The E-pistolary Novel: Print Screens of Media-driven Thoughts in David Llewellyn's *Eleven*

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Abstract
Contemporary literature seems to have reconciled the idea that everything valuable has already been said and done and, as such, has wilfully inscribed itself in a never-ending cycle of narratives about narratives, in a process of recycling and updating the past, which some love to name postmodernist. What is left at stake is simply the consumerist need to produce an oxymoronic 'original copy': to launch that piece of literature unseen and unheard of before on a crowded book market. A recipe for success seems to be the ability to combine the novelty of the architectural design – the formal innovation – with the thematisation of the present. It is precisely what the young Welsh novelist and scriptwriter, David Llewellyn, achieves with his debut novel, Eleven. *In an attempt to translate the old into the new,* Eleven *is constructed following the design of the early modern epistolary novels, yet making use of a contemporary mode of writing: the e-mail. Thematically, it is an exploration of patterns of individual thinking shaped by the media, against the background of an event with global consequences, which is, nevertheless, viewed from afar, without the inherent trauma so visible in American post-9/11 fiction. The present paper aims at analysing the construction of the novel, including the linguistic transformations it employs, and at accounting for the identitary revolt that transpires from the e-mails exchanged between various character-narrators on an apparently ordinary day: September 11, 2001.*

Keywords: post-9/11 fiction, epistolary novel, recycling, internet talk, media impact

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Aims, scope and method

The present paper is part of an in-depth endeavour which aims at discussing recent history as discursive formation, irrespective of its sources of emergence and means of making itself available to the public

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sphere. Starting from the assumption that literature is – more than ever – communication, and that Orwell's assertion that "anyone sensitive enough to be touched by the zeitgeist is also involved in politics" (2009: 129) fully applies to the twenty-first century historical and political context, the respective undertaking brings together political, journalistic, and literary texts which make use of the interplay of reality and fiction – a territory of literature, in the traditional sense – in order to *construct truths* about events which the target audience has actually witnessed first-hand.

A fairly representative, yet unexplored piece of this new type of intermedial literature is David Llewellyn's *Eleven* (2006), a novel which requires a closer look into its architectural design, as it is an unexpected blending of the new and the technological in a very old and traditional mode of writing: the epistolary. Thus, the first part of the paper sets out to formulate a hypothesis concerning the psychological drive towards the appreciation of this literary mode and to overview the transition of the letter in fiction: from its initial mimetic role to that of a signal for misrepresentation and the unreliability of the written word, in the more recent years. The second part of the paper, which focuses on the novel, attempts to contextualise it from two perspectives: on the one hand, as a marketable product which has overcome that 'anxiety of influence' and has adopted freely modes of writing proven successful in the yesteryears; on the other hand, as a product of the present-day history, with political and identitary implications for the individuals.

Forethoughts on representation and prying

Although obsolete, the epistolary mode seems to have preserved something of the past glory from the early days of novel writing until today - due to its polyphonic nature and its creditability. Beyond the continual evolution of forms and literary devices which have re-designed both structures and approaches to novel writing (over and over again along the years), it seems that the contemporary readers still find the Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* appealing.

Readers should understand that literature is representation, not reality; however, they might still feel an urge to pry into other people's lives, even when fully aware that these 'people' are mirror images of themselves. A few devices are able to render this inherently human indiscretion more plausibly than others: it may be rewarding for the reader to acquire omniscience together with the narrator, to accompany

him or her alongside a theatrical-like experience in which, from a vantage point, 'the lives and opinions' of the characters may be observed in their smallest details. Furthermore, it may be worthwhile to catch a glimpse into one character's overall 'consciousness' or stream of thoughts at a given moment, but it is hardly credible that one is actually able to reach this point of understanding of the human mind. And there is this third form of interference with someone else's thoughts and actions, one that seems the most credible and creditable at the same time, and that has inspired the *pacte de lecture* (or, in Leech's words (2007: 222), "the secret communion between author and reader") for a large category of literary texts related to the (auto)biographical domain: the monological diaries and memoirs, on the one hand, and the dialogical epistles, on the other. One can actually get a hold of someone else's diary or letter and find in it the other's most intimate thoughts, most secret actions. The inquisitiveness of the human mind is thus fed in a manner that hints at verisimilitude: writing *is* material – despite Raymond Williams's claim that "there is no *Hamlet,* no *Karamazov Brothers*, and no *Wuthering Heights*, in the sense that there is a particular great painting" (2005: 49). It is a material practice that leaves real traces which can be made available for others to pry into them.

