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# Trauma Freud: Sigmund Freud as a Fictional Character in D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*

Miroslav Kotásek

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## ABSTRACT:

The paper views the novel *The White Hotel* (1981) written by D. M. Thomas as a specific model of a general situation of a human in Modernism. It points at specific instances where the text of the novel itself refers to certain limitations of such a view of trauma which interprets it as an effect of a real (primal) event onto the life of an individual (i.e. as a structural trauma), while the attempt to overcome the personal horizon, so as to apply a general psychoanalytic structure of human existence (structural trauma) onto an individual trauma implies unacceptable consequences. For the purpose of “criticizing” psychoanalysis the text of the novel employs different strategies, especially an imitation of the genre and structure of a Freudian “case study” (Krankengeschichte), making Sigmund Freud one of the main characters in the novel at the same time. The second part of the paper focuses on the article concentrates on the relationship between the traumatizing event and its possible or necessary deformations caused by its later attempted linguistic account. Especially relevant in this context is the way in which Anatoly Kuznetsov used the eye witness testimonies of the Babi Yar massacre survivor, while the article stresses the strategy D. M. Thomas employed when using Kuznetsov’s “documentary novel” in *The White Hotel*.

## KEY WORDS:

Sigmund Freud – hysteria – Anatoly Kuznetsov – The Modern – neurosis – D. M. Thomas – trauma

Although the title of the paper might suggest otherwise, declaring Sigmund Freud a “fictional character” means that I neither see this equation as an appropriate way to approach the main thematic issues of the novel nor do I want to reduce it to one single topic which would, in effect, trivialize the complex

structure of the text. The exact opposite should be the case. *The White Hotel* (first published in 1981) presents a model of a multilayered field of more general questions that arise precisely in connection with a traumatic experience. Firstly, it is the question of the possibilities and limitations of linguistic treatment (representation) of trauma; secondly, the question of the role that has been delegated to psychoanalysis by patients and modern culture in general – as a more or less effective hermeneutic instrument for explaining the origins, effects and treatment of trauma; thirdly, the question of violence not only in its personal (interpersonal) dimension, but also in its culturally social form (thus in a way legitimized or becoming legitimate), implying the question of personal and social guilt. Last but not least – and here the “fictional character” of Sigmund Freud is most relevant – the text of the novel employs complex relationships between “fiction” and “history” as they have been defined and questioned by historiography, literary theory, and philosophy of the last fifty years.

For the lack of a better term I will call Thomas's novel “a model” of a more general multilayered configuration. I will attempt to outline its functioning, or rather to delineate some particular components of its novelistic form, represented by different “genres”, stylistic and narrative techniques. Their innerconnectedness within a single text does neither function solely as a criticism of the different story forms that have been presented in the novel up until then, nor to make clear “what really happened”, but also as a “critique” of the very “genres” that are mutually delimiting their positions and functions, thus pointing, however indirectly, at the limits of their own possibilities.

In the “Prologue” to *The White Hotel* the reader is confronted with several “fictional” letters exchanged between Sigmund Freud, Sándor Ferenczi, and Hans Sachs. Although the content of the letters is the product of author's imagination, certain circumstances can be identified in the letters that history tells us are real (the complicated relationship between Freud and Gustav Jung, awarding the Goethe Prize to Freud), they refer to existing texts (Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) and, of course, they pretend to be written by a real man living in the historical past. At the same time, Freud's letters accompany a consignment of texts written down by one of his (this time “exclusively novelistic”) patients, whom Freud is treating for neurosis and related hysterical symptoms. In the book, these texts follow the introductory passage. It should be kept in mind that the reader is already prepared for their reception, and it can be said that the aforementioned letters interpret and in this way classify them. To be more specific: the letters class them into the category of hallucinations /

dreams / phantasms of a neurotic patient containing explicit sexual content, (presumably) carrying in themselves the original traumatizing event that could be unearthed by psychoanalytic treatment.

