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POLITICAL SYMBOLISM,
(IL)LEGITIMACY AND TRAUMA:
LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS
OF TERRORIST ACTS AND IDEOLOGIES
IN THE RECENT
BRITISH AND AMERICAN NOVEL

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În cadrul studiilor culturale şi politice recente, fenomenul terorismului, cu diversele sale implicaţii de ordin social, psihologic, politic, religios şi chiar artistic a ajuns un subiect de vârf, abordat la diverse niveluri transdisciplinare, iar înţelegerea complexelor sale semnificaţii este departe de a da posibilitatea unei definiri certe sau a unei previziuni cu grad mare de probabilitate în ceea ce priveşte evoluţiile sale viitoare.

Având drept obiective principale trasarea cadrului conceptual al fenomenului şi analiza detaliată a reprezentărilor literare ale terorismului în romanele britanice şi americane recente (pornind însă de la două romane mai vechi, de Henry James şi Joseph Conrad, publicate în apropiere de anul 1900 şi legate de fenomenul anarhist-terorist), lucrarea d-nei Valentina Stîngă răspunde aşadar unei preocupări generalizate astăzi. Însă a aborda un atare subiect la zi prezintă pentru cercetător şi un pericol potenţial - acela de a se lăsa sedus de o poziţie politică sau de alta, de a avea parti-pris-uri sau de a judeca emoţional (de pildă în cazul atacurilor din 11 septembrie 2001), în fine de a se cantona în unele din truismele specifice unei mari părţi din mass media.

Nu este cazul acestei lucrări, care se prezintă ca o cercetare de calitate, răspunzând cu succes exigenţelor academice, acumulând o mare cantitate de informaţie teoretică bine filtrată şi controlată cu ajutorul conceptelor metodologice utilizate şi totodată aducând o contribuţie originală mai ales prin interpretările practice ale corpusului de texte literare aflate în vizorul autoarei.

Avem prin urmare de a face cu un studiu remarcabil, de reală importanţă pentru cercetarea românească în domeniile studiilor culturale, literare şi politice. Scrisă într-o limba engleză limpede, curată şi bogată în nuanţe, cartea va fi în mod cert de interes atât pentru studenţii şi profesorii din facultăţile de ştiinţe umaniste, cât şi pentru o parte mai largă a publicului cunoscător de engleză şi interesat de interacţiunea dintre literatură şi fenomenele socio-politice de mare impact cum sunt violenţa şi terorismul.

Prof. univ. dr. Radu Surdulescu

INTRODUCTION

One of the vital concepts of the current technocratic societies, *terrorism* (< *terror* < Lat. *terrere* "to terrorize", Gr. *tremein* "to tremble") is produced through such discursive practices as that of labelling, measuring and categorizing, it has no clear ontological status and possesses an obviously negative cultural-political baggage that sometimes leads to its misuse by experts and common people alike. While there are many intellectuals and political activists who conceive terrorism as a strategy of telling the truth and denouncing the injustice to which traditional communities have been subjected along time, there are many others that interpret terrorism as a hypostasis of alterity, of Otherness in the form of a "vital passion": "Against the perfection of the system, hatred is a last **vital reaction**" (Baudrillard, 1996: 147). Thirdly, there are opinions according to which terrorist violence is illegitimate and should be combated by means of violence, not to mention the terrorists' own discourse in the matter.

The present thesis seeks to evaluate the spectacle of *political terrorism* by commenting on the controversial meaning of the term, of the reality it embodies, and on the manner in which its image is constructed, represented and reproduced in various sectors of Western culture. The foundational theoretical premise is represented by terrorist violence as *both* physical killing and fictional construct. This endeavour possesses therefore a high degree of complexity derived, paradoxically, from the ubiquity of the phenomenon in all kinds of discourses. The theme of research demands that the material be organised according to several objectives, among which I should mention the de-construction and re-construction of terrorism as a type of ideologically-motivated violence used to destabilise/shatter not only cities and buildings, but cultural identities as well. I am not solely interested in identifying a valid theoretical perspective on terrorism and the 'excess' of reality that it provokes (Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, 2001). This project is guided by an obvious intention of transcending the "accredited" discourse of the mass-media and politics on terrorist violence (Borradori, 2004: 70). I find it equally important to "diagnose" the impact of terrorist violence on literature and comment on the way in which the writers "on duty" (Borradori, 2004: 60) responded to the various instances of terrorist violence. The theoretical foundations for such a direction of research are set by Zulaika and Douglass in their seminal study, *Terror and Taboo*, where they state that "Whatever else it might be, 'terrorism' is printed text. Initially, it is a pamphlet describing action, the militant's personal document, his manual – a shabby text, in essence a catechism, replete with directives, stuffed with morality and bursting with urgency. Then, it is the daily journalistic report, sometimes as front-page news, more frequently as a formulaic note on a bombing or a killing, usually accompanied by a gruesome photograph" (Zulaika, Douglass 31). Thirdly, a significant contribution to the tracing of the trajectory of terrorist violence is provided by literature as well.