A very short history of the epistolary novel

This 'voyeurism' may be one of the explanations for the success of the epistolary novel along the centuries. A description of the genre is not one of the aims of the present undertaking. In brief, this literary form entered the world of English literature as early as the end of the seventeenth century, with Aphra Ben's *Love Letters between a Nobleman and His Sisters* (1684-1687), but 'the rise of the [epistolary] novel' took place in the next century, with Samuel Richardson's moralising novels *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1749). However, the influence on the contemporary epistolary mode of writing should be sought much later, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Among the novelists who made use of this technique in the first half of the twentieth century, E.M. Forster (*Howards End*), Virginia Woolf (*Jacob's Room*) and James Joyce (*Ulysses*) should be mentioned. Yet, in their cases, the epistolary mode is not extended to the entire novel, letters being incorporated into the narrative with an aim at exposing subjectivity and misrepresentation of the written word. James Joyce may be the influence 'responsible' for the proliferation of the epistolary as a

form of *mise en abyme* in postmodern literature. A thesis on the epistolary form in the twentieth century argues that postmodern authors "continue Joyce's treatment of the epistolary form, investigating the way in which language complicates representations of the subjective experience and exploring the letter's relationship to different states of being" (Gubernatis 2007: 170). It is further argued that postmodernist milestones, like *Possession* (A.S. Byatt) or *Atonement* (Ian McEwan), employ the epistolary technique in order to challenge this subjectivity and to create alternative story-worlds that "fracture the coherence of those novels" (225).

Twenty-first century literature profits from technological advance and multimodality to reinstate the epistolary novel in forms and shapes familiar to the new readers: e-mails, forums, blogs, Twitter, SMS, mobile applications, etc. Though reluctantly, literati make the acquaintance of new forms of fiction, which are termed, accordingly, with equally new words, as it is the case of *Twiction* – denoting a novel published entirely in 140-word 'instalments' on Twitter [1], or this *e-pistolary*, which follows the word-formation with the prefix *e-* (from *electronic*) attached to fully-formed words like *mail* or *commerce*. Of course, this term, which has started to be acknowledged by some slang dictionaries, despite its ill-formed nature, is meant to denote that kind of epistolary novels written not in the traditional pen-and-paper manner, but in the form of e-mails exchanged between their character-narrators. A good case in point is David Llewellyn's 2007 debut novel, *Eleven*, which will be analysed in the following sections.

Textual designs between the old and the new

Following the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the literary stage welcomes a new category, which rapidly gains adepts from the highest ranks of the contemporary writers and which manifests plentifully in the English-speaking space. Soon, this new literary product of the international political context is given a name – post-9/11 fiction – which comprises novels, short-stories and drama connected by their being temporally placed during or immediately after the respective event. Either explicitly political, expressing viewpoints on the attacks through techniques which borrow directly from the mass-media, or focusing on identitary crises generated by trauma, these writings – some of them, products of very resonant names of contemporary literature, like John Updike, Don De Lillo, Philip Roth, Ian McEwan, Martin Amis,

etc. bear the burden of having to reinvent the already invented 'wheel', to update past writing techniques so as to suit the present-day tastes and, more than anything else, to sell. One should not forget that the world has entered the post-industrial era, a time when selling is everything and everything is for sale. Moreover, the book and the more interactive media have been competing for supremacy for some time, and the former does not seem at all in pole position.