The next section of the novel, named “Don Giovanni”, contains a poem by Freud’s patient who was already mentioned in the letters (it should be noted that D. M. Thomas, before publishing *The White Hotel*, was known as a poet and translator of poetry, the poem appearing in “Don Giovanni” was already published separately in 1979 in the journal *New Worlds*). The title “Don Giovanni” was chosen because the poem had been written into the score of precisely this Mozart opera. The consequent part of the novel called “Gastein Journal” offers the description of the same events as the poem, this time in prose. Apparently, this time the designated “genre” should be “journal” (though limited in its scope only to the title of the chapter), but the described scenes are no less phantasmagoric when compared to the poem: both versions present explicit sexual acts interwoven with scenes of violent deaths. The “Don Giovanni” version presents the story using metaphorical, lyrical imagery (“The whole night sky came down that night, in flakes, / we lay in such high silence that we heard / the joyful sighs of when the universe / began to come, so many years ago, / at dawn when we crunched stars to drink the snow” [THOMAS 2004: 28]), while the prosaic version presents them with disinterested objectiveness, almost impassively (people die in a hotel fire, sink in ships, die under falling avalanches, in cable car accidents – similar multiplication can be observed in the descriptions of sexual acts).

These texts have been written by Anna G., a fictional character, as a part of her therapeutic treatment. Anna G. is a pseudonym which will be given by Freud to Lisa Erdman in the following part of the novel, which takes on the form and structure of a Freudian case study. The case study describes the treatment that started in 1919; and is presented to the reader from the point of view of Sigmund Freud until he declares Anna’s / Lisa’s treatment successfully finished. When reading the novel the genre switch might lead to the need to reconsider the reader’s previous interpretation of Lisa’s texts. Let me try to outline the reasons for this reconsideration with the help of Freud’s *Introductory Lectures into Psychoanalysis*:

When he [the patient] brings up the material which leads from behind his symptoms to the wishful situations modelled on his infantile experiences, we are in doubt to begin with whether we are dealing with reality or fantasies. [...] It will be a long time before he can take in our proposal that we should equate fantasy and reality and not bother to begin with whether the childhood experiences

under examination are the one or the other. Yet this is clearly the only correct attitude to adopt towards these mental productions. They too possess a reality of a sort. It remains a fact that the patient has created these fantasies for himself, and this fact is of scarcely less importance for his neurosis than if he had really experienced what the fantasies contain. The fantasies possess psychological as contrasted with material reality, and we gradually learn to understand that in the world of the neuroses it is psychological reality which is the decisive kind (FREUD 1924a: 382–383).

Although in Lisa's case the texts are not dealing with childhood memories, but sexual fantasies of an adult woman, still the psychic reality carries, or can carry, the same importance for the patient as the physical reality does. Quoting Freud once more, this time from 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria':

In the further course of the treatment the patient supplies the facts which, though he had known them all along, had been kept back by him or had not occurred to his mind. The paramnesias prove untenable, and the gaps in his memory are filled in. It is only towards the end of the treatment that we have before us all intelligible, consistent, and unbroken case history. Whereas the practical aim of the treatment is to remove all possible symptoms and to replace them by conscious thoughts, we may regard it as a second and theoretical aim to repair all the damages to the patient's memory (FREUD 1924b: 15).

These quotes present several problematic premises which psychoanalysis relies upon, and what is even more important, Thomas's novel makes an extensive use of them as well.

At this point, the most important question concerns the status of "Geschichte" that forms during the analysis (history comprised of causally linked events, while at the beginning of this link psychoanalysis believes to be discovering the original traumatizing event) if its material is (though provisional), reality of phantasm, and memory which is temporarily undetermined. (Later on in one of her letters to Freud, Lisa confesses to having concealed some relevant points in her story during her treatment, while other parts of her story presented the effect of retroactively created false memories, which is especially relevant for Lisa's "primary scene" – whatever the further fate of this term in psychoanalysis might be). How is it then possible to guarantee that the repairs of all the "damages" of a patient's memory are correct?

