9/11 causes in the lives of the characters, and the suggestion of a return to ordinary life is clandestine. The attention to the details of the effects of the attacks on lived lives—references to 'terror sex' or fears of anthrax or characters talking of leaving the city—almost distracts from the creeping return of balance.

In *Falling Man* the final chapter sequence works towards an even more clandestine suggestion that some degree of normality is returning. The penultimate chapter, quoted earlier, finds Lianne emerging from her dazed, post-traumatic state: she was 'ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way they were before the planes appeared' (p. 236). The final chapter, following this directly, is a four-page account of one of the aeroplanes speeding through the Hudson corridor towards the World Trade Center. It describes the aeroplane hitting one of the towers from inside the plane and ends with Keith's frantic escape. This act of textual repetition has encouraged readings that evoke trauma and trauma theory. But it is important to bear in mind the power of Lianne's statement, and what it means for this vivid scene to come just after it. The juxtaposition does have the effect of bringing the trauma of the day back to the fore, but with the underlying scene, fresh in our minds, of Lianne moving on—almost in spite of the vividly rendered image. Furthermore, it feels to some extent like a forced reminder of the horrors of the day, placed strategically to balance such an explicit statement. The reality, however, for the main protagonist of the text, is that despite the novel's lengthy focus on the rupture of 9/11, her life is not fundamentally changed and is no longer strictly characterized by uncertainty or trauma.

There are many notable inversions of and departures from *The Good Life* and *Falling Man* in *The Emperor's Children*, but ultimately it reinforces and strengthens the idea of a literary seismograph. The most notable departure is the novel's strong satirical element, which is focused on the set of New York liberal literati that comprise the main characters. The 'emperor' of the novel's

¹⁷ Benjamin Strong, 'Last Night', *Village Voice*, 30 January 2006 <<http://www.villagevoice.com/2006-01-24/books/last-night/>> [accessed 8 November 2010].

title is Murray Thwaite, highly regarded author of numerous books and academic articles on world affairs and politics, tenured professor, adulterer, drinker, smoker. Thwaite is a clear caricature of the prominent American cultural critic, the archetypal *New Yorker* or *New York Review of Books* contributor. His status is described by his nephew as follows:

From the civil rights movement and Vietnam right down through the Iran Contra and Operation Desert Storm, from education policy to workers' rights and welfare to abortion rights to capital punishment—Murray Thwaite has voiced significant opinions. We have believed him, and believed in him.¹⁸

The clumsily condescending tone of this extract from Bootie's article on his uncle, 'Murray Thwaite: A Disappointed Portrait', both lends itself to the general satire of Murray and forms part of the satirizing of Bootie himself. Bootie is one of four of the emperor's 'children' who all have their own various literary or cultural pursuits. Murray's daughter Marina is beautiful and basks in her father's celebrity; she has been half-heartedly working on a cultural studies book of her own (about children's clothes) for nearly eight years. She exposes her naivety and superficiality early on, deliberating whether or not to get a job: 'should I even have one when I'm trying to finish the book and then, you know, a real job would be so demanding, after all, that's what an interesting job is supposed to be; and an easy job, a dumb job, well, at that point, who am I kidding?' (*The Emperor's Children*, p. 90). The satire is less prevalent in the characterization of her friend Danielle, though it is evident in the clichéd way in which she embarks on an affair with Murray—lured by his genteel pre-eminence. However, the satirical evocation of cliché borders on the politically incorrect in the depiction of Julius, characterized, for Amanda Claybaugh, as the 'bitchy gay friend'. Julius, a freelance *Village Voice*-style critic, embarks throughout the course of the novel on a druggy, sexually promiscuous period of his life that relies heavily on a clichéd vision of male homosexuality. These various gradations of satire in *The Emperor's Children*, in general, have been widely recognized; Claybaugh astutely describes how the text relies on dialogue: 'the spoiled princess and her bitchy gay friend; the philandering husband and his loyally oblivious wife [. . .] Messud allows these shallow people to speak for themselves, devoting a great portion of the novel to dialogue.'¹⁹

Indeed these are largely stock characters whose superficialities are self-evident, but the impact of the satire goes further, extending to the characters as a group, a New York 'literary set', and there is every reason to believe that the social milieu in which they circulate would include people like McInerney,

¹⁸ Clare Messud, *The Emperor's Children* (London: Picador, 2006) p. 343. All further references will be to this edition.

