NOVELIST VS. TERRORIST IN DON DELILLO'S MAO II

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Terror makes the new future possible. (Mao II)

Abstract*: It has become common knowledge that terrorism is chiefly constructed on sound and photographic image, in a word on media representation; this paper advances the idea that terrorism can also impact on a culture through literature. The purpose of the present endeavour is to make some comments on the manner in which the two human agents responsible for the proliferation of artistic images, respectively violent practices (i.e. the writer and the terrorist) interact at the level of fiction. The concrete point of reference is the American writer Don DeLillo'S* Mao II *- a novel created by an artist who finds his vocation challenged by the emergence of a new type of narrative, a narrative of terror, elaborated by the terrorist.*
Keywords: *(postmodern) terrorism, representation, power.*

This paper originates in the need to become acquainted with the modality in which a particular domain of culture, i.e. literature (to be more restrictive, the *novel* as a particular form of literary creation) can be utilized in the process of deciphering the terrorist message. Moreover, it is my declared intention to extend this analysis to the relation established between the two human agents responsible for the proliferation of prose artistry respectively violent practices, i.e. the novelist and the terrorist. Because the issue of novelist/terrorist relation, conceived in terms of both rivalry and affinity, runs through the tenth novel published by the American writer Don DeLillo, I shall examine it with special attention paid to an artist's representation of the postmodern condition experienced, more or less in a different way, by both novelist and terrorist; as already suggested, the general background is to be ensured by the post-industrial, consumerist and simulacra-governed era, where loss of identity and meaning are primary features.

In broad lines, *Mao II* is a postmodern novel that imagines the emergence of a writer in a political world dominated by violence and chiefly composed of individuals who remain indifferent to whatever message the artist, a representative of an 'endangered' species, might bring along. From this point of view, the novel "provides a larger context in the by-now familiar conflict between actual late-twentieth-century life and romantic notions about the writer" (Scanlan 2001: 26). As a direct consequence of this conflict, the main idea in *Mao II* is the figurative, followed by the literal death of the writer in the American (and not only) post-industrial society (Tabbi: 173). The writer's place, DeLillo states, is taken by a new type of authoritative consciousness: that of the terrorist, who weaves plots that fascinate and terrify at the same time.

The title of the novel is provided by a series of Andy Warhol silkscreened portraits of the Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong, portraits that were popular in China during and after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Warhol intended the representations to deprive Mao of the status of a feared Communist leader, turning him into a pop star, a product of mass culture. On a deeper level, DeLillo's choice of this particular cultural personality as the title of his novel may trigger connections with his

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intention of making him, and the cultural event that he stands for, symbolize totalitarian discourse, identity destruction and mass thinking.

A quick incursion into the narrative layer of the novel will finally prove most useful to my research. On the whole, *Mao II* in centred on Bill Gray (by his real name, Willard Skansey, Jr.), a writer "*born under the old tutelage*" who has grown famous and materially rich after two early novels. In the beginning of the story, we find Gray isolated in the anonymity of his secured settlement, struggling to complete the third novel by writing and re-writing every single word of the book. Even though his identity is shaped by the power to write ("*I've always seen myself in sentences. I begin to recognize myself, word by word, as I work through a sentence. The language of my books has shaped me as a man. There's a moral force in a sentence when it comes out right."* (*Mao II*, 48)), he experiences a loss of meaning that brings along a creative crisis. His present activity is overshadowed by his constant meditating on the place of the writer in the contemporary "*image world*" (*Mao II*, 1991:36) that is corrupt and forces the artist to "*hide his face*" (*Mao II*, 1991:36). The traditional conception, also shared by Bill Gray, is that a writer can be deeply influential and can shape human consciousness by the power of his writing (Shelley's "unacknowledged legislators of mankind"), that could "*alter the inner life of a culture*" (*Mao II*, 1991:41). The old romantic view of novelists and novels is seriously challenged by the overall context of contemporary, post-industrial society filled with simulacra and perpetual consumption. His refusal to deal with this kind of society results in his decision to leave it and isolate himself in a secret place, far from the tumultuous rhythm of the outward community.

Inside his world, the writer from *Mao II* is not as free or as content as he claims or as he wanted to be. Various characters act in his life at the moment when he begins to feel tired of his seclusion. Gray is permanently monitored by a fan that had volunteered himself as an assistant and had moved with the old writer some eight years before the present action. Scott Martineau assumes the role of "a guardian of Bill's image" (Scanlan 2001: 27) as a writer, and in this quality he does not hesitate to ask Bill to withhold the publication of the third novel: "*it would be the end of Bill as a myth, as a force*" (*Mao II*, 1991:52). The second inhabitant of the house is Karen Janney, a young woman that had previously adhered to the cult of Reverend Sun Myung Moon as a means of being part of something larger than herself. She is the character who "is infected with the postmodern world, as seen in Jean Baudrillard's apocalyptic vision" (Scanlan, 2001: 28), the one highly addicted to the televised nature of global culture.

