

The worlding of the American novel

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It was not a street anymore but a world.

The first sentence of Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) describes lower Manhattan in the chaotic minutes after the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. But it could also be read as a description of *Falling Man* itself, and perhaps also of the contemporary American novel in general. So read, the sentence would suggest that the American novel has recently become more worldly, whether because of 9/11 or in response to larger causes that 9/11 stands in for. This proposition is gently self-congratulatory, hence open to doubt. But there are also reasons for taking it seriously.

The street is what most novels take for their subject most of the time. It is by watching society at street level, so to speak, that the novel reader's sense of identity and relationship has mainly been formed. Most novels do not train our eyes to look very high or very low, or for that matter very far away; they do not encourage us to look at superstructures, or infrastructures, or the structuring force of the world capitalist system.¹ There are notable exceptions – some of them discussed in Cecelia Tichi's chapter in this volume^a – but as a rule, worldliness is not natural to the novel.² This does not immediately change after 9/11. Like the protagonist in a suddenly darkened street that has been struck from above and from far away, the post-9/11 novel is first of all disoriented. If we can say that, like the street, the novel takes on the attributes of a world, the first meaning of this statement would have to be (this is how I understand Heidegger's sense of worlding) that the event has created its own unique local surround, a restricted time/space that replaces and cancels out any abstract planetary coordinates. In this sense the worlding of the novel would leave it less worldly rather than more.

a Cecelia Tichi, "Novels of civic protest," chapter 23.

If we want to argue nevertheless that the novel has indeed become more worldly, we need some clarity about those particular attributes of the world that we expect it to reproduce. Must it for example enter into the subjectivity of the hijackers and the logic of their attack, as *Falling Man* so boldly does? We are all connected, as the saying goes, but in different ways and at different scales: political, economic, ecological, and so on. What sort of interconnectedness are we asking the novel to apply its street smarts to? There are also questions of form. Street-level storytelling is associated with certain formal conventions of character, plot, point of view.³ Which of these would have to be stretched or even replaced in order for the novel to embody a greater worldliness? And would such stretching and replacing necessarily be greeted as marks of literary success? Again, what exactly do we want? For some readers, true worldliness might require an honest confession of the novel's inability to tell meaningful stories of identity and relationship at the global scale; it might mean reflecting back to us the world's true meaninglessness. Others would ask for measurable achievement in reading the distant world with sympathy and accuracy, or at least a good-faith effort to make it as familiar as the streets where we work or live.

There is no doubt that, as the regions of the world that are obscurely tugging on each others' everyday life have increased, the demand has grown for better maps, more complex and reliable global positioning systems. But we cannot take for granted that the novel has managed to satisfy this demand. Does it indeed make the world more navigable? The plethora of questions above can be summed up in one large question. Has there in fact been a worlding of the novel?

A number of 9/11 novels suggest that the answer to this question may be no. In the face of large-scale impersonal violence, many of them retreat into domesticity – behind national borders, behind the door of the family home. In Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006), for example, 9/11 interrupts like a moralizing *deus ex machina*, determined that the events should end in a return to order: an extramarital affair is broken up, an ambitious usurper has his projects foiled, a woman is reunited with her mother. Only one strand of the plot goes the other way: an uncomfortable young man, presumed killed in the towers, is enabled to disappear from his family without leaving a trace. In William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003), 9/11 provides the needed ethico-emotional excuse for the disappearance of a family member who was missing anyway. Because of the falling towers, both the absent father and the putatively villainous father-surrogate can finally be forgiven. In Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008), husband and wife split up over their

The worlding of the American novel

reactions to 9/11, and to the American government's reactions to it. She says: "Our personal feelings don't come into the picture. There are forces out there." He says he is "a political-ethical idiot," and is clearly pleased to say so; he believes that only personal relations matter. The couple is reunited when his view more or less wins out.

