

Mens Rea and Narratives of Violence: The Guilty Mind in Twenty-First-Century American Literature

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***Abstract:** This article presents two twenty-first-century novels that deal with particularly charged and contemporary expressions of violence in the United States: Matthew Quick's *Forgive Me*, Leonard Peacock and the threat of armed students in school, and John Updike's *Terrorist* and the threat of Islamic extremism. High profile acts of violence of this kind in the United States leading up to and into the years following the turn of the millennium prompted significant concern surrounding the identification of would-be perpetrators, including those in the premeditating stage of their intended attacks.*

This article argues that stepping away from the violent act and focusing instead on the violent mind situates premeditation as an integral part of violence and its conceptualization. Further, interest in the internalized aspects of violence can be seen as a response to very real socio-cultural concerns in the United States. In order to achieve this analytical focus, the article adopts the legal concepts of mens rea (the guilty mind) and actus reus (the guilty act), interweaving them with literary criticism in order to suggest that novels can serve as Momusian windows into the premeditating stage of violence through immersion into the violent mind. In so doing, they contribute more robustly to broader understandings of violence in the United States as it evolves from concept to action.

***Keywords:** Violence; premeditation; guilty mind; mens rea and actus reus; twenty-first-century American literature*

Introduction

Narratives of violence, seemingly by definition, involve acts of violence. Within the American literary tradition, such texts are somewhat ubiquitous, albeit certainly not characteristic of all novels to have come out of the United States, and their heightened visibility could in large part be because, as Richard Slotkin reminds us, “the culture and literature we call American was born out of [...] confrontation” (1973: 25). Here, however, I am not preoccupied with the extent to which violence has infused American literature, nor with narratives that involve acts of violence, but rather with those in which violence is purely theoretical, internalized as a protagonist’s thought process but never acted upon within the context of the narrative.

Around the turn of the millennium, high profile acts of violence in the United States brought to the surface greater awareness of the extent to which perpetrators go undetected in the build up to the atrocities they commit. The Columbine Massacre of 1999 reinforced that as the precursor to a violent act, premeditation can exist in seemingly innocuous contexts and individuals. After the fact, it becomes clear that violence was already in process as a theoretical exercise, through evidence of extensive preparation and meticulous forethought by the perpetrators. In such premeditated cases, the violent act and the violent mind are separate yet overlapping incarnations of violence. A useful way to approach this distinction, and one that this article will adopt in due course, is to consider the legal definitions of *actus reus* and *mens rea*, or the guilty act and the guilty mind, respectively. While the former is more visible due to its connection with bodily violence, the latter is less discernible. Yet literarily speaking, the *mens rea* can occur separately from the *actus reus*; by this I am referring to novels that engage with premeditation but that do not include the violent act, perhaps by stopping short of its implied occurrence, or by having characters ultimately choose not to commit violence or being prevented from doing so. Some familiar literary engagements with violence that are told homodiegetically through first-person narration, what I have termed elsewhere as violent-eye literature (Wilson-Scott 2017), combine both the violent mind and the violent act.¹ However, novels that fit this criteria, such as Jim Thompson’s *The Killer Inside me* (1952) and Joyce Carol Oates’s *Zombie* (1995), remain

1 In Gérard Genette’s definition, a homodiegetic narrative is one in which the narrator is “present as a character in the story he tells,” and it is thus distinct from a heterodiegetic narrative, in which the narrator is “absent from the story he tells” (1980: 224–245). This forms part of Genette’s belief that the distinction between first- and third-person narratives is “inadequate” (243).

more firmly fused with presentation of the violent act and the considerations this raises.

The premeditation stage of violence can be far more elusive, therefore, than the eventual act, and by engaging with it we respond to key concerns that have arisen in the wake of the litany of school shootings and acts of terror that occurred in the United States in the closing years of the twentieth century and that have continued into the twenty-first. By focusing on the violent mind rather than the violent act, this article looks at two twenty-first-century novels that grapple with prevalent manifestations of violence in and around the turn of the millennium: John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) and Matthew Quick's *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock* (2013), a novel about an armed student. These texts offer us the opportunity to explore historical and sociological concerns within the context of the United States, of relevance to wider research within the field of American Studies. While the former novel is written in the third person, the latter is a first-person narrative, yet both afford the reader sustained insight into the minds of the protagonists as they plan acts of violence, albeit from different proximities, with varying levels of reliability, and with differing emphasis on emotion. In Quick's novel, the protagonist is the eponymous Leonard, a teenage boy who arms himself with an old Nazi pistol with the purpose of shooting his bully after the end of the school day, and the narrative is a prolonged exploration of Leonard's mental state as he prepares for his crime and subsequent suicide. It is also a narrative of causality in that it explores the etiology of Leonard's desire to commit an act of violence and take his own life. Sometimes considered a school shooting narrative, particularly in reader reviews, the novel should not be interpreted as such for two reasons: first, Leonard's plan is to kill his bully after the latter has returned home, and not whilst the pair are at school, and secondly, he never goes through with the murder.² It is this latter point that makes *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock* of thematic and conceptual relevance to this present study, as Leonard is violent only in mindset and not in action. He engages with premeditation, but does not go through with his attack.

