

Unspeakable: Literature and Terrorism from the Gunpowder Plot to 9/11

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Terrorists explain themselves. Whether they describe their actions as ‘terror’ or not, perpetrators of political violence tend to publish manifestos, produce justifications, and explain their rationale. In his wide-ranging monograph *Unspeakable: Literature and Terrorism from the Gunpowder Plot to 9/11*, Peter C. Herman proceeds from a deceptively simple question: if terrorism produces language, why is its perception dominated by the notion that it cannot be understood, articulated, let alone addressed? If the act of terror is intended as a form of communication – ‘propaganda by the deed’ (35) as it was briefly known in the late 19th century – the message is lost in transmission. Once the smoke has cleared, terrorism appears inexpressible, beyond reason or understanding. ‘Terrorism speaks. Terrorism is unspeakable’ (34) – this is the central paradox which Herman unearths in fictional accounts of political violence from 1623 to the present.

The narratives that Herman analyses do not simply reproduce the taboo against understanding terror. In this, they depart from a host of discursive strategies by means of which political violence ends up being discursively contained. There are, as *Unspeakable* amply demonstrates, veritable stock phrases in response to terror – turns of phrase that co-construct the phenomenon ‘terrorism’ they presume to simply describe and evaluate. These language rules have remained curiously invariant throughout the centuries. By contrast, the novels, plays, and films assembled in this remarkable volume rearrange these assertions of incomprehension, question their validity, and test the limits of the imperative not to understand terrorism. In its analysis of terror in literature, *Unspeakable* makes the case that describing a given act of terror as ‘unspeakable’ is not just descriptive, but typically comes with an ethical injunction: the act of violence should not be understood. In political, social and medial discourses from the early modern age onwards, an epistemological blank emerges as the only proper response, a gap that is filled at one’s own peril. This is where fictional license comes in: fiction fosters temporary empathy with perpetrators, blurs the lines between statist and extra-legal violence, and crosses and re-crosses the boundary setting apart what can be spoken about from what ought to remain unsaid.

Most intriguingly, however, *Unspeakable* investigates the ways in which the trope of terror as motiveless malignity is reproduced. Already regarding the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, Herman encounters a mismatch between a radical political gesture and its discursive aftermath. That these dynamics of misunderstanding are repeated with a difference allows *Unspeakable* to find commonalities between forms of terrorism which, on the surface, appear substantially different. Herman’s examples run the gamut from 16th century plots to late-Victorian dynamite ‘outrage’ (57) and, in the end, white nationalist terror. Ideologically

distinct as these forms of terrorism may be, they revolve around the same paradox: unspeakable acts are – insistently, vociferously – spoken about. For instance, *Macbeth* (1623) already blurs the line between legitimate and illegitimate violence; Gillo Pontecorvo's film *Battle of Algiers* (1966) takes up a 'counterinsurgency understanding of terrorism as a "rational tool"' (107); this brief return to an dispassionate analysis of cycles of violence is inverted, suspended or undercut in John le Carré's *The Little Drummer Girl* (1983) or Steven Spielberg's *Munich* (2005); finally, another set of novels of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (Updike, Hamid, DeLillo) dare to reverse perspectives and see the world from the perpetrator's point of view.

For each of these phases, Herman traces the contours of disavowed knowledge about terror. He identifies the precise points at which further inquiry is blocked and rerouted into expressions of disgust, horror, or shock. This construction of unspeakability becomes especially apparent in Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), an almost meta-discursive treatment of terrorism to which Herman returns time and again. In this novel, the production of unspeakable terrorism stalls. Europe has become too used to the cartoonish – and utterly inaccurate – stock-figure of the bomb-toting anarchist terrorist, as a Russian attaché bemoans. Make terrorism unspeakable again: this character yearns for a return to the status quo of outrage (and attendant state repression), an effect that can only be achieved if terror elicits mute incomprehension. What is required, in other words, is 'an act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable; in fact, mad' (58). Herman is particularly adept at thinking with this (and other) literary examples. From passages like this, he extrapolates a demand of terror to elude signification – only to encounter that same demand outside the fictional world. At the same time, *Unspeakable* never loses sight of the specificity of Conrad's historical contexts, nor of the way in which the fictional environment casts doubt on the attaché's 'philosophy of bomb throwing' (5).

