

Changing Landscapes in the New Millennium: On Nomadic Intellectualism, Terrorism, Horror and Some Related Issues*

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Summary

Within the frame of two contemporary poles of reading and interpreting literature – the postmodernist *engage*, reinscription of the “neutral” narratives through social, political, psychoanalytic thought and the nineties’ plea for “purer thought” and the critique of cultural relativism and infinite particularization and differences of voices – this text explores some new conceptual tools for literary studies, i.e. nomadic subject and nomadic intellectual. It will focus on the feminist “taking over” the terms from the poststructuralist male “master-minders”, on the gendered nomadic condition, the unavoidable split between the symbolic and the material function in the subject, the horror that gapes open in the nomadic figuration of the postmodern subjectivity and the madness of human acts that in terrorism questions the very premises of (acting through) critical theory and of performativity that we have cherished as our most precious concept.

Referring to the September 11 attack, the transference of knowledge of such a shifting subject in the academic and public environments and the capacity of engendering narrative with each shift is addressed and related to revised concepts of good and evil, sameness and difference in the contemporary theory.

Opsomming

Binne die raamwerk van twee kontemporêre pole van lees en interpreteer van literatuur – die postmodernistiese *engage*, reïnskripsie van die “neutrale” narratiewe deur sosiale, politieke, psigoanalitiese denke en die negentigs se pleidooi vir suiwerder denke, die kritiek van die kulturele relativisme, asook die oneindige partikularisasie en verskillende sienings neem hierdie artikel ‘n paar van die konseptuele instrumente van die literatuurstudie, naamlik die nomadiese subjek en die nomadiese intellektueel, onder die loep. Die artikel fokus op die feministiese “oorname” van hierdie terme van die poststrukuralistiese manlike “master-minders”, die gender nomadiese toestand, die onvermydelike tweespalt tussen die simboliese en die materiële funksie van die subjek, die afgryse wat oopgaan in die nomadiese figurasie van die postmoderne subjektiwiteit en die waansin van menslike dade wat deur terrorisme juis die spesifieke premisse bevraagteken wat onderliggend is aan die (uitvoer van) kritiese teorie en die uitvoerbaarheid daarvan wat ons as ons kosbaarste konsep gekoester het.

Met verwysing na die terreuraanval op 11 September 2001, word die oordrag van kennis van so ‘n veranderende subjek in akademiese en publieke omgewings en die

vermoë om met elke verandering narratiewe te skep en in verband te bring met hersiene konsepte van goed en kwaad, eendersheid en verskil in die kontemporêre teorie ondersoek.

Departments of Comparative Literature worldwide today encompass studies of (mostly continental) philosophy as much as studies of literature itself. Political theory and social thought are also included and literature passes a new transformation of its borders and its interpretation. A “task” of literature – and we have to be fully aware that such a label or requirement can very easily destroy the very essence of literature, as the history of its interpretation and teaching so often shows – has however to be found somewhere. Otherwise its traumatic ground would fully separate its imaginary domain from any possibility of its being situated in reality. Thus we necessarily come to the point that Ihab Hassan in the eighties depicted in his *The Postmodern Turn*: “I can learn to do push-ups in the prison cell, but I cannot any longer read literature as if the Earth is still in the orbit of my imagination” (1987: 39).

What is theory indeed? Or, in the context of the paper, what does it stand for? Reflection, vision, sublimation, endurance, resistance, belief, religion? Literary theory does all of that for literature. Yet who can say today that Slavoj Žižek or Richard Rorty are not part of literary studies, even if their domains are political approach to psychoanalysis or pragmatism in philosophy? To make it clear, we are not talking about inter- or multidisciplinary. That term has already lost its significance, being often used imprecisely and with confusion and paying no attention to the subject that is the very agent in the process of connecting those disciplines. The introduction of a wide scope of knowledge in literary scholarship requires new conceptual tools and in my article I propose to talk about one of them, namely the nomadic subject and intellectual. The term nomadism has figured openly in theory since the seventies and eighties, yet it is in the last decade and with the advent of the feminist understanding of it that it is in full sway. Some points of the contemporary condition that preceded it or asked for it should be considered though. For this last wave of feminism, as have all previous ones, has come from a particular living, textual and thinking situation as well as from the capability – of either wilful or forceful moving from place to place – that we have obtained in our time.

