



## *“Temperate and Nearly Cloudless”: The 9/11 Commission Report as Postmodern Pastiche*

by Alan Nadel

“Tuesday, September 11, 2001 dawned temperate and nearly cloudless in the eastern United States”. Thus begins Chapter One of the *9/11 Commission Report*, a chapter that bears the title, “We have Some Planes”. As with all good pop fiction, the reader awaits to see what this quote means, although we know already that it will mark a crucial moment, one that renders the innocuous urgent, or gives meaning to a startling chaos of coincidence. Pop culture has taught us the formula well: Everything looks fine; high school kids sip pop and dance in front of the juke box; Ole Doc Jones is mowin’ the lawn while Mrs. Jones makes lemonade. BUT strange noises have been heard in the cellar; no one can find the cat; Mr. Grundy insists he saw flashing lights last night, but no one believes him because Mrs. Grundy says he’s been acting strange ever since she flushed his Viagra; mysteriously, all the clocks in Indianapolis have started running fast or slow by *exactly* 24 hours. Then we hear the message on the police radio: “we’ve got some planes...as large as football fields hovering over every Wall-Mart in the nation”. At last someone will believe the geeky newspaper boy and his big brother’s girlfriend, who knew all along he was on to something. Let’s hope it’s not too late.

Terror, as the movies repeatedly show, requires the quotidian, that perfect good egg whose absolute normality is just waiting to be cracked. There may be suffering in Hell, there may be pain, but there is no terror. Suspense, in fiction as in film, is another name for the temporal disparity between established normality and the hinted



onslaught that *will* disrupt and *may* obliterate. Think of *Jaws*. In the same way that thousands of vacationers flocked to the beach for summer fun, and hundreds of merchants engaged in normal summer business, “Millions of men and women,” the *Report* (2004: 3) goes on, “readied themselves for work. Some made their way to the Twin Towers, the signature structures of the World Trade Center complex in New York City. Others went to Arlington, Virginia, to the Pentagon. Across the Potomac River the United States Congress was back in session. At the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, people began to line up for a White House tour. In Sarasota, Florida, President George Bush went for an early morning run”.

In the suspense film or the potboiler novel, the genre itself creates the initial disparity between normal life and its threatening other. So too for the *Report*, in that we know September 11 will not be a normal day. Genre expectations, however, must be confirmed. Hints of the immanent must appear, simultaneously arousing the audience’s concern and also privileging that audience as knowing, better than the audience inside the novel or film, how to interpret the missing cat or Mr. Grundy’s lights. The *Report’s* (2004: 3) first hint comes in the second paragraph: “For those heading to an airport, weather conditions could not have been better for a safe and pleasant journey. Among the travelers were Mohamed Atta and Abdul Aziz al Omari who arrived at the airport in Portland, Maine.”

Irrelevant details, mild irony, and scary names all iterate the idea that terror resides in the most commonplace environments. Atta, the *Report* tells us, took a phone call from a colleague at another terminal at Logan Airport. “They spoke for three minutes”, the *Report* (2004:4) states. “It would be their final conversation”. It would in fact be another 28 pages before we find out from the *Report* (2004: 32) that, “We have some planes. Just stay quiet and you will be okay. We are returning to the airport” – is a transmission from American Airlines flight 11, picked up, to be precise, at 8:34:28 AM. The chapter title actually reveals, therefore, that the *Report* has misled the reader as much as the terrorists had deceived the passengers or misled air traffic control. It has done so by using a chapter title that is supposed to mark a moment of revelation and a style that impels such expectations.

This issue of genre expectations haunts the report from the outset. The “Preface,” signed by Chair Thomas Kean and Vice Chair Lee Hamilton (2004: cxxi), announces that “we have come together with a unity of purpose because the nation demands it,” and states the Commission’s charge simply: “The nation was unprepared. How did this happen, and how can we avoid such tragedy again?”. Only a relatively small portion of the *Report*, however, serves to answer those questions. Repeatedly, in its organization, rhetoric, blend of descriptions, explanations, assertions, recommendations, and platitudes, the *Report* reveals that the unity of the Commission is wed to – perhaps contingent upon – a multiplicity of purposes, something indicated by the final



sentence of the Preface (2004:cxxv): “We hope our report will encourage our fellow citizens to study, reflect – and act”.

Explicitly no longer an investigation but a call to action, the *Report* uses several strategies to motivate – that is, to appeal to the reader’s emotions. This explains why so much of the *Report* serves the chief purpose of enthraling the public with a good read, evoking the convention of pop culture whereby thrill trumps logic, and attention to detail numbs concern over gaps. Richard Falkenrath (2004/5: 177, emphasis added), who praised the clarity of the *Report’s* enthraling prose, comes to a conclusion consistent with the rhetorical strategy I am describing,

In short, the commission’s report sweeps away most of the mystery surrounding the 9/11 attacks giving the reader a *clear and accurate* understanding of where the attacks came from, how the plot unfolded, what the U.S. government was doing to prevent such attacks, and why the government failed.

