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An introduction

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Terror and the Literary: An Introduction

Sourit Bhattacharya and Arka Chattopadhyay

Terror and terrorism are probably the most frequent catchwords of the contemporary times. At the turn of the century, Hardt and Negri warned us that we are living in a world of Empire as biopolitical production, where transnational corporations operate the mechanics of governance, and can wage 'just war' and resolve conflicts with the moral policing of the NGOs (2001: 22-41). Terror is part of the surveillance and regulation of life, while 'terrorism,' in its delimited political use, is only one way of engaging with it. Agamben's notion of 'state of exception' in fuller picture indicates that the practice of life in contemporary times is a conscious response to fear of an unknown, unaccountable death which may not always be the death of the body as corpse. As Elizabeth Dauphinee and Christian Masters note: "Livings and dyings are ruptured by survivings that are neither livings nor dyings, but which are otherwise: liminal spaces of abjection that are dangerously difficult to recognize." (2007: xvi) If contemporary bio-politics frames life from a normative position of mortality, as Badiou argues, its ethics foregrounds a 'victimary' notion of the human subject. The task for Badiou's ethics is to counter-emphasize the 'immortal' in man where he treats a situation from the point which is impossible in relation to that situation. To treat the situation qua its impossible point is to change the situation and replace it with a new one and this highlights the subject's immortality over the ephemeral situation. If this change is premised on the eventual dimension of novelty, it encounters the impossible, which is not without its horizon of terror and trauma.

The complexity of terror as an affect makes for an intricate field where the objective territory of a terrifying event encounters subjective history and makes an imprint on mind, body, self and memory. Not only does it combine the public and the private, the religious and the political; it is a site where the technological repertoire of the plotted event meets the inexplicably sacred rupture of its irruption. The experience of terror does not remain restricted to the terrifying event but consolidates itself over time running through a series of affects like trauma, fear, horror and anxiety. Terror establishes a socio-psychic structure if not an industry in which the psychic apparatus of traumatic

repetition and phobic fixation is complemented by a 'culture of terror'. Is then the mediatized dissemination of terror as an image verging on a spectacle another name for terror's incessant reproduction? Terror is not only commoditized but also normalized in today's world where everyone lives under the persistent shadow of its hypothetical recurrence. Terror has become the new name for the contingency of our contemporary world. Terror is not a single emotion but a composite multiplicity of layered affects brought together by the contingency of an event which ruptures the circuitous paths of our everyday reality.

What we need to think through here is the extent of subjective investment in this culturalization of terror where it becomes an industry. What makes for the saleability of terror? Does its ubiquitous and normativized character in the contemporary world contribute to its saleability? Is there a human drive which enjoys terror? Be it Freud's conception of a traumatic 'repetition automatism' which underlies neurosis or Lacan's configuration of 'jouissance' which unites joy with torment and is located beyond the pleasure principle, we notice a link between terror and enjoyment which can potentially explain its favourable reception in the culture industry. What makes the representation of terror aesthetic is a question premised on the sado-masochistic operation of 'jouissance' in terror. And this is a question which goes far back into Greek antiquity. It goes back to Aristotle's *Poetics* if not further. Aristotle's theory of 'catharsis' which works through both an evocation and an overcoming of the twin emotions of 'pity' and 'fear' as the affective function of tragedy places this question at the heart of tragic experience. Why do we watch a tragedy which works at the level of identification and makes us aware of our own potential perilousness? Following this suggestion, we can formulate that terror can only be overcome by way of traversal or to put it in Freudian terms, it has to be 'worked through'. Aristotle has shown us way back that the aesthetic and literary experience of tragedy is a site of this working through.