Part of the process of maintaining alive the public interest for Bill and his work, Scott invites Brita Nilsson, a photographer, into the house, since "*the book disappears into the image of the author*" (*Mao II*, 1991:71). During their photographic sessions, Brita displays her awareness of the social importance of the writers, whereas Bill himself denies this importance and asserts instead his incapacity to perform any longer the traditional role of the writer; he sees himself as a "*bad actor playing the role of death*" (*Mao II*, 1991: 42). The *death* of the writer, the death of the belief in the writer's ability to effect changes in the inner structure of the individual, is caused by the emergence of a new type of narrative: *"News of disaster is the only narrative people need. The darker the news, the grander the narrative. News is the last addiction before - what? I don't know* (*Mao II*, 1991:42). Traditional narratives have lost their power to subdue and transform reality; there is no place for a novelist in a culture in which the act of inflicting terror may be seen as the only act carrying meaning. Scott himself

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acknowledges the emergence of the people's dependence on a new type of narrative: "*The novel used to feed our search for meaning. Quoting Bill. It was the great secular transcendence. The Latin mass of language, character, occasional new truth. But our desperation has led us toward something larger and darker. So we turn to the news, which provides an unremitting mood of catastrophe. This is where we find emotional experience not available elsewhere. We don't need the novel. Quoting Bill. We don't even need catastrophes, necessarily. We only need the reports and predictions and warnings*" (*Mao II*, 1991:72). The romantic notions about the writer are contrasted once again with the actual mentalities of late twentieth century society living in a world saturated with images and simulacra.

Reversing the process of escape, and now trying to free himself of his failed novel, Gray finally takes the decision to leave his den and get involved in the world of terror. In New York he meets Charlie Everson, his publishing agent, who brings the news of a young Swiss poet, Jean-Claude Julien, having been kidnapped in Beirut by a terrorist group. Bill is asked to take part in the operations that were meant to free the young artist. As part of his efforts to help his fellow artist, Bill enters into contact with George Haddad, a Lebanese political scientist known to have some affinities with the terrorist group in question. Haddad repeatedly challenges Gray to reconsider his views on terrorist identity: *"And isn't it the novelist, Bill, above all people, above all writers, who understands this rage, who knows in his soul what the terrorist thinks and feels?* (*Mao II,* 1991:130) In reply, Bill states that *"What terrorists gain, novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought. The danger they represent equals our own failure to be dangerous"* (*Mao II,* 1991:157). A novelist's work is irrelevant in an age when terrorism attacks cultures at large. The novelist's creative process begins to lose the power to "alter" the inner life of a culture, while the terrorist's action assumes this new function. The individuals no longer need the novel to involve them emotionally, but rather terrorist acts.

Ultimately, as part of the same process of saving the poet, Gray goes to Beirut, but the end of the journey brings along the news of his physical death. His passport and other identity papers are stolen to be sold to some Beirut militia; therefore there is no means of identifying the body: the artist remains anonymous. His disappearance is counterbalanced by the disappearance, endowed with political significance, of the hostage, who had been given to the fundamentalists. This is learnt by Brita Nilsson who continues Bill's mission in Beirut and manages to penetrate herself the shadowy world of international terrorism. Her incursion into the bombed city, in order to take photographs of the leader of the terrorist group, could be interpreted in symbolic terms as the occupation of the East by the West. She finds there "*a millennial image mill*" (*Mao II*, 1991:229), a devastated city, full of images and posters, whose presence seems to stand for the assimilation of the East by the corrupting power of images. In such an environment, Brita has a conversation with Abu Rashid, the leader of the terrorist group, who discloses his ideology of action: "*Terror makes the new future possible. All men one man. Men live in history as never before. He is saying we make and change history minute by minute. History is not the book or the human memory. We do history in the morning and change it after lunch*" (*Mao II,* 1991: 235). Terrorists re-write history. The future belongs to them and their power to inflict violence. Even the ceremony of a wedding in Beirut is re-written according with the new circumstances: the wedding

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party celebrates love on the background of terrifying sounds of gunshots - the most intimate, ritualistic moments of life are corrupted by terrorist violence.

