

**The American Tradition
of Descent/Dissent: The Underground,
the Countercultural, the (Anti)Utopian**

A Collection of Essays

Foreword by

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CONTENTS

Foreword	9
I. DESCENT INTO THE LITERARY CANON: REFLECTIONS OF DISSENT	
The American Tradition of Descent in the Recent Fiction of Dissent (Rodica MIHĂILĂ)	19
The President as Player in Philip Roth's <i>The Plot Against America</i> (Eduard VLAD)	31
<i>I Married a Communist</i>: Philip Roth's Other Version of the American Pastoral (Teodor MATEOC)	41
Of Terrorism and Other Demons: The Psychology of Dissent and Otherness in John Updike's <i>Terrorist</i> (Mihaela-Cristina LAZĂR)	49
'Écriture Féminine' and <i>For Whom the Bell Tolls</i> (Daniela CRĂCIUN)	61
A Feminist Approach to <i>The Great Gatsby</i> and <i>Tender is the Night</i> (Corina GROSU)	69
To Defy / To Defend: Letters of Dissent / Descent in American Literature (Anca PEIU)	77
Edgar Allan Poe's Alternative Routes into the Inferno (Marina CAP-BUN)	85
Mary Rowlandson's Captivity Narrative. Dissent and Liminality (Andreea MINGIUC POENARU)	95

II. MULTICULTURAL/DIASPORIC INTERROGATIONS: ETHNICITY AND GENDER AS DISSENT

- The American Multiculturalism as Counterhistory to the Canonical Rhetoric of Assimilation/Assent** (Roxana MIHELE) 109
- Afrocentrism Challenges Americanism: Black Essentialism as Dissent** (Tunde ADELEKE) 119
- Ralph Ellison's Generative Apparatus – Patterns of Relevant Functionality in *Invisible Man*** (Lavinia Costinel LĂPĂDAT) 135
- The Descent of the African American Woman in Kara Walker's Silhouettes and Alice Walker's Novels** (Adelina VARTOLOMEI) 143
- Hybrid Identities of Women of Colour in Toni Morrison's Novels** (Alexandra-Lavinia MACAROV) 155
- Instances of Descent and/or Dissent in Tony Morrison's Novel *Jazz*** (Irina TOMA) 165
- The Chinese Tradition of Descent versus the American Tradition of Dissent in Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*** (Gabriela BEDREAGĂ) 177
- Sandra Cisneros – Still in Need of a Room of One's Own** (Anca Mihaela DOBRINESCU) 187
- “Lower-Case People”: Ernesto Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams*. Intertextuality and Claims on the Canon** (Ioana STAMATESCU) 199
- Places of the Heart: Cultural Identity in Autobiographical Accounts of Contemporary Immigrant Women** (Anca-Luminița IANCU) 215
- Strategies of Postcolonialism: From Describing to Writing the Empire** (Cristina-Georgiana VOICU) 227
- Traditional Roles and Dissent in Indian-American Literature** (Smaranda ȘTEFANOVICI) 235

Respect **Disentangling History(ies). From West to East and Back: 255**
Colonizing Journeys in Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*
 (Mariana BOERU)

III. (ANTI)UTOPIAN HISTORY, RELIGION, LITERATURE: VISIONS OF AMERICA

Conterculturals and Utopians: The Old Order Amish Communities 271
Countercultures (Andrea BORELLA)

The Quakers and the Impact of their Dissenting Origins on the 285
Abolitionist Movement: John Woolman and Anthony Benezet
(17th-18th Centuries) (Costel COROBAN)

Writing Large Race and Religion, Unwriting Descent; or, Still 299
Dissenting to the Old World in Nineteenth-Century America
(Estella Antoaneta CIOBANU)

The Philosophy of Dissent: John C. Calhoun and the Southern 315
Identity (Octavian ROSKE)

