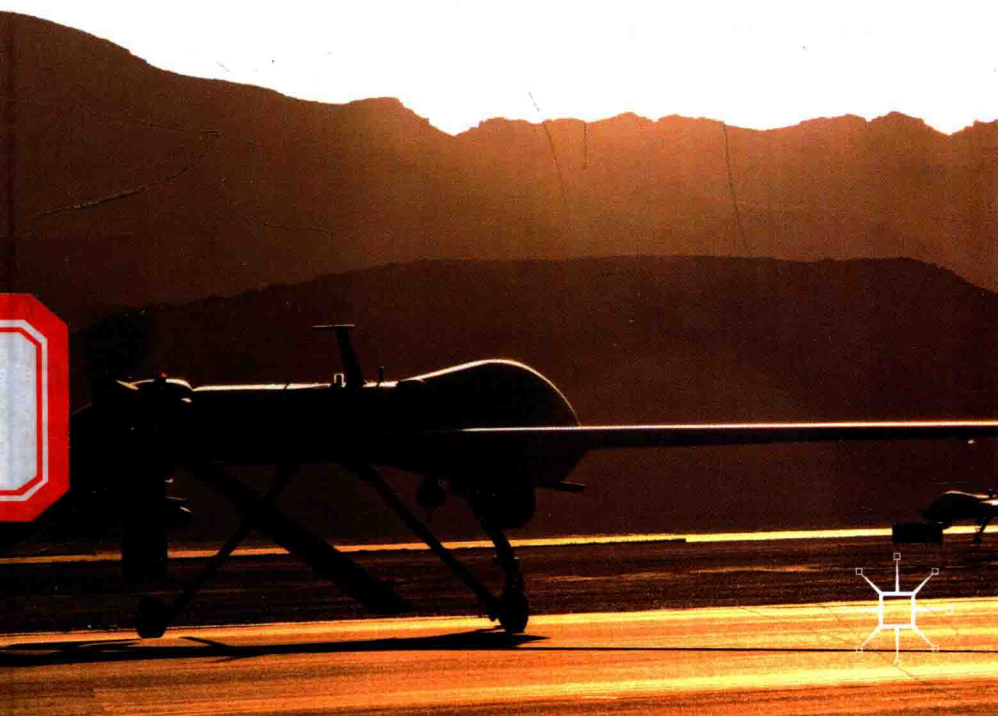# FICTIONS OF THE WAR ON TERROR

Difference and the Transnational 9/11 Novel

Daniel O'Gorman
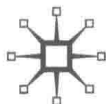
Fictions of the War on Terror

Difference and the Transnational 9/11 Novel

Daniel O'Gorman

Fictions of the War on Terror

For my parents

Acknowledgements

Contents

Introduction

Us and them

Four days after the September 11 attacks, Ian McEwan set the agenda for a new genre of writing, both fictional and non-fictional. Although never explicitly stated, his discussion of the nature of empathy in 'Only Love and then Oblivion' is heavily suggestive of an important role for literature and, perhaps even more so, *writers* of literature in the post-9/11 world. In his emphasis on the power of empathy – that is, of 'imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself' – to combat impulses towards fundamentalism and terror, there is a strong hint that literature might provide an important forum for such imagination to take place. Indeed, he attempts to enact it himself by beginning to fictionalise the attacks before all of the dust has, quite literally, had a chance to settle:

> This is the nature of empathy, to think oneself into the minds of others. These are the mechanics of compassion: you are under the bedclothes, unable to sleep, and you are crouching in the brushed-steel lavatory at the rear of the plane, whispering a final message to your loved one. There is only that one thing to say, and you say it. All else is pointless. You have very little time before some holy fool, who believes in his place in eternity, kicks in the door, slaps your head and orders you back to your seat. 23C. Here is your seat belt. There is the magazine you were reading before it all began.[1]

McEwan is attempting to show that he is capable of precisely the kind of empathic imagination that the hijackers were not, and that fiction, even in as brief a form as the few sentences here, can help to catalyse

1

a similar sense of empathic identification in its reader. The effect is underscored by his use of direct address: in this instance, 'you' (the reader) are the other, forced to imagine yourself into the almost totally unknowable experience of a passenger on one of the hijacked planes.

