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Initiated by the Centre of Excellence for the Study of Cultural Identity of the University of Bucharest, the international interdisciplinary conference entitled ***Literary into Cultural History / De l'histoire littéraire à l'histoire culturelle*** (25-26 May, 2007) is the fruit of systematic institutional ties with the New Europe College and the Romanian Cultural Institute. The conference agenda gravitated round the *historical embeddedness* of *cultural institutions*, of which literature and culture are central ones. The keynote papers given, the responses offered, and the no few debates ensuing confirmed the topicality of the subject in academic and more broadly intellectual circles today. This volume brings together most of the contributions presented.

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Of Literary Representations of Extreme Violence and Their Ethical Coordinates

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G. S. Rousseau's article '"The Hate That Is Not in Us": British Literature and Acts of Extreme Violence' (2005, 2006) stimulates reflection on the culturally meaningful ways in which experience is transformed into discourse. By the author's own admission, his piece 'began as an extended commentary' on Roland Littlewood's 1997 anthropological analysis of the socio-sexual mechanisms behind military rape (Rousseau 7). Reading the two articles side by side helps us uncover key differences in their authors' positions, in spite of the fact that most of Rousseau's post-WWII examples of excessive violence come from Littlewood's text. Significantly, the footnote in which he acknowledges his debt to the latter contains a serious misreading of the anthropologist's approach to atrocity. According to Rousseau, Littlewood argues that 'despite "atrocity's transcending analysis" there is no excuse for mere revulsion: the topic must be faced' (7). What we read in the 1997 article, however, is the following:

> Revulsion at actions found in the anthropologist's own society and sex is no reason for exculpation through claims that atrocity transcends analysis, or for adhering to an objectivizing or pathologizing position: such revulsion may be less a 'cultural' response to such a pattern than intrinsic to its maintenance [my emphasis]. (9)

In other words, Littlewood is suspicious of the claim that 'atrocity transcends analysis' and of the tendency to 'objectivise and pathologise' acts of violence because both positions may result in the exoneration of the perpetrators of such acts. 'Revulsion' in the face of atrocity and the consequent refusal to analyze it may lead to the perpetuation of the socio-sexual patterns through which it is maintained. So, atrocity must not merely be '*faced*', as Rousseau urges us to do, but *interpreted*. In fact Littlewood's ethical stance in his 1997 article seems to me to be very similar to that of French-Bulgarian cultural philosopher Tzvetan Todorov, who maintains that '*understanding* evil (and atrocity is certainly a manifestation of evil[1]) [...] is *the means* of preventing it from occurring again [my emphasis]' (124).

Regretfully, G. S. Rousseau fails to foreground the ethical implications of the *rational comprehension* of evil and its expression through violence. I hasten to add that *rational* should not be interpreted as meaning *simplistic* in this context – just as *comprehension* does not involve the assumption of a straightforward relationship between causes and effects. Rousseau's emphasis on *incomprehension* is evident from the very beginning of his article: his point of departure is a quotation from Primo Levi's 1947 masterpiece *If This Is a Man*, which underscores the impossibility of understanding Nazi hatred in rational terms. Rousseau maintains that the extreme violence instigated by (quasi-)barbaric hatred of this kind cannot be 'named' effectively but can be expressed 'through metaphor and simile' (7), that is, figurative language is a better vehicle for conveying impressions of it than 'non-poetic' elucidatory discourse. In a rather controversial fashion, he opposes such violence to the 'antagonisms of war' (7). I, for one, wince at the sweeping generalization that while '[v]iolence in the West has been bred of hatred and fear, war [has sprung] from *the impulse to salvation* [my emphasis]' (8). Worse still, the crude contrast between 'West' and 'non-West', which is in evidence in this instance, structures most of Rousseau's article. It should be pointed out that his sanitized vision of war in the West and repeated recourse to the West/non-West dichotomy have no analogues in Littlewood's text, which is an honest attempt to explain the complexity of excessive sexual violence in a wide variety of cultural contexts cutting across the West/non-West divide.