A Simple Proposal of "Utopian" Free-Market Activity Derailed 329
Amidst a Dystopia: Texan Don Pierson and the Aborted
Freeport Project in Haiti, 1967-1974 (Eric GILDER and Mervyn
HAGGER)

Dissent and Compromise: A Case Study of the Beat Generation 345
(Raluca ROGOVEANU)

Utopia/Dystopia as a Psychedelic/Narcotic Adventure: from 357
Huxley to Burroughs and On (Andrzej DOROBK)

The Beautiful America: Immigrant Visions (Oana-Elena 369
STRUGARU)

The Fall from *Paradise*: Toni Morrison's Novel or an American 383
Dystopia (Maria-Magdalena FĂURAR)

Ecological Spirit as Dissent in Wendell Berry's *Remembering* 391
(F. Gül KOCSOY)

Westering: An Ecologue (David JENKINS)	401
US Universities, A Reflection of US Culture (Mihaela ARSENE)	417
IV. (COUNTER)CULTURAL IMPULSES: CONTEMPORARY CINEMA, THEATER AND THE MEDIA	
The American Myth of Descent and Quiltmaking (Adina CIUGUREANU)	429
Dissent and its Discontents (Barbara A. NELSON)	437
Into Hell: The Representation of the Holocaust in American Cinema (Raluca MOLDOVAN)	447
Post-Apocalyptic Descent: Contemporary Contagion Movies and the Politics of the Clean Slate (Florian Andrei VLAD)	463
Descent and Cinematic Politics of Dissent with Quentin Tarantino: <i>Inglorious Basterds</i> (Ileana CHIRU-JITARU)	471
Cinematic Representations of <i>Descent/Dissent</i> in James Cameron's <i>Avatar</i> (Camelia ANGHEL)	483
Performing Tribalography as Dissent in "Indian Radio Days" by LeAnne Howe and Roxy Gordon (Ludmila MARTANOVSKI)	497
Trading Sex: Female Discourses on Sexuality in Paula Vogel's <i>Desdemona. A Play About A Handkerchief</i> (Corina LUNGU)	507
Descent / Dissent in Advertizing in Mid-Twentieth Century America (Nicoleta STANCA)	517
A Queen Conquers America. Some Considerations of the U.S. Press on the Visit of Queen Maria in the United States (Mădălina LASCA and Emanuel PLOPEANU)	533
Notes on Contributors	541

THE AMERICAN TRADITION OF DESCENT IN THE RECENT FICTION OF DISSENT

Rodica MIHĂILĂ

ABSTRACT: Starting from the general observation that all post-9/11 writings engaged in one way or another with making sense of America, re-writing or simply re-inventing it, are dissenting narratives, legitimized by their implicit or explicit oppositional cultural critique, my essay comments on the descent-dissent nexus in four post-9/11 novels dealing with a deeply traumatized America in the wake of the terrorist attacks and respectively, of an imaginary nuclear cataclysm which potentially have the capacity to alter American culture's sense of self-identity, but stand proof for the endurance of the myth of exceptionalism – a perfect illustration of the intricacy of the American tradition of descent, and of its relation to the tradition of dissent.

KEYWORDS: descent-dissent nexus, the 9/11 American novel, the post-apocalyptic novel, falling man/fall of man tropes, myth of exceptionalism.

When asked to give a keynote lecture at a Conference titled *The American Tradition of Descent/Dissent: The Underground, the Countercultural, the (Anti)Utopian* I thought of a lecture that would resonate with the general theme of the Conference (implying, in my opinion, a tense, at times insidious, and yet contained relation between *descent* and *dissent* in American culture and society) and at the same time, one that would revisit my own critical inquiries of the last few years into post-9/11 American fiction. The present essay is based on an abbreviated form of that keynote.