'Only Love and then Oblivion' is an early contribution to a debate that has been central to fiction and criticism about 9/11 and its aftermath: namely, a debate about difference. This is evident in the fact that McEwan seems unable to decide whether the lack of empathy shown by the hijackers is an inability or a choice. On the one hand, he writes: 'If the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed.'[2] Yet, immediately after this, he adds: 'It is hard to be cruel once you permit yourself to enter the mind of your victim.'[3] In the first sentence, the hijackers are unable to empathise, but in the second they have not 'permit[ted]' themselves to do so. Moreover, when he goes on to suggest that '[i]magining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity', it is clear that his use of the pronoun 'our' is not intended to include the hijackers. What is less clear is precisely who it *does* include. Is McEwan referring to 'us' in the post-Enlightenment West? Problematic as this may be, the notion of a shared humanity is one that is closely tied with Enlightenment liberalism. Or is he using the term more loosely, denoting an identity shared universally among all of the world's population? This is more likely what he is driving at, but then why preface it with 'our'? His decision to exclude the hijackers from the category would have been clear enough without qualification. Whichever the case, in both instances it is humanity that is the binding factor, the concept through which identification – and, in turn, empathy – becomes possible: it is *us*, the members of 'our' humanity, who are able to empathise with others, unlike *them*, the terrorists, who have chosen to step outside of it.

The binary at play here will be recognisable to anybody who has paid attention to international news coverage since 9/11: the 'us and them' rhetoric employed by the Bush administration was central to its mobilisation of support in favour of military intervention both in Afghanistan and in Iraq. It was in his speech of 20 September 2001 that President George W. Bush made his frequently cited and controversial declaration that '[e]very nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists'.[4] The 'us' in this declaration, of course, ostensibly refers to the United States, but its underlying assumptions are more complex than they are often given credit for: 'This is not, however, just America's fight. And what

is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom. We ask every nation to join us.'[5] There is a clearly identifiable 'us and them' binary in the speech, but this binary goes deeper than that of a conflict between America and Islam, or between America and 'terror'. The binary at play in the speech is one that pits those who share the civilisational values that the United States perceives itself to uphold – 'progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom' – against those who wish to see these values destroyed. Putting aside for a moment the question of precisely to what extent the United States might be said to have actually upheld (or failed to uphold) these values during the ensuing war on terror, the 'us' of its 'us and them' binary is one that, perhaps more so than is often thought to be the case, crosses the borders of national identity: it is the product of an internationalist political stance that in turn implies a crossing of other, related identitarian borders (particularly racial, cultural and religious). As in McEwan's 'us and them' binary, inclusion in Bush's 'us' is not innate, but rather determined through a sharing of a particular value or set of values specifically pertaining to the treatment of others.

This is not necessarily to suggest that McEwan is, as Ziauddin Sardar has put it, really a 'Blitcon' (or 'British literary neoconservative').[6] Nor is it to conversely posit that the Bush administration was actually, in hindsight, a misunderstood advocate of planetary cosmopolitanism. What links McEwan's article with Bush's speech is that the former's defence of what he calls 'humanity', just like the latter's defence of what he calls 'civilization', ultimately adheres to the terms of engagement dictated by extremist Islam. As Osama bin Laden declared in his speech of 7 October 2001: the United States 'came out to fight Islam [in] the name of fighting terrorism. ... I say these events have split the whole world into two camps: the camp of belief and of disbelief.'[7] While McEwan, Bush and bin Laden are responding to 9/11 from three extremely different, deeply antagonistic political perspectives, in all three cases the details of what terms such as humanity, civilisation and Islam constitute are left conspicuously vague. What all three share is precisely what bin Laden quite accurately refers to as 'belief': that is, a fidelity to – or rejection of – fundamental ideological principles. As Ivan Leudar, Victoria Marsland and Jiří Nekvapil have demonstrated in an article that compares the 'us and them' rhetoric of post-9/11 speeches by Bush and Tony Blair with two contemporaneous statements by Osama bin Laden:

[there is] a fair degree of symmetry between Bush and Blair's state-
ments, on the one hand, and bin Laden's, on the other hand. In bin
Laden's statement, Bush and Blair's aggressors become the victims
and vice versa. Instead of explaining and justifying the attacks on
New York, bin Laden refers to happenings in which the 'Muslim
brothers' were the victims. For bin Laden the conflict is grounded
in religion and actions are taken for the sake of God, whereas for
Bush and Blair the conflict is between social political and moral sys-
tems. His 'us'/'them' contrast is then in religious terms, which were
ignored by Bush, and explicitly set aside by Blair. In each case the
distinction is coupled to securing allies.[8]

It is clear from this analysis that an ideological clash is at play not so
much *between* civilisations in the sense famously outlined by Samuel
Huntington, but, instead, *about* civilisation: that is, literally about what
it means to live in a civilised way.[9] As such, it follows that Bush is, in
a basic, descriptive sense, correct to delineate between those who are
'with us' and those who are 'with the terrorists': in an ideological dia-
lectic on a scale such as this, it becomes virtually impossible to take a
neutral position.

