



Antiheroes in Mock-heroic Battles: Post 9/11 Alternatives in Jess Walter's Novel, The Zero

Munir Ahmed Al-Aghberi¹

Associate Professor of English Literature, Albaydha University

maghberi@yahoo.com

Hussein Saleh Ali Al-bahji

Assistant Professor of English Literature, Sana'a University.

Assistant Professor of English Literature, Azal University for Human Development

Husseini9472@gmail.com

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Abstract

Placing Jess Walter's *The Zero* within a post 9/11 counter discourse, the present study examines the novel as a modern mock-heroic fictional work. It embarks from the hypothesis that the novel stands out as a counternarrative to the official 9/11 discourse which Walter chooses to satirizes by using his own version of the mock-heroic traditions. Relying on the formalistic critical tenets, the novel is critically and textually analyzed as a parody of both the detective fiction genre as well as the early post 9/11 fiction adopting the American official narrative. The argument proceeds through three sub-headings. The first part queries the novel's representation of antiheroism in response to the discourse of heroism prevalent in American culture. The second part ponders on the mock-heroic battles and situations taking place as part of the US war against terror. The last part tackles the multilayered parody by which the novel addresses the hyperreal world created by the mainstream media to overshadow the event's factual enigma. The study concludes that *The Zero* features Walter's modern mock heroic of an entire socio-political and artistic phenomenon.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Greek myth, Cadmus killed a dragon and sowed (planted) its teeth which sprang up as warriors who fought each other; the few survivors supposedly founded Thebes. The proverb “sow dragon's teeth” applies to the action that is intended to prevent trouble, but which inadvertently brings it about (Farlex Dictionary of Idioms, 2017). The above context might serve as a brief prologue to the present study which explores the mock-heroic elements in Walter's novel, *The Zero*. Embarking from the observation that the novel deliberately deviates from the common post 9/11 discourse, the inquiry intends to substantiate how Walter satirizes

the American official response to the event by using an adapted version of the mock-heroic style. Choosing to investigate the mock-heroic elements marks an advanced step in the novel's body of literature which, as shown in the following section, either reads it superficially as a novel of trauma or examines its humorous and satirical elements. In this light, the present study presumes that 'sowing the dragon's teeth' can be one of the several 9/11 alternate narratives that the novel has addressed, namely the one in which the action of an undue heroism adversely backfires.

2. Literature Review

Jess Walter's novel, *The Zero* (2006) encompasses the elements of a multilayered satire which parodies the thriller plot structure in order to poke fun at a national political system, that, in the process of promoting security, creates its own enemies. Most of the studies approaching the novel from the post 9/11 standpoint disregard the centrality of its satirical style and choose to focus on the traumatic experience, violations committed under the state of exceptionalism, etc. One of the recent queries which tackle the satirical form of the novel is Worthington's book chapter "Jess Walter's *The Zero*: Satirizing the 'Desert of the Real,'" (2015). The chapter explores the style of *The Zero* in terms of adequacy to depict an individual's trauma by way of creating a narrative form that re-enacts the same traumatic experience. Dodge's "September 11 and Public Grief: Grieving Otherwise in Jess Walter's *The Zero*" (2014) argues that the novel serves as a satire against the US response to the attacks as well as the collective grieving.

Kristine Miller's "Reading and Writing the Post-9/11 Cop: Trauma, Personal Testimony, and Jess Walter's *The Zero*" argues that the novel's authentic approach to trauma as fundamentally "unspeakable and unrepresentable," (2014, p. 29) surpasses the traditional notions of trauma fiction adopted by Caruth and others and makes it "absolutely true to the event" (2014, p. 29). From a relevant viewpoint, Daniel Olson chapter in the book titled *Gothic War on Terror* (2022) embarks from the biographical background of the novel when Walter was ghostwriting a memoir to investigate the psychological effects haunting the protagonists as a result of their criminal involvements. Duvall's "Homeland Security and the State of (American) Exception(alism): Jess Walter's *The Zero* and the Ethical Possibilities of Postmodern Irony" (2013) seeks to show how Walter's novel, through the use of a postmodern irony, succeeds to address the post-9/11 scenario as well as the official blurred narrative of the event.