In classical psychoanalysis the "correctness" of the aforementioned repairs is guaranteed by one crucial move. The analyst-interpreter tends to project the story fragments offered by the analysand onto pre-prepared schemes, whose

fundamental function is an explanatory one: Oedipus or Cassandra complexes, Father, Mother. Despite the first impression, the schemes are not conceptual but rather narrative. Dominick LaCapra (LaCAPRA 1999) distinguishes between historical trauma (event that really happened) and structural trauma (“anthropological”, common to all humans). Using his distinction it can be said that in the analytic procedure historical trauma is being projected onto the ground-plan of structural trauma. Because historically specific traumas are thus being categorized and analyzed through a structural trauma, one of the consequences is that in this process structural trauma becomes retroactively legitimized. The reason might be that the “historical” dimension of structural trauma, in the sense of the original, specific primary trauma, is at best unsure and thus requires exactly this retroactive legitimization.

This exchange between structural and historical trauma, together with its consequences, acquires a reverse form in Freud as well, as Cathy Caruth has pointed out in her comments on Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (*Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*, 1937):

By replacing factual history with the curious dynamics of trauma, Freud would seem to have doubly denied the possibility of historical reference: first, by himself actually replacing historical fact with his own speculations; and secondly, by suggesting that historical memory [...] is always a matter of distortion [...] when Freud goes on, later in his work, to compare the Hebrew's traumatic experience to the traumas of the Oedipal boy, [...] this leads many readers to assume that the only possible referential truth contained in Freud's text can be its reference to his own unconscious life, a kind of self-referential history which many have read as the story of Freud's 'unresolved father complex' (CARUTH 1991: 185).

The sphere of *Geschichte* – story / history – as a discourse built around a specific past reference is abandoned in favour of and traversing into the territory of history which is essentially non-referential. (I hope not to reveal too much by pointing out the fact that Thomas's novel goes into the extreme by placing the traumatizing event – responsible for Lisa's pains in her abdominal area – in her future and not her past.)

Caruth might be too harsh on Freud. Freud's perspective regarding history can be at least in a certain sense regarded as a symptom of the puzzlement which is so typical for the turn of the nineteenth century. In his *Fin-de-siècle Vienna* Carl Schorske quotes a passage from Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*: “People who were not born then, [...] will find it difficult to believe,

but the fact is that even then time was moving faster than a cavalry camel. [...] But in those days, no one knew what it was moving forwards. Nor could anyone quite distinguish between what was above and what was below, between what was moving forward and what backward" (SCHORSKE 1980: 116). Schorske continues by commenting on the political efforts of the liberal middle classes, whose liberated powers they themselves could not control nor understand, consequently leading to a fundamental disbelief in the rationality of history. In his comment of three Viennese politicians who turned their back to liberalism, the pangermanic Georg von Schoerner, Christian socialist Karl Lueger, and Zionist Theodore Herzl Schorske describes their successful political strategies as an ideological collage, "collages made of fragments of modernity, glimpses of futurity, and resurrected remnants of a half-forgotten past" (IBID.: 120).

Let us turn back to the novel itself. The implicit critique I have already mentioned does not only target the interpretation process of psychoanalysis, but the genre of "Krankengeschichten" or "case studies" as well. In this connection the cyclical relationship between the historical and structural trauma comes to the forefront: a particular case is used as a material to find certain general psychological features or qualities. Linda Hutcheon comments on the genre: "its basic nature is private (one patient's case); but its import is intended to be universal or public (hence its publication as a 'scientific' document)" (HUTCHEON 1988: 174). That is why you can in fact find two stories in these case studies: the story of the analysis and the story of the illness. Their relationship should not in any respect be understood as hierarchical – the story of the patient should not be the content or object of the story of analysis, ideally it should modify it and its procedures (if they have not already been petrified). Obviously, this form of hermeneutic circle remains an ideal (the most tangible reason being that if such a process of interpretation should really take place, then it would not be possible to stop, the story could not be closed, the patient healed).

However tempting it might seem, there is another reason why the outlined structure of the hermeneutic circle is impossible to be implemented. The authors of published case studies are psychoanalysts, in the case of Anna G. it is the fictional character of Sigmund Freud. The mandate to become the author of the story of the illness is being assigned to the psychoanalyst by the patient (naturally, the psychoanalyst has already always been the author of the story of analysis). The patient's faith in the psychoanalyst, which takes the form of "Übertragung", "transference" (Lisa's sexual fantasies circle round Freud's son), is the condition of successful treatment, and the story of analysis is thus

made superior; the language used is no longer functioning in the narrative mode, relying on representation or mimesis – the patient's silent endorsement guarantees the analytical language the status of a performative: the analyst is given the right to tell the patient's "life story" and the patient is healed by accepting it.

