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Terrorism, fiction and assassinating Thatcher: introduction

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What can literature do about terrorism? What has literature done with terrorism? It has, for instance, given terrorism a narrative form through the terrorist plot, thus allowing readers to imagine how a terrorist attack can be planned, and how it would feel to carry it out. Writers of fiction have responded to violence labelled terrorism by imagining the experiences, thoughts and behaviour of the victims and the perpetrators, as well as their pain and suffering. Literature has also reacted to the media coverage and overexposure of terrorism, and the various discourses related to terrorist groups. Authors have sought to investigate the symbolic significance of terror, and perhaps to undermine it, or they have tried to amplify the cultural and societal significance of such acts, creating characters, personalities and voices that tempt their readers with the spectacle of terror. Thereby, literature has also contributed to myths about terrorist acts and their perpetrators.

The terrorist novel is a thematically defined, open-ended category, which has existed since the nineteenth century. The novels in this tradition depict how terror disrupts the everyday reality of innocent victims, as well as the psyche of the perpetrators. The terrorist plot in these novels also frequently touches on one of the deepest fears in people nowadays, which is, to use Francis Blesington's formulation, to be "a random casualty in a political or religious conflict" (2008, 118). However, the terrorist novel and film have never merely reflected terrorism. Writers of fiction have actively re-created terrorism and invited their audiences to respond to their imaginings. Hence, terrorist fiction, no matter how limited in its significance, or how indirect in its means of communication, is also responsible for what terrorism means.

In a recent online collection of articles on literature and terrorism, *Littérature et arts face au terrorisme* (2018), Catherine Grall ponders on what it means for literature and the arts to "face" terrorism. She suggests that there are two main approaches: either literature and art react to terrorism by representing terrorists and

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their acts, or writers and artists use terrorism as a kind of distorted self-image, in other words they position themselves in relation to terrorists as if they were looking at themselves in a carnival mirror. One implication of the latter, in other words the use of terrorism as a distorted self-image, is that art and literature take on the role of a kind of symbolic terrorist who seeks to disrupt everyday literary and artistic processing, or to jam narrativity, to make a political or a philosophical point or to instigate fear in the audience. Spectators of contemporary theatre about terrorism may be confronted with their fears in the immediacy of the terror of violence—as Florence Fix points out in her article included here.

The interface between literature and terrorism takes other forms, too. For instance, writers and readers may pose moral questions about themselves and their society through terrorist fiction. In her article included here, Blanka Grzegorzcyk discusses the way in which some writers of young adult fiction have imagined new subject positions from which to resist the call to violent extremism, as well as new forms of ethical opposition to the bipolar worldview that has accompanied the war on terror. Another distorting mirror between literature and terrorism is the analogy that is sometimes drawn between a fiction writer and a terrorist combatant. Margaret Scanlan points out in *Plotting Terror: Novelists and Terrorists in Contemporary Fiction* that the motif of the writer as the terrorist's victim, rival or double already appears in Dostoyevsky, James and Conrad (2001, 1–2). The terrorist and the novelist are both, in the cliché image, solitary figures working in isolation, and agents of transformation who wish to leave a lasting impact on people's consciousness. Yves Clavaron, in his analysis of Yasmina Khadra's *L'Attentat* (2005) and John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) included here, further develops the question of the writer's and the terrorist's relationship.

Still another and darker potential reason why terrorist fiction exists is that it gives vent to the author's or the reader's murderous imaginations and repressed violent urges, thus possibly allowing readers to assert themselves by destroying others in their imaginations. The terrorist character has enabled some authors, readers and viewers to investigate their affinity with the thoughts, emotions and choices of the perpetrators.

The controversy surrounding Hilary Mantel's short story "The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher" (2014) made manifest some of the moral complexities involved in imaginative role-taking through terrorist fiction. Mantel's story is told by an anonymous, politically left-leaning narrator who, much like the author herself, lived in Windsor in the early 1980s in a flat opposite the hospital in which Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had an eye operation in August 1983. The narrator of this story allows an IRA assassin into her flat believing, first, that the intruder is her plumber's son, and then that he was a paparazzo photographer interested in getting a good shot of the PM when she left the hospital. It gradually dawns on the captive narrator that the man is, in fact, an assassin. Subsequently it becomes evident how perfectly the narrator shares her captor's loathing of the Iron Lady, and the ensuing situation demonstrates how she becomes in some way the assassin's willing accomplice. She makes the man tea, offers to hold his gun when he asks for more tea ("You go and make the tea and I'll sit here and mind the gun"), and helps him to plan an escape route after the assassination. The narrator's and the assassin's views on Thatcher

only seem to differ in their reasons for their hatred. For the assassin the murder is all about Ireland and nothing else, whereas the narrator's hatred goes far beyond politics to the Prime Minister's personality—her way of being a woman, her “fake femininity,” her “counterfeit voice” and her philistinism. The narrator feels compelled to say that she does not believe that violence solves anything, but it is as if, given her sympathising with the assassin and her agreement on the desirability of shooting Thatcher, she has started to doubt her own moral principles. Mantel's story, therefore, is not about the Stockholm syndrome, when an innocent bystander creates a psychological alliance with his or her captor, it is a tale in which two seemingly very different personalities and worldviews suddenly, and absurdly, are aligned by their shared object of hate. One thematic question in the novel, then, concerns what still separates the narrator from the IRA combatant. What keeps the narrator from assassinating the PM, whom she hates so much?