No single methodological approach could hope to do justice to a coherent study of the complex aspects of terrorism with which the phenomenon and the reality it refers to have entered the public discourse. As a result, the present thesis will utilize an interdisciplinary method as an efficient means of adequately understanding the phenomenon in all its complexity. The research will be conducted with the help of various concepts taken over from the fields of cultural studies, sociology, political philosophy, modernity and postmodernity studies – a combination of fields and concepts that, in my opinion, serves the overall purpose of approaching terrorism as both a political phenomenon of undeniable 'singularity' and as an equally intriguing narrative. Secondly, I will also resort to the methods of 'close reading' and text analysis, combining them with narratological instruments: the mixture is meant to ensure a larger degree of meaning coverage for the literary works that will be under scrutiny.

In point of structure, this thesis is organised in five main chapters, each dealing with a specific aspect of the theme and consisting of further subchapters meant to bring a clearer perspective on the issue. Generally speaking, the discourse is structured around two principal ideas: on the one hand, there is the idea of *terrorism* as a phenomenon of (extreme) political violence; on the other hand, there is the idea that fiction as a whole provides an eloquent critique of terrorist violence. Consequently, the thesis may be taken to revolve around two main directions: first, there is the need to build the endeavour on a sound scientific foundation and, therefore, to introduce into the discourse the pieces of information that could be thought as relevant from this point of view (information related to such aspects as defining the phenomenon, identifying its historical evolution, classifying the various forms of manifestation and commenting on the recent forms with which it shocks the audience). Secondly, there is the declared intention of moving beyond the official discourse on terrorist violence as elaborated by the public authorities or the mass media, and interpreting terrorist violence through the filter of fictional representation.

The theoretical chapter – ***Chapter I. From (Political) Violence to Terrorism: An Intellectual Journey*** – represents an attempt to introduce the reader into the complex problematic of terrorism studies; since the most common association that the notion of *terrorism* triggers in the consciousness of the readers is with *violence,* the initial step is the launching of an investigation into the concept of 'violence', to continue with a typology of the phenomenon (national vs. international, real vs. symbolic, direct vs. indirect, democratic vs. nihilistic) and with a succinct presentation of the debates surrounding the instrumentality and 'creativity' of violence. The basic idea is that the occurrence of a violent act needs delimitations derived from the relation between *violence, culture* and *subjectivity* in order to be properly decoded. The second direction followed by *Chapter I* will be represented by a complex analysis of the notion of *terrorism* (extended over a number of 10 subchapters). The starting point will be represented by the idea that terrorism is both a political construct (from which point of view, terrorism will be defined via such important aspects as its instrumental, planned nature, the nature

of the target etc.) and a culturally-embedded one (terrorism can be defined as the symbolic reflection of a culture suffering from ill-defined or atrophied identity boundaries when at odds with an emerging global culture. When the integrity of an underdeveloped culture and its capacity to develop harmoniously are seriously challenged, then the respective culture is prone to a diseased interpretation of world conditions. From this to violent behaviour there is only a step.

The trajectory followed in the analysis of terrorism is very complex, starting from an etymological incursion into the semantics of the word and continuing with contextualising and defining terrorist violence. Important attention will be paid to the *narratives of terror* (*official*, *oppositional* or *alternative* narratives) or to such a highly complex endeavour as trying to gain access to the root causes of terrorism or to the postmodern hypostases of the same phenomenon, with special emphasis on the 9/11 plane crashes as the epitome of the new forms.