Leaving Rousseau's tendency to generalization aside, the intellectually stimulating question that he poses in his text is 'why [has] imaginative literature – especially canonical British literature – had such difficulty representing [extreme] violence' (10)? To appreciate the broader ethical and ideological implications of this question, we need to distance ourselves from the nineteenth-century notion of national literature as 'the expression of a nation's mind in writing' (Channing 3) that, to my mind, underlies it. Further on I am going to quibble about Rousseau's view of canonization. At this point, I will only question his selection of British literary texts: despite the fact that his non-literary examples of violence mostly come from the Holocaust and the post-WWII period, the majority of literary *œuvres* he mentions and/or briefly comments upon in his article, are considerably older (10, 12, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20) and, possibly, reflect the extensive work that he has done on the eighteenth century. The author does claim that 'since 1945 the literature of atrocity has continued to flourish [...] heralding a type of poetic justice through mimesis of the twentieth century's brutal life' (21) but most of the material, which he uses to illustrate this, comes from the North American context.

Surprisingly, British postcolonial literature is not mined for representations of violence. J. M. Coetzee is mentioned briefly but given the article's title, his work remains outside the avowed scope of Rousseau's analysis. The situation would have been different had the author opted for *literature(s) in English* rather than for *British literature*. Even under the circumstances, though, he could have searched for – and found – memorable representations of violence in, inter alia, Salman Rushdie's Shame (1983). This postcolonial novel could have been read alongside Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which Rousseau interprets as the ultimate statement of atrocity in (British) literature and as a prophetic tale anticipating later acts of violence (13-14). In principle, a comparative reading of the two books may uncover intertwined histories of aggression and violence as well as shared textual genealogies.

Quibbling aside, the question that Rousseau asks alerts us to the importance of symptomatic absences and encourages us to speculate about the *absence/exclusion* of the 'awkward' topic of extreme violence from the traditionally canonized areas of British literature. It is likewise possible to problematise the assumption behind the question and reflect on specific cases in which excessive violence is represented. The exploration of literary contexts marked by the symptomatic *presence/absence* of violence encourages interdisciplinary research. On the one hand, such an exploration is resonant with the 'new' ethical turn in literary studies[2] to the extent that it makes us reflect on literature's engagement with political and ethical issues. On the other, it may provide valuable insights into culture conceived as a way of life and thus bring together the mutually complementary fields of literary and cultural history.

A link between literary and cultural history is forged by Rousseau himself as he attributes the scarcity of canonical British literary texts engaging with violence to anxiety over symbolic pollution. He first raises the issue in the opening part of his article by asking how one can 'respond to extreme fanaticism without becoming fanatic oneself' (7). Further on the author speaks of representations of atrocity 'contaminating' (9) and 'tainting' (12) their narrators. Anxiety over symbolic pollution has long attracted anthropologists' attention. Mary Douglas in particular has identified the social mechanism involved in the location of pollution. Christopher Hamlin sums up her views thus: 'we label as polluting [...] whatever threatens the categories we use for the normal conduct of social business' (5). To ensure 'the normal conduct of social business', individuals and institutions may resort to acts of *symbolic cleansing*. Terry Eagleton links such acts to a desire to negate what appears contingent and superfluous in a particular context (208). In its 'pure' form such a negation is typical of the fundamentalist mentality. As part of 'the fuzzy, rough-textured, open-ended nature of human existence' (Eagleton 208) contingencies and superfluities interfere with the functioning of a supposedly orderly world, infringe upon the integrity of the presumably inviolable selves that inhabit it, and/or sully the 'purity' of the straightforward, transparent narratives of virtue and heroism they are likely to favour. Needless to say, the symptomatic absence/exclusion of representations of excessive violence from the traditional British literary canon that Rousseau has diagnosed is substantially different from an absolute, 'fundamentalist' longing for 'cleanliness' of the kind that Eagleton describes. Yet the difference is one of degree, not kind. The juxtaposition of the two therefore helps us identify a shared distaste of 'impurity'.