However, a deeper problem with the 'us and them' dichotomy articu-
lated on the one hand by Bush, Blair and McEwan, and on the other by
bin Laden, lies not so much in its descriptive accuracy as in the question
of precisely what happens when the borderline between 'us' and those
external to 'us' is subjected to analysis. There are, for instance, already
clear disparities in the criteria by which each distinguishes between 'us'
and 'the terrorists': for McEwan, the cornerstone of 'our' humanity is
empathy; for Bush, it is freedom. Both concepts are highly contestable
and open to interpretation: one might ask, for instance, whether the
concept of the human is a prerequisite for empathic identification, or
whether the hijackers simply possessed different emotional parameters,
limited to those whom they believed to be practitioners of a 'true'
Muslim faith. Similarly, it is unnecessary for me to elaborate here on the
multiple ways in which the term 'freedom' has been interpreted in legal,
philosophical and historical thought over the centuries.

Even from this very brief look at the language of the war on terror,
it is evident that while there certainly is a consensually agreed 'us' and
'them' at play in the rhetoric of all parties, there are also clear differ-
ences in the details of exactly what constitutes each identity category,
and nowhere are these differences more clear than in the multiple
disparities within, as opposed to simply between, any given culture

or identity group. In the context of the war on terror, 'us' and 'them' are, to borrow from Benedict Anderson, 'imagined communities': they are fictions which create fraternity amongst even the most disparate of people. However, in doing so they can also be extremely dangerous: as with Anderson's take on nationalisms, it is precisely this fraternity 'that makes it possible ... not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings'.[10] Indeed, while all players in the present conflict share an aspiration for the ideals of civilisation, freedom and humanity, the meaning of each ideal immediately begins to fragment when subjected to comparison. Nevertheless, to recognise that even these very broadest of identity categories are not only socially constructed, but also filled with difference and contradiction, is by no means to slight the importance of their existence: on the contrary, it highlights an urgent need to think about the *ways* in which the social construction of categories such as these takes place, and as such to actively defend the meaning of each term that one judges to be most ethical and just. In short, I would suggest that an analysis of the ways in which difference is framed in the construction of collective identity is the first step towards a necessary questioning of what it means to be human or civilised in the context of the war on terror.

Aims and argument

This book aims to contribute to such questioning in a small but precise way. It does this by focusing on the role of literature in both shaping and critiquing issues of difference in the construction of post-9/11 identity. While I do not dispute McEwan's implied contention that literature might inspire in its reader an important post-9/11 broadening of empathic identification with others, I would add that it also has potential to go further than this, disrupting and rethinking the processes by which the division between the self and the other are conceptualised in the first place. While numerous works within the genre of '9/11 fiction', particularly those published in the first five or six years after the attacks, have aimed to challenge the politics of the Bush administration by attempting to generate precisely the kind of empathy that McEwan calls for, they have, like McEwan, often fallen into the trap of perpetuating the very 'us and them' binaries that they ostensibly wish to critique, albeit from an inverted, 'liberal' perspective. Much emphasis is placed on empathising with the Muslim 'other', for instance, but this otherness itself nevertheless almost always remains taken for granted in a way that is perhaps somewhat archaic in an increasingly globalised early

twenty-first century. Bush's political manipulation of the categories 'us' and 'them' is frequently challenged in this fiction, but the assumptions about identity which underpin this dichotomy remain largely intact. As Kamila Shamsie asks in her 2012 essay 'The Storytellers of Empire': 'where are they, the American fiction writers – and I mean literary fiction – whose works are interested in the question "What do these people have to do with us?" and "What are we doing out there in the world?"'[11]

It is the argument of this book that there are a number of contemporary texts that do not straightforwardly generate empathy with a fixed other in the way that McEwan describes, but that have begun to question the discursive frameworks within which difference between the self and the other is conceptualised in the first place. Although they are not always American, they do this precisely by asking the kind of questions that Shamsie describes, blurring the boundaries between the domestic and the foreign in a way that draws attention to the element of the other within the self, as well as the self within the other. As a result, categories such as East and West, American and non-American, and Muslim and non-Muslim are productively subjected to scrutiny.

Reframing 9/11

The argument that I have outlined above is one that is, at heart, about frames of perception. These frames take more than one form, perform more than one function, and operate on multiple levels, to different degrees of scale. Frames of perception are complex, not least in representing issues of identity and difference, so it is necessary for me here to provide some theoretical grounding.

