THREE NOVELS OF TERRORIST VIOLENCE: 20th CENTURY LITERATURE IN ENGLISH AND CONFRONTATIONAL POLITICS

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Abstract: *The present paper is oriented towards identifying the particularities of the relation between politics and literature, more precisely towards understanding how "literary imagination responds to the violent intrusion of politics" (HOWE, 1957: 15) in what could conventionally be described as the 'political novel'.*

Key words: *anarchism, left-wing terrorism, postmodern terrorism.*

The present paper is oriented towards identifying the particularities of the relation between *politics* and *literature*, more precisely to understand how "literary imagination responds to the violent intrusion of politics" (HOWE, 1957: 15) in what could conventionally be described as the "political novel". In doing this we will choose a more moderate position that the one voiced by the postmodern theorist Fredric Jameson, who stated that "political interpretation (…) is the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" (JAMESON, 1982: 17), and will advance the idea that certain texts have a particular political resonance that intrudes on their literary fabric.

While the literary side of the equation is represented by the novel, the political one is represented by terrorist violence, i.e. the extreme manifestation of political violence. The issue here is not necessarily of a definitional nature; both terrorist violence and the political novel cannot be conceptualised in a single, universally-accepted way. However, for the sake of this research, terrorist violence will be taken to denominate a particular manifestation of political violence aimed at communicating a message (through violence) meant to destabilize not only cities and buildings, but cultural identities as well. On the other hand, the political novel could be identified as a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the major setting.

The founding premise of this paper is that terrorist violence is, beyond the physicality of the phenomenon, "printed text" (ZULAIKA, DOUGLAS eds., 1996: 31); following this line of thought, this paper seeks to analyse three such instances of 'writing' terrorism in terms of their literary structure and representation of political violence. Thus the focus will be laid on *The Secret Agent* (Joseph Conrad, 1907), set at the end of the 19th century in a dynamite-obsessed England; *The Good Terrorist* (Doris Lessing, 1985) - left-wing terrorism and its "good" agent directed against the capitalist society of the 20th century; *Mao II* (Don DeLillo, 1991) – the postmodern features of terrorism, accompanied by the peculiarities of the artist-terrorist relationship as projected against the background of a terror-dominated late 20th century society.

THE NOVELS AS FORMS OF LITERATURE

As works of literature, *The Secret Agent*, *The Good Terrorist* and *Mao II* have achieved an enormous amount of success in time. If needed, the arguments that could be invoked in order to justify their popularity as pieces of literature are to be identified rather easily. All three novels are populated by characters whose inner structure is of

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some depth and prominence and who perform in masterfully-devised plots. They are structured around themes that were invested with a great amount of importance at the time of their publication and still possess that importance in our times.

1.1. CHARACTERS AND PLOT

The Secret Agent (1907) sprang from a "few words uttered by a friend in a casual conversation about anarchists or rather about anarchist activities" (*TSA*, *The Author's Note*); consequently, it reveals many truths about anarchist terrorism and its human perpetrators, whom the novelist describes in a caricatural manner. It is here that we meet a small shop owner, like Adolf Verloc (the secret agent from the title hidden under the mask of bourgeois respectability), his younger wife, Winnie Verloc, her brother, Stevie, a group of sham anarchists (Karl Yundt, Ossipon, Michaelis, the Professor) who have recently accepted Mr Verloc as one of their own, Mr. Vladimir (a foreign embassy official) etc. The plot of *The Secret Agent* is launched when Mr Vladimir urges Adolf Verloc to take action and stimulate the vigilance of the English authorities by organising a terrorist incident. In response, Mr. Verloc infiltrates a group of so-called anarchists whose philosophy of 'action' resided in talking about violence and not perpetrating it. The terrorist incident planned by Verloc goes wrong and leads to the death of his mentally-handicapped brother-in-law, Stevie. Stevie's death provides Winnie Verloc with the reason to murder her husband by stabbing him in the heart, after which she flees the house and ultimately commits suicide on a train. The novel ends with the image of the Professor walking along the streets of London "frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable - and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world" (*TSA*, 269).