2 Gwynne Ellen Ash and Jane M. Saunders also exclude the novel from their analysis of rampage school shootings in young adult fiction, primarily because Leonard only plans to kill one individual as revenge. There is, it should be noted, a lack of literary precedence for school shooting narratives written from the first-person perspective of the shooter, with the notable exception of Stephen King's novella *Rage* (1977), which since the late 1990s has no longer been in print.

John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) utilizes third-person rather than first-person narration, yet it still, as Catherine Morley observes, "takes the reader into the mind of a home-grown jihadist, Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy" (2016: 4), in a fashion similar to Don DeLillo's earlier novel *Libra* (1988), which imagines the mind of John F. Kennedy's assassin Lee Harvey Oswald. In this manner, it is also akin to DeLillo's later novel *Falling Man* (2007), in which the narrative is focused at times upon the perspective of Hammad, a fictional version of one of the 9/11 hijackers, and also Martin Amis's short story "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" (2006), which approaches 9/11 from the perspective of one of the actual hijackers. Yet unlike Oswald, Hammad, and Atta, and analogous to Leonard, Ahmad does not commit an act of violence, waylaid as he is by disruptions to the plan, external interferences, and his own eventual decision not to go through with his suicide bombing. As Mark Eaton observes of what he terms an "implausible" ending (2016: 108), "Terror averted" (120). As such, the title of Updike's novel is simultaneously misleading and eye-opening: Ahmad is not, one could argue, a terrorist, for the simple reason that he never commits an act of terrorism (in the same way that Leonard is not a murderer). Yet if Ahmad is considered to be one anyway, as the directness of the concise title may suggest (and the scholarly literature at times indicates, even if only fleetingly; see e.g., Botelho 2018; Eaton 2016; Gray 2009), then intent and premeditation are positioned on a level playing field with action in terms of the way in which we understand violence and apportion blame.

It may be constructive at this stage to set out what exactly is meant by the adoption of the terms *mens rea* and *actus reus*, and how they can be of use in approaching a broader understanding of narratives of violence within the twenty-first-century American literary tradition, and the particular relevance of identifying and attempting to comprehend premeditation that arose in the wake of events such as Columbine and have continued into the post-Parkland era. Let us then consider a brief overview of the legal theory incorporated in this research, especially as it relates to literary theory, before progressing to an analysis of the presence of the guilty mind but the absence of the guilty act in the novels under study, and how this allows us to consider more precisely premeditation as a form of violence.

***Mens Rea* and *Actus Reus* in Literary Theory**

Broadly put, legal theory dictates that in order for a crime to be committed, there must be a concurrence of both *actus reus* and *mens rea*: a combina-

tion of the guilty act and the guilty mind. Whilst constructive in coming to terms with these two concepts in their loosest sense, such a definition does not fully do justice to the complexities of the two within legal theory (see, for example, Gardner and Jung 1991), and arguably evidences this article's somewhat (and deliberately) liberal approach to such theory. But given that the purpose of this work is not to contribute toward a greater understanding of criminal law, nor to explore the way in which law has filtered into fiction, certain conceptual liberties may be beneficial. After all, it is already well established that law has occupied somewhat of a ubiquitous place in literature, thematically speaking (Posner 2009: 4), with the former influencing much of the latter's structural and dramatic elements through the borrowing of characters, plot devices, and settings (MacNeil 2012: 1). Instead, this paper borrows conceptually from law in order to cast light on the violent, premeditating mind.