We cannot define terror only as an event in itself, a unique, authentic experience, but also a figure and a response that can be perceived in different forms and practices of life. For example, the terror in 9/11 cannot be equated with the terror of the December 16 rape case in Delhi; or the terror of the body, produced by the phenomenon of 'suicide bombing' is quite different from the terror one perceives in the ancient ruins, and the historical residues. If our life is regulated by the perception of and response to terror, how do we perceive it? What are the different forms of terror? How do we encounter terror

and the difference in perception? This is where we see the ‘literary’ as an important term. By the ‘literary’ we understand a sensitized and perceptive dimension of every discursive experience. Following Rancière, we would like to revive the ‘aesthesis’ or the ‘sensual stimulation’ in the ‘aesthetic’ where the artistic realm opens up to the wide array of sensations and perceptions. In our world where each discourse is tied up with the other, the ‘literary’ is the name of a particular semiotic practice which seems to be embedded in various discourses like the social, the political, the cultural, the technological, the religious and so on. The literary is both the semiotic perception of an event taking place and the recognition of the conditions that produce it. And that is where the ‘literary’ operates as an analytical category which tries to address the interaction between an event and the response it generates in the minds of the witnesses, audience, or in turn readers.

What are the possible relations between terror and the literary? Are they intertwined only in a mimetic relation or is there something constitutive about this relation? Is terror constitutive of the discursive literary apparatus? Apart from the literary representation of terror, is there a literary becoming of terror and a terribly sublime becoming of the literary itself? If the literary is understood as a realm of sensations and perceptions, it automatically leads on to the affective realm where the experience of terror can be localized. Terror is not ubiquitous because it exists in sinister and deceptive fashion with the everyday; but it pervades the domain of perception and thus can be anything – from the fear of machines to the anxiety of ‘hate mails’. If the literary partakes of the symbolic power of language and the energetics of the sensual, how does it respond to the sensation of the terrifying event and its socio-political and psychic circulation?

From an analytic perspective, the literary category throws up an open field of contesting interpretations. The lack of closure in literary interpretations ensures that this analytic field is nothing short of a battlefield and this interpretive ‘agonism’ partakes of a certain kind of terror. If terror involves a traumatic encounter with the repressed Real of things, the Symbolic act of the literary must engage with terror since it works by boring holes in the epistemic edifice of language, as Lacan would say. Behind every representation there is a scene of murder; behind every signifier, there is a corpse of the thing it has to kill in order to come into existence. This is where terror becomes endemic to literary inscription which for the Samuel Beckett of *How It Is* thus becomes a furrowing with nails into the other’s body. This metaphor of literary inscription captures

its terrifying viscerality and evokes the literary as the violent locus of agonism. Beckett writes elsewhere, commenting on the paintings of the van Velde brothers:

Here everything moves, swims, flies, returns, is given away, is recovered. Everything ceases without cease. Akin to insurrection of molecules, the interior of a stone a thousandth of a second before it disintegrates.

This is literature.

The literary, understood as a broad perceptual category, is built into the experience of terror and vice versa. What is important to us here is that it also stages a response to terror. In Beckett's description, it is important to note the emphasis that literature captures the moment before the final disintegration of the mute but agonistic interior of the stone. The literary forestalls the nihilism of this final disintegration by fixing the penultimate moment as a figure of liminality. The penultimate supplements the ultimate here in the literary and this is where it stages a working through of the terror intrinsic to its world. We can think of Kafka to Rabelais to Ionesco and so on.

In Australian writer Luke Carman's 2013 book of fiction *An Elegant Young Man*, he remembers the paradigmatic terror-event of our generation i.e. the 9/11 attacks in the following way:

‘Mum, wake up.’ She turned to me, her hair a mess in the dark.

‘What?’

I didn't know how to answer.

‘America's being attacked.’

‘That's no good,’ she said, and was soon asleep.