The distaste of 'impurity' is part of the 'nature' of the canonization of art in general and literature in particular. Canonization is the outcome of institutionalization and academic power politics and as such embodies a desire for order and what Bakhtinians would call *finalizability*. As far as I can see, Rousseau does not take into account the *constructed* character of canons and therefore assumes that the British literary canon does not include texts representing extreme violence because of their overall scarcity, a trait that he attributes to writers' reluctance to address the issue out of fear of being 'tainted' by it. To understand his position somewhat better, we need to consider the tentative definition of extreme acts of violence, which he provides on p. 8, despite his initial conviction that such acts cannot be 'named except through metaphor and simile' (7):

> Extreme acts of violence are committed if the intention of the perpetrator is (1) violation through ritual bodily mutilation; (2) the annihilation of an entire race of people; (3) other disturbance so extreme that it would be punishable by death in most courts of law according to most Western systems of jurisprudence. (8)

(1) is easily traceable back to Littlewood's article and interests me most. On the other hand, (3) invites further quibbling: Rousseau appears to have forgotten that quite a lot of 'systems of jurisprudence', both in 'the West' and outside the boundaries of the civilization traditionally designated by that name, no longer include the death penalty. Some of the examples that support (2) were already touched upon. For (1) Rousseau provides illustration that ranges from punitive rapes performed on Bosnian women (9), through the castration of Croatian male prisoners by women (9) to the unspeakably brutal gang rape of a Congolese woman (21-22). The victims' emphatic *sexualisation* is among the most disturbing features of the cases he recounts. Social scientists have demonstrated that the drastic devaluing of the victim is part of the psychological mechanism that makes acts of extreme violence possible (Staub 3-12). Degradation either through what may be, in other circumstances, acts of intimacy or through downright sexual mutilation – frequently performed with a fetishized weapon (Littlewood 12) – is a way of negating the victim's personhood

and demonstrating her/his utter helplessness. What happens when literature attempts to represent the deeply disturbing combination of sexualization and victimization? What might the ethical coordinates of such a portrayal be? To provide a tentative answer I will take a look at D. M. Thomas's novel *The White Hotel* (1981) and select aspects of its reception.

Despite its nomination for the Booker Prize, praise from writers as eminent as Graham Greene and Salman Rushdie and considerable commercial success, this text has largely remained outside the literary canon – if inclusion in academic courses is anything to go by[3]. Readers' attitudes to it are probably best summed up in the title of a review of Thomas' later novel *Ararat* (1983): '*elaborate and perverse* [my emphasis]' (Dickstein 516). *The White Hotel* has been found disturbing on account of its representations of terrifying violence performed, for the most part, on sexualized and/or 'racialized' victims. Besides, in a memorable instance this violence is portrayed through the near-plagiarism of a Holocaust survivor's memoir. Linda Hutcheon, arguably, the most authoritative literary theorist to write about *The White Hotel*, regards the text as 'profoundly anti-humanistic' (166). This does not imply any value judgement but merely suggests that the book 'problematizes the same issues as poststructuralist theory' (166). For instance, it deconstructs the idea of the autonomous, unitary subject, traditionally defined through references to history, society, biology and/or psychology. The novel likewise blurs the dividing line between productions of meaning in history and in fiction. The near-plagiarism mentioned above is part of this process: the text presents us with 'borrowings' from Anatoli Kuznetsov's historical-documentary text *Babi Yar* (1966, 1967), which are intermixed with Thomas's own, 'properly' authorial discourse. According to Hutcheon, *The White Hotel* 're-fictionalizes' Dina Pronicheva's eye-witness account of the Babi Yar mass killing (167), which Kuznetsov subsequently incorporated into his book. The survivor's doubly mediated experience (Pronicheva told her story after the event and Kuznetsov *recounted* it in his own text) is then 'shared' by *The White Hotel*'s female protagonist Lisa Erdman. This 'sharing' illustrates the intertextual condition of all literary texts and, indeed, of the entire cultural domain.