DeLillo too takes 9/11 as an occasion to send his protagonist home to his estranged wife and child. When the word "world" comes up in *Falling Man*, it's often to indicate that ambitions are being scaled-back, life-complicating desires are being abandoned. "Keith used to want more of the world than there was time and means to acquire. He didn't want this anymore, whatever it was he'd wanted." "This was the world now," DeLillo writes. In "a time and space of falling ash and near night," the point seems to be that the novel's field of vision has contracted, not expanded. When the street becomes a world, perhaps we can see less rather than more of the world outside our borders. Seeing less may even be the goal we strive for. By this logic, worldliness is not an unambiguous ethical good. Perhaps the novel would be better off doing what the protagonist and his wife do late in *Falling Man*: "falling out of the world."⁴

Readers of American fiction should not be surprised by this anti-worldly moral. Rituals of retreat to a private or familial zone, whether fully comfortable or (more likely) not, make up an unbroken tradition in the novel before and since 9/11.⁵ And often these celebrations of the private are tied to public events that, like 9/11, have some claim to the status of national trauma: the Vietnam War, the Soviet atom bomb test at the beginning of DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), and the bursting of the dot-com bubble in the late 1990s, to which the title of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) refers.⁶ The sentiment that Franzen puts into the mind of his patriarch, another falling man, as he goes over the side of a cruise ship – "There was no solid thing to reach for but your children" – does something less than justice to the argument of Franzen's novel, as we will see, but it will certainly stand for many other withdrawals from worldliness.

One way to rationalize such withdrawals is to decide that the world outside the borders of the USA is incomprehensible, if entertainingly so. *Absurdistan*, the title of a novel by Gary Shteyngart (2006), is not a bad term for the generic place where, from the perspective of the American novel, the foreign is the absurd, or an inevitable object of satire – which is not to say that for Shteyngart the USA lacks its own targets of satire. Another possible term, from DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), would be "The Museum of the Misshapens." It is there that US visitors can inspect the effects of radioactive

testing and waste on two generations of Russian children. To a large extent, the novelistic treatment of historical suffering outside America's borders has resembled visits to such a museum – mercifully short visits. Between comic entertainment at the expense of foreign absurdities and the representation of foreign history as extreme suffering, the latter may sound as if it offers a more earnest educational payoff. But for the most part it too is subject to generic rules that severely limit the instruction it can deliver about the world and America's place in it.

One such rule is that history abroad will be never be less than atrocity, and atrocity abroad can then serve as the motivating event behind a “coming to America” story. In Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), as in many other narratives of heroic American acculturation, the protagonist's country of origin – here, India – is vividly presented as a place of inscrutable and incurable ethnic violence.⁷ Her fiancé is assassinated in a bombing, thus underlining the ineligibility of her homeland as a place to live and reproduce. The more painful the history, the more the protagonist is justified in leaving her home behind and coming to America. America, despite all the nasty obstacles it puts in the way of the would-be immigrant, cannot equal the nastiness of such a history.⁸ Thus it can only figure as redemptive, a pattern that goes back at least as far as Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917). In Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), the abominations of the Trujillo dictatorship in effect take over large sections of a novel that initially seems to be about present-day Dominican Americans. The premise is that only this buried history, which explains the family's presence in America, can make sense of the twisted and passionate lives of the younger generation. But it is those American lives, not an ongoing life in the Dominican Republic, that must be made sense of. In Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* (2002), the so-called *Megali Katastrophe* of 1922, when Turkish troops slaughtered large numbers of Greek and Armenian Christians in Smyrna, is represented at some length (and in flagrant imitation of the Amritsar Massacre in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* [1981]).⁹ But Eugenides (unlike Rushdie) allows the initial atrocity to dissipate gently into another coming-to-America narrative of perpetual self-fashioning. Unlike the trauma itself, the *scene* of the trauma disappears forever.