I went back to the computer. [...] I turned off the television, which was inconsolable, and looked long out the window toward the eastern shore where Sydney lay immaculate. The tip of the Tower was blue as the burn of a birthday candle and nothing seemed amiss, and

outside there was only calm and quiet. You could see the tail-light of a plane passing serenely over the night. It was hard to believe in that stillness and silence that the world was collapsing in a place far away. (Carman 138)

There are a number of remarkable things in this literary revisitation. It exposes the narcissistic subjective indifference to the experience of terror when we ourselves are not subjected to it. It also highlights the incredulity embedded in the terror-event by juxtaposing the image of the dilapidated WTC and the terrorist planes in New York with the still nocturnal landscape of Sydney skies where the tail-light of a passing flight leaves the sibilant trace of a luminous inscription. The analogy between the unharmed Sydney Tower and the 'burn of a birthday candle' operates as a phallic anchor of the subject's symbolic certitude. The make-believe aspect of this experience of terror focalises its geopolitical nature and its specific situatedness. In a world which exists only as a ruined patchwork of scattered zones, the narcissistic subjective indifference is fuelled by this sensation of geopolitical alterity associated with the terror-event and its spectacle.

To read the text against its grain here is to ask the question if the passing flight in the Sydney skies instead of mocking the terrorist planes in all its peacefulness can harbour a potential threat of 9/11. If so, will that evental frame breaking the eventless monotone of Sydney feed into the sado-masochism of terrorist jouissance? Will the subject enjoy that counter-factual moment when the eventless quietude of the Sydney skies is interrupted by the exciting sounds of explosion? It is not for nothing perhaps that a film like *Pacific Rim* in the same year 2013 shows the monster attacking the Sydney Opera House. Does the apparent prevalence of peace in a particular place make room for a perverse imaginative jouissance of terror? If it does, it is for art, fiction and cinema, in this case to hold a mirror up to that hypothetical spectacle. Since the literary object, be it a painting, a sculpture, a film or a book by definition brings a singularity into this world which does not exist as such in the reality, prior and external to it, it has the agency to add itself to the external conglomerate. It is here that the literary must negotiate not only with the terror built into the external order of things but also with the terror integral to the way in which it adds or supplements itself to that order.

To extend the discussion a little further, the Hollywood cinema industry, which is perhaps the most industrious and industrial in popularizing the mindscapes of terror, repeatedly produces superhero or 'disaster movies' where we see

‘alien’/‘weird’/‘grotesque’ bodies or machines fight each other either to vanquish humanity or to rescue it. The videogames, computer games, or entertainment parks are made in such a way that you can live terror on an everyday basis and come out victorious, outliving it. One has to survive, know the skills well; and if you don’t know it, watch the many survival-based reality shows that grab all the televisual attention in today’s generation. Have we ever asked why? Wasn’t the threat of the unknown, the all-powerful, the overwhelmingly devastating there in the previous generations? Didn’t the world see the two World Wars? Why is then such hullabaloo over the 9/11 or say the 7/7? It is precisely because you can see them now, visualize its dimensions, and feel puzzled when you balance them against the ominously gargantuan protective security measures that your state and the meta-state bodies like the UNESCO seem to vociferously maintain. It is to pacify this puzzlement and ‘restore justice’ that Hollywood and such film industries keep telling you that the US or such forces are ready to defend you against these unknown vermin and parasites, to let you believe that counter-violence is the only choice and the developed countries have discovered the ways to tackle them. You just sit back, take the pleasure of violent justice, and ‘believe’ in it. The only way of supporting them, playing your part is to take part in the consumption of belief, i.e. to consume the products, be it daily commodities or the video games that they are throwing at you (it does not matter which part of the world you are anchored in). Terror is becoming the everyday product in our life, and thus the raping of a woman hurts our ethic, elasticizes our morality, tickles our anger bones, but eventually ‘the news’ becomes just another piece of news in this 24/7 dissemination of ‘breaking news,’ floating like an unwanted leaf from this edge of the bank to the other in this virtual stream of social media lives. It is important that we read these moments of terror or the process of its neutralization; it is important we analyze them, and find also the possibilities of resistance and redemption. The ‘Arab Spring’ or the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ for many is that potential moment for redemption where the myths and symbols of terror are dispelled by the gathering of the many, the unknown, the anonymous. Do we remember Kafka here, or say Naguib Mahfouz, or even the birds of Alfred Hitchcock? Do we receive a fading echo of Pedro Páramo’s nightmarish journeys, or say George Romero’s deadened bodies, or Jacques Louis David’s exciting brush strokes? What do these moments say to us, how do we see them, what makes them perceptible could be the category of the literary, the intimate rationale. The important question for the time being is not the know-how of resisting terror and redeeming us, that would end up in another heated philosopher’s debate, but to locate them, try and analyze them, and question our processes of analyzing them, in short

to critically acknowledge them. It is to this end that this issue asked for contributions, and the articles below have thrown all charge and energy in addressing them from different perspectives.