To explore the two legal concepts further, a useful way of comprehending the distinction between *actus reus* and *mens rea*, beyond the most basic interpretation of 'guilty act' and 'guilty mind,' and one that lends itself particularly well to the focus of this study, is literary scholar David Paroissien's explanation that *actus reus* "refers to the *external* elements of the crime, an act and its consequences," whereas *mens rea* refers to "the *internal* elements, the mental and intellectual elements that comprise, in effect, the guilty mind of the perpetrator" (2006: n.p.; emphasis added). This division of a criminal act into externality and internality is of relevance to literary analysis, which often affords far greater insight into the interior mind of a violent individual than can ever be hoped for within the legal system; as Paroissien continues, "On issues related to motive, intent and a person's inner life, writers of fiction have an advantage over judges, criminal lawyers and legal historians," those with no access to the internal machinations behind a guilty act (2006: n.p.).

Fiction thus affords unprecedented understanding of the inner workings of a perpetrator's mind, a Momusian window to the internal thoughts and feelings of the individual (see Cohn 1978).³ The novelist, as Paroissien observes, is able "to probe minds, expose how they work in a state of flux, [and] examine consciousness as it ebbs and flows" (2006: n.p.), an ability that Dorrit Cohn describes as "the singular power possessed by the novelist:

3 Momus, a Greek god who criticized the decision to create human beings without a window through which to view their inner machinations, thoughts, and feelings (see Cohn 1978).

creator of beings whose inner lives he can reveal at will” (1978: 4). Yet this power is not singular, as through such revelation the novelist opens up the interior world of their character to the reader and critic. Through access to the mindset of a protagonist or other character, either through first-person or third-person omniscient narration, the literary critic is able to comprehend what thoughts and feelings the character experiences at a given point in the narrative, keeping in mind of course that issues of honesty and reliability may be present. In instances where a violent crime is involved, in terms of the guilty mind, the guilty act, or the legally all-important combination of the two, the inner machinations of the perpetrator come to the surface, revealed rather than concealed. And even when the *actus reus* is, ultimately, absent from the narrative, what we are exposed to is the violent mind in the premeditative process.

Bearing all this in mind, there is the risk of eliding crime with violence, and also with culpability and guilt, yet such concepts are not presented as synonymous herein. Rather, in their ability to shed light on criminal liability, *actus reus* and *mens rea* serve as useful lenses to explore literary violence and its separation into two distinct elements. After all, this article is not concerned with whether or not a crime has been committed, but instead to borrow the concept of *mens rea* (and by extension *actus reus*) in order to conceptualize the distinction between violence as an internalized form of intent and as an externalized action. It is of course the externality of *actus reus* that affords it overt importance in studies of violence, since such an act is most striking due to its visibility and tangibility. In contrast, the guilty or violent mind as something internal can be more elusive, and through its intangibility is often overlooked in favor of narratives that emphasize the guilty act as the definitive signifier of violence, at the expense of a more thorough grappling with the premeditating stage.

Twenty-First-Century Violence: A Comparative Approach to Ahmad and Leonard

As two twenty-first-century texts, *Terrorist* and *Forgive Me*, Leonard Peacock explore home-grown terrorism and armed students in school, respectively, and as such thematically engage with what David McWilliam (2016) has identified as key areas of American fear and “moral panic” in and around the turn of the millennium (184). Such fear is intimately connected

with a desire to understand motivations and, importantly, identify signifiers in the build up to an act of violence in order to prevent its execution.⁴

On the surface, Ahmad and Leonard share a number of similarities, presenting fertile opportunity for a comparative analysis of the two novels. Both characters are eighteen years of age, and thus are on the liminal threshold between childhood and adulthood. They are also isolated and vulnerable, with physically absent fathers and emotionally distant mothers, with whom they live in New Jersey – at least while the mothers are at home. Ahmad’s mother, a nurse’s aide who paints in her spare time, often sees him for “less than one hour in twenty-four” (9), while Leonard’s mother “de-mommed herself” by renting an apartment in Manhattan and leaving him alone in New Jersey (9).⁵ The boys’ suburban existence further situates them as liminal, existing on the margins of New York City, which occupies an important place for both characters in their respective texts: it is the Lincoln Tunnel (that connects New Jersey with Manhattan) that Ahmad intends to bomb, and it is life in the City that Leonard’s mother chooses over a home in New Jersey with him.