The White Hotel's mosaic-like texture likewise comprises echoes from Freud's work, the libretto of Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*, Pushkin's poem *Eugene Onegin* and Mikhail Bulgakov's *The White Guard* (1924, 1966). Tangible traces of Bulgakov's religious-philosophical vision of a paradise to which everyone is admitted structure the British novel's concluding part, 'The Camp'. *The White Hotel*'s multiple intertextuality may, in addition, be said to reflect its author's career as a translator of Russian literature as well as a writer of 'original' literary texts. D. M. Thomas' novel thus comprises most of postmodernism's distinctive features and shares some of the charges levelled at the ideological and ethical underpinnings of one of the most controversial intellectual projects of the post-WWII era.

Representations of sex and violence recur through the novel, starting with Lisa's hysterical fantasies and ending with a nightmarish representation of the sexual violence she suffers prior to her death at Babi Yar. Her prophetic anticipation of the mass killing that occurred in the Kiev ravine is said to have shaped her entire life. The text portrays her as having experienced its horrors in advance and, in a typical postmodernist fashion, problematizes the uniqueness of a historical event marked by excessive cruelty. I do not mean to imply that the Babi Yar massacre was the only case of mass extermination before, during or after the Second World War; in fact, I am convinced that instances of 'extreme evil [like it] def[y] comparisons of magnitude' (Staub xiii). Rather, the idea that the mass killing was experienced in nightmares and fantasies long before it actually occurred makes it difficult for readers to grant ethical credit to Thomas' text as it would appear that historically authentic and fantasized violence were equated in it.

Commenting on other literary and cinematic representations of the horrors of the Second World War, Alberto Caciedo outlines the following scenario of the relationship between text and reader: through the portrayal of 'ultimately inexpressible horrors' the reader is engaged in 'a dialogue that might produce the *saeva indignatio* (savage indignation) that Jonathan Swift [...] considered the affective preliminary to ethical social action' (357). In my view, *The*

White Hotel's ethical focus is on the need not to consign the horrors of the past to oblivion. However, the text largely fails to engage readers in a dialogue clarifying this position and helping them achieve a morally unambiguous understanding of the reasons for 'forgetting' the Babi Yar mass killing.

In principle, *The White Hotel*'s concern with the ethical parameters of remembering the past can be deduced from the closing paragraphs of section V, 'The Sleeping Carriage'. In them the novel's omniscient narrator reveals repeated attempts, in post-WWII Soviet Ukraine, to erase all traces of the memory of Babi Yar. The urge to forgetfulness is so strong that even the massacre's survivor Dina Pronicheva 'stopped admitting [after a time that] she had escaped from Babi Yar' (Thomas 222). Moreover, rather than being 'placated with a memorial' (Thomas 222), the ravine where the mass killing took place was flooded with water and mud as a dam lake was constructed over it. How are readers to interpret such attempts to negate the past? Significantly, interpretations are likely to involve 'extra-literary' knowledge of history, group psychology and even ethnic stereotypes as well as readings of the literary representation under consideration.

Thus, the attempts at erasing the memory of Babi Yar that the novel brings to our attention could be attributed to Ukrainians' post-WWII guilt over their collaboration with the Nazi plan for the total destruction of the country's Jewish population and other 'undesirables'. While such an answer may reflect a trend of Anti-Semitism in Ukrainian history and/or group psychology, it is far from satisfactory in moral terms insofar as it erases individual differences and provokes the question: why should *all* Ukrainians be answerable for what *some* did or felt? The irrational economic policies of the Soviet totalitarian state could also be cited as a possible explanation, although such a view would result in the rephrasing of the question and the adoption of a radically different perspective on the activities in the ravine. A third interpretation would be to attribute the urge to oblivion to 'all-human' moral inadequacy.