That is why at the beginning I mentioned trauma that both in the real world and in theory has so often been used in the past decades. Although the almost omnipotent masculine deconstructionist movement was a bit softened by its few female practitioners and some opponents, it threatened to ignore the whole scope of human experience that carried by now already ideologised

and worn-out labels “oppression” and “trauma”. Yet, thought – not as a rhetoric but as necessarily grounded in more or less stable emotional codes – is the only means to combat the depths of the death drive and circulation of negativity in a social, political and literary reality. It is worth recalling here that a traumatised person lives in a state of paralysis that extends and reaches deeper with any exposure to reality, with any reminiscence of the traumatic event. And trauma does not have to be only personally experienced, or, actually, when it is, it also repeats what was in a (non-)subject before, as her or his, perhaps generations-old, unconscious heritage. It is not only within a certain line of thinking – of racism, of violence against and torture of women, of ghettos and camps that we are asked for the interpretation of the historical trauma. Because it is certainly not with literature as mimesis that we are primarily concerned today, although literature is still that, sometimes even at its peak achievements. And the term nomadism also implies this transition from the enunciative, interpretative and critical position of one victimised group towards another. That is the place where the possibility of the death drive, or in ordinary language, of common-to-all hatred is kept, as a lure that we are unaware of, and that very easily, even inevitably comes when the referential ground slips beneath us – the transformation of literary consciousness is what is needed, the urge to learn not to mime but to deal with documentariness of horror that only the lucky ones escape in their lives.

The Flashback of Biology

What might be frightening today is that we defeatedly admit that the issue of genes is coming back, because the attempt of its resolution through cultural superstructure (in the case of race, gender, sexual preference, etc.) has proved also to be a further repression of biological issues that culture has not yet managed to overcome. If we, in the field of the humanities (with Nietzsche or someone else), agree, as we did and as we do, that “God” does not exist, we also agree (with Foucault or someone else) that “man” (“woman”) does not exist, so what remains is biology and genetic transmission, like it was “in the past” – in Shakespeare, Faulkner or Dostoyevsky, is also an idiotism as a core of human life with an idiot hiding in each of us and telling the non-sense of our story. Can we use the word “idiot” as a metaphor? And idiotism as it is used in the more popular psychoanalytic jargon for the core of our human desire and the essence of our contemporary enjoyment? Those who argue for a case of biological degeneracy will protest for sure. What other word can replace it then, if our common material idiotism can really be documented?

Why do we say that “we are sexually equal” (have equal rights) when it is really not like that, and some of us (men or women) are sexually (made) more idiotic than others, meaning more forbidden to come to their sexual and material consciousness? Why do we claim that there is indeed no race, “that all of us are the same”, while there are races, for sure, and we are different, and our racial difference also and not only our oblique equality brings sense and beauty to our life, as much as disaster and fighting for the promised heavens that will always elude us? It is not the first time that I quote Barbara Smith Herstein’s words: “all the Women are White, all the Blacks are Men, but some of us are brave” (1991: 110). These words do not have the same meaning on the African continent that they have on the American or European continents; they have different weight and they recall different concepts of race – and that is where the positive connotations of the concept of nomadic intellectualism – or the transference of cognition and knowledge in the “changing landscapes” condition comes to the fore.

For the last ten years, owing to my national and state background and the circumstances of my life, the subject of my writing has been horror and trauma. That is a very personal and also theoretical position that most theoreticians, whether they are black, yellow or white, women or men, heterosexual or homosexual, handicapped or not, have never experienced. As a literal nomad (I have never accepted the word “refugee” as my designation because only my personal dignity and ability to work was left to me, although I have devoted all my texts, that means years of my life, to those killed, tortured or displaced from my country – so wherever I came to I managed to get status in Academia, even when it meant no financial remuneration), as a woman who was not really able to combat the iron maternal heritage in tradition which basically allows a woman emotions for only one man in her life and who was for years forced to live in the condition of a phantom pain, with a couple of suitcases of books and lectures about the sources of violence in the world that I was giving from China to Mexico, from California and New York to Finland, Germany, Austria and South Africa – I do think I can say something about the gendered nomadic condition in the contemporary world.

One more issue I will introduce here – the discrepancies between the symbolic and material in a woman – the point where she abolishes her materiality through the symbolisation of herself – her self-representation fails as much as it gains in the process of making her survival. For, besides her symbolic articulation and the sexed position within language, in the formation of her (gender and sexual) identity, a woman also needs a physical one – that means at least the reality of her body and home (and perhaps some emotion).

We should realise that the exclusion from the symbolic order actually comes primarily from the lack of that, *and that the symbolic function should in no way replace the material one*; they should coexist, if the reality of the subject is to be constructed. Otherwise the abyss threatens to swallow up the subject's physical numbness that generates the symbolic. If a woman's physical, willing submission to a man is the far past for the feminist project, it is not the past for the everyday reality of more than three quarters of all women in the world, not the past that is transformed through reflection, but the past that is currently lived as a form of development of their sexual beings. How can a feminist say this? She can, if she sees history with its madness as too close, repressed or not lived through and if biology within history cannot really be processed to reflection and culture. For thinking is a bodily and not a mental process; it precedes rational thought.