Derosa's "Alterity and the Radical Other in Post-9/11 Fiction" is a journal article arguing that *The Zero* is an exploration of "the engagement with alterity and the terrorist Other" (2013, p. 159) that, through the Arab and Muslim characters, reconfigures "terrorism not as a cultural phenomenon" (2013, p. 159) but as an action that can be taken even by those who claim combatting terror (2013, p. 159). Such insights are shared by other recent studies which investigate the novel from variable perspectives, yet make almost similar conclusions. Thannoon (2020) uses the socio-cultural approach to figure out the traumatized responses of the individuals and the motifs behind these reactions. However, the study departs the psychological realms to show how Walter introduces a special kind of comedy to criticize the political system of America within the time of terrorism.

Resano's study, "Of Heroes and victims: Jess Walter's *The Zero* and the satirical post-9/11 novel" is one of the fewest that could understand the real message conveyed by the novel

Antiheroes in Mock-heroic Battles: Post 9/11 Alternatives in Jess Walter's Novel, The Zero

which is, accordingly, found to engage in a dialogue “with the official narrative of 9/11 as trauma and the War on Terror as a righteous act of national defense” (2017, p. 12). Resano investigated the multiple layers of satire encompassed by the novel which, instead of going in line with the contemporary contest to dignify the event and take for granted the official narrative, questions many law violations committed under the name of national security and even poses challenging counternarratives to what has been said. “Against the univocal, black-and-white rationale of the official narrative, the novel suggests the possibility of alternative and open-ended discourses” (2017, p. 13).

Although some of the above studies preferred to apply the term ‘satire’ to *The Zero*, an important aspect has been overlooked that the novel incorporates the elements of both parody and satire which associate it with the mock-heroic style and content so far. Resano mentions at the outset of his argument that the novel can “take the shape of a satiric mock-heroic” (2017, p. 17) where the protagonist stands out as a mockery of the widespread use of the term “hero” in the 9/11 narrative (2017, p. 90). Walter was quite aware of the importance of the genre to convey his ideas about 9/11 and, thus, he noted in the “journals” he kept during writing the novel to how he “struggled to find a narrative shape for an allegorical satire about the aftermath of 9/11” (Walter, 2007b, p. 8).

The classical mock epic (mock-heroic) denotes a “satirical form, usually a poem in heroic couplets, which presents low characters or trivial subjects in the lofty style of classical epic or heroic poems” (Birch & Hoope, 2012, p. 1178). Its conventional form relies on the disjunction between the content of the literary work and its style in a way that tends to both parody the epic poetry and satirize “the people and events who appear to regard themselves in heroic light” (Birch & Hoope, 2012, p 1178). Employing an elevated diction to depict absurd incidents and situations as heroic, the mock epic usually incorporates the elements of epic machinery including: “invocation to the Muse; the challenge; battles; boasting from the hero; games and other tests of prowess; perilous journeys; epic similes; prayers and sacrifices to gods and goddesses, and their subsequent intervention; the visit to the underworld; and the vision of future glories.” (Birch & Hoope, 2012, p 1178). Nevertheless, the prose mock epic of the 18th century onwards, namely after Alexander Pope, tended to deviate from the norms of the classical epic machinery in part or whole “for more direct personal and political satire” (Birch & Hoope, 2012, p 1179).

Precisely, the present argument embarks from the notion that the novel is a modern version of mock-heroic, thus it should not stick to the classical conventions of the epic form and adapt to the modern-day generic transformations. Taking into account that the typical mock-heroic satirizes both the heroic style and heroic situation, *The Zero* uses some generic conventions to parody both the early post 9/11 novel, on the one hand, and to ridicule the widespread discourse of heroism, on the other. In addition to satirizing the heroic response to the 9/11 attacks, the novel parodies the detective fiction and thrillers narrative modes which occupy an important position in American culture.

3. Methodology

Following the qualitative approach, the study depends on the formalistic theoretical framework to analyze the stylistic features of the novel as a mock heroic. Besides, it makes use of the descriptive and textual analysis of the novel to find the stylistic structures that support the argument, whereas a broad and detailed discourse analysis of the novel's content is conducted to substantiate the counternarrative hypothesis. The approach entails showcasing many fictional people, events, expressions, motifs, and images which are found to have their own counterparts in real life in order to prove how the novel mocks an entire complicated situation in an analogical mode. To facilitate the argument, the topic is approached from three perspective: the representation of antiheroism in response to the discourse of heroism prevalent in American culture; the mock-heroic battles and situations taking place as part of the US war against terror; and the multilayered parody by which the novel addresses the hyperreal world created by the mainstream media.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Antiheroes