Emmanouil Aretoulakis's essay 'Acknowledging Fascination with Catastrophe and Terrorism: September 11 and the Nuclear Destruction of Hiroshima/Nagasaki' borrows the Kantian notions of beauty and sublime to interrogate the performative image of the largescale catastrophe. Following Kant, Burke, Heidegger and Derrida, Aretoulakis contends that the difference between determinant and aesthetic judgement mobilizes the distinction in perception between morality and ethics. Whereas morality appears to be beauty aligned with rationality or the intellect of comprehension, ethics is a field of posterior judgement where the sublimity of an image coalesces with the memorialization of it. He takes the memorial techniques of photography or report writing of the events of Hiroshima and September 11 as methods in approaching such a complex issue.

Manas Ray engages with Agamben in 'Life, Law and Abandonment in Giorgio Agamben' and explores how far his seminal concepts like 'homo sacer' and 'state of exception' could be productive in examining the relationship between law and human life and allocating the positions of terror vis-a-vis legality and the function of sovereignty. Working through Agamben's body of thought and relating it to a host of other political thinkers like Schmitt and Mbembe for example, his essay endeavours to sketch out the problematic yet fundamental definitions of politics and what it means to be in relation to that in our modern times.

Alyx Steensma's article 'Horror's Effect on Identity in *Life of Pi* and *Arthur Gordon Pym*' interestingly fuses the Poe novel with the more recent novel by Yann Martel and examines their comparative treatment of horror in the lonely life of the lost human subject with recourse to Julia Kristeva's work on horror and abjection. The article shows how horror as an experience ruptures meaning and collapses identity by flattening out the space between the subject and the object and the self and the other. It interrogates the supposedly universalist claim in this experience of horror and identity loss and throws light upon the process in relation to the coming of age of the two boys in question. Steensma's analysis of de-humanization turns us back to the animal question in a dichotomous way and balances the ontological implications of the lost subject's

tribulations with the corporeality of the suffering body torn between a survival instinct and a death instinct.

Maria Antónia Lima's piece 'Psychos' Haunting Memories: A(n) (Un)common Literary Heritage' engages with terror from the perspective of the Gothic. Taking from Lacan's seminar on psychoses the dialectic of jealousy and the mark of alienation in the imaginary, Lima goes on to locate the return of the haunted in some of the most popular characters both in literature and film such as Robert Bloch's *Psycho*, Bret Ellis' *American Psycho*, Patrick McGrath's *Spider*, or Poe's *Tales*. The essay further discusses the psychological and aesthetic purpose of haunting in arguing for the asymmetrical systemic chain of the Gothic and the perceptual-anatomical symptom of the literary.

Samrat Sengupta's article 'Autoimmunity and the Irony of self-definition' addresses the undecidable interval between the human and the animal as a space for the literary which incessantly produces this interval of hesitation between the two categories. It works through a diversely illustrated structure punctuated by the *Mahabharata*, an American soldier's 'concept' of the Iraqis, the poetry of Jibanananda Das and Bangladeshi fiction, and shows how terror is intrinsic to the perceptual field of the literary inflecting it through the animal question. In a critique of the bio-political machine with theoretical resources expanding from Derrida to Agamben through Heidegger, Sengupta reveals the hegemony implicit in the statist notion of 'autoimmunity' and deconstructs the bio-political emphasis on death with recourse to death's radical political agency in Achille Mbembe's work.