At the same time, Falkenrath (2004/5: 175) had stated earlier in the same review that “the report allows the reader to reach his own conclusions about the many important questions raised by the attacks”, an outcome peculiar for a report of a commission whose charge was to answer questions surrounding the event. The prose that “sweeps away mystery” thus replaces it with an ostensive clarity and accuracy so vague that the reader, instead of the *Report*, must provide the conclusions. If this effect ought damn the *Report*, instead it received much kudos. The *Report* was widely praised for its novelistic qualities.<sup>1</sup>

To produce this effect, award-winning historian Philip Zelikow was hired to oversee the writing of the *Report*, an aspect of his job as the Commission’s Executive Director at which he was extremely successful. Zelikow convinced Kean, who liked the popular history genre – according to *New York Times* reporter Philip Shenon (2008) he was proud of his master’s degree in the teaching of History – that the *Report* should be written for the “general public” and published the same day it was delivered to the White House. It is not surprising, in this light, that Zelikow added to the staff Alexis Albion, who was completing a history dissertation at Harvard that identified her as an expert in espionage and counterespionage, that is, fictional espionage. Her dissertation, titled “The Spy in All of Us,” focused on the public image of James Bond in the mid-1960s.

But the purpose for hiring Zelikow is not the same as the purposes he brought to the tasks. The vita they reviewed when Co-Chairs Kean and Hamilton considered Zelikow omitted the fact that he had also served on the Bush transition team, which thus precluded his having to explain what tasks he performed on that team. Most significantly, Zelikow had structured the demotion of Richard Clarke and the

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<sup>1</sup> Warren provides a very comprehensive summary of the *Report’s* reception as “novel”.



counterterrorism unit he headed within the NSC that tracked Al Qaeda and generated the most persistent and adamant warnings about the threat bin Laden posed. "Clarke's colleagues believed", Shenon (2008: 63) explains, "that Zelikow's 'reorganization' had all but guaranteed that the White House would pay little attention to the flood of terrorists warnings in the months before 9/11".

Exercising iron-fisted, often brutal control over the Commission staff, Zelikow prevented the staff from having virtually any contact with the members of the Commission, just as he prevented those Commission members from having independent staffers. With all the information channeled through Zelikow, he was able to suppress the aspects of the *Report* most critical of the Bush administration and, especially, of NSC Director Condoleezza Rice, whose performance leading up to 9/11, many staffers believed, was categorically incompetent (Shenon 2008: 145-146).

The first chapter of the *Report*, consistent with Zelikow's approach, presents in melodramatic fashion, almost minute by minute, experiences on each plane in a story organized not to explain what happened but to draw out the suspense and to do so poignantly, using selected summaries of or excerpts from cell phone calls made by passengers and crew. For each plane we follow the events anew, with the appropriate sprinkling of human interest: A woman called her mother to tell her the plane had been hijacked and ask her to alert American Airlines. She and her husband, the *Report* (2004: 15) tells us "promptly did so." A man called his father in Easton, Connecticut; another left a phone message for his wife and then spoke to his mother. Not surprisingly, these calls had common themes: there seems to have been violence, stabbings; the planes had been hijacked; the flying was erratic; the callers feared they were going to die. As the moments of impact near, the calls become more frenetic: "'Oh my God, we are too low.' The phone call ended" (*Report* 2004: 11). "'Don't worry, Dad—if it happens, it'll be very fast—My God, my God'. The call ended abruptly. Lee Hanson heard a woman scream just before it cut off" (*Report* 2004: 13). Only in the narrative of the last flight, United 93, in which the passengers stormed the cockpit and forced the pilot to crash the plane, do we conclude with the voice of the terrorist pilot, who is screaming "Allah is the greatest. Allah is the greatest" (*Report* 2004: 22).

After the full series of dramatized crashes, when the *Report* then replays the same events from the perspective of the ground, we finally encounter the "We have some planes" transcription. In the first rendition of the events on American 11, in fact, we do not even learn that the ground had received transmissions from the plane's radio. And while the chapter title suggests its authoritative presence, "we have some planes" does not make sense of the terrifying intervention. Rather than a proclamation to the "authorities", the announcement is apparently aimed at the plane's passengers and overheard on the ground because the inexperienced terrorists could not operate the system so as to differentiate an intercom communication from a radio transmission. As a result, we do not know who is speaking or what the phrase "have



some planes” means to convey. We know only that the two explicit claims – that they are returning to the airport and that “you will be okay” – are false. The chapter’s title thus refers to impenetrable utterances from an unidentified source making unreliable claims.

At the end of the opening chapter, with its often-minute-by-minute rendition of the events of 9/11, from terrorists boarding planes, to air traffic controllers, Air Force, and Government executives (albeit chiefly not President Bush) attempting to deal with problems, we are told that “in a brief moment of reflection, [an assistant to the mission crew commander at NORAD] was recorded remarking that ‘this is a new type of war’” (*Report* 2004: 70). This nameless assistant enters the *Report* not to provide analysis but to dramatize it. The eternal truth of his relatively vacuous pronouncement—even less illuminating than “We have some planes”—is affirmed by the *Report’s* (2004: 70) voice-of-God narrator: “He was, and is, right. But the conflict did not begin on 9/11”.