Naturally, in such a consumerist context, when even the great favourites of the grand literary prizes make one-century-long steps behind, back to the Experimentalists (trying to write themselves and their surrounding reality in a manner equally unusual and linguistically-challenging with that employed by their forerunners), it gets even harder for young novelists and playwrights to produce an original piece of writing. Thus, in turn, they look back (in resignation) and replicate over and over again Burroughs, Kerouac and other beatniks, or *le nouveau roman*, or Joyce… or whoever may still keep the reader's attention vivid through imaginative techniques which do not necessarily presuppose plots, actions, temporal order, beginnings, endings, typologies of characters, 'literary language' [2] and anything else which a 'traditional' novel might make use of in order to recreate, imitate or reflect realities. The difference often lies in political engagement, as many twenty-first century novelists have been transformed into war-journalists by the turn of events on the stage of international politics – which is not to say that they are all new Hemingways, but that they have developed a form of counteraction to media feeds which impart information into the public sphere. In other words, behind textual innovation and intricacies lies a need for communication and reality (or actuality, or factuality).

Such is the case of *Eleven*, the debut novel of a young Welsh novelist, David Llewellyn, who introduces his "dear, dirty"…Cardiff [3] without having his characters look through the window at least once, but making them look in what has become for some time the window to the world – the computer screen. Formally, the novel is constructed exclusively on an epistolary pattern, following the trend established back in the eighteenth century: a central character-narrator, Martin Davies, corporate accountant and would-be writer living and working in Cardiff, exchanges thoughts and ideas with various other character-narrators who take the floor in turn, to express their perspectives. However, as writing letters has become obsolete and has been replaced

with faster variants of communication, the letters that make up *Eleven* are electronic – e-mails that come and go at a fast pace, sometimes even simultaneously, assailing the reader with various opinions, which are, more often than not, influenced by external factors, of which the media is the most important.

The layout – together with the cover artwork of the book, which presents two stylised towers with many windows – a double allusion to corporate buildings in general and to World Trade Center in particular – is an important paratextual element, introducing the correspondence exchanged by the characters in the complete form in which an e-mail is customarily transmitted. It is not just the body of e-mail that is relevant for the textual analysis, but also the header, which provides information about sender, receiver, time of transmission, and subject of the conversation. It is this layout what creates the image of a disorganised inbox – as all the mails are either sent from or to the mail address of the main character. Once accessed, the messages seem to have been either printed on paper or 'print-screened' (a function available on most operating systems which provides a 'snapshot' of the content displayed on the computer screen):

> FROM: Martin Davies
> (Mailto: martin.davies@quantumfinance.co.uk)
> TO: lloydt@callotech.co.uk
> SENT: 08:51, Tuesday September 11, 2001
> SUBJECT Morning!!!
> (Llewellyn 2006: 9)

Apart from providing such information which would be hard to grasp from the texts of the messages, which do not observe the standard rules of drafting a traditional letter, these print screens add to the construction of the illusion of authenticity required by the epistolary novels in order to create those alternative worlds in which readers can take a squint.

At the linguistic level, Llewellyn's *Eleven* may prove puzzling here and there, as it is an exploration of the "newspeak" of the twenty-first century, the language of the internet, which wilfully disregards all the norms of spelling with the justification of always being in a hurry. Thus, the discourse is constructed on a combination of slang and exaggeratedly formal language in the e-mails sent by the company's staff, used even in circumstances which would not require it. It is the case of: "it has come to the attention of building supervisors that people are not putting out their

cigarettes in the designated ashtrays in the smoking area" (2006: 70). *It has come to the attention of* is a set-phrase used in official communications in view of announcing infringements of various rules and regulations. Another example of formal language meant to disrupt the flow of the text is: "Congratulations to Lisa Gough on getting her Stage 3 Mandate. This is a reflection of the hard work of Lisa and her mentor, Simon" (113) – which is sent at 15:52, amidst the general confusion and contradictory e-mails about the attacks in America and which functions as a reminder that corporations represent small worlds which do not pay attention to whatever may happen outside of them.