In 'Sri Lankan Conflict and Tamilnadu: Terror, Bare Life and Necropolitics' Swarnavel Eswaran Pillai takes us to the issue of suicide bombing and the spectacle of violence. He speculates on the link between the transgressions within the practice of law and the question of death over life in the modern colonial-liberal form of politics. Taking from Walter Benjamin's formulation 'bare life' and Mbembe's 'necropolitics', Pillai discusses the trajectory of ambivalence and arbitrariness within the praxis of law, and applies the critical studies to the suicide bombing case of the four 'Tamil tigers,' especially the girl Dhanu, in assassinating Rajiv Gandhi. He proceeds further to understand the prevalence of such situation, the inevitable and ceaseless production of bare life, in the contemporary context.

I Watitula Longkumer's article, 'Reading Terror in Literature: Exploring Insurgency in Nagaland through Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*' grounds the study of terror in the geopolitical context of the North East in India. Locating the political history of Nagaland from colonial India to the post-independence scenario and identifying the ever widening gap between the internal insurgency problems and the external (national administrative) neglect, Longkumer discusses how several Naga writers especially Temsula Ao in recent times have been vocal about the issues plaguing the possibilities of living in Nagaland since the 90s. The author's critical appraisal of the stories in Ao's collection however suggests that the problems have not entirely strangled the ways of living in this resource-scanty state; the wit and humour that bind the shared memory of the different ethnic tribes in the land together can also be a way of addressing what defines the cultural community and everyday living in this otherwise torn land.

Puspa Damai's article 'Terror, the Gift of Death and Hospitality' reads Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* in relation to the political straitjacketing of terrorism on ethnic and gendered lines in the West and mobilizes Derrida's thoughts on death, autoimmunity, hospitality and the impossible gift as critical resources to read the literary text. It critiques J. Hillis Miller's reading of Morrison's novel through Derrida and goes back to Derrida himself to offer a more nuanced view of autoimmunity in the text. The article questions the geopolitical model of terror as a Third World phenomenon entering into the Western reality and counterbalances the standard reading of the novel through the present of the 9/11 attacks by reinforcing the American history of slavery. Damai's reading operating through the spectral ethic of hospitality as a futuristic opening towards the Other allows us to see how the literary text can become an ethical apparatus to critique and nuance any majoritarian and hegemonic simplification of terrorism.

In another article, 'Hollywood's Terror Industry: Idealized beauty and *The Bluest Eye*', Eric C. Koch takes Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, and interrogates the way the cultural conception of beauty is produced and racially appropriated in a deeply discriminatory society: the Hollywood construction of ideal beauty in the 1930s and 40s in white actresses such as Shirley Temple and Greta Garbo and the societal pressure and cultural expectations for emulation of such ideal by the black women. In the failure of finding any alternative path and the ultimate surrender to the scarred perception of a racial impossible, Morrison, the author argues, etches the hegemonic history of the

American beauty that is produced and preserved through the cultural sanctity of the Hollywood classic film genre.

Finally, Parvin Sultana shifts our attention from the question of cultural construction to the relational aspect of the female body. Her article “Body and Terror: Women’s Bodies as Victims and Perpetrators of Terror” examines the female body as a dialogic site combining terrorist victimization with ethical resistance. Drawing on Foucault’s take on the institutionalized docile bodies, the article explores the protesting female body, the ideological use of nudity therein, the explosive masochistic body of the suicide bomber and complicates the representation of the female body under regimes like heteronormativity and so on. It delves into the profound affect of shame and its impact in this act of resistance which speaks to our broadening out of the literary as a perceptual field alongside the experience of terror.

These are but only a few ways of engaging with the literary and tapping its potential as an analytic category in discussing terror. The aim in this collection or the entire endeavour is not to justify whether the categorical use of the literary has been successfully mobilized, but to begin the discussion – a discussion where the literary can play an important role in an otherwise quantitative-statistical discursification of terror in the academe. If these essays can start the discussion, we will consider our job satisfactorily done.

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