

An electronic reprint from

Symbiosis

a Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations

Daniel Lea

Aesthetics and Anaesthetics:
Anglo-American Writers'
Responses to September 11

<http://www.humanities-ebooks.co.uk>

FOR GUIDANCE ON USE OF THIS EBOOK PLEASE SCROLL TO PAGE 2

PUBLICATION DATA

© Symbiosis 2007, 2009 all rights reserved

The Author has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this Work
in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

First published in SYMBIOSIS 11.2 (October 2007)

2nd electronic edition published in 2009 by Humanities-Ebooks LLP

<http://www.humanities-ebooks.co.uk>

Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith CA10 2JE

Essays published in Symbiosis are subsequently digitized
for the benefit of the author (80%) and the Journal (20%)

READING OPTIONS

To use the toolbar this Ebook should be read in default view.

To navigate use the hyperlinked 'Bookmarks' or thumbnails at the left of the screen.

To search, click on the binocular symbol in the toolbar.

Use <CTRL+L> to enlarge the page to full screen.

Use <Esc> to return to the full menu

LICENCE AND PERMISSIONS

This ebook is licensed for reading on a particular computer.

It is permissible to print a copy of the book for your own use
or to save it to another device of your own, but it would be illegal to
make a copy for another reader, or to permit anyone to do so.

ISSN: 1362-7902

A cumulative index of Symbiosis essays and reviews is online at

<http://www.symbiosisonline.org.uk>

DANIEL LEA

Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Anglo-American Writers' Responses to September 11

I think it better that in times like these
A poet keep his mouth shut, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right;

(W. B. Yeats, 'On being asked for a War Poem')¹

Al Qaeda's attack on New York's World Trade Center on 11th September 2001 sent seismic reverberations through the geopolitical bedrock of the nascent twenty-first century, but its impact on cultural politics was, and continues to be, equally momentous. Despite Norman Mailer's recommendation to Jay McInerney to 'wait 10 years...it will take that long for you to make sense of it', recent years have begun to see the creative reflex being exercised with increasing confidence and self-assurance.² Ignoring Mailer's advice, McInerney's novel *The Good Life* was published in 2006 where it joined such fictional treatments of the events as Fredric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (2004), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Ken Kalfus' *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2005), Patrick McGrath's *Ghost Town* (2005) and Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006).³ John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) have also lent weight to the trend of anatomising the multivalency of post-9/11 cultural landscapes. But though 9/11 novels and stories have begun to form a sub-genre of their own, they follow a pathway of literary response that can be traced back to the immediate aftermath of the WTC's destruction. On 12th September Ian McEwan wrote of the confused but compelling horror of the events as they unfolded on the television in front of him, but in truth even he was a late starter, Paul Auster, amongst others, having recorded his impressions on the day itself.⁴ In the week after, so many literary figures contributed commentary, consolatory, inflammatory or diagnostic pieces that by 20th September Sam Leith in the

4 SYMBIOSIS

Daily Telegraph could provide a summative overview of the literati's collective effort which included Auster, McEwan and McNerney, but also referenced Martin Amis, Blake Morrison and Jeanette Winterson.⁵

In *The New York Times* on the same day Dinitia Smith sampled the views of 'prominent authors' to discover whether the city's catastrophe would impact upon their work.⁶ Smith called upon Rosellen Brown, Joan Didion, Bobbie Ann Mason, Tim O'Brien, Joyce Carol Oates and John Updike, among many others, to express their views on the future of writing after 9/11. By 24th September *The New Yorker* felt able to anthologise writerly responses with pieces by Updike (one of the more loquacious of respondees), Jonathan Franzen, Denis Johnson, Roger Angell, Susan Sontag and Amitav Ghosh being included.⁷ The process of consultation with literary eminence continued on both sides of the Atlantic so that by 30th September John Dugdale could record in the *Times* that: 'Among the literary authors to have written about the World Trade Center bombing so far are Martin Amis, Peter Carey, Amitav Ghosh, David Grossman, Ian McEwan, Jay McNerney, Susan Sontag, John Updike and Jeanette Winterson'.⁸ He goes on to itemise those of more populist literary credentials such as Robert Harris, Tom Clancy and Frederick Forsyth before concluding by mentioning Jonathan Franzen, Philip Hensher and Rick Moody.

For the literary researcher tracking down writers' responses in the days after September 11 such compulsive recording and filing of views is helpfully comprehensive and time-saving but it begs broader questions: why are the views of writers, and in particular novelists, deemed so worthy of collation and dissemination? Why, in the aftermath, were novelists sought out to air their opinions on the traumatic character of events? What, in other words, does the novelist have to offer that cannot be provided by reportage or political commentary? Through examining a small proportion of the body of literary response, this essay will explore the roles of the novelist in contemporary world-historical events both as explicator and arbitrator of human psychology and emotional dumbfoundedness. It will additionally address what I, following Karen Alkalay-Gut, will choose to call an aesthetics of rawness that is the reconstitution of a stable representational ground from which to regard the events that is, paradoxically, both engaged fully in the raw emotionality of the moment and sufficiently distanced from it to enable aesthetic contemplation.⁹ In such a collision of affect and artistry, the enormity of the human tragedy overwhelms the meaning-making apparatuses of narrative representation, but not completely, leaving an aestheticised space that is at once paralysed and recuperative. One question that emerges in post-9/11 discourse is whether rawness and artful constructedness can