The use of *descent* and *dissent* as categories of cultural and literary analysis calls for further qualification. Even at a superficial glance it is obvious that all post-9/11 writings engaged in one way or another with making sense of America, re-writing it or simply re-inventing it, are dissenting narratives, legitimized by their implicit or explicit oppositional cultural critique. The focus of my essay is on novels that deal with a deeply traumatized America, in the wake of catastrophic, apocalyptic events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks or an imaginary nuclear cataclysm which potentially have the capacity to alter American culture's sense of self-identity. There are many other recent American novels that

do exactly this. I could have based my argument, for instance, on Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (Pulitzer 2008) or on Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (2008), both of which posit new histories of America’s origins subverting official discourses of identity, historiography and geography, but mainly for reasons of space, I had to carefully circumscribe my area of inquiry by limiting my comments to several novels from the category mentioned above.

I’ll address the descent-dissent nexus as symptomatic of a lasting multi-faceted polarity of American culture – in this particular case, its conservatism (read also Puritanism) set in a tensional relation with its strong propensity for diversity and change.

If the tradition of dissent has made itself heard and seen more prominently in epochs of political and social turmoil and instability, and the dawn of the new century has already proved to be such an epoch, its relation to the tradition of descent is complicated by the various meanings, especially the negative connotations, of the notion of “descent”: “descent” as moving down from a higher to a lower place or from a better to a worse condition, and “descent” as origin, lineage, ancestry (as in “an American of Romanian descent”).

A perfect illustration of the intricacy of the American tradition of descent, and of its relation to the tradition of dissent, is the endurance of the myth of American exceptionalism, an ideological creation myth, rooted in Biblical, puritan mythology and reinforced by the progressive principles of the Enlightenment incorporated in the founding documents of the American Republic (“all men are created equal”).

In the European imaginary, the repetitive foundational myth of America as Paradise Regained, the new Garden of Eden, places the American experiment within the eternal universal frame of the myth of creation, nevertheless, adding to it the possibility of new beginnings. The American, “this new man,” as de Tocqueville described him, is thus seen as a new Adam, who is given a new chance, redemptive of mankind, and thus, the possibility of acquiring a new messianic role. In the cast of American exceptionalism, the genuine American is of “New Adam” descent. As such, the American experiment has rescued man from the fall from grace; it has turned ruin into redemption (even though the descent into the hell of the contemporary world has often proved otherwise).

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Few U.S. images could contradict the success narrative of American exceptionalism and evoke the current fall from grace better than the 9/11 snapshots of the more than 200 so-called “jumpers” – desperate people who kept jumping from the TWC’s North tower during the one and a half hours

before the tower finally collapsed.¹ All, with the notable exception of Richard Drew's famous "Falling Man" photograph, taken seconds after the first attack, which because of the extraordinary dignity and ultimate freedom suggested by the man's posture became an even more powerful document of the human drama, simultaneously symbolic of the upcoming Age of Terror, the modern fall from grace, and of a new vision of rebirth and regeneration made possible by Falling Man's compelling heroism and humanity.² As such, the photograph appealed both to reporters, who tried to identify the actual Falling Man in the picture and to writers in search of ways to deal with a reality that had rendered fiction irrelevant.

In his famous 9/11 essay, "In the Ruins of the Future", written under the immediate impact of the terrorist attacks, Don DeLillo observes that the devastating hard evidence of the destruction indicates that "the world narrative belongs to the terrorist" the only thing a novelist can do is to give a measure of man's humanism and heroism, to take us "beyond the hard numbers of dead and missing and give us a glimpse of elevated being" (DeLillo 2001), which is exactly what he tries to do in his novel *Falling Man*.

As I intend to argue in my paper, despite, or rather because of the threat of an "Age of Terror," and American exceptionalism's self-destructiveness, of which the recent American novel is only too aware, it is this humanism, this ethical challenge, shaped by falling man tropes, that distinguishes the voice of this novel and substantiates a new cycle of vision, of rebirth and self-renewal, which, paradoxically, perpetuates the idea of American exceptionalism into "the ruins" of the post-apocalyptic future.