Thatcher's recent demise (8 April 2013) contributed to the controversy over the story's publication in September 2014, but at the heart of the issue was the way in which the author associated herself closely with the story's narrator, her antipathies and her sympathy for the terrorist. In an interview in *The Guardian* that accompanied its publication, Mantel explained how in August 1983 she had spotted, from the window of her flat in Windsor, the PM “toddling” around the hospital gardens unguarded (Barr 2014). Then, at the point at which Thatcher seemed most vulnerable, she fantasised about the possibility of assassinating her. Mantel mused further: “I thought, if I wasn't me, if I was someone else, she'd be dead”. She also said to *The Guardian* interviewer, her finger and thumb forming a gun, “Immediately your eye measures the distance”.

The interview provoked a fierce backlash that gave a lot of publicity to the story. Some of the public reactions were strongly condemnatory. Lord Timothy Bell, a friend of and former PR adviser to Thatcher, said that Mantel should be investigated by the police, or should see a therapist. “If somebody admits they want to assassinate somebody, surely the police should investigate. This is in unquestionably bad taste,” he told the *Sunday Times*. MP Stewart Jackson described Mantel as “sick and deranged”, and MP Conor Burns told the *Sunday Times* that the story was gravely offensive to the victims of the IRA. Lord Norman Tebbit called the story a “sick book from a sick mind” when it was announced it was to be featured on Radio 4. In response to these allegations, English PEN released a statement in support of the author saying that the call for the police to investigate Mantel was “disproportionate and wholly inappropriate”, and further emphasised that “authors are free to shock or challenge their readership by depicting extraordinary events or extreme acts”.

It remains unclear so far what the crime was for which Hilary Mantel should have been investigated. Neither bad taste in the timing of the publication nor imaginary Thatchericide is a crime. The author also strongly denied, in another interview (the *New Republic*, October 2014), that her story implied that it would have been moral or right to assassinate Mrs. Thatcher. However, the controversy over “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher” is a telling example not only of Thatcher's amazing capacity to arouse strong emotions even after her death, but also of the kind of moral ambivalence in autobiographical fiction that authors and readers can readily exploit for their various purposes. Fiction is freely open to the imagination, and in

this day and age it is important to defend this freedom. It may also be worth emphasising that when fiction directly draws on the reality or imagines perfectly possible counterfactual situations, or when the author insists on the work's autobiographical significance, it may still not be reliable, and need not be particularly responsible. At the same time, however, fiction that explores the grey area of sympathy for the terrorist cannot remain an innocent or objective observer. Terrorist fiction is inevitably a means of active meaning-making and a way of defining terrorism, as well as some kind of exploration of its definition. Readers, writers and filmmakers take advantage of that opportunity, and continue to make sense of terrorism through fiction in their numerous and often incompatible ways.

This cluster of articles on literature and terrorism is based on papers given at the 7th Biennial Congress of the European Network for Comparative Literary Studies. The conference, entitled "Fear and Safety", was held in Helsinki, Finland, in August 2017.

Du terrorisme et de la littérature

«Je n'ai pas de réponse littéraire au terrorisme». Tel est, le 11 septembre 2003 dans *L'Express*, l'aveu surprenant d'un écrivain, Don DeLillo, qui a pourtant consacré une partie de son œuvre au terrorisme en littérature, qu'il conçoit par ailleurs comme en prise avec son temps, et dont le roman *Players* (1977), qui met en scène un attentat contre les tours du *World Trade Center*, a été lu comme prémonitoire de la montée du terrorisme aux États-Unis. La fable de Don DeLillo se concrétisera un certain 11 septembre, *nine-eleven* comme disent les Américains, occultant l'horreur de l'événement sous une sorte de code numérique, et fournira le substrat réaliste incontournable de nombreux autres romans à venir. Dans *Mao II*, Don DeLillo avait fait du terroriste un miroir du romancier avant de se raviser quelque peu face à la dimension apocalyptique des attentats dits du 11 septembre. Désormais, les romanciers auraient moins d'impact sur les consciences collectives que les terroristes.