When writing *The Good Terrorist* (1985), Doris Lessing focused her attention on a group of would-be revolutionaries, made up of Alice Mellings, the 'good terrorist' from the title, Jasper, her homosexual boyfriend of fifteen years, a lesbian couple (Roberta and Faye), a heterosexual couple (Pat and Bert) etc. – in a word, they are all characters that at some point in their individual lives decided to cut off all relations with their social origins and gathered in one of the many abandoned houses in a poor section of London. The plot of *The Good Terrorist* lacks in complexity. The novel is protagonised by Alice Mellings, formerly a good child and respectful daughter, who grows up to despise the bourgeois principles and way of life. She meets Jasper, a homosexual, who introduces her to a group of communism-oriented individuals who address one another as 'comrade' and fight against capitalism. They found their own organisation, the Communist Centre Union (or CCU in short), whose agenda is aimed at attacking capitalist society and values; to demonstrate their hate - the "last vital reaction", according to Baudrillard (BAUDRILLARD, 1996:147) -, Alice's group get more and more involved in the world of real violence and end up as real terrorists, who enjoy killing in cold blood. The novel ends with the dissolution of the group and with Alive being held responsible for her deeds.

In DeLillo's *Mao II* (1991), an artist shares his meditations on the current state of the world corrupted by terror. Bill Gray, a writer "*born under the old tutelage*", has grown famous and materially rich after two early novels. In the beginning of the story, we find Gray isolated in the anonymity of his secured settlement, struggling to complete the third novel by writing and re-writing every single word of the book. His isolation is not complete, however; there are two other inhabitants of the house, one of which is Bill's personal assistant, Scott Martineau, who assumes the role of "a guardian of Bill's image" (Scanlan 2001: 27) as a writer, and in this quality he does not hesitate to ask Bill to withhold the publication of the third novel: "*it would be the end of Bill as a myth, as*

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a force" (DELILLO, 1991: 52). The second inhabitant of the house is Karen Janney, a young woman who had previously adhered to the cult of Reverend Sun Myung Moon as a means of being part of something larger than herself. She is the one character who "is infected with the postmodern world, as seen in Jean Baudrillard's apocalyptic vision" (SCANLAN, 2001: 28), the one highly addicted to the televised nature of global culture. When asked to get involved in the process of saving a young Swiss poet from the hands of fundamentalists, Gray accepts and finds in this activity a pretext to escape from the writing of his third novel. The novelist dies on his way to Beirut at the end of *Mao II*. Since his passport and other identity papers are stolen (to be sold to some Beirut militia), there is no means of identifying the body: the artist remains anonymous.

In *Mao II* the focus is laid on a writer whose trajectory in the novel is marked by constant meditation on the role of the artist in a postmodern, highly televised global society. Bill Gray's identity is shaped by the power to write; at the beginning of the novel, the protagonist experiences a loss of meaning that brings along a creative crisis. His activity is overshadowed by his failure to cope with the contemporary "*image world*" (DELILLO, 1991: 36) that is corrupt and forces the artist to "*hide his face*" (DELILLO, 1991: 36). The rhetorical structure underlying DeLillo's perspective sets an interesting temporal dialectics that pervades his narrative at different levels. A strong contrast is established between the past position held by writers and the present, when they have lost their privileged position in the shaping of ideologies: "The novel used to feed our search for meaning" (ibid., 72); "I no longer see myself in the language" (ibid., 48); "our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought" (ibid., 129-130).