¹⁹ Amanda Claybaugh, 'Life and Death Stuff', *London Review of Books*, 19 October 2006, p. 15.

Messud herself, and to a lesser extent DeLillo—particularly in Chapter 21, ‘Awards Night’, a long chapter describing an unspecified literary awards evening, where Messud pays careful attention to the ‘milling, crowing glitterati, assembling for their annual fete’ (*The Emperor’s Children*, p. 200). This satiric element is important because it clearly presents a chance for the author to discredit the views of this set and also to question the viability of their status as representative or suitably microcosmic. Ultimately though, as Joyce Carol Oates writes, ‘Even as she un.masks them, Messud can’t resist evoking sympathy for her mostly foolish, self-deluded characters; and can’t deny even the fatuous Bootie the possibility of regeneration in the chaotic aftermath of September 11.’²⁰ The satire is not so much dulled by the good revealed in characters but superseded by the misfortune or suffering that they experience; Marina is manipulated into courtship and marriage by Ludovic Seeley, the Australian magazine editor who is using her name and prestige, Murray is sabotaged by Bootie, Julius is violently attacked by his new boyfriend, David, while Danielle is seduced by Murray.

What effect does this satire actually have, then? David Simpson suggests that it may ‘be taken as a fitting acknowledgement of the limits of fiction in the face of an appalling and indescribable event [. . .] or it might be read as a cry of quiet rage against the capacity of these people not to be radically moved or changed’.²¹ But to understand how it operates, it must be considered in tandem with the equally deliberate structure of the novel. *The Emperor’s Children* is a countdown narrative and there are clear temporal indicators, such as the reference to the election of George W. Bush and the sections entitled chronologically in months, which begin the countdown to 9/11. The attacks occur in the final stages of the text, and while they do test the characters’ temperaments and composure and evoke sudden change, the drama of the novel is largely conducted before the attacks, which occur in the fifty-eighth of sixty-seven chapters. In the preceding chapters all the major characters enter a new phase of their lives, establishing new relationships, which could represent, in every case, a major life change or personal epoch. The book culminates simultaneously with the advent of 9/11 and with a sudden climax or culmination in the characters’ changed personal lives, and ostensibly there are various degrees of direct connection between the two. In contrast to *Falling Man* or *The Good Life*, then, in which 9/11 happens at the beginning, the novel takes some five hundred pages to reach the attacks, and when they do happen there is already a sense of near culmination in all of the plot-lines. Thus, in the conclusion of the novel there is a blurred sense of what real impact the attacks have had on the close of each narrative strand, and the powerful

²⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, ‘Men without Qualities’, *New York Review of Books*, 5 October 2006, p. 30.

²¹ David Simpson, ‘Telling it Like it Isn’t’, in *Literature After 9/11*, ed. by Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 209–23 (p. 218).

suggestion that individuals all bring their own personal concerns or psychic dispositions to an experience of collective trauma, though this suggestion is not fully developed. In one of these strands, charting the relationship of Julius and David, a startling episode of violence inflicted by David on Julius occurs just before 9/11. There is the possibility here for a study of what Kaplan calls the 'aggregation' of traumas or the entanglements of personal and public traumas, 'the way that symptoms of prior traumatic events are triggered by new ones'.²² However, after 9/11 occurs in the text, this strand is largely over, and clearly equilibrium is restored. Julius has a permanent scar but he returns to the disposition in which he was introduced—not just before 9/11 but before his dangerous relationship with David:

Julius was the same, at least [. . .] He seemed in all aspects more sober for his Conehead [David] interlude—more cynical, if that were possible. And he still didn't know what he was doing wasting his talents on trivia, like the piece on nightclubs he'd resold to *Interview*. (*The Emperor's Children*, p. 545)

Rather than making a comparison between the effects of his personal incident of violence and the impact of 9/11 on him, or depicting a blurring of two traumas, Messud shows him recovering from both. There is, though, a powerful suggestion in his description of his scar:

You don't think of yourself as scarred. You forget. And you think you can just keep being your same self. But everyone sees you, and they see a changed person, and the ones who know the story see you as changed in a very particular way, which isn't so nice. (*The Emperor's Children*, p. 545)

Like the novel as a whole, this passage hints at the psychic sophistication of this experience, but again Julius is clearly depicted as largely unchanged.