The book itself functions as a kind of framework. It analyses the framing of post-9/11 reality in dominant political and media discourse, as well as the reframing of this reality in 11 contemporary novels, but at the same time it also takes part itself in at least two processes of framing. The first is a framing of genre: it attempts to expand the rather narrow scope of an emerging canon of literature involving what might be termed the '9/11 novel'. In Shamsie's words, this canon might be described as one containing novels that focus primarily upon, or circle closely around, the immediate trauma of 'the day itself'.[12] I will look more closely at this canon in the next section of this Introduction, 'Expanding the 9/11 genre'. The second kind of framing that the book partakes in is one that comes about as a necessary consequence of the first. Specifically, by attempting to adjust the scope of the 9/11 genre, it inevitably also contributes, in a small way, to a reframing of the event

itself. By analysing a range of novels that, for the most part, initially appear to make only tangential reference to 'the day itself', the attacks are necessarily placed within a broader (and, as I will go on to argue, more complicated) context.

I suggest that one result of this reframing of the 9/11 genre – primarily in the texts themselves, but also to an extent in my analysis of them *as* 9/11 texts – is an encouragement for readers to help redress what Judith Butler has described as a 'derealization of loss', or 'insensitivity to human suffering and death', that has resulted from a media-driven imbalance in the 'framing' of violence during the war on terror.[13] Butler uses the 2003 American 'shock and awe' bombing campaign in Iraq to illustrate this idea: 'That the US government and military called this a "shock and awe" strategy suggests that they were producing a visual spectacle that numbs the senses and, like the sublime itself, puts out of play the very capacity to think.'[14] It is precisely through their de-emphasising of the immediate impact of the attacks that, I argue, the novels at hand are able to explore both the 'derealizing' post-9/11 framing of reality that Butler describes *and* the complex constellation of histories from which the 11 September attacks themselves emerged. In doing so, the texts work to complicate the reductive 'us and them' identity binaries that have been present in global discourse over the past decade, and upon which a 'derealization of loss' relies.

The notion of reality being framed in a way that benefits hegemonic power, or that harms those antagonistic to it, is by no means specific to Butler. George Lakoff, for instance, has spent much of his career examining the role of framing in political language, while Edward Said's *Orientalism* is perhaps the most prominent study in recent decades to have analysed the connection between power and frames of representation (his main contention is that 'the Orient is *contained* and *represented* by dominating frameworks').[15] Jean Baudrillard has likewise influentially decried a contemporary 'collapse of reality into hyperrealism, in the minute duplication of the real, preferably on the basis of another reproductive medium – advertising, photo, etc'.[16] He has gone on to apply a similar argument, controversially, in his 1991 article, 'The Gulf War Did Not Take Place', as well as more recently in *The Spirit of Terrorism*, in which he posits that '[i]t was, in fact, ... [the towers'] symbolic collapse that brought about their physical collapse, not the other way around'.[17] The cultural theorist Marc Redfield has made an argument along similar lines on the topic of post-9/11 collective trauma, which he suggests can in many instances be described as a kind of 'virtual trauma', conducive to the perpetuation of dominant

discursive frames. In Redfield's words, virtual trauma constitutes 'a wound that ... exceeds the difference between the real and the unreal'. '"September 11,"' Redfield argues, 'is at once traumatic and not quite properly so ... its temporal complexity and spatial diffusion depend upon its global tele-technical diffusion as name ("September 11") and as spectacle.'[18] Susan Sontag's much-cited 2003 study, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, meanwhile, has argued for the power of photojournalism to counter governmental attempts to minimise the horrors of war in its framing of discourse: 'In an era of information overload,' she writes, 'the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it.'[19]

However, two of Butler's more recent studies – *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009) – have provided the most prominent and far-reaching theorisation of the processes at play in the construction of reality after 9/11. Butler does not provide an easy-to-summarise definition of what she refers to as 'the frame' (or occasionally in the plural, 'frames'). The reason for this is that the concept is, necessarily, highly diffuse and slippery. However, she does provide some relatively clear descriptions of what the frame does. 'The "Frames" that work to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot', she writes, '(or that produce lives across a continuum of life) not only organize visual experience but also generate specific ontologies of the subject.'[20] For the most part, these frames are to be understood as visual phenomena, but she makes clear that they are also part of a more abstract, discursive framing of the ways in which life is 'recognized' as life: that is, as what she terms sufficiently 'grievable' if lost: 'Such frames are operative in imprisonment and torture, but also in the politics of immigration, according to which certain lives are perceived as lives while others, though apparently living, fail to assume perceptual form as such.'[21]