1.2. THEME

As a common feature, all three novels selected for this study are structured around one main theme - terrorist violence and its consequences on human relations – to which other adjacent microthemes subscribe at some point in the narrative. Presented in a novel, terrorist violence is more vivid and symbolical than in newspaper accounts or statistical reports. A powerfully written novel, *The Secret Agent* is in fact a grim "tale"[1] set in the world of the anarchists and secret agents around the end of the nineteenth century and explores the intricate mechanisms that lie at the heart of political terrorism and its *propaganda by the deed* orientation. It would be a wrong approach to consider that *The Secret Agent* is a novel of terrorist violence manifested exclusively on the physical level. The real, material hypostases of terrorist violence occupy a relatively insignificant place in the overall structure of the novel. The one single incident of brute terrorist violence is introduced to the readers (and, at the same time, to some of the characters) as some information gathered from a newspaper: "Half past eleven. Foggy morning. Effects of explosion felt as far as Romney Road and Park Place. Enormous hole in the ground under a tree filled with smashed roots and broken branches. All round fragments of a man's body blown to pieces" (*TSA*, 95). What seems more predominant is a form of symbolic violence – violence in discourse – that the would-be anarchists practise in a constant rhythm ("I have always dreamed", he mouthed, fiercely, "of a band of men absolute in their resolve to discard all scruples in the choice of means, strong enough to give themselves frankly the name of destroyers (…)" *TSA*, 74). The "old terrorist" (*TSA*, 74) dreams of and talks about 'absolute' perpetrators of violence that should have the power to inflict the changes he and his companions have never been able to produce.

[1] as suggested by the Conrad in the subtitle of the novel, "A Simple *Tale*".

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In this particular case, terrorist violence triggers domestic violence: Verloc's selfish act of letting the poor Stevie go on with the terrorist plot is punished by Winnie, his wife, once she discovers the truth about the incident. Domestic drama and political drama share some common characteristics: first, they are protagonised by the weaker members of the equation, frail or marginalised individuals dissatisfied with their lives; secondly, they both lead to tragedies.

The Good Terrorist is a novel of immense power, demonstrating Doris Lessing's profound insights into the world of left-wing terrorist violence in 20th century London. In this particular novel, terrorist violence manifests itself more frequently and with more intensity than in Conrad's novel; *The Good Terrorist* is punctuated with numerous instances of physical violence, from protest marches to placing bombs and eventually murder. The message sent by this novel revolves around the dehumanising force of terrorist violence; at the beginning of the novel, the group of communism-oriented individuals participates in rather insignificant acts of protest; the end of the story, however, portrays terrorists who enjoy killing in cold blood. One of the characters is killed by a bomb she herself placed.

DeLillo's *Mao II* is thematically constructed around terrorist violence of fundamentalist orientation in a 20th century society saturated with images. There is a two-fold perspective on terrorist violence: one conceptualised by Bill Gray, who approaches it as the new symbolic system (cf BOURDIEU) that dominates the world, and the second voiced by the Other - Abu Rashid, the leader of the terrorist group that took hostage a young poet, declares to a journalist: "*Terror makes the new future possible. All men one man. Men live in history as never before. He is saying we make and change history minute by minute. History is not the book or the human memory. We do history in the morning and change it after lunch*" (*Mao II*, 1991: 235). Terrorists re-write history, permanently altered by violent actions. The future belongs to violence perpetrators and to their power to disrupt normality by inflicting violence. This is, in broad lines, the essence of what Walter Laqueur terms as 'postmodern terrorism': a new type of terrorist violence, more dramatic and lethal, performed on a global scene. The postmodern terrorist, Abu Rashid, states his firm belief in a new kind of *future* and of *history*, modelled by individuals prone to violence.

Omnipresent in all three novels, terrorist violence brings about such secondary themes as alienation, disruption of communication and eventually death (physical or spiritual). The would-be anarchists from *The Secret Agent* permanently discuss about their impossibility to cope with society and the necessity to change it; in fact, all their meetings are governed by this topic of discussion – talking is their favourite activity, not taking action. This feeling of alienation is definitely produced by a disruption of communication, perhaps the type of communication breakdown that Jürgen Habermas identified as the cause of violence (cf BORRADORI 2006). After Stevie's death, Mr. and Mrs. Verloc are unable to communicate with each other in any intelligible fashion. Once integrated in the group with communist views, Alice finds it difficult to communicate with her own mother, whom she sees as an authentic representative of the capitalist system she so highly hated. Though once famous, DeLillo's Bill Gray suffers from the same inability to communicate that results in a loss of creativity and diminution of the artistic *personna*.