The essence of the satiric, countdown narrative of *The Emperor's Children* is that it replicates the setting up of ostensibly life-changing absolutes that appear in *The Good Life* and *Falling Man* but which, despite epochal rhetoric, reveal characters that return quickly to their pre-9/11 conditions. What binds the satire to the advent of 9/11 and the relationship narratives in *The Emperor's Children* is the idea of the satirized 'children', Marina, Julius, Danielle, and Bootie, all ostensibly pursuing a new seriousness—the kind of seriousness embodied by Murray Thwaite. This combination, then, of satire and countdown narrative sets up an ultimate test of the idea of 9/11 as an epochal moment: does 9/11 augur a new era of seriousness in these characters who have seemingly been seeking just that? In the first instance, this does seem to have happened. Ludovic, by now Marina's husband, immediately scraps his magazine project *The Monitor*: 'nobody wanted such a thing in this new world, a frivolous, satirical thing' (*The Emperor's Children*, p. 542).

²² E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005) p. 2.

This follows a clear logic in the text after repeated references, before 9/11, to ‘criminally uninteresting times’ and ‘people who aren’t *for* anything, just against everything’ (*The Emperor’s Children*, p. 49), implying that 9/11 should usher in a new era of gravity. More powerfully, after watching the attacks from Danielle’s apartment, Murray leaves Danielle, who has become his mistress, and returns to his wife:

She had seen the second plane, like a gleaming arrow, and the burst of it, oddly beautiful against the blue, and the smoke, everywhere, and she had seen the people jumping, from afar [. . .] and she had seen the buildings crumble to dust [. . .] she had seen these things and had been left, forever, because in light of these things she did not matter, you had to make the right choice, you had to stay on the ground [. . .] and now there was nothing but sorrow and this was how it was going to be, now, always. (*The Emperor’s Children*, pp. 501–02)

Thus the relationship is over amid the shock of 9/11 and thoughts of ‘forever’ and ‘always’. But while Danielle is hurt the most by 9/11 and the demise of her relationship, after a few short chapters she and the others recover. They are revealed, in spite of their personal melodramas and the occurrence of 9/11, to have reverted to their initial dispositions. Marina discusses new plans with Julius in the November after 9/11:

‘Our goal for next year will be to get you into a proper apartment.’
 ‘And get me a proper job, too?’
 ‘I’m unemployed myself, remember.’
 ‘With a book coming out, thank you very much.’
 ‘Well, but...’
 ‘It will change everything. It’s huge.’
 ‘Or will slip into the bookstores and out of them just as fast.’ (*The Emperor’s Children*, p. 546)

They have clearly returned to the concerns that preoccupied them in Chapter 3, when they were first introduced. Danielle takes time off work but decides ultimately to return:

she had a film about liposuction to make. It seemed, in some lights, trivial, but it wasn’t really. By the time it was finished, people would be tired of greater tragedies and would be ready to watch it again. Mostly people’s tragedies were small. She’d be doing the right thing. (*The Emperor’s Children*, p. 572)

Danielle here announces her recovery from post-9/11 depression, which suggestively has hidden her post-relationship depression: when Marina, standing at Danielle’s window, speculates that ‘maybe seeing it all so clearly was more traumatic’, we know the real reason for her depression, which, like Julius’s scar, hints at personal problems entangling themselves in public trauma (*The Emperor’s Children*, p. 544). While Murray and Danielle split on 9/11 under

the weight of this new seriousness, the novel has repeatedly suggested that they would inevitably have done so regardless of 9/11. Furthermore, the occurrence of the attacks does not inspire any truth-telling between Marina and Danielle regarding the latter's affair with the former's father. The other relationships that have formed the 'stories' for each character are unaffected by the attacks. Just as a succession of precarious situations involving Danielle's friendship with Marina always seems to threaten Murray and Danielle's relationship, there are clear signs from the beginning of the novel that the manipulative Ludovic will ultimately disappoint Marina and that the indulgent David will likewise let down Julius.

The Emperor's Children goes one step further than *Falling Man* or *The Good Life*. Not only do we see a restoration of equilibrium in the characters and in their relationships after the rupture of 9/11, as well as a clear suggestion of the importance of previous circumstance and conditions, but we can see this in spite of the attacks. In other words, things do not fundamentally change despite major disruptions in the characters' personal lives, nor does the ostensible new seriousness of life after 9/11 shed light on these disruptions either. There is one character in the novel for whom 9/11 is epochal—at least provisionally. Bootie Tubb uses the chaos of the aftermath of 9/11 to flee to Florida, leaving his family to assume that he has perished in the attacks. However, while he begins his new life there, the novel ends with the revelation that his regeneration is predicated on re-entering his previous life and returning to his long-held obsessions. The final sentences—'take them by surprise. Yes. He would' (*The Emperor's Children*, p. 581)—reveal not a new life and identity but an obsession with problems left unaddressed.