A cynic might remark that we are dealing here with the profane version of the biblical "Believe and your faith shall heal you". It could be said that such cynicism does not have to be necessarily misplaced at least as regards *The White Hotel*. In the novel Lisa meets Sergei Konstantinovich Pankejeff several times, who, like Lisa, comes from Odessa, and who is well-known from Freud's case study From the History of an Infantile Neurosis as "The Wolfman" or rather as "wolf man" or "wolf-man". Lisa mentions Pankejeff to Freud in one of her letters: "The Wolf-Man's story haunted me for years: a kind of Christ figure of our age" (THOMAS 2004: 172). During Lisa's waiting for a reply to her letter, which grows longer and longer, in Lisa's imagination and dreams about Freud acquires a dreadful form: "As the days, and then the weeks, passed without a response from the Professor, anxiety became a kind of terror. She had mortally offended him. He was in a state of rage. Indeed, how could it be otherwise? She merited his wrath. Her breathlessness came back [...] She suffered from nightmares, [...] Even as she ran for life, she knew she deserved it, for her letter to Freud" (THOMAS 2004: 172–173). In Lisa's imagination Freud's wrath acquires the qualities of God's biblical rage from *The Old Testament*, but in her self-deprecating fantasies she imagines the wrath to be directed exclusively at her.

The passage just quoted comes from another part of the book called "Health Resort". It describes the period after Lisa finished her therapy, covering roughly the 1930s. Most remarkable are all the changes and amendments which Lisa makes in relation to her story as it was presented in the previous sections. Before concentrating on the most crucial ones, it is necessary to shortly comment on one feature of Modernity which essentially determines the life of Lisa Erdman and is being ignored by the "character of Sigmund Freud" in his interpretation. What I have in mind is the role that the human body (i.e. not the human individual or subject) plays in Modernity and the function it fulfils. Probably the most profound and urgent "modern" feeling is that the industrial development, technology and resulting new type of society claims the human body to be nothing more than its one tiny replaceable part. There is the widespread feeling that the human body is being influenced and deformed by the technological process it cannot withstand.



In 1866 in the *British Medical Journal* there appeared the first article by John Eric Erichsen, in which he claims that railway disasters inflict a new type of spinal cord injury, which, although there is no evidence of any physiological or anatomical damage, are accompanied by a variety of symptoms categorized as “hysterical”. This clear, indisputable connection between technology and (psycho/neuro)pathology clearly states a causal relationship between the technological achievements of Modernity and the state of human psyche. Later, Jean-Martin Charcot will also devote his attention to the problem of “railway spine”, as Erichsen named the syndrome. And even later Freud will do the same, finding similar symptoms in soldiers coming back from the battlefields of the Great War and categorize them as “post-traumatic neurosis”.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century we can find a multitude of similar examples illustrating this way of looking at the connection between humans and technology. I will quote only one that I find especially appropriate. The author of *Psychopathia sexualis*, Richard von Krafft-Ebing states in his often quoted article “Nervosität und neurasthenische Zustände”:

Countless modern human beings spend their lives not in fresh air, but in gloomy workshops, factories, and offices, etc., others in stressful duties which have been imposed on them by steam and electricity, the means of transport as well as the driving forces of modern times. However, increased work creates the demand for more of the pleasures of life. The progress of civilization has created a life style with greater needs, and the brain has to pay for the gratification of such needs [...] One can see them in continuous feverish excitement hunting for money, using all their physical and mental powers in the form of railway, post and telegraph. However, such strained nervous systems develop an increased need for consumption and excitement (coffee, tea, alcohol, tobacco). [...] When such a modern man of business and work eventually gets married at an advanced age, he is decrepit, debauched and often syphilitic. (quoted in RÜHMANN 1992: 352)