The ultimate event connected to terrorist violence is physical death (*The Secret Agent, Mao II*) or spiritual dissolution (*The Good Terrorist*). Stevie, the accidental terrorist from Conrad's novel, is killed by the explosion of a bomb he was carrying. The novelist from *Mao II* finds his death on the way to Beirut, and his death could be related

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to the postmodern idea of the death of the author. Alice's journey through the novel does not end with her physical death, but with her spiritual one; abandoned by her former companions, the "poor child" awaits the consequences of her/their deeds from a variety of sources.

THE NOVELS AS POLITICAL ANALYSES

After having approached the literariness of the three novels, the stress will fall on the relation between politics and literature and on the way in which the literary act of representing particular people, places, situations etc. through fiction is related to the political act of creating structures that give a voice to particular groups or ideologies.

What do these novels tell us about terrorism? In broad lines, the obvious conclusion is that they condemn terrorist violence. There might be some attachment to terrorists, but terrorist violence is negatively presented. The narrators are not impressed by the idealism and goals of the terrorists, but rather insist on their ordinariness and lack of results of their actions. Approached from this perspective, all three novels could be described in terms of a powerful critique of the essential futility of terrorist actions as a means to produce social change. The end brings about if not the destruction of the terrorist, the dissolution of the terrorist group, alongside with the insecurity of the victim of terrorist violence.

Conrad's novel was written at a time when revolutionary ideas were brought to life in a violent manner, either through explosions (more frequent after Nobel's invention of the dynamite that gave new strength to anarchist propaganda) or through assassinations of political figures - the safest way to produce political change (between 1881 and 1900, anarchists murdered a Russian Czar, a French president, an Austrian empress, and an Italian king, not to mention dozens of prominent officials (cf FASEL, 1974: 153)). The novel as such was inspired by a series of disparate, real life facts, among which the central place is occupied by the controversial bombing of the Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park, London in 1894, the so-called Greenwich Bomb Outrage; the event was fictionalised by Conrad without him directly admitting the relation between fiction and real life.

In *The Secret Agent*, the terrorist action is represented by an explosion; the place ascribed to the explosion itself in the narrative of the novel is at least interesting. The reader is hardly prepared for it at all. Having discovered that it has happened, one is drawn to discover the inner mechanisms of the event. The key to a proper decoding of the enigma does not lie in seeing the Greenwich explosion as the work of anarchists that wanted to publicise their grievances. The anarchists that we might identify initially as the agents of the attack are in fact harmless. They lost their power to fight and are content with talking about it. The real agent behind the explosion is a secret governmental agency, probably the Russian one, which ordered that a terrorist incident take place on British soil to stimulate the vigilance of the authorities.

Of great relevance to this section of our paper is the speech Mr. Vladimir delivers in front of Verloc on the necessary symbolism of the target. The Greenwich Royal Observatory would definitely gain such dimensions, since its destruction would somehow annul world space and time. Mr. Vladimir explains to the *agent provocateur*: "The fetish of today is neither royalty nor religion. Therefore the palace and the church should be left alone". (*TSA*, 65) Political assassinations had already lost their sensational side because it "has entered into the general conception of the existence of all chiefs of state" (*TSA*, 66). On the other hand, choosing a religious place as target would give a religious significance to the act, which was not the case. The most

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adequate solution is to attack a symbolic target so that the middle classes might get the real message. "The attack must be against learning-science. But not every science will do. (…) What do you think at having a go at astronomy?"(*TS*A, 68) this happens in an age when science held a prominent role in the formation of the individual and, even if it didn't explain everything, it still managed to provide questions with adequate answers.