Terror, Horror and Submission

I will link to this the events of massive destruction that we have witnessed through the media since 11 September 2001* – the crashes of the commercial planes used as guided missiles in New York and Washington. As a grateful immigrant to America from the most hellish part of the world in the nineties that had been for full four years waiting for the promise of the Americans to save them from the horrors of war and that had lost one tenth of its population during that period, as coming from the secular tradition of European Muslims and as a feminist scholar and educator in literature, as well as one of the last week's passengers on a transatlantic flight, I have had a shifting (nomadic) perspective on it. As (mighty) George Bush said: "America will never be the same", literary scholars with each of the historical and social catastrophes should say: literature will never be the same. For history and its interpretation counts the most to those who live it. How can literary studies address terrorism and interpret it or understand it? Twenty years ago international terrorism was an attempt to draw the attention of the public to the wrongdoings of their governments; now it is not so. Today it is committed and comprehended as an awful collision of two worlds, or two realms – the one of murderous phantasmatic desire and another of the ruling reality. What counts for humankind and for literature are the corpses of those who are victimised and mass trauma that comes as a consequence.

More than two decades ago Hassan called Lyotard's postmodern dissolution of *grand narratives* in philosophy – the sentimentalising of terrorism. While talking on the transitive and cognitive dispositions of

nomadic subjects, we have to keep this in mind. (I would add that Hassan – a brilliant humanist and mind – is an Egyptian-American and, given the richness of the conflicting cultures within himself, he certainly also had a personal perspective on it). Since “the central figuration for postmodern subjectivity is not of a marginalised exile but rather that of an active nomadism” (Braidotti 1994: 32), literary patterns and archetypes, confirmed or dissolved in a particular communicative situation, ask for our profound consideration and use of all possible tools that the world's cultural history provide us with. That is no longer structuralists' (Levi-Strauss's) *bricolage* or poststructuralists' “theft” of concepts – de-territorialisation or the becoming-nomad of ideas as Deleuze used to say – that rather implies the ability to project ourselves into different ontological and epistemological conditions. Deleuze's figure for the nomadic mode is the “rhysome”, a “rhysomatic” mode that expresses a nonphallogocentric way of thinking: secret, lateral, spreading, as opposed to the visible, vertical ramifications of Western trees of knowledge; for him thinking is to a large extent unconscious in that it expresses desire to know as prelinguistic condition.

Although Deleuze's definition points out to prephilosophical, affective foundations of philosophy, the performativity of nomadism is not implied there, so finding ourselves not only as thinkers of but also as inhabitants of different environments, cultures, disasters and traumas is not implied either. Foucault's “counter-memory”, as a form of resisting assimilation or homologation into dominant ways of representing the self comes closer to the nomadic subject whose relation to the earth is one of transitory attachment and cyclical frequentation. The transference of knowledge of such a shifting subject in academic and public environment implies also the capacity of engendering desire and its narrative with each shift. In that way Rossi Braidotti sees nomadism as “an epistemological and political imperative for critical thought at the end of the previous millennium and further as sexual difference as providing shifting locations for multiple female feminist embodied voices” (1994: 3).

Yet connecting her words to what I mentioned before – to a material and physical need for a home for a nomadic female and feminist subject as a prerequisite for thought about intellectual nomadism and to the fact that even the terrorist act that produces several thousand dead people requires explanation, we see the aporia that destroys both projects from within.

Speaking of September 11, we can be pretty sure that precisely performativity (and not longer oral tradition) that has prevailed in cannibalistic contemporary narratives and the blind drives that are worked through a

different logic and cognition led to such madness. We know no way out of that horror. It calls for our submission.

Have we asked ourselves how many people in the world would see this technologically devised carnage committed in the name of “God” (is God evil as we agreed?) as a kind of (historical) justice for people who suffer less than they do? We can recall Nietzsche’s, Heidegger’s and Arendt’s opposition to the utilitarianism intrinsic to the “value” of God (“Those who conclude from the frightening events of our times that we have got to go back to religion and faith for political reasons seem to me to show just as much lack of faith in God as their opponents,” wrote Arendt in the *Life of the Mind*, 1987: 19); yet there are millions of those for whom, even if they come to the point to read them, these words would be only rhetoric of the prevailing world’s script, the intention of which is to improve their own suffering. Dealing with the humanities and literature, we understand well that is the point when the worst is still to come.