Chapter II – *The Theatre of Terror: Western Culture and Terrorist Violence* – will depart from the traditional approach of terrorism through its predominantly physical component and will insist on the idea that, however intense and cruel it may be, the category of violence usually associated with terrorism is not an *end* in itself. The primary intention of this chapter will be to rethink *terrorist practices* as *communicative practices*, however traumatic and offensive the message communicated through them may be. The overall purpose of such a refashioning is not to make the experience of pain and death, usually inflicted by terrorist agents, less important. The finality of such an action would be that of increasing the chances of understanding terrorism though the prism of its less explored aspects, that is the attempt to *transmit* a message. Starting from such theoretical considerations as those proposed by Brian McNair ("terror is a form of political communication, pursued outside the realm of constitutional procedures" – McNair, 2003: 181), Jean Baudrillard (terrorism as "theatre of cruelty" which is aimed at communicating a political message – of challenge – to the public) or Schmid and de Graaf (each instance of terrorist violence represents a strange combination between real life-and-death spectacle, politics and criminality that can enjoy high coverage in the media – qtd. in McNair, 2003: 232), to name just a few of the experts whom I will employ in constructing my discourse, I will continue with a presentation of the manner in which the rhetorical stratum of terrorist violence demands an interpretation in various discourses activated within Western culture by such authors as journalists, academics, politicians or literary writers. The focus will first be laid on the mass media-terrorist violence symbiosis, which will be accompanied by some theoretical delimitations on the role of the mass media in social life, as well as the fascination with terrorist violence, to continue with the tripartite model of mass media-terrorism relation: 1. terrorism exists in a culture exclusively as a *media event*, terrorist violence does not exist outside mediatic discursive practices (Anthony Kubiak); 2. the terrorists are in fact the ones who *organise* and *direct* the terrorist performance by taking advantage of the mediatic discourse, of its vulnerability to news of terror and of its dependence on the spectacular; 3. the mass media are not the creators of the terrorist phenomenon,

but rather its *modellers*, its *shapers*. There will be a concrete analysis of the manner in which the mass media have represented to the public imagination a terrorist event, or *the* terrorist event par excellence, with emphasis on a written material consisting of headlines on the 9/11 terrorist attacks in American and British newspapers. The material incorporates a total number of forty-two popular newspapers, thirty of which belong to the American cultural scene, and twelve to the European one. The analysis will concentrate on two major aspects: on the one hand, newspaper front page headlines and, on the other hand, newspaper front page photographs.

Chapter II will continue with an attempt at deciphering the meanings attached to terrorist violence and practices by the philosophical discourse (as conceived by Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida or Jean Baudrillard) and by political discourses (after all, the connection between terrorism as a manifestation of political violence and public opinion is ensured to a great extent by political discourses consciously employing language in order to influence the manner in which the audience thinks and acts). The two final subchapters will deal with the way in which the actual perpetrator of a terrorist event formulates his own opinion on the matter and makes it known to the larger public as part of the so-called media strategy a terrorist group elaborates whenever performing a terrorist attack (based on Muhammad Khan's videotaped statement released after the 7/7 London underground attacks), and respectively with the idea that terrorist violence can impact on a culture through literature as well. In fact, "in attempting to trace the complex dynamics of terrorism, there is much to be learned from the examinations of it from within literature itself" (Houen 18). Literature as an effective means of inquiring into the subtle mechanisms of terrorist violence has already been approached in Alex Houen's famed study *Terrorism and Modern Literature. From Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson*. However, the major difference to be drawn between Houen's study and the present thesis has to do primarily with the issue of literary periodization. If the former mainly approaches the matter of *modernist* literature (Joseph Conrad, Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound) and its representation of modern terrorist violence, the latter chiefly analyses the *recent* hypostases of terrorist violence as rendered at the level of the recent (postmodern) literary productions (i.e. the final decades of the twentieth century – the beginning of the twenty-first). Furthermore, mention should be made of the character of the material utilised in the two cases. If the objective of the thesis is to investigate the *novelistic* representations of terrorist violence, *Terrorism and Modern Literature* refers to a variety of other literary (and non-literary) sources – poems, theatre plays, newspaper and journal articles, legislation, letters and manifestoes.

Literature possesses the potential to aestheticise terrorism in what Marc Guillaume defines as "mixed fictions" (Baudrillard, Guillaume 35) or Irving Howe as "political novel" (Howe 17), within which the 'figurative' aspects of terrorism become obvious and implicitly contribute to the process of remodelling/refashioning literature. Given the dimensions achieved by the phenomenon of terrorist violence in recent decades, I will approach the terrorism-

literature relation in relation to a wider – both European and American – context; consequently, the literary texts under discussion are to be situated within the cultural framework of the United Kingdom and, respectively, of the United States of America. The analysis is restricted to the area of Western literature and 'terrorism from below' as a means of offering my thesis a focus both in terms of literary periodicity and of the historical stages of terrorist violence. With readings of Doris Lessing's writings on leftist terrorism in late twentieth-century England (*The Good Terrorist*, 1985), Don DeLillo's responses to the artist-terrorist relationship in a postmodern world, accompanied by an analysis of the postmodern features of terrorism (*Mao II*, 1991), Paul Auster's fictionalization of the relation between a novelist and a terrorist (*Leviathan*, 1992), Ian McEwan's theory of terrorism as potentiality (*Saturday*, 2005), and Don DeLillo's re-enactment of the traumatizing fall of bodies from the burning World Trade Centre and illustration of the aftermath of this global terror in the intimate lives of a few characters (*Falling Man,* 2007), the thesis will look into a number of movements and groups that were labelled 'terrorist' by public authorities, and then look at how the literary authors mentioned above have engaged with the issue of mediating and representing them to the public.