Such “industrialization” of the body, its integration into the emerging capitalist society, together with its accompanying pathologies (whether they be real or a product of fantasies and fears), and up until that time, an unknown mode of visibility or socialization of the human body (see e.g. Georges Didi-Huberman’s book on Charcot’s “reinvention” of hysteria *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière /Invention de l’hystérie. Charcot et l’Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière/*) have a darker side, which progressively gains in power and importance. If industrial production can be administered in a rational and aim-oriented manner, despite the fact that whimsical

human beings form part of the entire process, there is only a small step to the idea that similar “rational” procedures could be applied to the direction of society as a whole – it should not surprise anybody that the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the appearance of the first serious (i.e. “scientific”) eugenic and social engineering theories. Despite the fact that Freud (both in the novel and in reality) lived in Vienna, where anti-Semitism was the standard, expected and probably even “patriotic” attitude, in his case studies he never took into account any kind of macro-social relations and concentrated exclusively on the micro-social ones, namely the family.

It is precisely this neglected dimension or factor that Lisa reminds us of in “Health Resort”. In one of her letters to Freud she changes the resolution of one of the scenes which was supposedly responsible for the establishment of her neurosis. Round the age of seventeen she was forced into fellatio by a group of dock workers, who were at the same time threatening her with all possible kinds of torture. Lisa acknowledges that the threats themselves had not been the main traumatizing factor – later they even became a source of her sexual masochistic fantasies. On the other hand, what did provoke a profound traumatic effect was the fact that she had been repeatedly called a Jew by the dock workers, who were using the race denomination as an abuse, as a designation of a person, who is intrinsically rotten due to his or her lineage. Lisa declares that she had started to feel terribly guilty for her origin and stopped referring to herself as Jewish.

This trauma, which is at the same time in the most mundane sense possible both culturally social and physical, provoked by the negatively evaluating term “Jew” was further deepened during Lisa’s marriage to an Austrian lieutenant (not aware of her Jewishness), a militant anti-Semite. Consequently, Lisa was never able to establish a real physical contact with her husband; the emotions of hatred that she would have provoked in him as a Jewess were always stronger than any possible show of affection on either side. The trauma connected with Lisa’s Jewishness is accompanied by “guilt” – guilt that cannot be redeemed, guilt one is born with, because one is born into a society whose members have constructed precisely this guilt as a standard evaluating practice: “There was a lot of anti-Semitism in Russia at that time, as well as revolutionary feeling. There was even a disgusting organization advocating the extermination of the Jews as a race” (THOMAS 2004: 168).

The attempt to introduce “guilt” into the reading of the novel might seem questionable. Lisa’s husband served in the Great War as a military attorney who

never left out any possibility to boast his skills as a lawyer which led to the execution of a number of soldiers accused of desertion. Now it becomes quite clear that an absolutely different dimension of explicit violence is being targeted by the novel as well. It is no longer the violence a person or a group of people aim at another person; it is the violence that is legitimized by the whole society and its laws, and it is with this support it legally executes the violence. The parallel with the Jews being the target of violence which is acceptable in a given society should be obvious. Apart from her husband's army career as an attorney Lisa mentions another example of a similar type of violence from the time her therapy at Freud was already over. She refers to a case of a mass murderer from Düsseldorf, which at the time fascinated Austrian and German press: "Lisa, though tortured by thoughts of the murdered children, held a passionate, instinctive conviction that it was abhorrent to take human life" (THOMAS 2004: 159). Lisa's "abhorrance" does not seem to be pointed at the murderer, but rather at society, which claims the right to decide upon human life and death.