Nonetheless, such instances are rare in the novel. They are often replied to with a "Fuck off" (43) or with a "fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fudjkflas; dfdljkgfal" (17) which are never sent, but *saved in drafts*. These drafts function as asides, revealing to the reader what remains unsaid in the written dialogues between the characters. However, access is granted only to the personal thoughts of Martin Davies, although his focalisation of the external events is filtered through the information present in the e-mails he receives from other characters.

A large part of the text is made of abbreviations usually employed in conversations on chats and SMSs - "the kids *r* back in *skool*" (9); alternate spelling with symbols used instead of letters -"*f*king ba$tards*" (12), "*bull$hit*" (23); or spellings imitating various accents - "these *laydeez*" (13), "this girl is *da* bomb" (19). All these seem to point to the degradation of the English language in the internet era, but this is only a convenient variant of looking at things, from a purist, philologist's perspective. What is, in fact, more interesting here is the fact that this 'inconceivable' language usage has entered the 'sacrosanct' territory of literature, replacing those *beautiful words* which were said to constitute its core. This may lead to a parallel between "Culture and culture": whereas the former is, in Arnoldian acceptance, "the best that has been thought and said" (Matthew Arnold in Gallagher 1995: 309), more recently understood as "high culture", the latter is confined to the areas of "low culture", "subculture" or "counterculture". Along these lines, the cultural theorist Stuart Hall's view that the youth resort to a re-signification of themselves by "combining things borrowed from a system of meanings into a different code, generated by subculture itself and through subcultural use" (2006: 43) in order to resist society through a ritualization of practices, may be a key to understanding the language in *Eleven*. Though not specifically defined as belonging to a subculture, the characters in the novel are concomitantly part of the corporate 'in-

group' and a subgroup which aims at fighting its constraints and permanent surveillance.

The use of the phrases containing the word "fuck" – with extremely high occurrence rate in the novel – points precisely towards that *resistance through rituals* which Hall claims to have characterised the British youth since World War II and which has accentuated with the expansion of the means of communication, contaminating all the social strata. To put it otherwise – argot is no longer the slang or jargon peculiar to "a particular group of people" (Longman Dictionary, 2008: 65), but a form of resistance to societal and linguistic norms accessible to all social categories. In the context of literature regarded as subversive social practice, non-abiding by the norms imposed by social constraints, the usage of non-standard English also takes the form of resistance, to the traditional literary conventions, this time. As such, one may assert that David Llewellyn's *Eleven* breaks with the tradition of the epistolary novel whilst also following its principles by relying on its voyeuristic appeal. The messages get to be read by prying readers, but also by the corporate Big Brother known as "System Administrator":

> FROM: System Administrator
> TO: Martin Davies
> SENT: 16:40, Tuesday September 11, 2001
> SUBJECT: Email Misuse
>
> The following email has been blocked due to its content:
>
> TO: SAFINA AZIZ
> SUBJECT: RE: Home Time
>
> You should be aware of the very strict company policy regarding email misuse. This issue will be forwarded to your department manager (Llewellyn, 2006: 127).

Therefore, the non-standard language used in *Eleven* functions as a statement which points in three directions: firstly, it mocks the literary tradition which the novel replicates and the elegant construction of the literary language; secondly, it unwinds as a form of resistance to societal (here including corporate) norms; and thirdly, it addresses serious contemporary issues from the perspective of the public sphere, closely reproducing its new linguistic habits acquired as a result of the exposure to "the new media".

9/11 between media representation and communication in the public sphere

Moving on from form to content, one should note that the novel seems to reveal its theme starting with the title, which, although incomplete, represents the day of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Perhaps making use of one of the complete phrases - *nine-eleven* or *September-Eleven* (as they have entered the collective mind-set with the large support of the media), would have displaced the focus from the individuals and their reaction to the event, which does not seem to be one of Llewellyn's aims. As a matter of fact, *Eleven* seems sooner a novel about an everyman's going through an era of globalization, corporations and, incidentally, terrorist attacks in another part of the world and their media coverage, than a novel about the aforementioned attacks.