To begin with, the central character stands out as a funny mimicry of heroism. Brian Remy is a policeman turned agent in the wake of 9/11. Remy suffers from a short-term memory loss which amounts to dissociative identity disorder resulting in a double personality, with one personality not recalling the earlier actions of the other. Throughout the novel, Brian works as part of a team to recover the paper scattered by the attack. They act like heroes distinctly championing the national cause of recollecting the shattered store of documents. The mission of recovering the paper amounts to a first-rate importance overshadowing many priorities of the 9/11 aftermath. As the novel proceeds, Remy is recruited to investigate some 9/11 suspects and, later on, he gets involved in many secret operations. The funniest humor about Remy, the mock hero with a presumable task of detecting shadowy suspects, is his inability to keep track of his own actions. He asks his friend Guterak to follow him, "I want you to physically tail me. Follow me around and see where I go. What I do. Keep track of it. Don't let me see you" (Walter, 2007a, p. 204). The mock-hero idea arises from the paradox of assigning a task of investigating such a significant case as a 9/11 investigation to a half-conscious cop who cannot keep up his senses and hardly remembers the circumstances he is working within.

Primarily, Brian Remy, the central character in the novel is an anti-hero who stands out as a mockery of the matter and manner of a post 9/11 detective hero. The anti-hero notion is set so early in the novel by choosing the speech of Bardamu for epigraph,

Could I, I thought, be the last coward on earth?

How terrifying! ... All alone

with two million stark raving heroic madmen

armed to the eyeballs ...

Céline,

Journey to the End of the Night (Walter, 2007a, epigraph)

Antiheroes in Mock-heroic Battles: Post 9/11 Alternatives in Jess Walter's Novel, *The Zero*

The epigraph, simulating the great epical armies and battles, foreshadows that the story of Remy will not be one of heroism, thus hinting to the alternative perspective from which 9/11 narrative is viewed in *The Zero*. The lonely “coward” standing against “two million stark raving heroic madmen” determines the nature of Remy’s encounter as well as the measures by which he is judged. Deeply considered, Remy’s anti-heroism results not so much from moral shortcomings but from the failure to be one of his time’s “heroic madmen.” To liberate the mind of readers from the dominant dictates of the media, Walter intentionally portrays the protagonist whose sense of weirdness results from being “the last sane person” in a world of insanity (Walter, 2007a, p. 291). Casting a character against such an unhomely backdrop unfolds multiple layers of “absurdity—in the face of absurdity” (Walter, 2007b, p. 13). This view is adopted by Resano who insightfully applies “Bardamu’s feelings of Dislocation” to the post-9/11 America in which a detached officer like Remy finds himself “surrounded by collective insanity.” Resano traces this insanity back to,

the American public’s overwhelming support for the Bush administration’s narrative of victimization and retaliation, which justifies the deeply aggressive and preemptive US military response by an oftentimes absurd logic: i.e., “they hate our freedoms,” in president Bush’s words. Thus, the “raving heroic madmen armed to the eyeballs” of the epigraph seems to refer not so much to soldiers acting on behalf of the US government but to the American public wholeheartedly embracing the patriotic and militaristic narrative which, in many cases, turns out to be unapologetically absurd. (2017, p. 193)

Symbolically, the American heroism might edge on villainy, a fact that, although officially disregarded, tells a lot about the 9/11 circumstances. Walter highlights it through his fictional mouthpiece, Jaguar, who asks, “[d]oes a man ever realize that he has been the villain of his own story?” (Walter, 2007a, p. 321).

Walter’s protagonist is an off-shoot of many heroes who fall the victims of absurd systems that they are simultaneously part of and cannot extricate themselves from. While Kafka draws the prototypes of such nihilistic scenario, Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* showcases the absurd order in the American context as some mysterious power beyond the individual’s understanding, “the anonymous “they,” the enigmatic “they,” who are in charge. Who is “they”? I don’t know” (Heller, 2010). Nevertheless, the hero in Heller’s satire is found less submissive to the oppressive power of the “enigmatic they” than Remy whose split personality is a defense mechanism that allows him to compromise between the paradoxical missions of committing illegal acts and preserving a semblance of innocence. He defines such a dichotomy as follows, “I apparently have this job where I file paper and chase down dead people, but I don’t have the first idea what it means. I do these things that make no sense, and people get hurt. I come home with blood on my shoes and . . .” (Heller 224).