At the time when *The Good Terrorist* was produced and then published, the British state underwent a period of serious crisis during the Thatcher era. According to Stuart Hall, this crisis assumed the forms of a "fracturing of traditional ideologies" and "a crisis of political representation" (quoted in YELIN, 1998: 92). *The Good Terrorist* is an expression of that crisis of political representation by exposing the "devastating effects of Britain's economic decline on what remains of its working class and the deformation of men and women alike by misogyny in particular and by the ideological hegemony of patriarchy in general" (Yelin, 1998: 92).

The novel was written by a woman who had a long history of Leftist activism and was even a member of the Communist Party up to a certain point. In light of this, the status of the novel as a "lesson in the problematic relation between realistic novels and literature"(SCANLAN, 2001: 75) becomes immediately visible. According to John Orr, "contemporary terrorism is the last resort of those who have effectively abandoned the political struggle for mass support…(it) is dystopian, arising from the active and at times cynical despair of those who still believe" (quoted in SCANLAN, 2001: 77). Lessing totally subscribes to this model, to which she adds the essential ingredient of terrorism/media interdependence – the dominant feature of modern terrorism (cf. MARRET 2002, WIEVIORKA 2007).

The immersion of the political in the novel becomes obvious the moment when the author reveals her characters' initiative of founding the Communist Centre Union as a means of materialising their belief that only political violence can inflict change; Alice is the one who provides an explanation for the title of the sect: "Centre (…) because we wanted to show we were not left deviants or revisionists; union (…) a union of viewpoints" (*TGT*, p. 98). The Communist Centre Union is not a political organisation, but rather a *parody* of political organizations: it is small, obscure and it has no political program articulately formulated. Its "climactic" (SCANLAN, 2001:87) act of protest, the blowing off a bomb in the vicinity of a London hotel, killing one of their own and four other persons, is "a model of senseless violence" (SCANLAN, 2001:87). It professes such abstract ideas as communist-inspired solidarity, yet it allows for individualism to flourish within it: each of the CCU members acts to his/her own best interest. The failure of the group to act as a 'union' proper is connected to its undeniable heterogeneity; the CCU is formed of people that belong to "different identity groups: gays, lesbians, white working class, women, blacks" (YELIN 94); the members have little in common, the only feature that unites them is the idea that they are all victims of a society they fail to understand.

Their attempts to negotiate with powerful political organizations of the time fail at some point; both the IRA and the KGB see them as "dangerous children". The end of the novel brings about the dissolution of the group (some of the members had died, some of them had left the group when violence had become too pervading) and the facing of responsibility by the one 'good terrorist': Alice Mellings. Alice is a different type of terrorist: Alice Mellings does not spend her time meditating on the founding principles of communism. At the meetings organised by her associates, she is never described when making a violent political speech or suggesting future actions, but almost always making soup and keeping the kitchen clean. Her idea of doing something

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radical is spraying protests on the bridges and taking part in protests - invariable organised by some other people. When her group starts searching for connections with the IRA or with the KGB, and plan violent incidents, Alice does her best to stay uninvolved. She dumps a shipment of guns into a local dump, and calls the authorities about the bombing plot. But the time for Alice to refuse responsibility runs out. At the end of the novel, Alice is alone, facing the consequences of her actions from a variety of sources. Her journey through the world of revolutionary violence ends in a most unpleasant manner: "Smiling gently, a mug of very strong tea in her hand, looking this morning like a nine-year-old girl who has had, perhaps, a bad dream, the poor baby sat waiting for it to be time to go out and meet the professionals".

At a first level of analysis, *Mao II* is a book about a novelist and his refusal to live and create in the postmodern world of simulacra. But reading *Mao II* separated from the political context of the period when it was created would seriously damage the overall significance of the novel. Operating in the best postmodern fashion, politics and history have broken the boundaries of fiction; following this line of thought, *Mao II* is an "exemplary instance of the postmodernist political novel encountering actual politics, actual violence" (SCANLAN, 2001: 21).