A similar structure shapes the treatment of the Holocaust in Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000). The family left behind in Hitler's Europe motivates attempts at transnational rescue, but also attempts at upward mobility.¹⁰ One might say that upward mobility in the USA is legitimated as a form of rescue directed at victims abroad.¹¹ The

The worlding of the American novel

protagonists' success depends on inventing a new comic book superhero. But the same underlying schema, however inflected with irony, remains visible in Dave Eggers's *What is the What* (2006), the testimony of a boy who survives the ethnic cleansing in Sudan's Darfur region. Step one: atrocity in a foreign country. Step two: escape to the USA.

For all its limitations, the "coming to America" narrative must be counted as a valuable mode of novelistic worldliness. Even if it necessarily paints the world outside America's borders as a place of atrocity, subordinates that world to a more or less comforting storyline, and flatters the American destination, it also offers readers some chance – in the case of Diaz and Eggers, a considerable chance – to get inside foreign minds in the midst of foreign histories.

A different brand of worldliness results from the symmetrically opposite genre that sends characters not toward America but away from it, or what might be called the expatriate novel. In *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), Paul Bowles revises the tradition of Hawthorne, James, and Fitzgerald, which made Europe a dangerous playground for the rich and aimless, by moving beyond Europe and playing up both the danger and the aimlessness. According to Bowles's 1998 introduction, the novel was born from a dream he had in Fez.¹² The novel begins with an account of that dream: "He awoke, opened his eyes. The room meant very little to him; he was too deeply immersed in the non-being from which he had just come. If he had not the energy to ascertain his position in time and space, he also lacked the desire. He was somewhere; he had come back through vast regions of nowhere." "Non-being" and "vast regions of nowhere" are clearly what he is seeking outside the United States. Africa offers an opportunity to be unlocated; it is not in itself a location.

Like most novels, expatriate novels are often love stories of a sort, and what they do with this novelistic convention may be their best claim to a more strenuous worldliness. Non-locations like North Africa offer wealthy white people the opportunity for cheap, hassle-free sex, especially sex of kinds that are more likely to be exposed and punished at home. For this reason and others, these settings put interesting pressure on conventional relationships. The disintegration of the protagonists' marriage in Bowles (as in Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*) can be read as an effect of transnational space. But this space also permits new forms of bonding that in one way or other integrate the largeness of the world into the couple. *The Sheltering Sky*'s Kit, having run off into the desert and joined a caravan after Port's death, thinks at the moment of succumbing to a stranger's sexual advances: "She was alone in a vast and unrecognizable world, but alone only for a moment; then she understood

that this friendly carnal presence was there with her.” It’s the vastness of the world that pushes them together, and the carnal-friendly bond thus produced may be appropriate to that vastness.

The first sentence of Norman Rush’s novel *Mating* (1991) is “In Africa, you want more, I think.” The “you” is specified as whites. What the white narrator wants is love. She and her white beloved both want equality, with the emphasis on gender equality; the beloved (an expatriate leftist intellectual) has set up a secret women-run utopian community in the Botswanan desert. But the privileges announced by the initial “you” are at odds with this egalitarian ideal, and the novel plays with the idea that love itself may also be at odds with it. As she begins to fall in love with the celebrity radical, who is a sort of ethical left-wing version of Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz, the narrator comments: “[a]pparently my fate is to resonate against my will to representatives of certain elitisms I intellectually reject.” She could be describing the fate of novel readers, especially in the presence of those oversize, seductive personalities capable of opening up for us a much wider world. By demanding unusual talents, worldliness seems to encourage the inequality of Pygmalion stories like Susan Sontag’s *The Volcano Lover* (1992).

In *Mating*, where the reader’s conventional investment in the love affair is cleverly channeled into a much less conventional investment in the success of the utopian community, the figure of the privileged expatriate shades imperceptibly into the figure of the do-gooder. The obvious difference between them – the latter seeks meaning, the former meaninglessness – might seem overshadowed by the privileges they clearly share. Still, the dominant tone is not always ironic, nor should it be. Despite the pervasive cynicism toward self-righteousness, innocence abroad, and the likelihood that the do-gooder will do unintended harm, this tradition has continued to suggest that justice may be more accessible or clearer in its outlines when viewed from abroad. Notable examples that refuse the temptations of easy irony and apolitical nihilism are Robert Stone’s *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981), Robert Rosenberg’s *This Is Not Civilization* (2004), and Benjamin Kunkel’s *Indecision* (2005). The works of William Vollmann are interesting limit-cases where missionary zeal is combined with obtuseness about the world and proliferating ironies that may cancel themselves out, leaving the zealous obtuseness undefended.¹³ Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) also falls into this category.