The episodic structure of the novel, “with each episode ending abruptly in media res and with a hyphen” (Miller cited in Diaconu, 2016, p. 49), includes only the perspective of one of Remy’s personalities, the apparently harmless distraught and disoriented policeman, adrift in the world following the disaster. Remy’s double personality showcases the American dual policies of protecting democracy and violating laws in the name of battling terror. In the words of Ali Behdad, “amnesia in the US is a cultural form of repudiation that works through projection and denial” and by which patriotism entails turning a blind eye to the abusive acts

committed by American soldiers (as cited in Diaconu, 2016, p. 55). In his notes taken during the process of writing the novel, the author himself mentions this national double identity: “We have chosen to forget. We have chosen to be a party to our propaganda. We are all living half our national lives, allowing some side of ourselves to do the dirty work” (Diaconu, 2016, p. 55).

Remy’s anti-heroic character is the product of a culture in which the discourse of heroism looms large within a materialist trajectory. Guterak, Remy’s colleague, finds his own approach to heroism. Like Remy, he is not brave enough in the face of death, yet he has to live up to the requirements of nationalism which, according to the media discourse, should not fail the expectations of heroism. Following the collective tendency to make a commercial gain out of the tragedy, Guterak would sign a contract to appear in an advertisement promoting a new brand of cereal “First Responder, the cereal of heroes” (Walter, 2007a, p. 285) which satirizes the way private sectors capitalize on the greatest national woes. Moreover, he seeks to invest his heroism roleplay in commemorative ceremonies, delivering speeches on behalf of a tear gas company, and future movies about the tragedy. For a commodity culture, everything is commodified including the colossal distress and the severest moments of suffering.

Due to its vital role in nurturing mock heroism, the role the media plays in idolizing the dead and dramatizing grief is also satirized. Edgar’s roleplay at being the son of a dead father carries forth a humorous query on the discourse of collective grief that has swept out the nation. Against Remy’s will, Edgar pretends that his father has been killed in the attacks and even personalizes his sense of loss by performing a show at school while his father is ironically watching the audience’s sympathetic response. Edgar epitomizes the general tendency to distinctly have a personal grief as different from the “[g]eneralized grief” that plagues the nation like “a trend, just some weak shared moment in the culture, like the final episode of some TV show everybody watches. It’s weightless. You wake up the next day and wonder when the next disaster is scheduled” (Walter, 2007a, p. 34). Going so far is his self-dramatized grief, Edgar enlists in the US Army to avenge the fake death of his alive father who cannot dissuade him.

While Edgar’s case provides much of the novel’s humor, it obviously conveys Walter’s satirical comment on the media’s contradictory inclination to dramatize a mock grief in order to make it authentic. The mock grief is, besides, ridiculed in Remy’s girlfriend April who is made to act a TV scene about her personal loss—an ex-husband and a sister March. The irony is climatic when the reader knows that the anguish that April tries to cope with is rather of betrayal by both her husband and sister who have had an illegal relationship behind her back, “I think of them ...up there at the end ... together...and I hate them most of all for that ...that at the end, they had each other” (Walter, 2007a, p. 249). Edgar’s and April’s examples pry open the halo of heroism by representing the dead as human sinners a few moments before death and the collective grief as fake.

4.2 Mock-heroic Battles

In parallel to the anti-heroic characters, the novel depicts mock-heroic situations in the form of absurd battles of documents, fake anti-terror operations, sarcastic evidence detections, filmed covert-ops, and much ado about nothing. From the outset, the novel records a battle focalized on papers that, getting scattered in the first scene, have to be retrieved and recollected

Antiheroes in Mock-heroic Battles: Post 9/11 Alternatives in Jess Walter's Novel, The Zero

throughout the novel. The details given about the work of the Documents Department are meant to portray it as the major battle America has to win against its enemies. Ironically, the 9/11 encounter, with all its global significance, is minimized into a challenge by which restoring the WTC papers means a victory. The entire federal agencies' mission shrinks into the absurd act of collecting the WTC papers that amounts to an ultimate end which would or would not prove the victory against enemies,

Above the door was a billboard-sized sign that quoted The Boss: "Imagine the look on our enemies' faces when they realize that we have gathered up every piece of paper and put it back!" There were such inspirational posters and signs all over the place, quoting The Boss and The President. Below this one was a smaller warning sign from the Office of Liberty and Recovery: "Removing unauthorized documents may result in prosecution for treason under the War Powers Act." (Walter, 2007a, p. 100)