From just this brief outline of Butler's analysis, it is clear that the framing process that she has in mind is one that is characterised by a language similar to that of the us-and-them binaries, which I have described in the first section of this Introduction. 'Why should it be, for instance,' she asks, 'that Iraq is called a threat to the security of the "civilized world" while missiles from North Korea, and even the attempted hostage-taking of US boats, are called "regional issues"?'[22] Likewise, the 'visual aesthetics' of reportage on war in the global media are such that they

do not show violence, but there is violence in the frame of what is shown. That latter violence is the mechanism through which certain

lives and certain deaths either remain unrepresentable or become represented in ways that effects their capture ... by the war effort. The first is an effacement through occlusion; the second is an effacement through representation itself.[23]

Such a framing of the world according to US foreign policy interests has a damaging effect, Butler argues, on the ability for 'us' in the West to recognise, in a meaningful, empathic way, the equal value of all human life around the world. Following Levinas, she claims that the way to redress this imbalance is by re-emphasising a sense of the 'precariousness' of human life: that is, 'to be awake to a sense of what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself'.[24] To redress a 'derealization of loss', in other words, it is necessary to acknowledge the difference of others at the same time as one upholds a sense of shared humanity (and, in particular, of human vulnerability).

However, while the novels under analysis in this book frequently challenge the 'frames of war' that Butler describes, they also attempt to refigure a broader process of framing, within which dominant media representations of violence only play a part. Expanding the scope of their engagement beyond the 'visual aesthetics' of war, they also work towards a reconfiguration of what, drawing on Heidegger, one might describe as a contemporary, globalised 'world picture'. According to Heidegger, '"world picture" ... [is, obviously], a picture of the world. But what is a world? What does "picture" mean here?'[25] '"World"', he suggests, 'serves, here, as a name for beings in their entirety.'[26] Meanwhile,

[t]o be 'in the picture' resonates with: being well informed, being equipped and prepared. Where the world becomes picture, beings as a whole are set in place as that for which man is prepared; ... Understood, in an essential way, 'world picture' does not mean 'picture of the world' but, rather, the world grasped as picture.[27]

In the sense described here, 'being well informed, ... equipped and prepared' does not equate to being educated about important goings-on in the world, but denotes an ingrained sense of what it is like simply to *exist* in the contemporary world. It can be equally indicative of ignorance or solipsism as it can of a more expansive curiosity about events unfolding in distant parts of the globe. One is, as such, always necessarily contained 'in' the picture's frame, but to 'grasp' the world 'as picture' is to simultaneously have a *perspective* on the picture that is completely unique. Those contained by the 'world picture' are, at the same time,

its spectators. 'World picture' is a way of understanding one's perception on the world as both framed by and, in turn, *reframing* reality: a mutual, if frequently uneven process that is broader in scope than that which Butler outlines.

In making this comparison to Heidegger, I do not mean to undermine Butler's understanding of the framing process. Although there are aspects of her argument that I do consider questionable (and which I will go on to look at in Chapters 1 and 2), my point here is to show how the more broad-scoped reframing of reality in my selected novels – which, incidentally, repeatedly underscore the salience of much of what she argues – places her post-9/11 frames into a useful context. Specifically, it is through a 'world picture'-like broadness of scope that, in my view, the texts productively *enhance* Butler's analysis by showing how no single perspective on the frame can ever be the same as any other. No matter how powerful the frame, it is always necessarily perceived from a unique and deeply subjective position in space and time. Butler at one point reminds her reader about the philosophical truism that '[w]e cannot easily recognize life outside the frames in which it is given, and those frames not only structure how we come to know and identify life but constitute sustaining conditions for those very lives'.[28] However, what I hope to show is that the novels encourage an understanding of the frame as not always 'given', but instead also at least partially constructed by the texts, as well as by the readers themselves. It is through an awareness of this construction that, I argue, the novels might be seen as representing the beginnings of what Derrida has described as a necessary set of 'new modalities'.[29] By, in Derrida's words, 'analyzing and discussing the very foundations of our responsibility, its discourses, its heritage, and its axioms', the novels both challenge and potentially help to reconfigure the frame.[30]

Expanding the 9/11 genre

The novels that I have chosen to focus on are varied. Some engage directly with 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror, while others mention them very little, if at all. Some are by long-established authors, while others are from newer or more cultish figures. Although all of the novels are Anglophone, they are not limited to any particular place: the authors are from all over the world, and in many cases consciously resist easy association with a single nation or area. In addition to this occasional transcending of national borders, however, there are two characteristics that connect all of the novels. The first is that they each either