The absence of the protagonists’ fathers is of important relevance to a study of violence and American literature, in part because it leaves Ahmad and Leonard further vulnerable to the whims and neglect of their mothers, but also because of the suggestion that adolescent boys require a relationship with their fathers in order to ensure socialization. This theory is a prevalent one, to the extent that Kenneth Millard has observed that for a boy to develop a place within society in the context of American narratives, “a satisfactory relationship with the father” is a requirement (2007: 15).⁶ In his 1990 text *Iron John*, a work infused with toxic notions of masculinity that render the text relevant today, Robert Bly argued that paternal remoteness can lead to a form of grief, coupled with the need to reassert a sense of

4 Consider Sandy Hook Promise’s short films *Evan* (2016) and *Tomorrow’s News* (2017), designed to reinforce to viewers that early indications of school shootings exist beforehand and, if identified and acted upon, can be used to prevent violence.

5 The extent to which the protagonists’ mothers are positioned as blameworthy in the texts, particularly *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock*, is arguably problematic, and prompts a reading of the novels as twenty-first-century examples of mother blame (see Wilson-Scott 2017).

6 For an indication of the extent to which absent fathers became a pertinent social concern in the United States in the years leading up to the turn of the millennium, consider the publication of the following texts: David Blankenhorn’s *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (1994) and David Popenoe’s *Life Without Father: Compelling New Evidence That Fatherhood and Marriage are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society* (1996).

masculinity. Beyond such senses of loss and even extraneity, there is also the suggestion that the absence of the father leaves the son exposed and vulnerable to external influences that can be (and often are within fiction) distinctly negative. In her article on postfeminist fatherhood in American animated films, Berit Åström argues that “if a father does not make his son feel loved, the son may be open to exploitation by other father figures (2015: 304), and within literature, violence is often the outcome. By way of example, in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1996) it is the absence of the father that leads to the protagonist’s need to establish a robust and idealized sense of masculinity through violence and the creation of a false father figure, with the effects of paternal absence (and the subsequent maternal omnipresence; see Wilson-Scott 2017) lying at the heart of the novel.

While absent from *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock*, such a dangerous false father exists in *Terrorist* in the form of Shaikh Rashid, Ahmad’s imam and “surrogate father” (13), who not only symbolizes the religion of Ahmad’s absent father but who warps it into something violent. This radicalization goes unchallenged by the actual father, who is not present to steer Ahmad away from fundamentalism and violence, figuring only limitedly in his son’s memory as a “warm, dark shadow” in possession of a “sweet smell [...] with a hint of some spice in it, perhaps a Middle Eastern dish he had just consumed” (36). Filling this wholesomely recalled void with Shaikh Rashid, despite the fact that the imam “does not offer himself as a father” (145), Ahmad is left isolated and vulnerable, to the extent that “the young man’s faith is welded into fanaticism” (Däwes 2010: 507), manipulated as he is “by older men to be both an executioner and a sacrificial lamb” (Botelho 2018: 23). Yet the risk of a false father can be mitigated by the arrival of a replacement father figure, one who comes to stand in for the absent father in a positive and nurturing manner, and prevents exploitation by false fathers such as Shaikh Rashid. Here the narrative arcs of *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock* and *Terrorist* again converge, as it is the intervention of a male faculty member – in both cases, and for varying reasons, a Jewish faculty member – that helps to prevent some of the eventual acts of violence from occurring. Coupled perhaps with Ahmad and Leonard’s own doubts about their respective attacks, and potentially even an underlying unwillingness to commit them, violence is halted while still in the premeditative stage. Both Herr Silverman and Jack Levy, it can be argued, are replacement father figures for Leonard and Ahmad, respectively. The former is “the most admirable adult” that Leonard knows (7), yet the paternal ele-

ment is more specifically realized in Updike's novel due to the romantic relationship between Jack and Ahmad's mother. Crucially, in the absence of the real fathers and despite the presence of the neglectful mothers and false fathers, it is these two teachers who offer support to Ahmad and Leonard, reiterating perhaps the oft-held conviction in literature that good American boys require good American father figures, as Millard's work suggests.

Beyond these fruitful points of comparison, the most pertinent connection between the two texts is the exposure they provide to the minds of Leonard and Ahmad as they prepare their attacks (both of which they deem necessary, and which also involve suicide), coupled with the lack of an actual violent crime – beyond planning and conspiracy. Put more plainly, Ahmad and Leonard prepare but ultimately do not commit an act of violence, and so what readers are left with is a protracted exploration of unfulfilled violent intent and purpose: premeditative rather than premeditated violence.