The text provides justification for each of the three interpretive solutions. It is even possible to combine them into a single reading: the overall moral failure of the human race manifests itself in hatred of (relative) outsiders as well as in attempts to obliterate the signs of such hatred when circumstances change; moral inadequacy likewise results in adherence to totalitarian ideologies like fascism and communism which rationalize hatred of others by basing it on 'racial' and/or class grounds and institutionalize absurd bureaucratic systems.

It should be noted that neither of the above interpretations is likely to lead to readerly indignation and ethical social action insofar as they all instil in us a sense of impotence in the face of controversial 'all-human' attitudes and ambiguous moral motivation. As was already remarked above, the novel's rhetorical failure lies in not initiating a dialogue that would enable *understanding* of the causes of 'forgetting' and, ultimately, of excessive violence. Writing from a social-scientific perspective, Ervin Staub maintains that the avowed incomprehensibility of excessive violence – and, I would add, later attempts to consign it to oblivion – is tantamount to 'romanticizing' it and endowing it with 'mythical proportions' (xii). Regretfully, *The White Hotel* does move in that direction by searching for the roots of violence and its later negation in the unconscious areas of the human mind and repeatedly blurring the dividing line between the protagonist's fantasies and nightmares and the historically authentic reality of Babi Yar.

It is possible to justify such an approach to extreme violence by arguing that events like the Babi Yar massacre fall so completely outside the 'normal' lives of post-WWII readers that the parallel with nightmares and horror fantasies might provide some notion of what it might be like to experience them. Moreover, such a vicarious experience could provide an antidote to forgetfulness. Yet, the universalizing model of the human mind as a repository of negative drives towards (self-)destruction, which structures *The White Hotel*'s plot, is not conducive to *moral judgement* upon the past. As was already hinted above, in the context of the novel, Lisa's whole life is a preparation for Babi Yar and the choices she makes, such as her marriage to Victor Berenstein and return to Ukraine, precipitate her horrific experiences and death in the ravine. In the closing Babi Yar episodes the protagonist is literally reduced to 'thingness' as she is first robbed of her golden crucifix (one of the objects signifying her problematic identity as a putative 'non-Jew') and is then turned into a macabre sex-toy by two Ukrainian guards (Thomas 218-20).

The 'new' ethical-rhetorical approach to literary texts acknowledges the fact that different readers 'bring different hierarchies of value to their reading' (Phelan 215) and, one might add, different affective responses. It could be argued that what happens to Lisa inspires disgust rather than indignation. Given the visceral ('gut') character of disgust, a dialogue between text and reader would be very difficult. What further prevents dialogue and moral judgement is the *depersonalization* of the perpetrators of the acts of violence upon Lisa. The one, who robs her of the crucifix and gives her a savage kick in the left breast, is merely identified as an SS man (Thomas 219). The Ukrainian guards, who abuse her sexually prior to killing her, are given the fairly 'average' names of Demidenko and Semashko (Thomas 219). As was remarked, an emphasis on 'averageness' could only lead us to accusing large groups of people without taking into account individual choices and actions.

In the interest of justice it must be admitted that the novel's omniscient narrator adopts a different approach to the victims of Babi Yar: 'he' underscore the value of each of the lives lost in the ravine. However, the dominant emotion is regret, not *saeva indignatio*:

> The soul of man is a far country, which cannot be approached or explored. Most of the dead were poor and illiterate. But every single one of them had dreamed dreams, seen visions and had amazing experiences, even the babes in arms (perhaps especially the babes in arms). Though most of them had never lived outside the Podol slum, their histories were as rich and complex as Lisa Erdman-Berenstein's. If a Sigmund Freud had been listening and taking notes from the time of Adam, he would still not fully have explored even a single group, even a single person. (Thomas 220)

The loss is indeed acknowledged but the overall effect – for me at least – is one of resignation and quietism.

