INTRODUCTION

On September 11, 2001, the news of an explosion having torn a gaping hole into the upper floors of the World Trade Center in New York City spread fast across the globe. In the words of British novelist Martin Amis, “it was the advent of the second plane, sharking in low over the Statue of Liberty: that was the defining moment. Until then, America thought she was witnessing nothing more serious than the worst aviation disaster in history; now she had a sense of the fantastic vehemence raged against her.”¹ The shock resulting from this realization was immediately translated into a “national trauma”, a label that activated long-standing American cultural templates for processing mass-scale, disastrous events. A widespread acceptance of this label simultaneously allowed America to retreat into the position of an innocent, confused victim and a resilient survivor that could make her vengeance felt throughout the globe. A division between these two seemingly incompatible positions can be observed in three major public discourses in the wake of 9/11. While the Bush Administration never refrained from confirming America’s unrelenting strength and power, the mass media, especially television, served to install a sense of emergency expressive of collective traumatization combined with an effort to rally people behind the American flag. Lastly, the imagining of short and long term effects of the national trauma was assigned to cultural production, especially to literature.

Starting 12 September 2001, American novelists were called upon to make their contributions to processing the alleged American collective trauma. This demand followed an understanding of cultural trauma which had formed in the decade leading up to 9/11 and singled out literary fiction as the main source for working through mass-scale catastrophes that have the potential to severely traumatize victims.

Despite the fact that much criticism of and secondary literature about what has come to be termed “9/11 fiction” is organized around the idea of trauma and trauma fiction, I claim that many of the 9/11 novels I read when preparing my study are rather expressive of perturbations which can be best analyzed by resorting back to the notion of melancholia. I focus my later detailed discussion of exemplary pieces of 9/11 fiction on novels by Jay McInerney and Don DeLillo. There are two reasons, which are closely intertwined, for such a restrictive selection of authors. First, I find these authors’ works to be the most striking examples for the ways in which novels implicitly, and possibly even unwittingly, portray the 9/11 attacks to be constitutive of a moment in which pre-existing melancholy tendencies within American culture are crystallized and then are aligned or superimposed by the idea of 9/11 as a collectively shared trauma. Second, focusing on these two authors allows me a substantial comparative reading of their 9/11 fiction with their novels published before the 9/11 attacks. Therefore, I exclude other authors’ novels either because their pre-9/11 novels are not equally expressive of a previous cultural malaise, or their post-9/11 novels do not invite a far-reaching discussion of the reverberations the 9/11 attacks had on American culture.

I would like to explicitly point out that I am not interested in diagnosing American culture as melancholy in any clinically valid sense. Rather, I aim to compare the different outcomes when reading public discourses – among which I count literary fiction writing – either through the lens provided by trauma theory or through what I will later describe as an approach guided by a philosophy of melancholia. Basically, melancholia and trauma as leading metaphors both initiate discourses that serve to address similar topics in public discourses – although differing vastly in the interpretative webs they offer regarding collective malaise. Through my comparative approach I argue that melancholia provides the more productive analytical concept for an interpretation of discourses both before and after 9/11.