Zooming in on the Docs' battlefield, the scene is enriched with details that highlight the campaigners' sacred mission,

Each table was stacked with mounds of burned and dusty paper: business cards and charts and index cards and company stationery. The workers all wore white paper jumpsuits and gloves. Most of them also wore surgical masks. A few met Remy's eyes, but most concentrated on the paper. (Walter, 2007a, p. 100)

The main purpose of the mission assigned to the Documents Department is to recover and interpret the infinite scraps of paper that blanket the city after the attacks, in order to reconstruct the fallen capitalist empire—WTC—which stands for "our place in the world, our heritage, [...] recapturing the record of our people, and our commerce" (Walter, 2007a, p. 54). In Resano's words, their job is "to reconstruct the prelapsarian narrative that was in place before 'everything changed,' before it was blown into fragments by the attacks" (2027, p. 163). Motivated by the goal of beating enemies "who hate our way of life and our abilities of organization" (Walter, 2007a, p. 101), the Documents Department has to find and file "every receipt, every purchase order, every goddamned piece of paper" (Walter, 2007a, p. 54-55).

Bringing to mind the epic armies trained and armored well for a critical encounter, the novel elaborates the great mission assigned to the "even more secretive Documentation Department, the Double-D's, the Docs" which necessitates selecting its special team "comprised mainly of retired military intelligence officers and some handpicked librarians and accountants rumored to have Special Forces training" (Walter, 2007a, p. 19). Placed under the limelight, the Docs' job gains priority over other tasks due to its "very difficulty." To highlight the importance of the DD's job, The Boss' words stated "before Congress and later on the morning talks and prime-time panels," are repeated every few minutes on cable news:

There is nothing so important as recovering the record of our commerce, the proof of our place in the world, of the resilience of our economy, of our jobs, of our lives. If we do not make a fundamental accounting of what was lost, if we do not gather up the paper and put it all back, then the forces aligned against us have already won. They've. Already. Won. (Walter, 2007a, p. 19, emphasis in the original)

The importance of documents is magnified to a point that other rescue workers are not allowed to handle or even peep into them, "Remy thought he remembered hearing something about

hidden cameras positioned to try to catch rescue workers and equivocators looking through documents” (Walter, 2007a, p. 38). Remy’s team is called in when a “USUM” is discovered by the space unit who define it as “Unidentified suspicious materials” and even rationalize, “There was some cryptic writing in the papers; we think it might be a manifesto of some kind, so they said we had to call you guys in” (Walter, 2007a, p. 168). The novel mocks the intelligence bureaucracy which always prefers to add an impressive halo to its work by giving codenames and acronyms to everything regardless of its actual relevance to the detected matter.

Obviously, *The Zero* presents a case of an utter absurdity in the official investigation process of the Documents Department. For instance, the coincidental shape of the burnt document making it look like Australia is a big discovery for the employee who has deemed it necessary to forward it to the SECURE section of the DD, helpfully attaching a map of Australia and adding a note that reads: “Isn’t this uncanny? Doesn’t it look like Australia?” (Walter, 2007a, p. 177). The Australia-shaped burnt document parodies the detective thrillers in which the hero will make use of random patterns and tiny threads as keys leading to solve the riddle. Markham talks to Remy about the skills of “[a]pplying models of randomness and linear motion probability to the patterns in paper burns?” (Walter, 2007a, p. 178). This is one example of Walter’s dual satire against the detective search for hidden patterns where there is none as well as the post 9/11 rush on discovering ambiguous clues to the anti-national individuals and groups.

Another example is the recipe for pecan encrusted fish which stands as the main allegation against March Selios the central suspect of the complicated investigation by Remy’s unit. The Documents Department believes that March Selios, had been tipped off by her ex-boyfriend, Bishir Maidan, to flee the towers on the day of the attack. The unit is guided by the clue that the “handwritten recipe for pecan encrusted sole” (Walter, 2007a, p. 61) appearing in Selios’s office as per a photo has really been found on a bus in Canada. Led by the mock detective Markham, the unit depends on this sarcastic evidence for launching a full-scale counterterrorist operation against Bishir and the missing March Selios. The farcical detective boils down to preparing the recipe dish so as to test/taste its genuineness by Markham and Bishir who wonders, “You were absolutely right. This is great. You wouldn’t think it would be so flaky and moist. And the pecans!” (Walter, 2007a, p. 252). The scene would set the tone for the extended parody that culminates in the covert-ops satire that follows. Obviously, getting involved into the ‘paper’ battlefield leads the character into absurd situations as well as miscalculated outcomes due to their utter detachment from verifiable realms of reality. By representing the Docs’ battles, *The Zero* leashes its harshest satire against the federal agencies’ proclaimed intelligence sophistication and the fallacy of solving riddles by means of document-based examination as well. Moreover, the novel questions the authenticity of the official narrative.