The geography of Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* seems very American: it sets the East Coast lives of the grown children against the Middle Western values of their elderly parents. Yet the single largest cause of the family’s

The worlding of the American novel

miseries can only be mapped when the novel takes a comic detour through the poor nation of Lithuania. “Your country which saved us also ruined us,” the Lithuanian Gitanas tells the expatriate Chip. Lithuania’s port has been sold off to Orfic Midland, the same people who have bought and liquidated the railroad to which Chip’s father devoted his life. The man who thinks as he falls that the only solid thing is his children has lost his foothold in the world as a result of the same theory – that “a railroad’s first responsibility was to its stockholders” and not to provide service – and the same financial processes that turned Lithuania into “a zone of semi-anarchy, criminal warlords, and subsistence farming.” This has much to do, though of course not everything, with how his children have turned out and why it’s so hard to get them home for Christmas. To a remarkable extent, the key to the absurd and heart-wrenching unhappiness of this relatively prosperous Middle Western family is to be found in another distant absurdistan.¹⁴

Appearances to the contrary, then, Franzen’s middlebrow, family-chronicle form allows him to extend the avant-garde ambitions of Thomas Pynchon. Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) begins with the inadequacy of the human sensorium to deal with global history. Like the V-2 missile, this history hits you before you can hear it coming.¹⁵ If you want to understand why V-2s are falling on London, you can’t just look at London. The rockets fall from high above; the launching sites are far away. In pursuit of their causes, you will have to spend some time as an expatriate. The secret you will find in the Zone will turn out to be bigger even than Nazi Germany; it will turn out to lie in a sort of conspiracy theory whose real agents are multinational corporations that work both sides of the World War II divide. This post-national answer need not be *the* answer. Blaming the United States is not, as it might seem, the only valuable content of worldliness. Neither Pynchon nor Franzen in fact identifies the USA as the definitive origin or center of global capitalism, and in this I think they rightly avoid a (common) sort of negative exceptionalism. Yet when the novel manages not just to describe other places, but to describe the causal connections between those other places and ours, the prospect of blame will necessarily arise.

One brilliant response to the blame problem can be found in the work of Jamaica Kincaid. Kincaid’s *Lucy* (1990) offers a series of strong causal linkages between American prosperity and Caribbean poverty. Yet at the same time the text allows readers to experience these linkages as evidence that Lucy’s character is hate-filled, unforgiving, a pathologically compulsive blamer. The voice is a repository of historical injury, yet it is always qualified by a hint of possible unreliability. For example:

BRUCE ROBBINS

Mariah decided to write and illustrate a book on these vanishing things [open land] and give any money made to an organization devoted to saving them. Like her, all the members of this organization were well off but they made no connection between their comforts and the decline of the world that lay before them. I could have told them a thing or two about it . . . I couldn't bring myself to point out to her that if all the things she wanted to save in the world were saved, she might find herself in reduced circumstances; I couldn't bring myself to ask her to examine Lewis's daily conversations with his stockbroker, to see if it bore any relation to the things she saw passing away forever before her eyes.

The finger points at a worldly causality that is not quite laid out even for us, but is still more forcefully blocked in its expression to characters like Mariah. Thus the emotional bond with Mariah takes on the depth and ambivalence of international causality itself, and so does the emotional bond with us. The American reader, who is told much that Lucy does not tell Mariah, can feel therefore like a privileged witness to the international causes of local emotion, but must also feel that, like Mariah, she or he may be a target of blame. The reader can also blame the narrator or the author in turn. We have little choice as readers but to pass through the question of blame, the question of responsibility for global injustice. It's the very substance of the narrative voice, which controls the entrance to the text.

Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* (2007) suggests another way in which the structure of the world of nations can work its way into the novel's structure – in this case, its narrative perspective. Set in the Vietnam War, the novel plunges us into a confusion of plots and counter-plots, official and clandestine operations, and it does not even try to reduce this disorienting, topsy-turvy whirl to moral or even causal clarity. As if to underline the impossibility of locating oneself properly, scenes of murder are typically presented through the eyes of the victim. "He did not feel himself collapsing toward the water, and by the time he landed in it he was dead." This perspectival play is a kind of objective correlative for global incoherence. Here, it seems, an American agent is defending a Viet Cong agent by shooting a German assassin who was sent by his fellow Americans. Why? It is unclear, except that perhaps some sub-national, familial loyalty is involved. It's certainly not sympathy for the Viet Cong. No serious attempt is made to see the war from the Vietnamese side. It's as if such an effort would risk compromising the key premise of irreducible moral confusion. "With three beers in her head the ruckus seemed more uniformly unintelligible and pointless." The unintelligibility of the

The worlding of the American novel

world might seem an argument for a retreat into privacy. Johnson seems to prefer the Graham Greene-like idea that only religion, which crosses national borders – Buddhism has been quietly built up as a counter-current to war on the Vietnamese side, paralleling Christianity on the American side – offers an alternative to murderous chaos.

It would be irresponsible to inquire into the worldliness of American fiction without making at least some passing reference to commercially successful genre fiction. A hypothesis worth exploring is that it is in genres like science fiction and the political thriller that the planet as a totality has become widely perceptible to readers and interestingly open to unfamiliar emotional identifications. But a first glimpse is not always decisive. Meaninglessness, which is the point for Johnson and Bowles, is sometimes also the main thing readers of American spy novels learn about the world outside their borders. Some, like the Jack Ryan novels of Tom Clancy, posit the essential goodness of the USA, though this one firm point contrasts with a slippery array of villains who are subject to change without notice, from Islamic terrorists to Colombia drug lords to neo-Nazis. In the Jason Bourne novels of Robert Ludlum, on the other hand, it would seem to be the American government that wants its agent dead. And this self-targeting pre-dates the end of the Cold War; *The Bourne Identity* was published in 1980. As in *Tree of Smoke*, the US government, all too easily represented by powerful rogue elements within it, is just another player in that shadowy arena of governments, movements, global corporations, and semi-autonomous agencies where no one occupies the high moral ground. This is a powerful alternative to belligerent patriotism, even if the moral is often, once again, the virtues of withdrawal from public action, especially in transnational territory.

In much science fiction, the modern nation-state is declared to be obsolete. Sometimes its much-anticipated disappearance makes way for a reassertion of older and equally questionable social forms, like the ethnic tribe. An example is Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* (1995), where the Great Phyles, or tribes, that divide most of the world are Chinese and Japanese (each of them ethnically exclusive) and Anglo (which alone is open to other ethnicities). Civilizational self-flattery, which is likely to increase with the rise of East Asia, passes more easily in the guise of science fiction. The science fiction of William Gibson also turns to medieval romance for much of its plotting, which is set in a neo-feudal vision of geopolitics. But there are clear continuities with Gibson's non-sci fi novel *Pattern Recognition* (2003), which makes quite an extraordinary effort to suture personal experience and the impersonal realities of global capital.¹⁶

BRUCE ROBBINS

Pattern Recognition is another 9/11 novel, as I've said, but its worldliness has less to do with terrorism than with the global circulation of commodities. Its equivalent of the technologically augmented capacities that science fiction so often bestows on its characters is the protagonist's uncanny ability to predict the success or failure of corporate logos, an ability that is both a kind of critique of the global marketplace – logos pursue her from continent to continent, literally making her sick – and itself a marketable commodity. The plot will treat this ability as a disease, curing her of it after a climactic recognition and reconciliation scene with a figure who personally embodies the combined menace of international terror and of corporate capital. But the novel's central mystery features a kind of anti-logo circulating for free on the internet, and this mystery is solved when the placeless identities of the internet resolve into faces, recognized, in the streets of a city. Here the streets are worlds, and the world is in the street. The novel gives readers their accustomed pleasure and instruction, and it does so on a genuinely global scale.