After the attack I met a young Pakistani friend to congratulate him on his appointment as Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of California in Los Angeles. What passed between us was a silent communication of two expatriates. “Very difficult to be a Muslim in today’s world,” he said. Since the phenomenological category of understanding has implied in the past decades mostly the capacities of the body, the nomadic condition contains all its aspects. “Islam was hijacked”, said an American, a fellow plane passenger on the seat next to me the very next day. “I worked for Washington for years”, she added, “so much misunderstanding and futile rage”. I was grateful for these words.

These days we are faced with media footage of murderous expressions of rage from those (in the Middle East) who know only poverty and fighting. It is not unknown to you who live in South Africa. Terrorism for them is about change as science or the humanities for us are about change. Terrorism can be seen as trust, devotion and a profession. To come to this understanding is what scares the most. I will mention here a remark made by Susan Rubin Suleiman, one of America’s highest authorities on postmodernist literature, a Jewish woman married to a Palestinian, and a mother of two sons: the real question of postmodernism, she said, is how is somebody (and she is referring to an incident from her neighbourhood) provoked to a murder just because another person looked down on him on the street (1994: 51, 52). We understand that it is an act of despair and total blocking of any reasoning capacities, yet no judicial practice in the world will ever consider that. And certainly not the dear ones of the murdered. To raise this discrepancy to the level of critical thought means to reconsider the very origin of critical thinking

that goes back to Marx's Eleventh Thesis on Foerbach and to the requirement for change as the real task for philosophers.

That is also why the renewed plea for "purer" thought attacked cultural relativism in the nineties. In his "Reclaiming the Truth: A Contribution to the Critique of Cultural relativism" and "What's Wrong With Postmodernism", Christopher Norris sees the danger of an infinite particularisation and the other side of so much needed and celebrated differences of voices. Another contemporary author and a direct opponent to French poststructuralist thought, Alain Badiou, writes that true ethical questions can arise only in a specific situation and under circumstances which, however divisive, are essentially indifferent to differences, concerning subjects disinterested in the other as such (2001: xxii). His basic concept is "sameness" (and not "difference"), not the recognition of the other, but the recognition of the same. If we relate it to the issues of terrorist attacks we see that both we and the attackers are in less danger trusting in our sameness than if we insisted on our differences. Badiou claims that evil must be distinguished from the violence that the human animal employs to persevere in its being to pursue its interests – a violence that is beneath Good and Evil. Evil for him is the category of subject, not of the human animal – there is evil only to the extent that man is capable of be-coming the immortal he is. Yet terrorism is not a matter of human animals, it is a matter of subjects; the very human subjects that postmodernism has produced out of its multiplicity and that now threaten us within ourselves. Is that why Badiou uses the expression "those enigmatic 'Muslims' of Bosnia" (2001: 34) – because of his fear not of our evil but of our six centuries of pacifism that marked us as continuing scapegoats in three genocides of twentieth-century Europe? Is this what made us "enigmatic" and invisible for him? As a Frenchman and as a philosopher, he should have at least the basic knowledge and understanding of European history and geography, not to mention of current politics and requirements of ethics.

The nomadic (intellectual) predisposition posits a very strong concept of sameness through its constant changing, for only that which is the same can indeed be changed. Another question can be posed – how does Badiou's call for recognition not of the other but of the same function on the level of sexual difference? Are sameness and difference just two sides of a coin – an interplay in the dialectics of living beings that social irregularities, combats and disorders bring to the surface of human thought? "The only genuine ethics is of truths in the plural – or, more precisely, the only ethics is of processes of truth – ethics does not exist, there is only the ethic-of (politics, love, science and art)", claims Badiou (2001: 28). Viewed from this perspective, sameness is about the politics (of power relations) as much as about thought.

Serendipities

This is the term Umberto Eco uses to describe layers of mistakes that have shaped human history – in his recent book with the same title he talks of how misunderstandings happen and coexist within the same culture. As a feminist, accepting the notion of the nomadic subject as a theoretical figuration that refers to the style of thought beyond the phallogocentric vision of the subject (and what is a terrorist act if not the rule of phallogocracy and facets of “God” even if a woman commits it internalising the phallusoid logic) and living nomadism as my both enforced and chosen predisposition, I can still feel or internalise some of the contemporary situations and stances from which feminist thought can be seen as non-sense and a waste of time. I am not essentialist enough, well aware that each political project will lose with me. The thought that remains in the lack of the devotion argues for itself though, and perhaps we also come to understand those who claim that literature and philosophy should remain in the realm of reflection and not action. The ongoing discrepancy between the stance with which I started the paper – of the necessity of the political interpretation and action of and through literature and the stance to which I came at the end of the paper – of the need to protect human thought from its dissolution in the madness of human acts is probably the only hope.

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