The voice-of-God narrator, however, is not a reliable source for facts but a narrative device that helps sustain the appearance of reality in imaginative writing. Similarly, reading the *Report* we often witness directly a character’s thoughts with a degree of immediacy only found in fiction. After the Vice President is told of the first crash, the *Report* (2004: 55) directly penetrates his thoughts at the moment of the second crash: “The Vice President was wondering ‘How the hell could a plane hit the World Trade Center’, when he saw the second aircraft strike the South Tower”.

This is one instance of free indirect discourse, among many that frequent the *Report*. This mode of narration, which relates a character’s thoughts as the expression of an omniscient authorial voice, is typically associated with psychological realism because it presents a character’s mind without mediation, that is, it helps mask the fact that the character is fictional.

Consider, in this light, a discussion in the *Report* (2004: 219) of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (whom the *Report* renames “KSM”) and another terrorist who “both decided to join forces with Al Qaeda because their terrorist aspirations required the money and manpower that only a robust organization like al Qaeda could supply”. Here the voice-of-God narrator reflects not the knowledge gathered from reports but rather a more intimate knowledge of those reported upon. The authoritative narrator who is one with the aspirations of its subjects thus substitutes for the less-than-reliable sources upon which this part of the *Report* is based. As the *Report* (2004: 212) explains, “Assessing the truth of statements by [the witnesses who inform Chapters 5 and 7]—sworn enemies of the United States—is challenging” because the Commission had no access either to those being interrogated or to those conducting the interrogations, and while the Commission was allowed to submit questions, it “had no control over whether, when, or how” the questions would be asked. “We were told,” the *Report* (2004: 212, emphasis added) states, “that our requests might disrupt the *sensitive* interrogation process”.



In a similar fashion, the *Report* (2004: 84) turns Bin Laden into a fictional character, employing the omniscient author's power to articulate Bin Laden's state of mind: "Bin Laden's assumption of the helm of al Qaeda was evidence of his growing self-confidence and ambition". A little later in the story (2004: 98), Bin Laden experiences serious financial setbacks, and then suddenly, with no explanation of how, no consideration where he may have gotten his money, no speculation based on reported sources, we are told, in a simple, declarative sentence: "Having rebuilt his fund raising network, Bin Laden had again become the rich man of the jihad movement". Not just the simplicity of the assertion but the way in which "jihad movement" is used here implies a coherent network, in the same way that the term "Mafia" often does in American popular culture. The *Report*, in other words, has adopted the voice of Mario Puzo relating the tale of "Godfather" Bin Laden and the international crime family he coordinated. Consistent with this narrative style, the chapter (2004: 103) ends dramatically with Bin Laden's "go to the mattresses" pronouncement that, "if instigation for jihad against the Jews and the Americans to liberate holy places 'is considered a crime...let history be a witness that I am a criminal'".

In an equally glib manner, Chapter Two, "The Foundation of the New Terrorism", attempts to provide the historical background for the events dramatically rendered in the opening episode of this potboiler. Early in this chapter (2004: 81), we find an Allah-like pronouncement from President Bush: "All Americans must realize that the face of terror is not the true face of Islam". No information, no documentary support; the word of the fearless leader sits comfortably alongside the commission's omniscient analysis, the consistency of the tone marking not the factual nature of Bush's remarks but the fatuous nature of the Commission's, evident in the way it immediately follows Bush's proclamation with its own, employing the kind of figurative language typical of fictional accounts but inimical to factual reports: "Yet as political, social, and economic problems created flammable societies, Bin Laden used Islam's most extreme, fundamentalist traditions as his match. All these elements—including religion—combined in an explosive compound" (*Report* 2004: 81).

Significantly, both of these pronouncements conclude the section of Chapter Two devoted to the history of the Islamic world, as context for the attack. That section, following two pages on the initial cause, Bin Laden's 1998 fatwa, provides a scant nine pages (of the *Report's* 608) on historical and root causes. First the *Report* covers the formation of the Islamic religion and then moves forward to the writings of Qubt, an Egyptian educated in the US and executed in 1966 in Egypt. Bin Laden, we are told, shared Qubt's loathing for the West, as configured in stark Muslim/anti-Muslim terms. "Bin Laden's grievance with the United States may have started", the *Report* (2004: 77) quickly acknowledges, "in reaction to specific U.S. policies", which the *Report* for all its



obsession with detail, never specifies, explaining instead that his reaction “quickly became much deeper”.

The *Report* omits any US or Western behavior, apparently too superficial to mention, moving immediately to those “deeper” sources, all produced in Arabia, which, according to the *Report* (2004: 77), went through struggles for independence after WWI, not led not by religious leaders but by “Western-educated lawyers, soldiers, and officials”. In one sentence, the *Report* (2004: 77) leaps several decades to the end of WWII, when, “after gaining independence, the Arab Middle East followed an arc from initial pride and optimism to today’s mix of indifference, cynicism, and despair”. The *Report’s* mythical place, less the Arab Middle East than the Arab Middle Earth, contains a lot of exotic names and regions, but shares a monolithic sensibility, one acquired in the post WWII period, after the influence of the Western-educated lawyers, soldiers, and officials had faded. Then, the *Report* (2004: 77) makes clear, “in several countries a dynastic state already existed or was quickly established under a paramount tribal family”. Interestingly, the *Report* seems to have no idea *who* established these dynastic states nor does it ever explain what a “tribal” family is. One might assume, however, that “tribal” does not designate the kind of family into which Princess Di married, or even the type into which Camella Soprano married. It’s something perhaps a bit more sweaty than the British monarchy and a bit more primitive than the Mafia. It’s one of those African things, where instead of governments, they had, and still have, tribes.