On the whole, *Mao II* has much to say about terrorism and literature. Like most novels written by DeLillo, it reveals the constancy of Terror as an element that has the power of turning the most insignificant aspects of suburban world and life into acts of desperate violence. When it was published in 1992, it was felt as adding something new to the paradigm of violence: whilst remaining faithful to the general trend of thought of its author, this particular novel managed to make pertinent comments on the death of the writer and the growth of the terrorist. The latter aspect gains even more meaning "through the operations of a kind of reverse déjà vu – a narratological, historical and psychological phenomenon that has a powerful resonance in DeLillo's writing" since "it is the pressure of the 2001 that exerts itself most forcefully as we enter into the 1990s, and into Don DeLillo's novel *Mao II* (1992)" (Boxall, 2006:157). Indeed, this novel published by an American writer at the beginning of the 90's seemed to anticipate the general circumstances and the consequences of the virulently symbolic terrorist attacks that the entire world witnessed in a state of disbelief in 2001.

Yet, terrorism is not the single issue here, and the terrorist is not the sole character in the book. The whole narrative of the novel develops in the symbolic space of the struggle between the *novelist* and the *terrorist*. In the first part of the novel, Brita photographs Bill Gray in a room – the only place untouched by the forces of the outward society, the space of his creative forces, the world of his novels: "*There was a typewriter on a desk and sheets of oversized sketch paper taped to the walls and the lower half of one of the windows. These were charts, master plans evidently, the maps of his work-in-progress, and the sheets were covered with scrawled words, boxes, lines connecting words, tiny writing in the boxes. There were circled numbers, crossed-out names, a cluster of stick figure drawings, a dozen other cryptic markings" (Mao II,* 1991: 35-36*)*. Everything in this room is connected with the process of writing; writing is his identity: "*I think I've grown a second self in this room. It's the self-important fool that keeps the writer going. I exaggerate the pain of writing, the pain of solitude, the failure, the rage, the confusion, the helplessness, the fear, the humiliation*" (*Mao II,* 1991: 37). It is in this room that he becomes painfully aware of his failure, of the novelist's failure to create and preserve his aura. Bill is not the sole bearer of this feeling of loss and "*failure to be dangerous*" (*Mao II,* 1991:157): "*He thought he was suffering like the rest of them. They all thought they were bungling and desolate and tormented but none of them ever wanted to do anything else but write and each believed that the only person who might possibly be worse off was another writer somewhere and when one of them mixed too many brandies and little violet pills or placed the nozzle of a revolver just behind the ear, the others felt both sorry and acknowledged*" (*Mao II,* 1991:38). The novelist is no longer the solitary hero, but the desolate and tormented individual who experiences the need to retreat from the cruel Real of life, either through pills or, more radically, through death. With his addiction to the singular, the authentic and the unique of the process of writing, the novelist belongs to the *past* stage of human cultural reality.

Deprived of their aura, writers cease to present interest to the masses. Consequently, Brita's career of taking pictures of writers will be ended by the photographer. In the last part of the book, we find the same woman who had once encouraged Bill to write, photographing the leader of a terrorist group, Abu Rashid. Just

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like with Bill, this meeting occurs in the private space of the new protagonist: the room where Abu Rashid and his close followers make plans for a new future of mankind, a future dominated by terrorist violence: "*Terror makes the new future possible. All men one man. Men live in history as never before. He is saying we make and change history minute by minute. History is not the book or the human memory. We do history in the morning and change it after lunch*" (*Mao II*, 1991:235). This is, in broad lines, the essence of what Walter Laqueur terms as 'postmodern terrorism': a new type of terrorist violence, more dramatic and lethal, performed on a global scene. The postmodern terrorist, Abu Rashid, states his firm belief in a new kind of *future* and of *history*, modelled by individuals prone to violence and makes permanent use of such notions as the idea of crowd, of loss of singularity and uniqueness, of future.

What else does DeLillo say about novelists and terrorists? A conversation between Gray and his agent brings reveals that "*You have a twisted sense of the writer's place in society. You think the writer belongs at the far margins, doing dangerous things. In Central America, writers carry guns. They have to. And this has always been your idea of the way it ought to be. The state should want to kill all writers. Every government, every group that holds power or aspires to power should feel so threatened by writers that they hunt them down, everywhere." "I've done no dangerous things."" No. But you've lived out the vision anyway.""So my life is a kind of simulation." "Not exactly. There's nothing false about it. You've actually become a hunted man"* (*Mao II*, 1991: 97). There is something dangerous about the novelists; toward the end of his life, Bill Gray states that the novel is "*a democratic shout*". There are two ways of understanding this association: on the one hand, it suggests that any individual has the right to express his/her opinion in a democracy; on the other hand, it announces that a novel is in fact a collection of multiple voices and points of view, and not the 'property' of a single mastermind. Writers, the promoters of such *democratic shouts*, hold *power* over people's consciousnesses, exert influence over their imagination and challenge them to express their own beliefs. The dangerous thing about Bill Gray is not represented by his carrying guns with him, but rather by his carrying a pen and a sheet of paper.