L'affirmation de Don DeLillo revient à reposer et repenser la question de Sartre: «Que peut la littérature?» dans un contexte où l'évidence immédiate de l'événement terroriste s'impose. En effet, comme l'écrit Jean Bessière (2018, p. 1): «la littérature tente de retrouver un pouvoir qui ne peut consister en un engagement explicite, une dénonciation, une consolation, ou un discours de vérité—inutile puisque le terrorisme est manifeste, il suffit de le citer». Le terrorisme se définit par son événementialité, son immédiateté, refigurées par les images médiatiques qui tentent de reconstruire la fulgurance de l'instant par une infinie répétition, ce qui conduit le spectateur médusé à incorporer l'hyperviolence de l'acte terroriste, phénomène à la fois lointain, quasi virtuel, et proche, au point d'être intériorisé et annexé à l'intime. L'esthétisation médiatique du terrorisme bloque la catharsis à la différence du roman qui a la puissance d'introduire la médiation nécessaire à la littéralité de la représentation de l'horreur, ce qui permet de distancer la terreur ou de la rendre réversible.

Si pour Hardt et Negri (Hardt and Negri 2000), le biopouvoir sert à assurer la domination d'une forme globale de mondialisation qu'ils appellent «Empire», le terrorisme, qui se construit dans une sorte d'internationalisation tout en

s'attaquant aux symboles les plus ostensibles d'une mondialisation d'inspiration américaine, correspond à un «nécropouvoir» (Mbembe 2006, p. 41). Au sein de la communauté visée, l'acte terroriste désigne par le plus grand arbitraire qui doit mourir et suscite la terreur chez les survivants. Arme létale pour le terroriste, au sens balistique du terme, le corps est aussi celui pulvérisé et invisibilisé de la victime anonyme. Les corps défaits des morts du 11 septembre n'ont pas été montrés, sauf ceux à l'intégrité fugacement préservée des «*Falling men*» qui avaient fait le choix de se jeter dans le vide—souffle ultime d'une vie saisi en plein vol—pour échapper au brasier infernal des tours en fusion. En revanche, les images exhibent continûment les gravats et les décombres fumants, symboles devenus universels de la ruine d'une civilisation. Ainsi, le roman représente une phénoménologie de la terreur selon une logique de la douleur et de la souffrance, érige un monde possible—une ontologie fictionnelle—où s'abolit le sujet, du terroriste et de la victime, où s'annule provisoirement la temporalité dans l'advenue brutale de l'événement et où le quotidien conserve la trace traumatique de la mémoire du crime, littéralement mythifié par la construction médiatique.

Si les attentats du 11 septembre ont déclenché en représailles une guerre contre la terreur perçue comme irruption de la primitivité et de forces obscures, ils ont également constitué une véritable césure culturelle pour tout un pan de la critique états-unienne. Effectivement, ils auraient affecté le corps même du roman et la littérature, qui a dû changer de mode narratif en rétablissant une continuité par-delà l'esthétique de la rupture privilégiée jusque-là et en mettant fin à une forme d'histrionisme énonciatif ou narratif fondateur du postmodernisme. Mais cette mise au pas de la littérature et de ses potentialités ironiques et subversives semble davantage relever d'un besoin social de réassurance que d'une inflexion esthétique réelle et durable, y compris pour les romans directement informés par le terrorisme. Le récit à la première personne fait de l'intérieur de la conscience d'un terroriste apparaît comme un jeu dangereux qui induit la rencontre avec ce qui est dénoncé comme le mal absolu, entraîne le risque d'expliquer et donc de justifier l'injustifiable et pose plus largement la question de la réception. Le schéma du roman d'apprentissage, souvent retenu par le récit terroriste pour suivre le parcours d'un jeune homme désorienté en quête d'identité, constitue une forme littéraire susceptible d'entraîner empathie ou sympathie par identification avec le terroriste, une problématique étudiée par l'article de Kai Mikkonen dans ce volume. Le genre théâtral pose des questions similaires, mais dont les enjeux sont exacerbés par le pouvoir de la représentation scénique qui permet de travailler l'immédiateté de la peur dans un espace partagé et clos, selon Florence Fix. Quant à l'intégration de la terreur et du terrorisme dans la littérature de jeunesse, elle associe encore plus nettement la question de la réception à une intentionnalité éthique sans négliger pour autant l'intention politique comme le montre Blanka Grzegorzcyk.

Le «roman terroriste» est en prise avec le politique, mais il doit surmonter le binarisme et le manichéisme au risque de l'idéologie voire de la propagande. Pour autant, il ne peut guère être «engagé» au sens sartrien du terme, tout au plus, est-il entraîné ou embarqué dans l'Histoire, jouant le rôle d'une «fiction critique» pour reprendre un terme de Dominique Viart (2007).

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