The political substratum of the novel and its relation to literature is commonly associated with the so-called Rushdie affair, i.e. the *fatwa* issued in February 1989 by Ayatollah Khomeini against Salman Rushdie, whose *Satanic Verses* generated a lot of heated debate and protest from Muslims in several countries. As a consequence of the numerous death threats and the fatwa issued against him, Rushdie was forced to live in hiding for nearly a decade.

Mao II presents a view on postmodern society as composed of poor and middle class people, all of which are dominated by the power of images in a highly technologized world. As it happens in real life, terrorist violence permeates those people's lives to such an extent that the televised narrative of terror replaces the artistic rendition of the world. Following this line of thought, *Mao II* distinguishes itself through its prophetic announcement of the future. "The novel that DeLillo publishes at the beginning of the 1990's seems so closely to predict and foreshadow the circumstances and the consequences of the attacks (n.r. the 9/11 terrorist attacks against America), that it becomes difficult to read it as anything other than, in Coleridge's words, a 'voice prophesying war'" (BOXALL, 2006: 157). The novel seems to announce the future conflict between globalisation and the emergence of a global, fundamentalist terrorism, on the background of the reign of simulacra and images in a postmodern world.

Analysing *Mao II* for what it was before 9/11, it could be thought of as depicting the most convincing terrorist group of the three novels. It has a declared Maoist foundation, it promotes violent intervention and resorts to hostage taking as an efficient way of obtaining the intended results – but its members are presented when watching a VCR tape and the walls of their headquarters are filled with advertisements of Coca Cola as a sign of the status of terrorism as "the contemporary partner of globalization" (BAUDRILLARD, *The Spirit of Terrorism*). Projected against this globalised background, the Maoist terrorists from *Mao II* believe that terror will remodel history, that terror will make the new future possible. It is interesting to note that their choice of the victim is highly symbolic in nature: the hostage is an artist, a young poet, as if the terrorists were aware of the danger represented by artists, but at the same time of the publicity associated with such an act. *Mao II*'s writer presents his thoughts on the relation between novelists and terrorists in contemporary times: A

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conversation between Gray and his agent brings reveals that *"You have a twisted sense of the writer's place in society. You think the writer belongs at the far margins, doing dangerous things. In Central America, writers carry guns. They have to. (…) Every government, every group that holds power or aspires to power should feel so threatened by writers that they hunt them down, everywhere." "I've done no dangerous things."" No. But you've lived out the vision anyway.""So my life is a kind of simulation." "Not exactly. There's nothing false about it. You've actually become a hunted man" (*DELILLO, 1991: 97*).* There is something dangerous about the novelists; toward the end of his life, Bill Gray states that the novel is "*a democratic shout*". There are two ways of understanding this association: on the one hand, it suggests that any individual has the right to express his/her opinion in a democracy; on the other hand, it announces that a novel is in fact a collection of multiple voices and points of view, and not the 'property' of a single mastermind. Writers, the promoters of such *democratic shouts*, hold *power* over people's consciousnesses, exert influence over their imagination and challenge them to express their own beliefs. The dangerous thing about Bill Gray is not represented by his carrying guns with him, but rather by his carrying a pen and a sheet of paper.

The ability to effect changes in the consciousness of the masses is the reason why writers have been hunted by any group that aspired to obtain power. In *Mao II*, Bill Gray is not hunted by any government. His major opponent is the terrorist, "*making raids on human consciousness*" and shocking the public imagination through images of violence and bloodshed. But DeLillo's willingness to keep on writing in such a hostile world demonstrates a "well-concealed optimism" (SCANLAN, 2001: 34) and belief in the power of fiction over violence.

It is obvious that literature can provide an important contribution to the constant exploration of the socio-cultural and political implications of terrorist violence. The three novels that have been selected as the study material for this paper are exemplary from the point of view of their literary qualities, as well as of their ability to represent terrorist violence in a way that is more interesting and vivid than any newspaper account or statistical report. What unites them, in spite of their publication in various periods, is their common perspective on terrorist violence as essentially inefficient as a means of producing social change.

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