To describe my own engagement with D. M. Thomas' text further, I will resort to the ethical-rhetorical approach one more time. From the perspective of ethical-rhetorical criticism the text 'hails' the reader (Hale 189) to become a member of the 'authorial audience', a privileged community of the author's ideal readers[4]. In this particular case, however, the reader is inclined to ignore the text's 'hailing' as she finds the author's ethical position (as expressed by the omniscient narrator) controversial and in many ways unacceptable. Phelan claims that a reader, who is also a rhetorical theorist, 'remains open to having [her own] values challenged and even repudiated' (212) as she engages with the text. I interpret this as a plea to readers to continue reading texts with whose treatment of moral issues they disagree. However, this does not preclude *debating* with such texts and/or *questioning* the values they convey, as, in the words of another theorist of the ethical turn, we 'open [ourselves] up to a type of decision-making that is itself inherently ethical' in the act of reading (Hale 189). The 'profoundly anti-humanistic' (Hutcheon 166) strategies of representation, which we experience as we read *The White Hotel*, stimulate *questioning* rather than *debate*. Despite some similarity in meaning, the two acts are distinct insofar as *debate* involves engagement and is thus close to *dialogue*, and *questioning* implies doubts and dismissal. While existence is not in any way sanitized in D. M. Thomas' novel and readers are not permitted to avert their gaze from the images of excessive violence that punctuate the narrative, little room is left for the kind of 'internal ideological distanciation' (Zhijian 16) that should result in dialogue between text and reader.

Such a dialogue might have led to moral judgement on the past insofar as it would have brought into relief the singularity of historical events and individuality of human acts. For Tzvetan Todorov the recognition of those qualities is crucial to understanding and judging human conduct. In a commentary on Primo Levi's rendition of his experiences in Auschwitz, with which Rousseau's article also started, he remarks

> What we seek to understand are human beings, capable of a great variety of different acts; what we seek to judge are specific acts carried out at particular times and places.
>
> [...] People may be made from the same mould, but events are singular. Those are what we must ponder and judge, because history consists of events [my emphasis]. (125)

Todorov's reference is not to literature specifically and we should not forget that *literary* representation was our starting point. Pondering the relationship between literature and fiction, Michael Wood states that 'literature is fiction in the fullest, most powerful sense when it sets out to encounter real knowledge along imaginary roads' (190). To my mind, it is this particular literary trait that makes readers' ethical engagement with literary texts possible. In the process we perform acts of *understanding* and *judging* similar to the ones described by Todorov.

As I tried to demonstrate through my reading of *The White Hotel*, a literary text's representation of excessive violence and its aftermath may have moral and ideological implications that do not correspond to our own outlook. However, even such a text's failure to involve us in a dialogue may be interpreted as part of our ethical engagement with literature. Our *questioning* of its value system in the process of reading may enact an ethical impasse that could be overcome through further reading – performed by us or other readers. For the diverse processes of creative readerly engagement to continue, though, we should move beyond incomprehension or mere insistence on the need to 'face' excessive violence. Literature can nurture both our desire to *understand* that violence and the moral imperative to pass *judgement* on its specific manifestations.

Notes

1 Ervin Staub remarks that 'evil is not a scientific concept with an agreed meaning' but its essence may nevertheless be assumed to be 'the destruction of human beings' (25).

2 For some scholars the 'new' ethical turn may be *intra*-, rather than *inter*disciplinary, insofar as it easily falls within an earlier Anglo-American tradition of ethical-rhetorical readings of literature. For an outline of the tradition, see James Phelan, 'Rhetoric/Ethics' (2007), esp. pp. 207-209. On the other hand, the ethical turn is interdisciplinary to the extent that it brings together literature and philosophy.

3 A Google search revealed only 2 taught courses that include *The White Hotel*. One of them is my own course on British literature since 1980 at www.uni-vt.bg. Information about the other course is to be found at *http://io.uwinnipeg.ca/~morton/Telecourse/White_Hotel/hotel.htm*

4 The term 'authorial audience' was coined by Peter J. Rabinowitz. However, in the present context I base my reading on Phelan's interpretation of it.

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