The ability to effect changes in the consciousness of the masses is the reason why writers are hunted by any group that aspires to obtain power. In *Mao II*, Bill Gray is not hunted by any government. His major opponent is the terrorist, "*making raids on human consciousness*" and shocking the public imagination through images of violence and bloodshed. At a certain point of this symbolic confrontation, a poet falls victim to the terrorists. Jean-Claude Julien is kidnapped by a Maoist group and objectified into a means of expressing publicly their cause. Thinking of the hostage and the potential sensations experienced by him, Gray re-discovers his passion for writing. He depicts the young artist's experience as he imagines it, thus creating an accurate opportunity of applying his empathetic powers. On the one hand, we are given the impression that a third person narrator tells the story of the young artist: "*The ants and baby spiders transported time in its vastness and discontent and when he felt something crawling on the back of his hand he wanted to speak to it, explain his situation. He wanted to tell it who he was because this was now a matter of some confusion"*. (*Mao II*, 1991:110) As the story progresses, we become aware of the fact that Jean- Claude's experience grows in fact out of Bill's thoughts on the matter: "*Find the places where you converge with him. Read his poems again. See his face and hands in words"* (*Mao II*, 1991:112). On

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the whole, terrorist violence has deprived the hostage of his sense of identity through the corruption of the senses and of the memory. He is dehumanized and forced to live out of the reach of his imaginative powers: *"Only writing could soak up his loneliness and pain. Written words could tell him who he was. ...The only way to be in the world was to write himself there. His thoughts and words were dying. Let him write ten words and he would come into being once again." (Mao II,* 1991: 204*)* Writing is identity; deprived of writing, the poet is dissolved as a creative human being.

But is the opposition between the novelist and terrorist an absolute one? In terms of traditional thinking, it is impossible to formulate any similarities between the two individuals. Each of the two individuals is to be related to a different area of human experience. The novelist is a creator, he/she works with words and imagination, whereas the terrorist is a destroyer, he/she is commonly associated with performing and perpetrating violence. This is what Bill Gray's evolution in *Mao II* apparently suggests. Yet, Don DeLillo introduced in this novel some definite clues leading to the conclusion that in contemporary world the opposition between the terrorist and the novelist collapses. On her way to Bill Gray's hiding place, Brita feels like being taken to see some dangerous terrorist leader. Later on, Bill himself acknowledges the resemblance between the novelist and the terrorist: *"There's a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. In the West we become famous effigies as our books lose the power to shape and influence.... Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated"* (*Mao II,* 1991:41). The only reason for establishing a correspondence between the two individuals is the power each has to perform a distinct role in the life of society. It is true that their means of achieving this are hardly similar. Bill sees that American society has become so fascinated by the noise and flashing colours of television, and images, by news, that they have grown deaf to the voices of the artists. The new shapers of consciousness and thought are the terrorists, "bomb-makers and gunmen", who retain the media's attention and corrupt the intimate structures of the human beings.

A conversation with George Haddad (the terrorism sympathizer) brings further arguments in favour of the resemblance between the two human types: "*Through history it's the novelist who has felt affinity for the violent man who lives in the dark. Where are your sympathies? With the colonial police, the occupier, the rich landlord, the corrupt government, the militaristic state? Or with the terrorist?" (Mao II,* 1991:130) Haddad states that terrorists are the only possible heroes of our time: they have not been incorporated, absorbed in the global order, and speak the only language the West understands, that of violence. In response to his observations, Bill says: *"For some time now I've had the feeling that novelists and terrorists are playing a zero-sum game.""Interesting. How so?" "What terrorists gain, novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought. The danger they represent equals our own failure to be dangerous." "And the more clearly we see terror, the less impact we feel from art." "I think the relationship is intimate and precise insofar as such things can be measured."* (*Mao II,* 1991:156-157) In a world dedicated to images and consumerism, to violence, "*the writer is absorbed, processed and incorporated*" (*Mao II,* 1991:157). There is no longer the need for the singular, the authentic and the past. Humanity moves towards the

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future, but this new type of future is altered by the omnipresence of violence. At the end of the novel, the novelist disappears without effecting any change to the historical evolution of the world he is living in. The one who survives is the terrorist, with his trust in a new future and in the power of violence to shape it by altering the course of history. Gray's third novel remains unpublished, and his writings on the hostage remain secret, whereas the terrorist leader photographed in his den manifests clearly his intention of spreading further news of terror.

All in all, DeLillo's *Mao II* ends with the failure of the novelist to find meaning in a world dedicated to the perpetual consumption of images. Novelists lose power in a world dominated by news of terror, and thus terrorists become the new legislators of postmodern society. Yet "DeLillo's willingness to keep on writing demonstrates some well-concealed optimism" (Scanlan, 2001: 34).

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