Just as the West is absent in the formation of this tribal rule, it is equally absent in the problems that ensued therefrom, whether in the enduring monarchies or in the subsequent secular states that, the *Report* (2004: 77) informs us, “promised a glowing future”. These promises faltered in the Arab Middle Earth when, for various reasons, the free market was not allowed to flourish. As a result, it turns out, the social and economic cause of the criminal 9/11 attacks was exactly the same as the root cause, according to rightwing ideologues, of crime in America: welfare. “In the 1970s and early 1980s”, the *Report* (2004: 79) matter-of-factly states, “an unprecedented flood of wealth led the then largely unmodernized oil states to attempt to shortcut decades of development. They funded huge infrastructure projects, vastly expanded education and created subsidized social welfare programs. These programs established a widespread feeling of entitlement without a corresponding sense of social obligations”.

This explanation suggests that the United States is being attacked from the outside by the same type of people who are ruining it domestically, the people who expect to get something for nothing, something such as education, health care, or food. The problem is even worse, moreover, because in their backwardness, these oil states desire “shortcuts”. Even for wealthy, developed countries, such as the United States, they should have realized, feeding people and educating them takes time; one



can't foolishly expect to do that over night. In the United States, after all, even today, after a solid half-century as the wealthiest nation in the world, 30 percent of the population is functionally illiterate, health care is substandard, and one in five children suffers from malnutrition.

The dependence on entitlement programs, moreover, the report makes clear, in the end only breeds resentment: "By the late 1980s", the *Report* (2004: 79) explains, "diminishing oil revenues, the economic drain from many unprofitable development projects, and population growth made these entitlement programs unsustainable. The resulting cutbacks created enormous resentment among recipients who had come to see government largesse as their right". Lazy malcontents, who want shortcuts, who have gotten used to getting something for nothing, who think big government will solve all their problems, and who lack any sense of social obligation, in other words, people whose tribes were not fortunate enough to have a leader like Ronald Reagan – these people, just as they have traditionally constituted the perceived threat to capitalism, are now also the ur-cadre of suicide bombers.

Clearly, at this point, our implied author has morphed from Mario Puzo to Rush Limbaugh, casting in a very different light the NORAD crew commander's pronouncement in Chapter One. New or old, was this really a type of *war*? Perhaps, despite the tenor of the voice, the idea is less a Godly pronouncement than a faith-based initiative, one supported zealously by a White House document, "The National Security Strategy of the United States", that articulates the Bush Doctrine of pre-emptive strikes. This 31-page document that provides the scholarly underpinnings of the Iraq War, was produced at the request of Rice and written anonymously by historian Philip Zelikow. This explains yet one more purpose reflected in the report, albeit to a far lesser degree that Zelikow wished: to link al-Qaeda to Saddam Hussein.

Zelikow, therefore, saw to it that in the public hearings devoted to Al-Qaeda, the first person to testify was Laurie Mylroie, a historian working for the right-wing Hoover Institute, who believed that "Iraq had played a role in every major terrorist attack against the United States since the early 1990s, including September 11 and the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. She even saw a link between Iraq and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing" (Shenon 2008: 130).

The seven chapters that follow "We Have Some Planes" provide a series of flashbacks, with the focus oscillating in alternate chapters between the terrorists and the U.S. Government, such that we have the crosscutting effect used in narrative cinema, where two adversaries are racing toward a climactic, possibly catastrophic, collision. Zelikow's narrative, thus structured and paced, does not find room to mention the numerous intelligence warnings the White House received and failed adequately to heed until after page 300, where the specific intelligence and policy failures of the Bush administration look like inevitable complications in an unavoidable narrative trajectory.





In this forestalling action, Chapter Three, “Counterterrorism Evolves”, instead of going forward, takes us back, to cover the same period as did Chapter Two, this time from the perspective of the government agencies and people charged with thwarting al Qaeda. A la Tom Clancy or television series such as *24*, the *Report* (2004: 104, emphasis added) indicates that this chapter will focus on personalities and personify institutions: “We mention many personalities in this report. As in any study of the U.S. government, some of the most important *characters* are institutions”.

In this spirit, KSM’s unrealized original plan to coordinate the hijacking of 10 planes involving nine crash attacks and the dramatic landing of a tenth plane as the platform for a speech, leads the *Report* (2004: 222) to conclude: “Beyond KSM’s rationalizations about targeting the US economy, this vision gives a better glimpse of his true ambitions. This is theater, a spectacle of destruction with KSM as the self-cast star—the superterrorist”. It is important to note here that the *Report* speaks with the greatest authority not when it is providing information it has gathered, but when the information confirms the roles into which the narrative has already cast its principals. All the details to this point attempt to render the events as though they were a movie. Bits of dialogue illustrate attitudes and make melodramatic pronouncements. Characters on both sides personify agencies and organizations. Bit players scream for help or make final farewells on their cell phones, while arch villains, equipped with comic book motivations, hatch master plots, jeopardized by the quotidian desires of their henchmen, who insist on meeting with their girlfriends or borrowing money for personal reasons.