The Violent Perspectives of Ahmad and Leonard

Given the absence of the guilty act in both novels, if this were a study preoccupied with legal rather than literary theory, there would be little to debate regarding the violence of Ahmad and Leonard, especially given that they choose not to go through with their attacks. The former, it can be argued, is not a terrorist, and the latter is not a shooter. In this sense, the novels are not as radical as sometimes perceived, as while readers may be “taken to places of discomfort and uncertainty [and be] asked to imagine positions and viewpoints they find inimical” (Botelho 2018: 24, on *Terrorist*), the texts lack the extreme qualities associated with actual rather than would-be killers.⁷ Yet given the protracted exposure to their inner thoughts as they prepare, at times meticulously, their intended violent acts, *Forgive Me*, *Leonard Peacock* and *Terrorist* can be read as prolonged explorations of violence, ones in keeping with turn-of-the-millennium and twenty-first-century concerns surrounding identifying violent acts prior to their execution. Updike's and Quick's novels may not be robust in their ability to stand

7 As a point of comparison with Quick's novel, Stephen King's *Rage* is also an exercise in exploring the mindset of an adolescent boy who takes a gun with him to school, with the intent to die at the end of his attack, and who reflects back upon the route that has brought him to this point. Yet unlike Leonard, King's protagonist kills two of his teachers and holds his class hostage at gunpoint.

in for the type of individual who perpetrates violent acts, but they nevertheless offer an insight into what a violent mind – framed here as the *mens rea* or the premeditating mind – can look like in flux and mid contemplation, as well as what motivates an individual to consider committing violence.

In her analysis of *Terrorist*, Birgit Däwes summarizes the text as “the transformation of a sensitive eighteen-year-old Arab-American high school graduate into a suicide bomber” (2010: 507). While her exploration of the novel is, of course, far more complex and nuanced than this quotation might suggest, as is her study of its protagonist, it serves as an interesting point to this current analysis. For one, Ahmad is not just an Arab American high school student, but is also Irish American, and thus he occupies two historically contentious and loaded representations of American identity: one synonymous with contemporary notions of the other within (people from the Arab world), and one indicative of an older example of American alterity (people from Ireland). Yet Ahmad is, first and foremost, American, to the extent that he is a “familiar, iconic figure” in the sense that he is “an outsider among outsiders” (Gray 2009: 136), but also because he is, as Teresa Botelho identifies, just “another in a succession of discontented teenage American characters inaugurated by Holden Caulfield” in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (Botelho 2018: 17).⁸ As an “attempt to imagine the other” that fails, in Richard Gray’s reading, to come “together as a meaningful story” (2009: 136), *Terrorist* is an example of what Michael Rothberg, in his response to Gray’s article, refers to as the “failure of the imagination” that he, Rothberg, views as indicative of post-9/11 fiction (2009: 153). Given that the novel never moves, as Gray argues, beyond Ahmad’s anger and hostility toward a world he sees as immoral, terrorism – or at least the threat of it – becomes a method of sensemaking and negotiating one’s place in the world. Alienation, fundamentalism, and parental neglect are at the epicenter of Updike’s narrative, which offers insight into the nascent fundamentalism of Ahmad, for whom God is everything:

Ahmad, in his fatherless years with his blithely fatherless mother has grown accustomed to being God’s sole custodian, the one to whom God is an invisible but palpable companion. God is ever with him. (39)

8 Additional hallmarks of Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* can be found in the narratives of both Leonard and Ahmad, further indicating the extent to which the novel has influenced subsequent characterizations of troubled adolescent boys in the United States.

It is this commitment to his faith that is ultimately distorted and twisted by his imam and the wider terror cell into something dangerous.

When readers first encounter Ahmad, he is religiously zealous but not extremist. Early in the novel, he refers to the “terrible doom” he believes American culture is heading toward (39), but does not reveal an intention to play a part in any sort of reprisal against those he describes as infidels and kafirs. While his eventual radicalization is foreshadowed through a “devotion to Allah” that is described as having “amputated” his future (184), it is only when Jack Levy, his guidance counselor, asks him about any work he has lined up after high school that Ahmad reluctantly reveals Shaikh Rashid’s suggestion that he “drive a truck” (41). The subtle distinction between being a truck driver and driving a truck is an important one, as through the unfolding of the narrative it becomes clear that the imam’s motivation is not “the steady money” associated with the work (141), nor finding a career for Ahmad. Despite Ahmad’s initial contentment driving for Excellency Home Furnishings, his imam does not intend for Ahmad to be a truck driver in the long run, but rather to drive a van loaded with explosives into the Lincoln Tunnel, killing both himself and others around him. The distinction is also one reiterated by Ahmad’s mother, who states, “I have no idea why he thinks he wants to drive a truck. It’s an idea he picked up from his imam – not his mama, his imam” (141). The fact that truck driving is not to be Ahmad’s career can also be read in his acquisition of a Class C license, which does not require him to pass a road test conducive to a life-long vocation.