Bootie's paradoxical situation is emblematic of the narrative paradigm that all three texts carry. On the one hand 9/11 has exacerbated what is undoubtedly a pre-existing condition in Bootie, impelling him to a dramatic course of action. However, it also becomes clear that despite his 'new life' he has returned to the exact obsession that he held when first introduced: his need to prove himself to his family, particularly his uncle. In all three texts, the suggestiveness or allegorical possibilities of pre-existing issues and concerns, whether brought to the surface by or unrelated to 9/11, are tempered by the suggestion of a return to normality which has its own suggestiveness. As we have seen, these strands do not sit comfortably together in the novels, and render this underlying seismographic suggestion even more oblique than it inherently is. One reason for this relates to what David Simpson has identified as another fundamental element of conflictedness in *The Emperor's Children*:

[. . .] that nothing has changed, and that life is not very interesting or stratifying. In this they show themselves suspicious of the rhetoric of 9/11 as a world changing event and not at all confident that the lives of these fictional Americans have been

transformed by the tragedy or even by the spectacle. The question they raise is whether this response (or lack of it) is a tribute to the resilience of ordinary life or a more damning indictment of the sheer indifference and self-centeredness of the homeland mainstream. ('Telling it Like it Isn't', p. 216)

The seemingly apolitical aspect of the surface action or stories in these novels, the focus on marriage or relationships and ordinary life in general, is underpinned by this conflict, which is complicated by the larger 'seismographic' tension, a combination which allows the texts to ask whether it is a characteristic courage or long-running lack of recognition or 'indifference' that allows recovery.

The distinctive character of the 'seismographic' aspect of the narratives is illustrated concisely by *Falling Man*. Keith, as indicated above, slides into numbness and gambling addiction, which, it has been suggested, is emblematic of a national condition. In this reading Keith could be said to carry a national allegory of trauma or to represent a nation suffering from collective trauma. Lianne, by contrast, is seen to recover from the initial impact of the attacks on her life, working through her trauma, and her equal if not greater narrative importance weakens this allegorical reading. However, in a more underlying sense, at the end of the novel narrative equilibrium is restored. Keith and Lianne were estranged before 9/11 and are now estranged once more, just as Corrine and Luke return to their marriages and families in *The Good Life* and the 'children' of *The Emperor's Children* resume their superficial, pre-9/11 concerns. While these novels do not operate successfully as national allegory, the 'seismographic' evocations of continuity and context are telling in stories that, on the surface, clearly want to study rupture and change. Despite being for the most part narrow in their outlook and lacking in historical or political insight, there is enough occurring beneath the surface of these narratives for them to be read, as Simpson suggests, as subversive of the 'everything's changed' rhetoric that the Bush administration propagated. In this seismographic respect, the novels also counter or oppose the theoretical accounts which understand 9/11 in terms of trauma and trauma theory. However, the seismographic registering of continuity in relation to 9/11 is not enough to make decisive statements about the causes or origins of the attacks. The novels cannot explicitly be applied to political or historical theories of continuity such as Chalmers Johnson's *Blowback*, which points to 'the nature and conduct of U.S. foreign policy over the previous half century'.²³ But there is no doubt that they all evoke a more general notion of continuity which crucially elucidates aspects of conflict and tension within it, centred around the depiction of both prehistory and recovery, and the question of whether it is characteristic steadfastness or strength that underpins the recovery or a

²³ Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback* (London: Time Warner, 2002), p. vii.

lack of recognition of the events' continuing relevance and connection to the past. Finally, the seismographic readings of these novels also provide another strand of insight in elucidating the conflicted, subconscious desire to understand 9/11 in terms of continuity and context. This comes in the possibility or suggestion that the tension within these seismographic narratives betrays a difficulty that the novelists may have had in making even an indirect political suggestion about 9/11 within what is clearly a deliberate and determined 'continuity' framework. Additionally, this may reflect both a wider need to begin imagining the prehistory of 9/11 and the recovery from 9/11, and the difficulty within American or Western consciousness of doing this.

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