The *Report*, which knows the story it’s telling, tells it well when information confirms, or at least doesn’t encumber the narrative. Hence, the exciting chapter, held until late in the *Report*, that recounts what went on in the towers after the planes struck, is a compendium of thrilling vignettes – remember *Towering Inferno*? We also get the humanizing moments in which Kalhid al Mihdhar and Nawaf al Hazmi come to L.A. for reasons, according to the *Report* (2004: 311), “we do not know for certain” and allow their friend to throw a party in their apartment for “20 male members of the Muslim community” (*Report* 2004: 318), or Ramzi Binalshibh enrolls as a student in Hamburg in the 1990s but “continually had academic problems, failing tests and cutting classes” (*Report* 2004: 233). In one of the vignettes, we learn that Ziad Jarrah discussed in Germany with his dental student girl friend Aysel Sanguen the honor of dying for Allah, but, as the *Report* (2004: 236-7) tells those of us who are following the throes of Ziad and Aysel: “Although Jarrah’s transformation generated numerous quarrels, their breakups invariably were followed by reconciliation”. Or were they??? The fact that these events, as the *Report*’s disclaimer has previously indicated, may not have occurred is not a problem, because it doesn’t matter whether they did, or whether Marwan al Shehhi was remembered by his friends in Germany as “a regular guy”, wearing Western clothes and occasionally renting cars for trips to Berlin, France



or the Netherlands" (*Report* 2004: 234). Irrelevant is the significance of the fact that Mihdhar put down a \$650 deposit to take over an acquaintance's apartment lease, subsequently sought a refund because he found the apartment too messy, and when the landlord refused he "remembers [Mihdhar] 'ranting and raving' as if he were 'psychotic'" (*Report* 2004: 318).

These vignettes serve to humanize the events, make the causes personal, psychological, and thus ultimately mysterious. This focus makes irrelevant Bin Laden's articulated motives, his writing and his speeches, as they are only symptoms of psychological disorders and/or personal ambitions and/or delusions. In this context, befogged reports of Bin Laden's actions enhance the report rather than diminish it. For example, it cites one of his acts as the 1996 truck bomb attack on the tower in Dharan, that was, the *Report* (2004: 89) states "principally, perhaps exclusively" carried out by Saudi Hezbollah. Even if it was the exclusive work of Hezbollah, according to the *Report* (2004: 89, emphasis added), there are "signs that Al Qaeda played some role, as yet unknown". The same lack of information informs the Commission (2004: 89), which informs us of a series of other attacks in which Bin Laden's role "is cloudy at best", in contrast to the morning of 9/11, but uncannily similar to the following account of President Bush's role in Vice President Cheney's issuing a shoot-down order, even on a day that was otherwise "temperate and nearly cloudless".

Late in Chapter One, Vice President Cheney authorizes the shooting down of a commercial aircraft and then informs the President that he has done so. Since only President Bush can issue such an order, Vice President Cheney's order was, by definition, given on behalf of the President, and since the Vice President answers to the President, Vice President Cheney then informed him (President Bush) how he (Vice President Cheney) had used his (President Bush's) authority, and he (President Bush) subsequently confirmed that the order issued by him (Vice President Cheney), was his (President Bush's) order. The *Report* further confirms that Cheney's actions were the result of a legitimate, if hypothetical, conversation with the President. "We believe", the *Report* (2004: 63k, emphasis added) states, "this call *would have taken place* some time before 10:10 to 10:15", pinpointing within a few minutes the exact time of the hypothetical conversation during which Bush would have given Cheney the order that Cheney subsequently informed Bush he had given. Even more interesting than the ersatz precision of a "before/between construction" ("before 10:10 to 10:15") is the *Report's* admission that there is no documentary evidence for this call, even though one charge of the Commission's investigation was to document the events of the day. Instead, the *Report* (2004: 63) explains that "the relevant sources are incomplete". The *Report* thus confirms a hypothetical conversation based, appropriately, on hypothetical records.

This is far from the only moment when the *Report* ventriloquizes Joseph Heller. While the "we have some planes" remark – as we later find out, one of several



overheard cockpit transmissions from American 11 – circulates at the various response sites, it provides as much misinformation as information, as the sundry agencies scramble to deal with the data, in much the way that, in *Catch-22* (1961, 1994: 45), a flurry of agitated communication occurs when switchboard operator ex-PFC Wintergreen, eavesdropping on Colonel Cargill's phone conversation, responds to Cargill's statement, "Name for example one poet who makes money",

"T.S. Eliot," ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen said...and slammed down the telephone without identifying himself.

Colonel Cargill was perplexed.

"Who was it?" asked General Peckem.

"I don't know," Colonel Cargill replied.

"What did he want?"

"I don't know."