As the novel progresses, Ahmad becomes increasingly radicalized, to the extent that he not only agrees to be an *istishhādi*, a martyr, but also jealously guards this opportunity: “the mission is mine” (237), “it is mine to do” (304). Despite being vulnerable to the fundamentalist propaganda of Shaikh Rashid and his wider cell (largely due to the absence of his own father and the apathy of his mother, it is suggested), Ahmad nevertheless “knows he is being manipulated, yet accedes to the manipulation, since it draws from him a sacred potential” (237). He possesses a need to belong and a paternal void that he fills with religion, but one that is complicated by an “itch of cruelty within him” (228). Upon learning that his friend and “ersatz older brother” (189), Charlie Chehab, has been beheaded by Shaikh Rashid’s cell, he shows little empathy. Nor is he moved by the realization that his mother will suffer as a result of the bombing, not just as a grieving parent but through the stigmatization associated with this role: “She’ll not only lose you,” Jack tells him, “but she’ll become known as the mother of a

monster” (293). In fact, while on route to the Lincoln Tunnel, he begins “to take pleasure in not being moved” (293) by such considerations. So, while his decision not to bomb the tunnel means that he “committed no crime” (308), no *actus reus*, the novel is replete with evidence of Ahmad’s violent mind, his *mens rea*, through trace signs that he is a willing participant if not in his own radicalization, then at least in the planned violence to which it leads. When combined with Ahmad’s itches of cruelty and a commitment to the terror plot (until the abrupt intervention of Jack Levy as a form of *deus ex machina*), *Terrorist* is a violent novel that seemingly ceases to be so only in its denouement. The novel closes with Ahmad and Jack driving back toward New Jersey in the van laden with explosives, with the former looking at the city as it “crawls with people [...] reduced by the towering structures around them to the size of insects, but scuttling [...] each one of them impaled live upon the pin of consciousness” (310). His concluding thoughts show little indication of a de-radicalization: “*These devils, Ahmad thinks, have taken away my God*” (310; emphasis original).

Unlike *Terrorist*, in which occasional instances of foreshadowing indicate a threat of violence that only slowly emerges in parallel with Ahmad’s gradual radicalization and commitment to jihad and martyrdom, *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock* opens with the image of a defining signifier of American violence: a gun. The weapon is positioned on a breakfast table and adjacent to a bowl of oatmeal, and despite being described as “modern art” and reminiscent of “some weird steampunk utensil anachronism,” readers are left in no doubt that the P-38 WWII Nazi handgun, complete with swastika and eagle, is “real as hell” (2013: 1). Thus, the novel engages instantaneously with the threat of violence, with Leonard outlining his intentions at the outset, as well as indicating an etiology behind them:

my modern artwork [will be] instantly famous. Especially after I actually kill Asher Beal and off myself. Art value always goes up once the artist’s associated with fucked-up things such as cutting off his own ear like Van Gogh, [...] or having his minions murder a celebrity like Manson, [...] or having unspeakable things done to him so he kills a classmate and puts a bullet in his own head like I will do later today. (2-3)

There is a puerile flippancy to Leonard’s thoughts, one that continues throughout the novel, yet the reference to the “unspeakable things” he has endured, and which indicate a trauma that prompts him to plan a murder-suicide, lends a gravity to the situation that is amplified by the presence of the real gun.

Throughout the narrative, Leonard ritualistically works toward his *actus reus* and suicide by giving important people in his life a farewell present. Through the act of rewarding and thanking individuals, the novel emphasizes both the absence and existence of relationships, to the extent that for Gretchen Rumohr-Voskuil, Quick “did not intend to explore gun violence, but rather, the importance of helpers” (2019: 42). This argument is plausible given that Leonard never uses the gun, but the presence of the *mens rea* throughout the premeditative stage prevents the threat of violence from being wholly alleviated. As with *Terrorist*, the *actus reus* is averted only at the denouement, meaning that up until it is avoided, the exposure to the protagonist’s violent intent, or *mens rea*, suggests that violence is a probability if not an inevitability.