Though my use of *descent* is primarily associated with origins, lineage, ancestry, in short, with how we define the mythical frame of "American descent"-- which takes us back to the old question "what is an American?", using four post 9/11 novels and a post-apocalyptic one, I want to show how the dissenting voices of the contemporary novel that explore the descent into the Hades of contemporary America in order to expose the deterioration of the human condition, the violence, fear and terror that threaten the very foundations of our civilization, which paradoxically keep alive (reveal) the power and endurance of America's exceptionalism – the "New Adam" descent of the American.³ In my reading of the post 9/11 novel I aim to show how the novel of

¹ See a compilation of photos of jumpers at http://americandigest.org/mt-archives/9_11_jumpers.jpg.

² See the photo taken by Richard Drew at 9:41:15 a.m. on 9/11/2001 at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Falling_Man.

³ In his book *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (1955), R.W.B.Lewis analyzes the formation of the myth of the American Adam in American culture between 1820 and 1860 in the writings of Holmes, Whitman, H. James, Cooper, Hawthorne and Melville, and of historians such as Bancroft and Parkman. The New Adam

dissent explores simultaneously all the aspects of the American tradition of “descent” at a symbolic and historical level, resurrecting the culture’s sense of hope, action and renewal.

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To illustrate my point I selected four novels that differ widely in their use of narrative techniques and literary traditions, from realism to post-postmodernism: Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007), Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006) and McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) - all of them remarkable attempts to redeem the “falling man”/ “fall of man” images and to transfigure the horror by placing the seemingly opposite binaries us/them into the larger universal context of an ethical relation between Self and Other.⁴

Jonathan Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2004), which has for a coda, a sequence of fifteen photo illustrations based on the photograph of a falling man by Lyle Owerko (2001/Polaris), filters the events of September 11 through the consciousness of Oskar Schell, a weird, exceptionally bright and imaginative 9-year-old boy, whose father was among the WTC victims.

Like his alienated literary siblings, Salinger’s Holden Caulfield, Gunter Grass’s Oskar Matzerath and Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim, Oskar, a trespasser of both the real and the surreal, lives within the self-created refuge of his prolific imagination, the only space where the 9/11 apocalyptic events that defied all reason and understanding can be represented and where the persisting fear can be dealt with.

Oskar’s fear is partly the result of ignorance and uncertainty (Bauman 2), but even more so, of a relation between Self and Other short-circuited or rendered absurd and hysterical by the terrorist attacks. As he confesses: “Even after a year...there was a lot of stuff that made me panicky, like ...Arab people

produced by the New World is, in his opinion, “an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources... His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent.” (Lewis 5)

⁴ Some of my comments on these novels previously appeared in my articles ‘The Falling Man of the 9/11 Novel’, in *University of Bucharest Review: A Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, 10:1 (2009), 21-25; ‘Strategies of Endurance: The Myth of American Exceptionalism’, *University of Bucharest Review: A Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, 11:1 (2010), 45-50 and ‘Falling Man Tropes and the New Cycle of Vision in the Recent American Novel,’ in *Writing Technologies*, vol.3 (2010), 86-99.

on the subway (even though I'm not racist), Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops and other public places ... " (Foer 36).

The only antidote to the post-9/11 fear seems to be what Levinas, in his ethical philosophy inspired by the Holocaust experience, calls "the humanism of the Other" (Levinas 2003) - love, compassion, responsibility for the other and a deep need to connect, which gives Foer's book a special touch of humanity. "How could such a lonely person have been living so close to me my whole life?" wonders Oskar after talking with one of his neighbors, a lonely and sad old man, "If I had known, I would have gone up to keep him company. Or I would have made some jewelry for him. Or told him hilarious jokes. Or given him a private tambourine concert." (Foer 163).