Taking into account the centrality of the paper imagery and document battling, the ending note of the novel might be suggestive when Markham asks Remy to start shredding documents. Ridiculously, the heroic course of action ends where it once began as the valuable documents—a cause that they have championed throughout—become a trace of failure to be eliminated. This is one of many instances testifying to how many schemes that America excels in and boasts of result in a backfire.

Beside preparing the scene for the anti-climactic satire that follows, the paper imagery (scraps, falling paper, or figurative paper in the shape of flecks in Remy's failing eyesight) recurs throughout the novel as one of the main motifs. The novel's elaborate description of the paper imagery and even the complex comparing of many objects to it can amount to epic simile as one of the essential mock-heroic elements. At various junctures, paper is a medium through which Remy can experience the world.

The image of the snowflakes falling down echoes in Remy's imagination that of the paper raining after the incident, "Paper falling against blooming darkness" (Walter, 2007a, p. 119). It affirms the difficulty of his mission as the natural as well as man-made phenomena depict a vertical downward movement of unlimited particles against an investigator who is too helpless to stop or even understand the progress of things around. However, Remy is inspired by the floating papers to jump and float up into the blue as if to be swimming, "To float in this life, like paper on a current" (Walter, 2007a, p. 160). Floating, for him, becomes a strategy of living which failed as Remy ends up a paper burnt and blown without a shape or an identity, "and he was airborne, free, light... like paper, tossed and blown with the other falling bits and frantic sheets, smoking, corners scorched, flaring in the open air until there was nothing left but a fine black edge" (Walter, 2007a, p. 323).

Perhaps, the paper shower following the bang leaves its deep scar in Remy's memory. This is why the reader comes across the paper imagery very early in the novel which opens with the bang of "creation", a significant moment in mock-epic style that will change history. The scene describing the bang at the outset of the novel tends to endow it with the creative destruction by which the "paper" empire would reshape.

THEY BURST INTO THE SKY, every bird in creation, angry and agitated, awakened by the same primary thought, erupting in a white feathered cloudburst, anxious and graceful, angling in ever-tightening circles toward the ground, drifting close enough to touch, and then close enough to see that it wasn't a flock of birds at all—it was paper. Burning scraps of paper. (Walter, 2007a, p. 3)

It is a watershed when a new history is reshaped from the ashes of the old one. The lines of the great mess mingle with a moment of enigmatic birth as the image of the smoke and bird-like paper looked "beautiful" (Walter, 2007a, p. 3) to Brian Remy, whose account of the subsequent events would be influenced by this scene.

The collapse of the WTC, the symbol of capitalism, is described in terms of a huge shower of paper slips. Consequently, the legendary battle is to recollect the scattered back in order to restore the capitalist empire of "papers". Of the materials blown off by the attacks, the paper clouds image is the most dominating. The WTC is symbolically made of capitalist transactions and records. Significantly, the "paper" is exempted from Remy's memory failure as "he remembered standing alone while a billion sheets of paper fluttered to the ground. Like notes without bottles on the ocean, a billion pleas and wishes sent out on the wind" (Walter, 2007a, p. 306).

4.3 Mock Thrillers in Hyperreality

As far as the style is concerned, *The Zero* can be read as a humorous comment on the modern forms of heroic literature. Undoubtedly, the novel includes elements of a thriller plot structure

that encompasses multiple layers of satire and embedded parodies. The television cop show is one example when Remy's senseless actions become the subject of a television show that claims to be "*ripped from the headlines*" (Walter, 2007a, p. 283, emphasis in the original). The "secret" activities of Remy's unit are no longer secret as Guterak takes literal Remy's request to track him and record his unconscious activities. He, however, could not resist the temptation gaining from such a trendy documentary and made it the script of a show that features "a retired cop named Bruce Denny, who'd recently left the force because of back problems" (Walter, 2007a, p. 283).