Herman's approach pays off in condensed passages in which the figure of unspeakability is shown to haunt the assessment of terror in a long terrorist modernity. In these vignettes, the book provocatively juxtaposes 'the Gunpowder Plot, the Irish dynamite campaign against London's cultural monuments in the late nineteenth century, the 'Munich Olympics Massacre' (7) and others. Readers should not mistake these montages for an argument that these events are in any substantial sense similar. The crucial point of these montages is not to flatten the distinctions between unfathomably different forms of violence. Instead, Herman asks how such patently *dissimilar* phenomena are made to resemble each other as soon as they are labelled as 'terrorism'. Once these forms of violence are placed in this shared category, their differences can no longer be marked by terms such as insurgency, rebellion, war, or outrage. They are all equally 'terror' and are thereby made to reveal a deep-structural similarity. In their cultural reception, they blur together as events that 'triggered the rhetoric of unspeakability, of assertions that the event has no precedent, and remains beyond imagining' (170). *Unspeakable* not only traces the appearance of this assertion in the fictional works, but consistently ventures beyond the literary text. Herman argues that the notion of terror as inarticulate horror is also reproduced in a whole host of non-literary discourses swirling around bombings, assassinations, riots, or insurgencies. For instance, to cite once more Herman's earliest example, the Gunpowder plot was to remain 'sine nomine' (22), what Milton describes as an 'unspeakable (infandum) crime' (22), an 'innovative' or 'unprecedented murder' (15). Because *Unspeakable* is so cogent in reconstructing these cultural contexts, the condensed historical montages never elide historical distinctions.

Instead, they extract grand narratives of terror's unspeakability from a range of meticulously analysed examples. Or rather grand non-narratives, since Herman analyses storytelling about a phenomenon that appears to exceed telling. Whenever the author interrupts his detailed close readings for a time-spanning review of this kind, we encounter variations of the manufacture of a semantic gap; voluble assertions that the terrorist act transcends the bounds of the human resurface with eerie predictability.

While the book demonstrates the lineage of 'inexpressible' (146) terror in a convincing manner, the formal equivalents to 'unspeakability' could, at times, have been systematised more clearly. Particularly the strategies of the literary artefact do, at times, remain underdetermined, as do the differences between the media that represent terrorism. What does the play show that a pamphlet cannot? Can moving images countermand the imperative not to speak about terrorism? What does the specifically *fictional* representation of suicide bombers, assassins, or insurgents bring to the table? Although *Unspeakable* does not belabour such formal and medial questions, two broad strategies can nevertheless be discerned throughout the book. The first option amounts to a (1) reversal of the speakable/unspeakable dichotomy, while the second consists in tracing the (2) uncanny recurrence of unspeakability. The former fictional response is politically consequential, but formally straightforward: whenever the rules of the language game are reversed, literary (or filmic) artefacts represent the unrepresentable. Consequently, the terrorist beyond the pale gains a motivation, a point of view, or an entire coming-of-age story. As a result of this imaginative realignment, we share in fiction's 'uncanny ability to allow readers to empathize with people and characters far different from themselves, including people one would otherwise dismiss as fundamentally evil' (196). *Unspeakable* offers striking analyses of this fictional response. In le Carré's *The Little Drummer Girl*, for instance, a liminal figure ventriloquizes a terrorist's autobiography. This character, Becker, is repeatedly described as a 'bridge' (114), since he inhabits the role of a committed terrorist with such disturbing ease. Why, however, does the novel opt for a bridge character in the first place? Herman's focus in elsewhere: he investigates the understanding, empathy (yet never justification) of terror enabled by fictional perspective-taking. While the analysis expertly traces the political ramifications of a liminal figure like Becker, the formal reasons for including him could have been further explored. Here, after all, the novel self-reflexively engages with its own ability to foster identification – and its failures to do so.