In this connection it would be highly relevant to consider a short enigmatic text written by Walter Benjamin, entitled 'Critique of Violence' ('Zur Kritik der Gewalt', 1921), which discusses the nature, structure, position, and function of law in human society. Throughout his interpretation of Benjamin's text, especially in "Post-scriptum" Jacques Derrida asks what Benjamin's text might be saying about the possibility of the so-called "final solution", simultaneously stressing that Benjamin could have been able to extrapolate or see through the politically-social and economically-legislative situation in Germany of the 1920s (DERRIDA 1990: 1040–1045). Let us return to Lisa Erdman – apart from the fact that the novel credits her with some clairvoyant abilities, her life situation and experience have definitely allowed her to connect her culturally and socially fabricated guilt in the form of her Jewishness with her punishment handed out by the society. Some reviewers of the novel have criticized the character of Lisa Erdman for having no political ideas – despite her contacts with Russian anarchists, her upper class membership in Tsarist Russia, and her marriage to a Viennese anti-Semite. Considering the situation and visibility of the human body in Modernism I have already mentioned, it can be concluded that this seeming absence of ideas and political stances is caused by the fact that Lisa's body itself has become a reservoir of these essentially political experiences. Inside and on the surface of her body she carries a sum of experience – her body is a paradigm of how the human body can become material into which society, culture, and history carve their texts, not unlike the machine inscribing

the wording of the transgressed law onto the culprit's body in Franz Kafka's short story "In the Penal Colony" ("In der Strafkolonie", 1914).

This brings us to the penultimate part of the novel called "The Sleeping Carriage". Kiev is being occupied by German troops and Lisa, as a half-Jew, is ordered to come to the train station together with her stepson and other Kiev inhabitants of Jewish origin. From the station, rumour has it that they are supposed to be transported into Palestine. Lisa's clairvoyant abilities leave her for a while and she tries to calm herself: "Were not the Germans a decent, civilized Race?" (THOMAS 2004: 206). Finally, all the people gathered at the train station are brought into a ravine near Kiev, called Babi Yar, where every one of them is shot, while Lisa finally discovers the cause of her allegedly hysteric pains during her brutal murder.

When being confronted with descriptions of violence in works of art we tend to forget a piece of fact which Laura Tanner points out in connection with *The White Hotel*: "The fictional representation of violence, whether intended as a form of mimetic depiction or as a type of aesthetic tool, necessarily invokes the readers' awareness of violence as a cultural fact" (TANNER 1991: 140). If it is possible to think about trauma and guilt as being constructed and legitimized by human society, it is feasible that aesthetic representation of violence is part of the same process. The description of violence in "The Sleeping Carriage" returns us in a way to the beginning of the novel, coldly describing Lisa's fantasies, in which innocent people were dying – the same coldness can be felt in the description of the massacre at Babi Yar. When creating the description of the happenings at Babi Yar, Thomas used Anatoly Kuznetsov's novel *Babi Yar* (which was "raped" by Soviet censorship and its complete text has only appeared in English translation) as one of the main sources of information. Kuznetsov himself used the testimonies of Dina Pronicheva, a Babi Yar survivor, when writing his novel. Thomas was heavily criticized for the usage of Kuznetsov's book, but what Thomas's critics and probably Kuznetsov as well had not realized is the specificity of the situation that was pointed at by Linda Hutcheon, namely that Kuznetsov himself "does not take into account the discursive context of her [Dina Pronicheva's] account (the 1946 Ukraine war crime trial) or the fact that (a male) has re-inscribed her (female) experience or that the narrativization (from memory) is already a distancing from anything resembling her real past experience" (HUTCHEON 1988: 171).

This neglected aspect comes into the forefront exactly at the moment when Kuznetsov's account is used (according to some: "misused") by Thomas and

placed next to the Freudian discourse, which in its theories and case studies rewrites, constructs and traumatizes a woman and her family and social role as well, though differently. From a certain point of view Thomas might be plagiaristic, but only to highlight the violence which is a typical sign of narrative discourse: in a way Thomas misuses Freudian case studies and Kuznetsov's novel in the same manner that Kuznetsov misused the story of Dina Pronicheva. Thomas does not use Kuznetsov's text to support the authenticity of his own story about Lisa. Rather, he questions the relevance of any narrative construction, and points out the limitations of not only a traumatic event, but he also questions the role of "story", which presumably should help humans to articulate the essence of their identity: "Lisa's self-inscriptions and her final fate teach that woman – like man – is not an autonomous, coherent subject outside the dictates of society and history, just as the novel, as a whole, further contests the closure inherent in our humanist narrative – both fictional and historical" (HUTCHEON 1988: 177).

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