The greatest parody of all is the covert-ops game that seeks to trap suspects when there is none reinforcing Don Quixote's antiheroic wars. As the agents found no concrete evidence to accuse the Middle Eastern suspects they had followed expecting a big catch, they proceed to stage a "performance" that acts out the envisioned success. They rationalize the dramatized operation with an ultimate aim of increasing the people's "waned" sense of danger since it is "counterproductive for the public to view our enemies as a bunch of harmless nuts" (Walter, 2007a, p. 274). The "hockey game against evil—" (Walter, 2007a, p. 274), as Markham prefers to describe it, is a battle where the dirtiest games are legalized. Mahoud, a Pakistani abused by the waves of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism, is an additional case in point. He received a note reading, "Go home, camel-fucker. We know where you live" (Walter, 2007a, p. 111). It was revealed later on that the racist note was a trick by Remy's unit to pulley him into collaborating with them. The scheme hints on how what seems to be a public wave of hatred against a people could be channeled by official agencies to serve strategic goals.

The framing of the terrorists in the last scene notes to the extent cinematic techniques shape reality or, at least, the people's perception of reality. The cinematic performance is intent to reassure the population that the intelligence agencies succeed in combating terrorists, and, at the same time, to keep people alert, even if that means they have to produce some corpses themselves first. It also hints about the illicit collaboration between the government and cinema that targets not so much combating a possible danger as shaping the Americans' consciousness of it. Thus, the elements of the detective parody interplay in *The Zero*, as there is nothing more parodic than recruiting suspects and creating a scenario in order to justify the need for launching a police operation. The tragedy of it, however, is that the suspects turn out to be the real victims of a scheme that would scapegoat them at the end.

As the novel comes to a close, the sarcastic counterterrorist operation delves into a further absurd scenario, with the agents in charge "busting in doors and swinging through windows, dropping through vents" (Walter, 2007a, p. 319) and ultimately finding out that every member in the farmed terrorist cell is dually an agent for the counterterrorist team. The detectives' looped investigation on the terrorist cell leads them back to their own unit. "[T]his can be interpreted as the "carnival scene" of the novel, that culminates in an absurd festival of subversions" (Resano, 2017, p. 166). Jaguar flees the fate of his fellows scapegoated by the counterterrorist plot to die while denoting the bomb provided by the unit; ambiguously it is not clear whether that happens as an intentional suicidal act or just takes place as part of the counterterrorist scheme. It totally satirizes the paradoxical job of the national security system, which, in the process of combating presumable enemies, creates real ones.

Antiheroes in Mock-heroic Battles: Post 9/11 Alternatives in Jess Walter's Novel, The Zero

Although the novel has nothing to do with the mock-epic supernatural machinery, its style, comprising surrealistic visions and dreams, borders on a margin of hyperreality that makes the real and natural world enigmatic and shadowy. The figures that appear to Remy like the Middle Eastern who keeps appearing and handing over a manila envelope to him may support this argument provided that it testifies to an abnormal psychological state. In addition, the detailed and surrealistic dream he had at the beginning of Part Three is confusing as the borderlines between reality and illusion are erased. The same ambiguity overshadows the next scene of Remy's memory flashes in a hospital bed. For, the reader is left wondering if Remy has already recovered from the blast at the train station or has just regained his consciousness after a long coma following the 9/11 WTC collapse. If it is the latter, then everything that the novel tells must have taken place in the realm of Remy's as well as the collective American subconscious. They are fragments—discursive but real—of a history which, although forgotten, defines the entire thread of events leading to the 9/11 attacks. This is confirmed by the instance Remy compares the ongoing events to dreams, “Maybe we're *all* like people in dreams” with a shared dilemma that they are “aware that something isn't right, but unable to shake the illusion” (Walter, 2007a, p. 103, emphasis in the original).

The surrealistic scene, as Remy wakes up in hospital after the eye surgery, creates an illusory mix-up over the post-9/11 life with many details that make it difficult to differentiate between reality and dream. It is reminiscent of the Chinese philosophical anecdote in which the Daoist thinker fell asleep and dreamed that he was a butterfly and upon waking up he wondered whether he was a man who had dreamed to be a butterfly or just a butterfly dreaming now to be a man. The anecdote shares with Remy's dream the moral as to what we take to be real when our dreams are compelling, a hypothesis which agrees with Descartes' words that, “waking can never be distinguished from sleep by any conclusive indications” (2008, p. 65). Remy's dream presents discursive fragments of real-life events, dream images, and mental hallucinations which together stand for the media's penetration first into the world's affairs and then into the viewer's minds bringing a great mess of real, magnified, mediated, or manipulated news. As a result, Remy finds the world of dream more stable, sane and fathomable than that of reality,

IN DREAMS , at least in this dream, Remy's eyesight was perfect, the world clear and crisp and devoid of the static that he'd grown accustomed to. (Walter, 2007a, p. 246)

The hyperreal element herein could interpret the fictional experiences in terms of an extended dream or hallucinatory sensations taking place in the post-traumatic brain of Remy who, towards the close of the novel, asks his psychiatrist, “Is it at all possible... that this is... all an illusion, that this is all in our heads?” (Walter, 2007a, p. 210).