While reversing familiar distinctions of justification and illegitimacy leads to fascinating reappraisals of fictional terrorism, *Unspeakable* is particularly adept at tracing the second strategy: Herman shows how unspeakability makes a comeback in many of the texts, recurring precisely at the point at which terrorism appeared to be understood. In the words of the self-appointed philosopher of terror in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, terrorism is perennially on the cusp of tilting over from the 'inexplicable, almost unthinkable' (58) into a routine shock assuaged by well-worn explanations – yet can be kept from doing so. And indeed, Conrad's novel struggles to make sense of its would-be suicide bomber: no 'bridge' leads into this character's mind. Regarding this uncontainable lack of understanding, Herman provides a fascinating study of ignorance. He traces how terrorism, its historical manifestations, its changing tactics, its dissimilar motivations and results return to the status of something that does not bear speaking, let alone thinking, about.

It is only fitting, then, that contemporary fictionalisations of terror do not innovate the genre by offering particularly convincing explanations, be they structural or psychological.

Rather, in his epilogue, Herman emphasizes how, for example, Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) demonstrates that if terrorists are a 'black hole of incomprehensibility to many in the West' (191), that same 'West is equally foreign, equally incomprehensible, equally "Other", to the inhabitants of Afghanistan and Pakistan' (191). This note of mutual, escalating, and insurmountable incomprehensibility reorients our understanding of this entire, fascinating volume. While *Unspeakable* does argue that fiction can familiarise us with the hitherto unimaginable, the book does, at times, sound a more pessimistic note: many of the texts it covers turn out to be more adept at tracing the production of a 'black hole' of incomprehension than they are at illuminating it.

Considered as a history of manufactured unspeakability, this volume offers a crucial genealogy of cacophony, misinformation, crossed lines – a literary history of incomprehensibility. It is precisely the lingering of the 'black hole' that yields some of the most productive readings of the traces of terror in literature. Herman already establishes this template in his take on the Folio *Macbeth*: in this occasionally speculative, yet always intriguing analysis, the 1623 version of the play tars the Stuart origin with the same brush as the Gunpowder plot, making both narratives incarnations of 'a deed without a name' (9). Herman's remarkable book is at its most innovative whenever it emphasises the layering of narratives in this manner, tracing how an event can move in and out of comprehensibility depending on the interpretative demands of individual characters and the cultures they incarnate. From this angle, what is unspeakable cannot simply be returned to speech by showing the perspective of the other side. By extension, the absence of understanding itself becomes the dominant political and aesthetic challenge for the literature of terrorism.

By confronting us with vociferous assertions of unspeakability, and making this trope an integral component of terrorism, Herman achieves a thoroughly convincing argument about the cultural production of speechlessness. The wealth of material he has assembled – congressional debates, letters, articles, and literary treatments – attests to the abiding creation of signs about something that ought to be beyond signification. It follows that we should not turn to literature for clarification; rather, as Herman puts it regarding the literary treatment of dynamite terror, the fictional version 'complicates the dominant view' (39). In each discursive field, a 'dominant view' of this kind emerges as dangerously simple, pitting a normative position against an inexplicable – and, crucially for the perpetuation of any so-called 'war on terror', *dehumanised* – miscreant. By thinking with literature, its means of fostering empathy, and its formal strategies of complication, Herman puts paid to such certainties.

Any reader of this ambitious, painstakingly argued and highly readable book will answer any invocation of 'unspeakable terrorism' with immediate demands for 'complication': unspeakable for whom? And: unspeakable to what end? This outstanding volume leverages its subtle readings to show that asking these questions does not diminish or, worse, justify the individual act of terror. On the contrary, Herman's subtle film analyses in particular are sensitive to the affective, immediate impact of artistic renderings of violence. However, Herman also provides us with analytical categories to recollect the shock of terror in tranquillity, placing it in larger discursive contexts and refusing to place it in an all-too-simplistic account of 'Them' against 'Us'. One uneasy consequence of this approach can be a recognition of the seemingly unthinkable within the self: we encounter extra-legal violence on the side of the state, white supremacist thinking within mainstream politics, and self-propelling cycles of violence where previously there only appeared to be unaccountable hatred. Among its many other accomplishments, this excellent book provides us with the

historical and narratological wherewithal not only to speak about the unspeakable – but also to ask how terror came to be beyond understanding in the first place.