Leonard’s gifting of farewell presents also places an unspoken and unacknowledged importance on his own suicide rather than his planned murder, an observation strengthened by his decision to commit these acts of violence on a day that holds significance for him: his eighteenth birthday. Janelle Mathis and Polly Vaughan incorporate *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock* into their work with adolescent boys experiencing psychosocial distress, and thus it is understandable that they focus on suicide in the novel more heavily than they explore Leonard’s fixation with revenge and murder. They observe that “Leonard fluctuates between feeling powerful and powerlessness” (2018: 297), and this adolescent preoccupation with being in control, particularly given the presence of trauma and instability in his life, manifests as the desire to commit harm to both another boy and himself. Leonard, and Ahmad it should be recalled, intend to die either during or immediately after their attacks, in Ahmad’s case during the explosion that is to destroy the Lincoln Tunnel, and for Leonard through a self-inflicted gunshot. In his work on suicide attacks, Antonio Preti discusses what he calls “suicide with a hostile intent,” which he links with a form of death known as *iacatio* that was used by the Romans “to make an enduring impression on the public” (2006: 28). Jonathan Fast makes a similar argument for school shootings, suggesting that they transform suicide into a “public ceremony,” one that is “a throwback to something very ancient and primitive” (2008: 19). Such “ceremonial violence,” as Fast describes it in his monograph of the same title, is a form of performance. While Ahmad cherishes the “sacred potential” (237) inherent in martyrdom, to the extent that he at times criticizes himself for veering toward blasphemy, Leonard is also preoccupied with power, explored through performance: “I feel so

fucking mighty knowing that the P-38 is loaded in my backpack” (36). Applying Fast’s line of argument to the novel, Leonard displays a desire to be godlike, a self-apotheosis that runs parallel with a form of ritualistic brutality and violence. Positioned outside Asher’s window, gun at the ready, Leonard wonders, “will I become temporarily powerful if I shoot Asher?” (189). Such a desire for power originates in Leonard’s lack of it, since he is not only Asher’s potential killer, but also his victim: late in the narrative, readers learn that Leonard has been sexually abused by Asher after the latter was similarly abused by his uncle on a fishing trip. While the planned murder is a form of revenge, it is also a method through which Leonard believes he can take back control and become powerful, providing insight into both the violent mind and the etiology of violence.

After giving all of his gifts and arriving outside Asher’s window with the gun and a seeming intent to use it, Leonard experiences an abrupt change of heart:

My P-38 is still pointed at the primary target, but I’m starting to realize that I’m not going to complete this mission. [...] My heart’s just not in it, but I’m not really sure why. Probably because I’m a fuckup who can’t do anything right. (194)

Unlike the sudden appearance of Jack Levy at the side of the highway along which Ahmad drives the truck, there is no intervention in *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock*. Two factors come into play at this stage in the novel. The first is that Leonard begins to display an understanding of Asher and his behavior, one that veers toward empathy, prompting him to question whether all “the really bad shit” was just Asher’s “way of punishing [Leonard] for failing to protect him” (183), for not recognizing the suffering and trauma he experienced on the fishing trip; here, we return to the issue of visible but overlooked signs in the build up to violence. The other factor is that at this stage, Leonard favors the expression “the target” rather than Asher’s name, adopting a pseudo-military vernacular that indicates both an unconscious distancing from the planned murder (framed as the “mission”) and Asher as a person, and also a puerile performance: Leonard is playing the soldier.

Reflecting back later from the safety of temporal distance and a clear head, Leonard admits that “it almost seemed like I was watching a movie when I had the gun pointed at my classmate – like it wasn’t even real” (251).⁹ There

9 Here again we find a link between the novel and Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, with both Holden and Leonard evidencing the influence movies can have on the lives of young American men in crisis.

is thus the suggestion that Leonard was only ever playing at violence, despite professing the authenticity of his attempt to Herr Silverman:

I went to Asher Beal's house tonight. I was going to kill him. I really was. I've wanted to kill him for a long time now. [...] I walked up to his bedroom window with the gun in my hand. I raised the P-38 up to the window, aimed at his head – but I couldn't do it. I just couldn't. [...] I *should* have killed him. (222; emphasis original)

Yet the absence of the violent act – the *actus reus* – and the uncertainty surrounding whether or not Leonard ever truly intended to perform it, does not mitigate the novel's explorations of the violent mind – the *mens rea* – and nor does it alleviate the relevance of such investigation at a time preoccupied with understanding motivation and signs of premeditation, particularly in this instance in young white men. Leonard is not violent in action but he is in intent, even if only fleetingly. As with the closing lines of *Terrorist*, Quick's novel concludes with Leonard still parentally neglected and in a similar, troubled mindset to the one in which readers first encountered him.