The epical supernatural element is transitioned in *The Zero* into the camera's hyperreal since the events are manipulated and mediated by the media to fit into cinematic show. Taking into account that the real battle is that of the camera lens (echoing the buffs, make-up, rogues, in *The Rape of the Lock*), the armies and warriors have special sorts. Evoking the epical categorization of armies by their heroic missions and role, Walter mockingly groups the 9/11 victims by their class strata and even by the pose they struck for the camera. Remy could group the jumbled pictures into three strata. The first comprises “bankers, lawyers, brokers, executives and their assistants, mostly white, some transplanted browns” whose posing for

pictures reflects the prosperous and careless type of lives they were leading. Remy could read their “smiling in their death photos . . . as if they’d been told at some point that they had nothing to complain about.” The second class “mostly of firefighters, a few cops . . . in old xeroxed pictures, in uniforms, in their official portraits, shaggy sideburns or military haircuts” According to Remy, these people died with a look that said “that they had only wanted a life in which they made a little bit of money and lived comfortably.” The last stratum includes “the workers who had been mostly invisible before, faces on the subway or at a bus stop: black and Hispanic, or foreign-borns, so many names heavy in consonants or vowels, the grunts who staffed the restaurants and cafeterias, the mailrooms and custodial sheds.” The grim pictures show these people “exhausted, as if they’d known disaster before this day, too, like flood survivors clinging to trees.” Since the nature of their jobs as well as social class had never allowed them to occupy a center, they did not appear “the focus of the photograph” when some pictures had been cut away from a group photo (Walter, 2007a, p. 73-4).

5. Conclusion

It can be confirmed now that *The Zero* features Walter's modern mock heroic of an entire socio-political and artistic phenomenon. It reenacts the 9/11 scenarios at both the stylistic and thematic levels. Politically, the novel satirizes the commonly-applauded heroes by representing them as anti-heroes who are either self-interested leaders devising schemes to polish themselves and their regime or followers unconsciously involved in those schemes. Stylistically, the novel can be taken for a modern version of a mock-heroic that parodies both the form and character in the classic detective fiction. The protagonist whose mission is to collect the hidden threads leading to the suspect is suffering from gaps in memory and cannot link up his own life that looks fragmented and incoherent. This is paralleled by the breaks and gaps in narration itself that is composed in disjointed sections with ruptured endings.

Hence, any interpretation of *The Zero* that overlooks the author’s allegorical intentions as well as the novel’s satirical potential would doom superficial like reading a mock epic as a real epic. Against the trauma reading, the above argument has spotted the novel's main crux in the collective heroic victimhood proclaimed by the media narrative which ends up in double-victimizing the real victims whose individual anguish is turned into a subject for commercial gain and political agendas. It has also highlighted the scenes behind the camera drawn by Walter to give the reader an idea about the actual setting from which the media’s stories of heroism are made up.

The ultimate finding is that the good-evil nature of the conflict as represented by the official narrative is subverted by the counter narrative imbedded within the novel. It addresses the contemporary discourse that intends to dignify America and demonize its enemies. There is, however, an evasive border separating the perpetrator from the victim. Under the name of combatting terror using a preemptive strategy, the Middle Eastern characters, categorized as unpatriotic and fundamentalist are framed into the terrorist plot in a violent and barbarous way by the federal agencies who act as patriotic and self-righteous. Ironically, the “American” and “patriotic” (Fadda-Conrey, 2011, p. 532) present themselves as perpetrators which confirms Jaguar’s subversive argument that a man—America—might be “the villain of his own story.” By reversing the victim/perpetrator relationship, the novel notes to the risks of a self-righteousness discourse in political conflicts. One needs to merely stand apart to see how those who are often represented as devils might be either cornered cats struggling to evade the limits

of danger imposed round them or just innocent victims whose presumable terrorism is the byproduct of the proclaimed heroes' hidden schemes and manipulations.

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