9/11 sets out just as a temporal milepost in *Eleven*, as an apparently ordinary day. It is unavoidably brought to the foreground by its becoming an "extreme phenomenon" which has disrupted "the whole play of history and power", as French theorist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard puts it (2003: 4) and which has been, up to date, the most "mediatised" event of the twenty-first century. The term between inverted commas refers, according to the 2006 book *Key Concepts in Political Communication,* to a theory which holds that it is the media which shapes the discourse of political communication and makes it available to the public sphere: "largely the public sphere is informed by the media, thus information is mediatised as all coverage can suffer from the media outlet's attendant bias and framing and must be located within media agendas" (Lilleker 2006: 118). Whilst also acknowledging the obvious, (that the fall of the two towers has had immense media coverage, being transferred from the reality to the domain of media representation), the view adopted further is that the perception of the public sphere on the day of the attacks on the WTC was not only informed, but *formed* by the news channels broadcasting live from Ground Zero (primarily, the American channels NBC, CBS, CNN, ABC and Fox News).

As the public sphere has been defined as "a network for communicating information and points of view" characterised by "open, permeable and shifting horizons" (Habermas 1996: 360) and not by a specific social order, this concept also applies to virtual 'agorae' using information-communication technology (ICT), which, in Lilleker's view, "allow for a greater community to exist, exchanging ideas and breaking down social, historical, cultural and political barriers" (2006: 205). Thus, it becomes fairly convenient to define the group of character-narrators in

Eleven as participants in the public sphere debate stemming from the contradictory rumours about the attacks on the other side of the Atlantic.

In the middle of the sterile conversations about past relationships, future aspirations (Martin Davies would like to relocate to London, as Cardiff does not provide the appropriate setting for his development as a writer), gossips, wedding invitations and the occasional communications from the company stuff, at 14:06 comes the first mail – sent by Dan Jones, whose institutional address is @mcpl-*media*.co.uk – a direct hint at the role of the media: "Tell me you are near a television" (Llewellyn 2006: 73). The first plane, American Airlines Flight 11, hijacked by Muhammad Atta, hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center at 08:46:40 (EDT) - 13:46 BST in Cardiff. CNN was the first television to break the news at 08: 48, quickly followed by the rest of the American televisions. BBC News World announces shortly after, around 14:00 (local time), that "a plane seems to have crashed into the World Trade Center" (Archive.org V08517-32, 00:23:41). The journalist passes the news via e-mail to Martin Davis: "There are planes crashing into America" (Llewellyn 2006: 74). At the latter's disbelief, Dan Jones refers him to a news website; nevertheless, Martin Davies never accesses such a source, continuing to rely on information provided by his friends via e-mail. It is unclear why, but there is a possibility for the access to external websites to have been restricted, a practice fairly common in the corporate world. The language employed here is as ridden with non-standard phrases as it is in the entire novel:

> I'm not joking, MD. Two f**king planes have gone into the twin towers. One crashed about twenty minutes ago, so there was a newsflash on BBC News 24… Well, you know what I mean. Not a newsflash exactly because it's a news channel. Just a flash, I suppose. And as they were showing the fire coming out of the tower, another plane came and went SMACK right into the other tower. Un-f**king-believable (75).

The reference to television as provider of news will be later dismissed by another character, which makes the observation that the audience is shown the same images, without being offered any new details. It is obvious that the people to whom televisions address are forced to rely on the information they receive from *the telly*, but they are aware of the manipulation to which they are exposed. The following quote comprises the most direct and powerful critique addressed to the media in the entire novel:

> It's typical. F**king news channels – they just show the same footage over and over again. Smoke coming out of the towers. **Someone jumping off one of the towers**. The second plane crashing into the tower. Three clips, that's all BBC, ITV, or f**king CNN have got. Fox News have one more bit of footage – A group of people on the ground screaming as the second plane crashes into the tower. They're all sitting at tables outside Starbucks sipping their mochas and looking at the sky. What the f**k is the world coming to? (85)