The choice of period that the book covers should also be explained. According to a widespread theory in the field of terrorology, terrorist practices are very ancient – to give just one example, assassination was a favourite mode of action of the *Sicarii* in Palestine during the first century AD. The *Oxford English Dictionary* does not record the term as such until 1795, when Sir Edmund Burke associated it with the *régime de la terreur* that emerged in France in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Thus, the term evolved from violence *perpetrated by the state against its citizens* to the nineteenth-century perspective of terrorism as violence *performed by individuals or groups against the state*. In the recent period, however, the phenomenon of terrorism assumed new forms of manifestation, more lethal and highly symbolic at the same time. By looking at literary responses to terrorist violence in the rather 'recent' stage of literary history, I will attempt to approach the 'recent' both in terms of the literary productions and the terrorist ideology represented within those works of literature. However, since terrorist violence possesses a long history behind, so do the writers' preoccupations with fictionalising it in works of literature that have managed to survive both the passing of time and the emergence of new literary representations. In this context, the recent novels that will be treated in this second part of the thesis will be anticipated by two modernist literary works that can be easily considered as extremely useful to setting the ground for the research: on the one hand, Henry James's illustration of the nineteenth-century anarchist movement in *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), and, on the other hand, Joseph Conrad's focus on the 'propaganda by the deed' philosophy of action (*The Secret Agent*, 1907). Leaving aside their known literary qualities, these two novels will serve as prefigurements for two of the main themes that will be addressed in the second part of the thesis.

The seven novels will not be organised chronologically, but rather in thematic groups that will be treated individually in each of the following chapters. If the themes are basically different, there is one constant and deeply relevant feature that brings them closer: the one hypostasis of terrorist violence that is fictionalised in their pages is '*terrorism from below*' (acts of terrorist violence varying in intensity, perpetrated by individual or collective terrorist entities against the state).

Chapter III – The Terrorist as the Writer's Double/Rival: Paul Auster's *Leviathan* and Don DeLillo's *Mao II* – starts from the hypothesis that a novelist's imagination has always been involved in the process of deciphering the 'narrative' of cruel and (in)discriminate violence that has been strategically created by literary figures since the end of the nineteenth century (the emergence of 'modern' terrorism). The present chapter revolves around two hypostases of being in time that have been frequently met with in the public discourse, i.e. the novelist and the terrorist, and will focus on three of the most famous writers who, having started from the presumption that both the artist and the terrorist are *marginalised* individuals, alienated from society, and hoping to revolutionize it in some way or another, have chosen to fictionalize a relation between the two human types, be it in terms of secret sharer or rival. The main objective of this chapter is to understand the relation between terrorism, real life experience and literature through an analysis of the way in which the two human agents implied above have interacted in the fictional world through the transfer of power from one to the other. The approach will contribute to the drawing of a comparison between writers and their ways of constructing their representations of terrorist ideologies and acts.

The overall intention of **Chapter III** is to discover the way in which the novelists *represented* terrorist violence at the level of the fiction produced in the final decades of the twentieth century. Out of a strong need to ensure both coherence and legitimacy to the discourse, the focus will first be laid on the *tradition* of fictionalising the relation between a creator of artistic works and a performer of violent acts, with special attention offered to its incipient forms of manifestation in the nineteenth century. To be more precise, Henry James's conceptualisation of the novelist-terrorist relation through his representation of anarcho-socialist terrorist violence in *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) will serve as the launching point for the investigation into the recent works of literature. After having dealt with the late-Victorian perspective on the personal dilemma which might be triggered within an aesthetically-sensitive soul by the involvement with radical politics, the focus will be laid on the two recent novels that have been selected as the proper foundation for this chapter, i.e. Don DeLillo's *Mao II* (1991) and Paul Auster's *Leviathan* (1992)*. As far as the former is concerned, the analysis will revolve around the relation between the two human types both in terms of rivalry and affinity as projected against the background of postmodernity. The latter will dwell on the fictionalization of the novelist-terrorist relation though the process of terrorist identity construction in twentieth-century America.