Notes

1. A notable exception that does train us to see at a distance is Russell Banks's *Continental Drift* (1985). Banks couples a desperate coming-to-America story (a Haitian woman moving north into the USA) with the parallel narrative of a New England white man moving south, escaping from a quiet desperation of his own.
2. This is not to say that worldliness is a recent phenomenon. On the transnational dimension of the earliest American fiction, see Paul Giles, "Transatlantic currents and the invention of the American novel," chapter 1.
3. This would be a context in which to discuss experimental or avant-garde writing that tries to do without some or all of the conventions of reader identification, plot resolution, and so on. As a gesture toward this absent discussion, let me simply mention Richard Powers's interesting experiments in getting readers to identify with a specifically inhuman protagonist. These are most relevant to the global scale in *Gain* (1998), where the inhuman protagonist is a multinational corporation, a toxicity-producing artificial being whose life trajectory extends over many generations.
4. Here, as elsewhere in DeLillo, seeing "world domination" behind local people and objects is a special ability shared by terrorists and novelists. Like the novelist, the hijacker is ready to see the "entire life" he wants to destroy as both a consistent, coherent, judge-able "world" and as a sum of odd, random, and infinite particulars.
5. For a spirited defense of withdrawal in explicitly political terms, see John A. McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

The worlding of the American novel

6. On the rich connections between war, cosmopolitanism, and absurdity in American fiction, see John Carlos Rowe, "US novels and US wars," chapter 49.
7. Interesting comparisons, from the perspective of how extensively and fairly the society of origin is presented, include Carlos Bulosan's *America Is In the Heart* (1946) and Gish Jen's *The Love Wife* (2004). On Bulosan's treatment of history in the Philippines, see Rowe, chapter 49, and Susan Koshy, "The rise of the Asian American novel," chapter 63.
8. On the frustration of the "land of opportunity" ideal in narratives of immigration, see Tim Prchal, "New Americans and the immigrant novel," chapter 25.
9. Compare with the treatment in Hemingway's "On the Quai at Smyrna" from *In Our Time* (1925).
10. On the rescue motif in transnational fiction, see Russ Castronovo, "Imperialism, Orientalism, and empire," chapter 32.
11. For a qualification of this reading of the upward mobility story, see Bruce Robbins, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
12. For contrast see Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998).
13. On Vollmann see Michele Hardesty, "Looking for the Good Fight: William T. Vollmann's *An Afghanistan Picture Show*," *boundary 2* (Summer 2009).
14. This doesn't mean the satire stops being funny: "Gitanas had created a satiric Web page offering DEMOCRACY FOR PROFIT: BUY A PIECE OF EUROPEAN HISTORY . . . Visitors to the site were invited to send cash to the erstwhile VIPPPAKJRIINPB17 – 'one of Lithuania's most venerable political parties' . . . and now a 'Western-leaning pro-business party' reorganized as the 'Free Market Party Company.' Gitanas's Web site promised that, as soon as the Free Market Party Company had bought enough votes to win a national election, its foreign investors would . . . become 'equity shareholders' in Lithuania Incorporated (a 'for-profit nation state')." Eventually the Web site will offer no-questions-asked access to wiretaps and the right to be called "Your Lordship" on Lithuanian soil (non-use punishable by flogging), among other perks.
15. On Pynchon as the highpoint of a certain worldly tradition, see John Carlos Rowe, "US novels and US wars," chapter 49.
16. If any novel has managed to do the street as a world, it is perhaps DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, whose protagonist is a financier and whose action is entirely taken up with a single cross-town ride, a ride that in very heavy traffic takes one full day.