"Well, what did he say?"

"T.S. Eliot'," Colonel Cargill informed him.

"What's that?"

"T.S. Eliot," Colonel Cargill repeated.

"Just 'T. S.—'"

"Yes, sir, that's all he said. Just 'T.S. Eliot'."

"I wonder what it means," General Peckem reflected.

Colonel Cargill wondered, too.

"T.S. Eliot," General Peckem mused.

"T.S. Eliot," Colonel Cargill, echoed with the same funereal puzzlement.

When Peckem decides, with an "unctuous and benignant smile" (Heller 1961, 1994: 45) to call General Dreedle and leave the same anonymous message, Dreedle retaliates in kind,

"Who was it?" asked Colonel Cargill, back in Rome.

"That same person," General Peckem replied with a definite trace of alarm. "now he's after me."

"What did he want?"

"I don't know."

"What did he say?"

"The same thing."

"T.S. Eliot'?"

"Yes, 'T.S. Eliot'. That's all he said."..."Perhaps it's a new code or something, like the colors of the day....Why don't you have someone check with Communications...."

Communications answered that T.S. Eliot was not a new code or the colors of the day (Heller 1961, 1994: 46). In a similar fashion, we watch the phrase, "we have some



planes” work its way through the FAA airwaves, after we are told, for the *second* time that,

At 9:03, United 173 crashed into the South Tower.

Meanwhile, a manger from Boston Center reported that they had deciphered what they had heard in one of the first hijacker transmissions from American 11:

BOSTON CENTER: Hey...you still there?

NEW ENGLAND REGION: Yes, I am.

BOSTON CENTER: ...as far as the tape, Bobby seems to think that the guy said that ‘we have some planes’. Now I don’t know if it was because it was the accent, or if there’s more than one, but I’m gonna, I’m gonna reconfirm that for you. And I’ll get back to you real quick. Okay?

NEW ENGLAND REGION: Appreciate it.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE VOICE: They have what?

BOSTON CENTER: Planes, as in plural

BOSTON CENTER: It sounds like, we’re talking to New York, that there’s another one aimed at the World Trade Center.

NEW ENGLAND REGION: There’s another aircraft?

BOSTON CENTER: A second one just hit the Trade Center.

NEW ENGLAND REGION: Okay. Yeah, we gotta get—we gotta alert the military real quick on this. (*Report* 2004: 35)

This part of Chapter One tells the story again, plane-by-plane, anecdotally, this time with portions of the inter- and intra-agency communications transcribed verbatim, instead of the phone calls from those aboard the planes. While these transcriptions retain grunts and fragments that reflect the suspense and confusion of the moment, like the phone calls from midair, they report almost nothing we do not already know.

Perhaps more revelatory, if also more ambiguous, is Chapter One’s fourth retelling of the events (after a third version is done with maps and timelines), which describes a confused administration, with the President continuing to read to grade schoolers after Andrew Card tells him “America is under attack,” because “his instinct was...not to have the country see an excited reaction at a moment of crisis” (*Report* 2004: 60). That this is theater rather than a commission report is clear.

Less so, what kind of theater. Attempting to sustain its Tom Clancy voice, the narrative moves from site to site showing the government agencies snapping into action, but in the end the action comes less close to resembling *The Hunt for Red October* than *Dr. Strangelove*. The usurpation of Presidential authority suggested by sections of the *Report* pales in comparison to the way the *Report* usurps authorial authority. If the tenor of this absurdity recalls Joseph Heller, the vast accumulation of unanchored narratives creates a cumulative effect more reminiscent of Pynchon. The aura of Clancy and Puzo start to fade, in other words, at the point where the revelation



of plot, meaning conspiracy, has facilitated twists in the plot, meaning story, such that the narrative, having established the coherence of the threat, should allow that coherence to facilitate the intervention and abortion that restores the order initially implied by people lining up for popular tours or going out for an early morning jog, by children playing with beach balls or Mr. Grundy not seeing lights.

But how, indeed, will normality ensue, how will the plot straighten things out, when instead of Mr. Grundy on Viagra, it is Donald Rumsfeld on steroids or Dick Cheney on a defibrillator? And how will the disparity between norm and disruption be resolved when neither the norm nor the disruption can find full articulation? While its prose is more pedestrian, therefore, the *Report's* structure is Pynchonesque – a series of delays infused with facticity – indicating a plot's presence but not its shape, not its purpose, not its possibility for resolution.

At another terminal in Logan Airport, for example, five more hijackers boarding a United Airlines flight had trouble, according to the ticket agent, "understanding the standard security questions and she had to go over them slowly until they gave the routine, reassuring answers" (*Report* 2004: 4). Their comprehension problems notwithstanding, the agent was ultimately "reassured" when she succeeded in evoking their claim that they had *indeed* packed their *own* luggage, that they had not been given *anything* by a *stranger*. The implication, of course, is that the least reassuring aspect of this event is the fact that the answers were "reassuring". In the end, they only assure us that the procedures assure nothing.