Like *Terrorist*, *Forgive Me*, *Leonard Peacock* offers a sustained insight – that Momusian window described by Cohn – into the mind of a young man as he works toward committing an act of violence. Yet through the *mens rea*, the reader enjoys a far closer proximity to the feelings and emotions of Leonard than they do to the inner world of Ahmad, in part because the first-person versus the third-person narration facilitates a greater intimacy. Readers are aware that Leonard feels “so low” (178), and that he is cognizant that the extent of his misery is hidden from others and thus unobservable: “I'm acting again, keeping my true feelings repressed – I'm aware of that, but I can't help it” (167). His narrative is confessional, an account of an internal world characterized by distress and arguably a greater focus on self-harm than the intended attack on another, although the two are intertwined. Conversely, Ahmad's narrative is more clinical and less confessional, potentially the result of his radicalization which keeps him at a greater distance from both the reader and also himself, lost as he is within the violent ideologies of other men. Ahmad is conforming to the expectations of others, and so while *Terrorist* engages with *mens rea* through the premeditative stage of a planned violent act, the inner feelings and emotions of the protagonist are less prevalent than in Quick's novel.

Both novels, however, allow the reader and critic to penetrate more deeply into violence as a mindset, something intangible through its internality and often invisible to the external gaze until it manifests as the *actus reus*.

When no such violent act takes place through the decision of the potential perpetrator, the violent mind can remain hidden, and this is where literature proves a fruitful means of thinking about violence as something separate from and not solely defined by the violent act, placing weight on premeditation and the violent mind. Despite their engagement and seeming commitment to the execution of an *actus reus*, Leonard and Ahmad ultimately choose life, not death, for both themselves and others. For Ahmad, this decision remains intricately connected to his faith, as “he does not want to desecrate [God’s] creation by willing death [and so instead] he wills life” (306), whereas for Leonard the decision is less precisely articulated. For both, however, the decision is their own (despite the intervention of Jack Levy in *Terrorist*), and while it comes in time to prevent the *actus reus*, it does not eradicate the existence of the *mens rea*, rendering the two novels illuminative narratives of American premeditative violence in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Mens rea and *actus reus* are valuable concepts when it comes to thinking about the internal and external aspects of violence, with the latter occupying a more discernible and recognizable position. Yet even when separate from the guilty act, the violent mindset provides fertile ground for considering premeditation and the way in which violence is an evolving process not simply defined by its eventual execution. The thoughts and perspective of a perpetrator of violence allow the reader and critic to explore the person behind the action in a manner more probing and with a greater sense of authority, thus bringing to light the human side of violence.

Both *Terrorist* and *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock* explore pertinent themes of violence, incarnations of atrocity that were and continue to be of heightened relevance in the United States both around the turn of the millennium and into the first few decades of the twenty-first century. Through the absence of the violent act, they are seemingly narratives of violence that cease to be so only in their denouements, yet the argument herein is that the sustained immersion into the minds of the would-be perpetrators enables a far greater picture of literary violence to emerge, one that shifts the focus away from the act without negating what the text has to say about contemporary American narratives of violence. What it offers us instead is insight into premeditation, and the way in which young men are lured or compelled towards violence as coping strategies. In both novels, the planning of a

violent act serves to impart a sense of stability, power, and purposefulness into Ahmad and Leonard's lives.

Abandoned by their fathers and neglected by their mothers, Ahmad and Leonard are recognizable representations of adolescence and alienation in American literature. As liminal characters on the cusp of adulthood, they both believe that violence is the answer to the problems they endure, or that they perceive to exist in society. Through Ahmad, Updike offers an exploration not of a terrorist act but of radicalization, while Quick explores the role of trauma and etiology in the development of a desire to commit violence. Thus, the sensationalism of the *actus reus* is mitigated, leaving the representation of violence in the sole custody of the *mens rea*, through premeditation. The removal of the *actus reus*, so frequently elided with violence, thus affords a novel way of thinking about what texts can tell us about narratives of violence in flux. This, arguably, is a response to concerns that arise out of actual acts of atrocity. After all, there is a lot to learn about etiology from concealed, internalized representations of brutality, ones that add to the picture of what violence looks like in its evolution from concept to action.

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