The last fifteen pages run the image of the falling man in Owersko's 9/11 photographs backwards until the man disappears up in the sky, which is Foer's way of reminding the reader of the manipulative, fabricated, spectacle culture that produces such terror, the fall from grace, and of something neither technology nor art can do - that is, give back life and safety. In a more optimistic version, the falling man trope marks here the beginning of a new cycle of vision; "like an arrow moving backwards in time" falling man may also indicate hope in a possible redemption, man's apotheosis in a future which, as De Lillo put it, Americans always "like to think that America invented" (DeLillo 6).

The importance of that photograph in Foer's novel takes us directly to DeLillo's *Falling Man*, in which Drew's "falling man" photo provides the central symbol. "Falling man" turns out to be a performance artist who appears around the city in the weeks after 9/11 leaping from high places - only to be caught by a safety harness and suspended, midair, dressed like a businessman, in the posture of someone falling from the World Trade Center. Bystanders are shocked, offended, and confused while scholars try to decide whether to call him "Heartless Exhibitionist or Brave New Chronicler of the Age of Terror."

De Lillo tries, as he confesses, to write a "counter-narrative", for in the case of the terrorist attacks life has obviously outdone the possibility of art to represent it - "the narrative belongs to the terrorist". His story focuses on a Manhattan middle-class family in the aftermath of the attacks. Keith Neudecker, a shocked survivor, who manages to escape from the first tower inferno, returns in confusion to his son and wife, from whom he has been separated for more than a year, only to find out that the 9/11 trauma has irredeemably shattered everybody's lives.

A novel about disconnectedness at every level, including the elliptical, jerky dialogues, disconnectedness as a syndrome of the new "Age of Terror," *Falling Man* is no exception when it comes to the ethical imperative, to knowing the other, and to reaching out for the others. The closing chapter of the book juxtaposes two ways of living in the aftermath of 9/11: 1) in isolation from the

others, as in the case of Keith, “self-sequestered” (212) in his un-involvement, in the repetitive gestures of his daily life and the routine of the poker game, and 2) trying to know the other, reaching out for the others, as in the case of Keith’s wife, “the girl who wanted to be other people” (233), who would go to church thinking that “it was not something godlike she felt but only a sense of others. Others bring us closer” (233).

Despite the book’s title and its central symbol, the performance artist called Falling man, and despite DeLillo’s ample use of photographs in earlier books like *Mao II*, for instance, in *Falling Man* Drew’s photograph is not reproduced, being mentioned only indirectly at the end of the book, when memory, not a photograph, is proclaimed to be the only “photosensitive surface” which could render the horror of the event. Instead of real photographs DeLillo offers various textualizations of the falling man photo: the performance artist’s repeated shows, the flight of the hijacker to his target, the implied biblical reference in the description of the falling man photograph (“he was a falling angel, and his beauty was horrific”) (222), and finally, Keith’s identification with the falling man. In the long run, the series of textualizations render totally meaningless the evidence provided by the original photograph, just as the infinite replications of photo-stencils in Warhol’s screen prints, to which DeLillo has already referred in *Mao II*, deprive the original image of meaning.

The book ends with another replication of Drew’s photo, in the version of Keith, the survivor: escaping from the towering inferno “he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life” (246).

The fall of Man becomes a question of ontological uncertainty and personal vision. Wondering “Who was the falling Man?” in Drew’s photo, Keith’s wife concludes: “that nameless body coming down, this was hers to record and absorb” (223) or put it differently, “all we know of him becomes a measure of what we know of ourselves.” Acknowledging the limitations of art to cope with reality, the multiple textualizations of Drew’s photo in DeLillo’s novel leave open the possibility of a new cycle of vision - the redemption of humanity and the recovery of hope through love and responsibility for the other.

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An altogether different representation of the relation dissent-descent and a multicultural approach to the idea of “American descent” is offered by Updike’s novel *Terrorist* (2005).

Terrorist is a political thriller based on the true story of three people who were arrested soon after 9/11 for attempting to blow up the Holland Tunnel which connects Manhattan with New Jersey. The novel juxtaposes official