A few years ago, when I had gone to the relatively small airport in Albany, New York, to pick up my son, the United States had just gone to a higher level of alert, and in response the Albany Airport police were stopping each car approaching the terminal. I rolled down my window. "Do you have any explosives in your trunk?" the officer asked me. "No", I said. "OK-Go ahead", he replied, and I drove on, reassured by the knowledge that no matter where in the lot I parked, the drivers of the cars on either side of me had provided the same, routine "reassuring" answers.

The structural inability to provide reassuring answers, applies not only to the terrorists but indeed the whole *Report*, exactly because of its structure as a post-modern novel. "Once it became clear", Craig A. Warren (2007: 549) accurately explains,

that the book was not the stiff and cluttered document that the public expected, the *Report* became available to as many different literary interpretations as there were interpretations of 9/11 itself. It was suddenly and simultaneously a trauma memoir, mystery novel, espionage thriller, confessional, legal brief, episodic history, cautionary tale, and work of fantasy. While it is true that the *Report* borrowed from the conventions of many of these genres, it also refused to accommodate any one genre above all others. Few works of literature fit within the categories that scholars and booksellers promote, but it is nonetheless striking to see how flexible the



report proved to be, satisfying the needs and interests of a diverse readership whose interpretations of 9/11 at times varied widely.

What Warren call “flexibility”, in other words, reflects a repression, the return of which pervades the *Report*.

The *Report's* authoritative voice substitutes authorial control for exactly what the report and the people who authorized it, and the groups who impelled them to do so, and the people they are addressing lack: control of events. This is exactly what makes the report so post-modern, in that one characteristic of postmodern fiction, as I (1995: 39) wrote many years ago, is that postmodern authors realize that they have complete control over history and no control whatsoever over events. In that respect, the genre pastiche does not make the *Report* postmodern, but rather symptomatizes the postmodern condition from which it is produced. The Commission's power to author this history derives from the fact that it is paradigmatically fictional, such that its style both deflects and reflects its estrangement from any totalized reality, whether it is the mechanisms that motivated the attack or those that allowed it to succeed, those that assembled around the catastrophe or those that rippled out from it.

The *Report* is situated, moreover, in an array of frames, each of which recontextualizes it in a different way. As published in paperback by St Martin's Press, “with reporting and analysis by The New York Times” (cover and front page), the report contains 125 pages, paginated in roman numerals. This prefatory section covers, according to the table of contents, “Background on the 9/11 Commission” (28 pages), “Times Coverage of the Report” (44 pages), “Executive Summary of the 9/11 Report” (34 pages), lists of illustrations, tables, commission members, and staff (8 pages), and the “Preface” to the report (5 pages). Then follows the 608-page report, plus 27 pages of appendices. All of the contexts supplied by the report, already framed by the circumstances that mandated it, are thus twice more framed by the *New York Times*, once in excerpted reports about the creation of the commission, and once in excerpted reports about the *Report*, and about what the *Report* reports. Like the *Report* itself, which organizes most of its chapters as narrative chronologies, this prefatory material privileges the unfolding of events over the categorical synthesis of a capacious topic. And like the *Report* it is structured by chronology more than by appropriateness or reliability. Repeatedly, for example, sources indicate a relationship between bin Laden and Iraq, only to conclude that “we have seen no evidence that [the meetings that sources report may have taken place] developed into a collaborative operational relationship. Nor have we seen evidence indicating Iraq cooperated with al Qaeda in developing or carrying out any attacks against the United States” (*Report* 2004: 97).

Similarly, in Chapter Seven, (melodramatically titled “The Attack Looms”) we follow the activities of the nineteen attackers in the months leading up to 9/11, even



though, as I noted earlier, the *Report* has explicitly stated that the chapter is based on unreliable information. Also, as we have seen, much of it is irrelevant. When Hazmi and Mihdhar first arrived in Los Angeles, in January 2000, they attended a mosque in Culver City, where, it is speculated, an imam named Thumairy “may have had a role in helping the terrorists” (*Report* 2004: 313). After discussing the contact between them and Thumairy, the *Report* (2004: 314) tells us both that Thumairy’s claim not to recognize either of them was “somewhat suspect” and that he met and counseled “countless individuals...so he might not remember two transients like Hazmi and Mihdhar”. “The circumstantial evidence”, the *Report* (2004: 314) goes on to explain, “makes Thumairy a logical person to consider as a possible contact for Hazmi and Mihdhar. Yet, after exploring the available leads, we have not found any evidence that Thumairy provided assistance to the two operatives”.

Literally, the *Report* explains that it has discussed Thumairy in order to explain that there is no reason to discuss him. Rhetorically, however, the passage, like the al Qaeda-Iraq red herrings, implies the fissure between logic and evidence, situating its implied narrator as speaking from the world of the uncanny, where logic is not supported by evidence but at odds with it, a world where *raison d’être* has supplanted *raison*, where the only *idée* is the *idée fixe*, a place where a monomaniacal obsession with transcendent verity discounts the things of this world. Over information gathered from the “available leads”, the report here privileges a logic based on unavailable leads, exactly the same kind of sources that supported Vice President Cheney’s use of the President’s authority to order the shooting down of a commercial airplane.