Yet another critique to media channels is forwarded in relation to the sentence emphasised above. Reference is made to a shocking image that arrested the eyes of the entire planet, a man falling off the tower – which was also immortalized by a famous photograph made by the Associated Press photographer Richard Drew. The photograph, known as "Falling Man" [4], was published by *The New York Times* on September 12, then by thousands of papers around the world, to the entire world's awe and indignation at the insensitivity of the press. It is exactly this reaction which *Eleven* reveals through the lines of another character, Lisa Cullis, who is much less acquainted with the ways of the news:

> Martin…you're a media type person, or at least you want to be. […] Are they allowed to show people jumping off a burning building, even on the news, because that's what they're showing, and if I wasn't coked up to the eyeballs, it would probably be too much. I mean, these people are thousands of feet in the air. […] It's all mildly perturbing (83).

What is more than *mildly perturbing* is this very remark – the event which some of the Welsh characters acknowledge as "*going to be* big", which others start discussing in terms of "who is behind this truly awful attack?" (90), and which determines flights cancellations all over the world, the evacuation of the City (in London) and many other security measures, is regarded almost indifferently in Cardiff. It is just "mildly perturbing" that "there's been a plane crash or something" (83). At Dan Jones's question regarding the reactions in Cardiff, Martin Davies responds: "nothing happens; none of the managers have ever mentioned it. It's like it isn't happening at all. In fact, I'm not entirely sure it is" (91). What "they're saying" (88, 99, 103, 106) (*they* denoting the media) is of little importance, since it is viewed from afar, without trauma, as if the characters were watching a feature film. In fact, there is also a cultural reference to the horror classic *Dawn of the Dead* (90), which points to the

transformation of the event in a media simulacrum. What is going on in New York (and later, Washington, with the attack on the Pentagon) is not REAL, since it is just on television and not "in this building", where "nothing happens - not time, not death: nothing" (92). Evidence of the reduced level of shock is also the fact that the e-mails return to their usual topics shortly after the fall of the two towers. By the end of the workday, only Martin Davis seems to have preserved the awareness of the event they all witnessed that day:

> I haven't seen the TV today, but it sounds as if the world's ending, crashing into a chasm of our making. Times like this make clear the order of things, and if civilisation is about to dismantle itself backwards, we're the first up lined up for extinction. Why do you think those planes flew into office buildings? (130)

The bitter last e-mail sent by Martin Davies to his entire list of contacts emphasises the lack of importance of the corporate workers in the game of history, their role as mere pawns of a collapsing civilisation subjected to predetermination. It points one more time to the frustrated existences which do not resemble the lives presented by sitcoms and adverts. Identity has already been annulled by the nature of the job. It is high time history erased the remains of the self completely.

Final remarks

To sum up, *Eleven* is not a novel about 9/11, after all, but a novel about identity caught in the course of history. *Eleven* is an epistolary novel because communication nowadays is most often reduced to a few lines thrown into an e-mail. It is an epistolary novel written in non-standard language because it attempts to re-create, as realistically as possible, the thoughts of those who can understand only through the media the importance of a day which was to have such an impact on the present-day history. It is a novel about reactions and understandings of a global phenomenon, and, in the end, it is a novel about solitude, about insignificant and disposable identities at the scale of the world's history.

Notes

[1] According to Reuters (2009), besides publishing new novels, there is an interest in 'tweeting' full chapters of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

[2] This is a paradoxical aspect: the readers of the so-called realist novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used to expect a certain elegant weaving of *beaux*

mots from a literary text which they wanted, at the same time, to mirror life as accurately as possible.

[3] For the sake of conformity, the original syntagm is "dear, dirty Dublin" – James Joyce, *Ulysses* (2010: 129).

[4] It is the photograph which inspired American novelist Don De Lillo in writing the novel of the same title. A high-resolution image is available on this web page: http://www.esquire.com/cm/esquire/images/6q/the-falling-man-esq-lg.jpg

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