

# *Terrorist*

by John Updike, Hamish Hamilton, 2006, 320 pp.

## Jonathan Derbyshire

When he reviewed Salman Rushdie's novel *Shalimar the Clown* for the *New Yorker* last year, John Updike praised Rushdie for 'animat[ing] Islam's tenacious rage with faces and life stories.' [1] In Rushdie's book, the eponymous protagonist, a Kashmiri circus performer, is cuckolded when his wife runs off with the former American ambassador to India. Shalimar swears revenge and subsequently joins a Jihadi training camp where he encounters the 'iron mullah,' an Islamist zealot made entirely out of metal, and hones his skills as a murderer until such time, he says, as 'I have become death.'

Updike thought the iron mullah an 'excellent caricature' of 'warrior zealotry,' a phenomenon that had been on his mind for a while. Some seventeen years earlier, for instance, he'd published an essay in the *New York Review of Books* in which he discussed, among other things, a famous passage from the final volume of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. [2] Marcel is describing the heavy task of winnowing a 'spiritual meaning' from the deliverances of involuntary memory and concludes that art is the 'most austere school of life, the true last judgement.' Updike remarks that there is something 'excessive,' to late twentieth century ears, about Marcel's nearly religious fervour here. It seems puzzling, almost quaint – especially now that 'austerity and fanaticism are entirely given over to the Muslims, who alarm us each night on the news.'

Alarm at the depredations of fanaticism is one of the themes of *Roger's Version*, a novel Updike wrote a couple of years before that essay. The central relationship in the book is that between Roger Lambert, a professor of divinity who shares his creator's distaste for biblical literalism (Updike, famously, is an enthusiast for the theology of Karl Barth), and Dale Kohler, a research assistant in computer science convinced that he can prove the existence of God by algorithms. Roger loathes Dale's cold-eyed passion and lust for certainty, and when the younger man declares that the 'Devil is doubt,' Roger retorts:

The Devil is the absence of doubt. He's what pushes people into suicide bombing ... Doubt may give your dinner a funny taste, but it's faith that goes out and kills. [3]

## DERBYSHIRE | John Updike's Terrorist

There is a striking anticipation in this passage of the preoccupations of Updike's latest novel *Terrorist*, which begins with the protagonist, Ahmad Mulloy, finding himself assailed by the 'devil' of doubt in the corridors of the New Jersey high school from which he is soon to graduate: '*Devils, Ahmad thinks. These devils seek to take away my God*' (p. 3). Ahmad is an Arab-American adolescent, the son of an absent Egyptian father and an absent-minded Irish-American mother. He is also a convert to Islam, and the vocation chosen for him by Shaikh Rashid, the imam at the mosque in the (fictitious) town of New Prospect, is disclosed in the title of the novel.

Updike has said in interviews that his intention was to treat Ahmad 'sympathetically' and to say something from the 'standpoint of a terrorist.' Contrary to what some critics have suggested, this is not a matter of ideological sympathy or of making Ahmad the nicest person in the book. Rather, what Updike was gesturing towards is a distinctively *novelistic* kind of sympathy capable of disclosing to us areas of experience inaccessible to journalists or pamphleteers.

One of Updike's models in this endeavour was surely Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, first published almost exactly a century ago. [4] Conrad wrote that the impulse for the novel, the centrepiece of which is a plot to blow up the Greenwich Observatory, was an actual bomb attack on the same site in 1894. For all the 'blood-stained inanity' of that episode, Conrad saw that 'perverse unreason has its own logical processes' and tried to describe these at work in the 'Professor,' the eminence of an anarchist groupuscule into which Mr Verloc, the titular agent, insinuates himself.

Although the Professor first appears wearing a detonator and uttering a now familiarly morbid refrain ('I have the means to make myself deadly ... I depend on death, which knows no restraint and cannot be attacked'), Conrad is careful to give him a 'note of perfect sincerity' and to make sure he is not completely 'despicable.' He does this by complicating the Professor's animus, making him an autodidact and zealot of self-improvement whose ideological fanaticism is intimately connected to his longing for acceptance and prestige. The Professor wills the destruction of the society whose recognition he craves.