Pointing out that the *Report* provides a great deal of information about the day-to-day activities of the terrorists, Kim Phillips-Fein (2007: 167) notes that “we are given only the barest interpretation of their motives, which the commission deems inexplicable”. But the inexplicable in the *Report* does not indicate the need for further investigation and explanation, but rather permits that which is beyond explanation. Understandably, therefore, Phillips-Fein (2007: 167) sees the report as leaving readers “with the understanding that one day, nineteen men decided to commit suicide and mass murder by flying planes into American landmarks – and act of unfathomable evil. The report, in other words, leaves us exactly where we began”.

Perhaps it is appropriate in a report on terror that the uncanny should authorize everything, from the mindset of the terrorists to the authority to counterattack, to the authority to speak on behalf of the 9/11 Commission. What could be more uncanny than the fact that the ethos of the Commission is omission. And sins of omission are prolific. In a particularly metafictional moment, chief author Zelikow appears as a character in his own narrative. In describing the Bush transition in regard to counterterrorism, we are told “Rice had asked University of Virginia history professor Philip Zelikow to advise her on the transition” (*Report* 2004: 288). A footnote then informs us that “Rice and Zelikow had been colleagues on the NSC staff during the first



Bush administration and were coauthors of a book concerning German unification (Zelikow and Rice 1995). As the Executive Director of the Commission, Zelikow has recused himself from our work on the Clinton-Bush transition at the National Security Council".<sup>2</sup> The problem is that as author of the document (or boss of those who authored this section), Zelikow has also recused himself from responsibility for the demotion of Richard Clarke's unit responsible in the NSA for tracking al Qaeda. If it was Zelikow's work, at Rice's behest, that relegated Clarke to that status, Zelikow as Bush employee was one major source of the culpability that Zelikow as Executive Director of the Commission was charged with uncovering. In the collapse of text and referent, of author and character, that typifies metafiction, author Zelikow omits discussion of character Zelikow in the same way that Rice coauthor Zelikow omitted his role as a character in the Bush transition team from his vita when he interviewed to become Executive Director and chief author of the 9/11 Omission Report.

The admission of this omission is signaled by the footnotes, which themselves have been omitted from the paperback edition of the *Report*: 1700 endnotes, 119 pages (of the online version), twenty percent of the entire report. The reader of the paperback version, for whom all the sources are unavailable (or only available extra-textually), cannot know that the notes not only cite sources but also often provide discursive contexts for the *Report's* utterances. Nor are these contexts always supportive of the statements made in the text.

For example, the famous Presidential Daily Briefing report, "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in the U.S." (*Report* 2004: 376) printed in its 450-word entirety is accompanied by a 461-word footnote, part of which indicates that the claim near the end of the Presidential Briefing, stating that "the FBI is conducting approximately 70 full field investigations throughout the United States that it considers Bin-Laden related" is erroneous, as the footnote explains: "The 70 full-field investigations number was a generous calculation that included fund-raising investigations. It also counted each individual connected to an investigation as a separate full-field investigation. Many of these investigations should not have been included, such as the one that related to a dead person, four that concerned people who had been in long-term custody, and eight that had been closed well before August 6, 2001".<sup>3</sup> Certainly this information, critical as it is of the FBI, is central to the charge of the Commission, not something to be buried in one of 1700+ footnotes. Even here, the *Report* fails to state

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<sup>2</sup> This appears as note 165 of chapter Six. Since footnotes are not included in the paperback text that is the subject of this essay, the page number for this citation (506) of the online document where the footnotes can be found would not be consistent with the parenthetical citations I have been using.

<sup>3</sup> This appears as note 37 of chapter Six, page 535 of the online document.





how many relevant investigations actually were under way, information it must have had to compose this note. Consider that if each of these alleged full field investigations employed two FBI agents (a modest number for a full field investigation) then 70 reduces to 35, thirteen of which should not have been counted, leaving 22, which include an undisclosed number of fund-raising investigations. Being generous to the FBI and to the Commission, it seems safe to say that the FBI was really conducting no more than 18 and more likely fewer than a dozen relevant investigations.

As I have tried briefly to suggest, the use of countless frames to reveal the “true” parameters of the event, the use of fictional devices to reveal the facts, and the use of ideological cant to claim the political high ground, all indicate the postmodern quality of the *Report*. Since the facts that this postmodern pastiche attempt to obscure preclude the conventional closure of a fictional potboiler, whereby catastrophe is either averted or revenged, the *Report* shifts the register from suspense to hope, in the form of a series of recommendations, many of which are actually vague ideals, lauded because they seemed more efficacious than the Cheney administration’s program at the time, which could be summed up as: take off your shoes at the airport and invade Iraq. Consider how much more useful, to give one example, is the *Report’s* (2004: 549-50) recommendation that: “The United States should combine terrorist travel intelligence, operations, and law enforcement in a strategy to intercept terrorists...and constrain terrorist mobility”.

I’m all for it; if we could just stop those terrorists from moving around, the planet would be safer. And that is, it turns out, the overall goal of the *Report* (2004: 517), because, as it explains, “9/11 has taught us that terrorism against American interests ‘over there’ should be regarded as we regard terrorism against America ‘over here’. In this same sense, the American homeland is the planet”.

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