In contrast, Updike's youthful jihadist, though born and raised in New Jersey, appears to have no attachment to the American present beyond his execration of it (and that extends even to his 'trashy and immoral' mother Theresa). Ahmad expounds his creed in sentences of 'pained stateliness' (p. 34) and affects a uniform

## Democratiya 7 | Winter 2006

of crisp white shirts and black 'stovepipe' jeans that are the emblem of an alienation so complete as to seem almost weightless. Early in the novel, he explains to the school guidance counsellor, Jack Levy, why he'd chosen a vocational course rather than consider going to college:

[T]he college track exposed me to corrupting influences – bad philosophy and bad literature. Western culture is Godless. ... and because it has no God, it is obsessed with sex and luxury goods. ... I of course do not hate all Americans. But the American way is the way of infidels. It is headed for a terrible doom. (pp. 38-9)

The effect of the stiff formality of Ahmad's speech is not just to make him sound like a recent immigrant rather than the American teenager he is. It also means that his politics and theology appear in the novel as so many undigested lumps of ideology. Moreover, it seals Ahmad inside those Islamist convictions in such a way as to stymie any genuine exploration of his motives for eventually accepting Shaikh Rashid's invitation to hasten America's 'doom' by driving a truck laden with explosives into the Lincoln Tunnel.

When the novel begins, Ahmad's conversion to Islam has already occurred, at the implausibly early age of 11, when the mildly delinquent Theresa started dropping him off for Koran lessons at the mosque on New Prospect's flyblown main drag. It is evidently central to Updike's design that we be privy not to Ahmad's formation as a Muslim but to his doubts. Therefore when Shaikh Rashid finally presents his pupil, who by now is making deliveries for a furniture company, with a proposal the reader has been expecting since the beginning, Ahmad accepts with alacrity, as if to ward off the devil of doubt: 'The boy knows he is being manipulated, yet accedes to the manipulation, since it draws from him a sacred potential' (p. 237). However, because Updike has made Ahmad so radically separate, his doubts seem merely idle or ersatz. As if to compensate, Updike rewards his protagonist with a power of noticing as microscopically precise and lyrical as his own:

Ahmad was native-born, and in his travels through New Jersey he takes less interest in its pockets of a diluted Middle East than in the American reality all around, a sprawling ferment for which he feels the mild pity owed a failed experiment. ... Each town bears in its center relics of the nineteenth century, civic buildings of lumpy brown stones or soft red brick with jutting cornices

## DERBYSHIRE | John Updike's Terrorist

and round arched entryways, ornate buildings outlasting the flimsier twentieth-century constructions. (pp. 178-9)

These are supposed to be Ahmad's thoughts, but they sound like Updike's (or Roger Lambert's or Rabbit Angstrom's or Henry Bech's). This passage, and many others like it which substitute the author's style for the character's, lacks the 'self-surrender' which Conrad thought was the key to his portrayal of the anarchists and revolutionaries in *The Secret Agent*.

Ahmad lavishly notates the 'American reality' from the truck in which he is frequently accompanied on deliveries by Charlie Chehab, the scion of the Lebanese family that owns Excellency Furnishings. Charlie is a 'man of many disparate parts,' both an adept of jihad and a keen student of the American Revolution. Shaikh Rashid says he is 'very American,' his Americanness a matter precisely of 'contending energies' and roiling contradictions and resentments absent in Ahmad.

It is Charlie, and not his employee, who embodies a truth Updike praised Rushdie for seeing – that 'everywhere was now part of everywhere else [and] our stories no longer our own, individual, discrete.' Ahmad, on the other hand, like Rushdie's iron mullah, is just an echoing vessel of Islamic rage.

---

Jonathan Derbyshire is a writer, critic and part-time academic.

### References

- Conrad, Joseph 2004 [1907], *The Secret Agent*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Updike, John 1986, *Roger's Version*, London: André Deutsch.
- Updike, John 1988, 'The Writer Lectures,' *New York Review of Books*, 35, 10 (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/4400> accessed 10 November 2006).
- Updike, John 2005, 'Paradises Lost,' *The New Yorker*, 9 September 2005 ([http://www.newyorker.com/critics/books/articles/050905crbo\\_books](http://www.newyorker.com/critics/books/articles/050905crbo_books) accessed 17 November 2006).

### Notes

- [1] Updike 2005.
- [2] Updike 1988.
- [3] Updike 1986, p. 77.
- [4] Conrad 2004.